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Mr. McCaskill's Thanksgiving



by Mrs. Paul E. King

MR. MCCASKILL'S THANKSGIVING By Mrs. Paul E. King

The street lights came on when Mark pedaled away from the office of The Daily Press, his canvas bag bulging with papers as it swung from the handlebars of his trusty old bicycle. Some of his customers would be furious again, he knew. But there was nothing he could do about it; not when the papers weren't ready for delivery. Wingrove Caliber had said something or other about one of the presses breaking down. This accounted for the delay.

But of course, some customers, like Harmon McCaskill, wouldn't understand nor take that for an answer. He'd be 'chewed out' tonight for sure. From Mr. McCaskill especially.

Breathing a silent prayer for grace and help, he pedaled down the quiet street, wishing he had been able to get that job at the Wayside Grocery but thankful, that since he didn't get it, he had his big paper route. At least this was better than no job, he told himself as he folded a newspaper expertly and tossed it onto the porch of his first customer. His aim was perfect; it landed in front of the door. . . . Whistling, he pedaled away.

The porch light was on at Mr. Merrill's house. Mark knew he'd hear about the lateness of his delivery. Still whistling, he tossed the carefully-folded paper onto the porch, making sure it landed in front of the door so the man had easy access to it.

The door swung open and Mr. Merrill, framed in the doorway, bellowed loudly, "Late again, huh! Unless you start having my paper here by four o'clock I'm finding me a new paperboy. D'ya hear?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Merrill. One of the presses broke down at the office."

"You expect me to believe that!" the angry man exclaimed, scooping up the paper.

"Call the office," Mark said kindly.

"I'll do that," came the immediate reply. "Yes, I'll do that!" he declared, slamming the door and disappearing inside.

Snow had begun to fall gently as Mark was on the last lap of his delivery. It added new glitter and sparkle onto that which had fallen a few days previously. He liked snow; especially when it first fell. It reminded him of a bride's dress, white and clean, as it covered the earth.

He was glad that he was almost finished for the day; he was both tired and hungry. Tonight he was to have gone to a special Thanksgiving Eve service with his parents and two sisters. But with the trouble at the office, he doubted he'd get home in time to get cleaned up to go.

He sighed, then tossed a folded paper onto old Mrs. Nantucky's porch. She was a kind-hearted woman who always had a word of encouragement for him whenever she saw him.

He pedaled away from the town, out some distance into the country to Harmon McCaskill's place, dreading his encounter with the odious man. For so long as he could remember, Mr. McCaskill was notorious for his temper and his bitter hatred of people. He carried on like some wild, demented being if anyone set foot on his lawn . . . his perfectly-beautiful, carefully manicured and weed-free lawn. He had a temper whose fuse seemed at the explosive point at all times and a tongue that was like a sharp, keen-edged blade.

Mark drove up to the porch, ready to give the paper a toss, when he noticed the house was dark. Not a ray of light shone through any of the windows.

Putting the kickstand of his bicycle down, he started walking along the side of the house. A thin sliver of light, coming from what was Mr. McCaskill's library, stopped him dead in his tracks. For only a brief instant was the light visible, then it disappeared as rapidly and as mysteriously as it has appeared.

Mark's pulses quickened. This was not at all like Mr. McCaskill. Always, he had plenty of light in the big house -- in room after room, too.

Quietly he stole alongside the house, not sure what was happening . . . or what had happened to the eccentric old man. Whatever was going on and taking place was absolutely abnormal and totally unlike Harmon McCaskill. He had a rigidly-set and strictly-adhered to pattern for his life; ways and doings which were every bit as much a part of his life as his name was. Mark knew this. Everybody knew it for miles around too.

He reached the back of the house and was ready to step out of the shadows and check the door . . . or knock, at least . . . when something caught his eye. He gasped; then crouching like a lion stalking its prey, he moved stealthily forward through the evergreens.

Instinctively, he knew: Mr. McCaskill had visitors. They were not friendly visitors either; they were thieves. For there before his eyes, was a truck, half-hidden behind a stand of young pines and other evergreens.

Still crouching, he listened attentively. All he heard was the now heavily-falling snow dropping gently into the outstretched arms of the myriad bushes, trees and evergreens. The sound, under ordinary circumstances and proper conditions, would have soothed and thrilled him. How, however, his heart sounded like a loudly-thudding sledge hammer inside his chest. He felt as if it were hammering its way into his throat.

What could he do? he wondered as near-panic churned and boiled up within him. How could he help the poor man? Crotchety and obnoxious though he was, Jesus' law was "If shine enemy hunger, feed him." "Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you." Not only had he learned the verses from memory as a child, Mark soliloquized, but since he was born again . . . converted, and made new in Christ . . . and was sanctified wholly, the law and the principles were written in his heart and his very nature. Naturally, he wanted to help. He wanted to bless and to do good, because of Divine Love shed . . . abroad in his heart.

Clenching his fists together in deep concentration, he thrust them into the jacket pockets. His knuckle touched something cold in the very bottom of one of the pockets. A nail. Thank God for the nail! He had his answer.

Still crouching, almost crawling now, he moved silently forward toward the truck. He must work fast, he knew; thieves didn't linger long at their wicked work. Almost, they were like a vicious storm; moving in, passing through, taking with them what they desired and leaving the house in a shambles.

Feeling around the front tire, (The end nearest the dense trees and bushes) he found the air valve. Carefully, he pushed the sharp point of the nail into the valve core. There was a satisfying hiss as the air rushed out. Holding the nail firmly in place until tire was flat-flat, he crept to the back tire and repeated the process. Then, like a deer, he dashed into the shadows, crept alongside of the house, grabbed his bicycle and pedaled away toward town to call the police.

Mrs. Nantucky was his last town customer so he decided to go to her home. Her porch light was still on when he raced up the steps to her door and knocked.

"My, my, my, Son, whatever is wrong?" she asked when she saw Mark standing on the porch, urgency and alarm written all over his face and in his eyes.

"Please, may I use your phone?" he cried. "It's urgent! "

"Course you may, Mark. Come right in. Come right in."

Without another word, Mark dialed the local police station, telling them what he had seen at Mr. McCaskill's place and how he had flattened two tires to delay the thieves until the police could get there.

"Everybody has one spare tire," he said. "And I was afraid they'd change and get away before you could get there, so I flattened a second tire. Not so easy to make a get-away with two down, flatter than a pancake. Please hurry!" he pleaded. "I'm afraid for Mr. McCaskill's life. For once, I'm thankful the Press ran late. Now hurry!" he exclaimed as he hung up.

Mrs. Nantucky was shaking and trembling by the time Mark finished the conversation. She sank weakly into a nearby chair, exclaiming, "Nobody's safe anymore, Son; much less we who are aged and live by ourselves. "

"These are climactic days," Mark admitted. "Days of violence and cruelty, it's true. But the Bible says, 'He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.

" 'They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.' And in that same Psalm . . . the 91st., by the way . . . we are told, 'He shall cover thee with His feathers, and under His wings shalt thou trust: His truth shall be thy shield and buckler.

" 'Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday

" 'There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.' That's security, Mrs. Nantucky! God's kind of security and protection for His children," Mark stated emphatically.

"I've been hiding under it for many, many years, Son" the widow declared softly. "I should not have allowed this to upset me so; but it did. You

see, I didn't think anyone would dare to cross Mr. McCaskill. He's lived selfishly and . . . and hatefully for so long as I've . . . know him. People in general have feared him. I can't understand how anybody got inside his house."

"I only hope he's not harmed. He isn't ready to meet God. Well, I must be getting home; my folks will be worried. You see, one of the presses broke down. This is why I was so late with the deliveries tonight. Thanks for allowing me to use your phone. If you need us, call. We'll be over as quickly as we can. Goodnight. God bless you."

Mark was putting the bicycle in the garage when his father called for him to come inside. "A phone call for you from the police," he said, handing the phone to his son.

"You got them then? Thank God! He's all right? Mr. McCaskill's going to be all right, you say? Oh, thank God! Yes, of course I'll go by and see him. Tonight? Well, OK. Thanks."

"What was that all about?" Mark's father asked when his son placed the receiver in place. "You're not in any trouble, I hope."

Mark laughed. "Not I; but a couple of thieves and McCaskill harmers are." Then he told his father the . . . happenings at the elderly man's place and how he had stalled the escape of the thieves by letting the air out of two of their tires. "The amazing thing is that Mr. McCaskill's asking me to come out to his place. Now, the police officer told me. He said Mr. McCaskill said something about this going to be the most wonderful Thanksgiving of his life; that, lying there on his floor gagged and bound, he made a covenant with God, and he just wanted to thank me for saving his life."

"Well, well, well!" Mark's father exclaimed softly.

"That isn't all, Dad: He told Officer Crabb that God changed his heart and now they'd have a new kind of citizen in town. And guess what? He even said 'Thank God that the paper came late!' "

"Sounds like he's changed all right, Mark."

"Come with me, Dad. Both of us will see the new and decidedly different Mr. McCaskill. I rather believe he'll enjoy chatting with an older man now."

"Might as well, Mark. Your mother and two sisters couldn't wait on you any longer. They're at the Thanksgiving Eve service. Yes, I may as well go with you. In fact, I think I'm going to enjoy this night as much as Mr. McCaskill himself. Nothing to exciting as listening to a new babe in Christ talk. Come on; let's go. "

Mark followed his father to the car. "This is one Thanksgiving evening I'll never forget," he said, thanking God for allowing the press to break down. Certainly, everything worked together for good. He was thankful. Yes, very thankful.