THE MAN
By Mrs. Paul E. King

He lived in the shell of a yellow school bus on a low knoll across the road from the river. His insulation was taped newspapers over the windows while a bent pipe sticking out of the roof near the back of the bus was proof positive that his heating-cooking was being furnished and done on and by a small wood-coal stove. Except for a docile, gray mule, who looked as old as the man himself, and whose domain was a collapsing barn behind the bus,
he lived alone. We boys thought we had spotted a gray-black cat a time or two when we were bold enough to venture over to the extreme outer fringes of his territory which, my father had once said, consisted of some better than ten acres of tillable land and a large tract of mountain land.

He was grizzled-looking and bronzed by the sun and the wind. A sure enough old-timer, if ever we boys saw one. He looked like someone . . . or something . . . from the long ago dead past. A legendary figure. A hermit. Yes, I suppose you could say he was a combination of the two and a mixture of many. A sort of composite of the old, the not so old, and the very old past. News had it that he received a monthly Social Security check and a small monthly stipend from the military, in which he had served for years. If he had ever married a wife or raised a family, it was not known.

He lived pretty much to himself. He and the gray mule. And I wanted to believe that the cat we boys were pretty sure we had seen, but couldn't say exactly so, was his. At least, that would give him something to talk to, if not with, in the evenings when he returned to his bus-home from keeping his mountain land in tip-top shape: young evergreens trimmed to perfect shape for future growth and maturity, deceased trees either treated or cut down as the case demanded, and dead wood carted home for feeding into the stove's mouth.

It was cold this particular winter. In fact, the thermometer plummeted and plunged with such dizzying rapidity that I was scared. For the old man, the gray mule, and the gray-black cat. Could they . . . would they . . . survive; the old man in his fragile looking bus-home, the gray mule in her collapsing barn, and the gray-black cat in I didn't know where?

"You're restless tonight!" my mother exclaimed, looking up from the rug she was hooking to watch me pace from one end of our warm, enormous farmhouse kitchen to the other. Every now and then, I cupped my hands to my eyes and pressed my face against the north-west kitchen window. I tried to peer into the deep, cold darkness outside to see the sliver of light which, if the wind parted the branches of the trees properly, we were able to see on rare occasions. This night . . . this bitter-cold, minus 30 degrees zero night . . . I couldn't find the sliver of light. Not even the faintest sliver. It frightened me. Terribly so. After all, the old man was human, same as I was.
"Something bothering you, Timothy?" Mother asked the question gently, the hook in her hand poised in mid-air.

"It's the old man in the bus, Mother. Maybe we don't know where he came from nor just who he actually is, but he . . . he's a human being. I . . . I'm afraid he'll freeze to death in that flimsy bus home. And the mule . . . What if the gray mule froze to death tonight? It . . . it's all he has. That, and the gray-black cat we're pretty sure we saw. I wish father were home. He'd tell us what to do. Jesus said, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these . . . ye have done it unto Me.'"

"Are you children not afraid of him anymore?"

"Sure, it's scary. But I guess it's our fault that we haven't tried to make friends. This fault lies at our door, with us -- Roy and Raymond and me. And I feel ashamed of myself for allowing fear to squeeze and snuff our courage and kindness to an old man who could well be super-great and good. And what if he's lonely? I'm sure he must be, at times."

"Would you boys like to go over and check on him, Timothy? Your father would be proud of you, and he should be home by the time you return."

"I . . . I feel it's the only Christ-like thing to do, Mother. He's been living here for three months or more, and to this day, I haven't paid him a visit nor talked to him about his soul. If he were to freeze to death . . . well . . ."

"You'd feel responsible for his soul."

"That's right. I believe in putting into practice everything Brother Crossman preaches. And I've been pretty faithful in obeying. Except where the old man enters the picture. All kinds of weird tales are being told about him at school."

"And maybe that's all they are, Timothy . . . tales. Your father thinks highly of the man, whose name is Stewart Boljevich."

The name alerted me as to his land, and that did nothing to help allay my suspicions nor calm my fears and the thumping inside my heart. "I'll go alone," I said quickly, trying to bolster my pounding heart with courage and
faith. "It's dreadfully cold outside. No need for Roy and Raymond to leave the warmth of the kitchen."

"Dress warmly," my mother admonished. "And keep those ear lappers down. Tonight's a good night to get frost-bitten. Take the lantern, so we can see your progress by the light. And if Mr. Boljevich . . . or his mule and cat . . . needs night lodging, you bring them all here. Our barn is adequate for housing two more animals, and the bedroom at the head of the stairs and to the right, will be ready for our neighbor. God bless you, Timothy. I'm thankful you're thrusting your fears aside."

The night was brittle-cold. So cold, in fact, that frost particles filtered from above me on to my heavy parka and my face. The stars were twinkling, glittering diamonds above me. Snow squeaked and crunched beneath me. The world around me was silent and still, wrapped in its blanket of sub-zero cold.

I was almost to the low knoll before I saw the slight sliver of light coming from the bus-house. My courage plummeted from my heart clear to the tips of my insulated socks and boots and, almost, I turned and fled for home. But no, I must perform the mission for which I had come.

I crunched my way across the better than ten-acre tillable tract of land to the man's door and knocked. Almost instantly, I heard a heavy thump, thump, thumping come from the inside and in the next instant, the door swung wide. "Come in," he said simply.

I didn't hesitate. I was glad to get in anywhere. The night air seemed to drill its way through my heavy parka, my wool shirt and insulated undershirt right into my bones. "Thank you, Mr. Boljevich," I said, stepping, for the first time, into his bus house.

"Sit a while," he invited, speaking clear English with a hint of an accent. "You're Mister Brown's oldest. Right?"

"Right," I answered, turning down the wick in the lantern and blowing the light out. "I felt I just had to come over to see if you are going to be warm enough. It's the coldest night we've had. Ever. A record breaker. We'd like to have you stay in our house, where we know you'll be warm, Mr. Boljevich."
And the mule; what about the gray mule? Will she be warm enough, or will she freeze?"

"Molly?" He raised his head and laughed. It was like a deep-flowing stream with merry little ripples. I forgot about my former fears and suspicions. Instantly, I relaxed.

"Molly?" Again, he said the name and laughed. "Molly's as warm as any mule can be. The barn may look a mess, but it's warm. I have it insulated with bales and bales of hay and straw. And Molly wears a heavy, wool, horse blanket over her back these cold nights."

"Mother said to bring her home if necessary, and house her in the barn with our livestock until the temperature moderates."

"Well, now that's sure kind of your folks, and I'll remember that when I need to."

"Will you be warm enough, Mr. Boljevich?"

"Are you cold, Son?"

With that, I laughed and unfastened the parka string beneath my chin. "As a matter of fact, no. I'm not cold," I answered. "It's toasty-warm in here," I added, noticing the orderliness of the compact bus house. From beneath the overstuffed chair in which the old man was sitting, a gray-black cat came out, stretched herself, yawned sleepily, then curled at her master's feet and fell asleep.

"That's Bridges," the man introduced. "She's getting old. Like the gray mule. Like I am."

"It must be wonderful to grow old, knowing Christ in saving grace, Mr. Boljevich. I'm still young, but the joy of knowing that Jesus lives within my heart is like a well of springing water inside me. Do you know Jesus? Is He your personal Saviour?"

The old man bowed his head. Then he shook it in a negative motion. "I heard about him years ago, Son," he admitted sadly. "When I was young. I should have done something about Him then."
"It's not too late, Mr. Boljevich. The Bible says, 'Behold, now is the day of salvation.' You're having an opportunity to repent and be converted now. Will you do it? Jesus invites you to come to Him. Just as you are, you can come. In fact, this is the only way we can come; just as we are. But God is faithful; He has promised forgiveness and pardon to all who confess and forsake their sins."

Mr. Boljevich was silent for a long time. His grizzled face twitched and I was sure I saw tears shimmer in his eyes.

"I'd like to pray for you." I pressed the issue. " 'Come unto me," said Jesus, 'all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, and ye shall find rest unto your souls; for My yoke is easy and my burden is light.' Will you come, Mr. Boljevich?"

"Let me think about it, Son. Yes, let me think about it. I have some straightening up to do first."

"I'm quite sure that if you promised God you'd take care of those things as soon as possible, He'd save you tonight. I want to pray with you."

"You may pray, Son. I will be happy for that."

"And will you confess your sins to Jesus while I pray, Mr. Boljevich, and ask Him to come into your heart?"

"I will try."

I was on my knees beside the man's chair and praying earnestly for God to have mercy on his soul when his big, calloused hand came down heavily on my shoulder. "It's done!" he cried joyously. "My sins are forgiven. He did the work of salvation in my heart just like you said He'd do. And now, I'll begin rectifying my wrongs and try to straighten out the past, as much as that is possible. Thank you for coming, Son. Yes, thank you. And thank You, dear God, for saving my soul."

"You sure you don't want to come with us tonight?" I asked sometime later, just before lighting the lantern for the homeward trek. "Will you stay warm enough, Mr. Boljevich?"
"Yes, indeed. And this new warmth in my heart will only add to the glow I feel. I won't be able to sleep much tonight; I'm too happy. Too full of joy and peace to sleep."

I walked home beneath the canopied sky and the blue northern stars. It was as cold as when I had come; no doubt, colder by now. But the warmth in my heart felt much like a summer day in late June, when roses bloomed and the sun shone warmly and the world was bathed in golden refulgence.

I felt like I was walking on air. The brittle-cold night echoed with my song of praise and thanksgiving as I hurried home. My heart had heard His gentle prodding and leading. I had heeded and obeyed. A sinner was converted . . . reborn . . . and I was blest. Truly blest!