

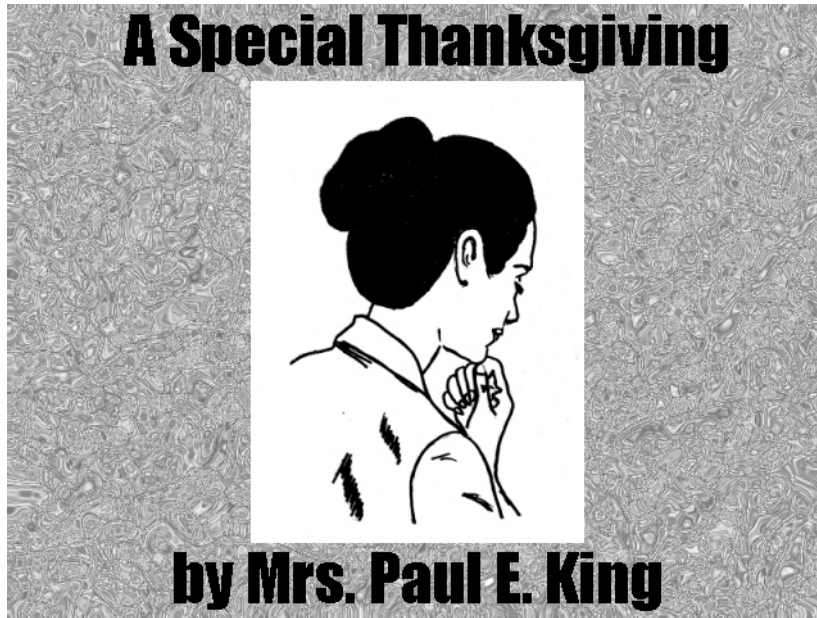
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A SPECIAL THANKSGIVING
By Mrs. Paul E. King

It was cold down there on that rocky outcrop from the beach, with the frothy, restless, never-still sea swirling around her. The soft, gentle zephyrs of summer had long since given way to the shaking tambourines of oak leaves tugged by brisk November winds. She felt numb with cold but, mostly, from shock. Her chest felt tight and constricted, like she couldn't breathe, and her hands were clammy-wet and cold with nervous frustration. Over and

over, like a broken record, the devil hurled the same words at her . . . "You failed him. You failed him. You failed him. . . ."

Tears slid down her cheeks. She had no defender but Christ; no plea but His shed Blood. She hadn't had the best to give him, it was true, nor the most. (Poverty could be such a cruel thing at times.) They always had enough good stable food to eat, however -- minus the expensive dainties with which his buddies and friends seemed always to be gorging themselves. This was true. But, then, the dainties were not a necessity; staples were.

She took a handkerchief from the pocket of her thin wind breaker coat and wiped her tears. The late fall sea wind had a way of crystallizing tears into icy droplets fast and she was cold enough without this happening and making her even more chilly, she told herself.

She looked out across the endless expanse of blue-green water, watching it rise and fall, rise and fall, like a great, strong man's rhythmic, steady breathing in sleep. Like Robert. Her Robert. He was great, he was strong. He was tall. He was gentle. He was kind. He was Christ-like. He was her husband. Her beloved. Her arm of strength when she needed it. Her provider. Her friend.

Where had those twenty-two years of married bliss gone to so fast? she wondered, while a flow of fresh tears surged from her eyes. They had been so happy in each other's love, Robert and she. So very happy. Marriage had done much for both of them, and the arrival of David had enhanced and enriched their already happy life together.

And then one day her happy world crashed around her. The coronary was swift and terrible. Robert had just had time to murmur, "Thanks for everything, Sweetheart. I'll be waiting for you inside the Gates," before he had gone, leaving her stunned and shocked and numb.

Dully she had carried on -- it was the only thing to do. And she had their son. But as the months went by things began to change. David spent less and less time at home, declaring that he had to put more hours at his after-school job. And she had believed him. Trusted him. Then the time came when she realized that he had almost become a stranger. He was withdrawn and sullen and sharp-tongued. He seemed to have had a complete reversal of personality. It stung and cut her to the quick of her heart. She prayed and

cried and tried to reach through to him but found it impossible He was behind a wall, or a barrier -- or a shield so thick as to be impenetrable and unreachable

Night after night found her on her knees pleading and interceding to God for her son's salvation. The real blow came when she discovered that he was hooked on drugs. The discovery hit her like an exploding bomb. She had reeled dizzily as she walked toward the nearest chair and sat down, giving unrestrained vent to her tears and wondering where she had failed and how she had failed. The enemy of her soul hounded and harassed her relentlessly, it seemed. Day and night; night and day.

It had been a time of real heart-searching and soul-searching for her. Always, she found comfort and solace in the fact that Robert and she had reared their only child by the standards of the Bible. The Book of Proverbs, especially. He was disciplined with love and in love. Always! But he was disciplined. And taught to obey, too. He was not "left to himself," as Proverbs 29:15 stated Such a child -- the one "left to himself" -- "bringeth his mother to shame." So stated the Proverbs.

"Lord," she cried aloud into the chilly-cold November sea wind, "we brought him up as Your Word instructed us to do. David is still in Your hands. He is still all upon the altar. Save him! At any cost, save him. And please bring him home."

She let her hands drop into her lap and sat very still, the plaintive cry of the gulls and the sullen sea washing over the gray rocks around her while her heart cried out to God for her son. She recalled the day when she had returned home from doing her meager grocery shopping and found the hastily-scrawled note on the kitchen table. "I'm leaving, Mom," it had read. "Don't worry. David."

Don't worry! How could any mother not worry? she wondered, specially when she knew the kind of boys he had become involved with. It had been almost a year since she had found the note; almost a full year since she had last seen him. If only he had written; it would have eased some of the pain and the loneliness, but he hadn't; and she had missed him dreadfully. She was thankful that God had spared Robert the pain and the hurt and the anguish of having known what David would be like after his father's decease. That's when it had happened, she realized, after Robert's Home going.

A new thought struck her mind; one she hadn't thought of before: David could well have felt rudderless, and like a ship with no sail without his father. Strange that she hadn't thought of this before. But the longer she thought about it the more certain she was that this is what had happened and taken place in his life. His father had been his "rudder," steering him in paths of right. The two had been close. Almost inseparably close. They had had a beautiful father-son relationship. Then, suddenly, David was bereft of his nearest and closest and dearest earthly being . . . his father.

It must have been every bit as hard on him as it was for her, she realized now. And every bit as painful and as hurting, too. With vivid recollection she remembered how she had gone to his room on numerous occasions and had found him lying across the bed, stifling his crushed and broken sobs in a pillow. He had tried to muffle his sobs in the pillow for her sake, she was sure. Tried to be brave and hold up under it like a man .. for her sake. And, suddenly, it had all become too much for his young shoulders. The load had become more than he could carry. Chub and Cy and Walsh had come along at the devil's appointed time via David's after-school job at the store. They seemed carefree, light and frivolous. They made him laugh a lot, taking his mind off the seriousness and the reality of death, which had dealt both him and his mother a crushing blow. What a blow!

The dark-haired woman groaned aloud, wishing she had thought of some of these things before now, thought of them during her son's great, dark period of grief and sorrow. True, she could never have taken Robert's place in David's heart and life, but she could have made his suffering and his pain lighter and easier by better communication and a more understanding heart as to what and how his feelings were. She had been so pre-occupied with her own heavy grief that she had all but lost sight of his.

Again she groaned; this time deep within herself. And more healing tears rushed down her cheeks. She felt melted. She buried her face in her hands and wept until her shoulders shook with the impact. "Oh, God, I'm sorry I didn't understand before. Please send David home to me. And, above all else, bring him back into Thy fold once more," she cried aloud. "I don't know where he is nor what he is doing, but You know. Bring him back, please; to Thine own dear self and home to me."

She knew the evening fishermen would soon be coming down to set up their rods and pull their nets, but she didn't care. The sea and the gulls and the cool sand had a steadying, tranquilizing effect upon her and she remained there until she felt a new strength flow into her being. Then she got to her feet and made her way inland, wondrously at peace and strangely calm, while the crying gulls circled and meowed above her.

A hazy dusk was creeping toward the house when she put her hand on the door knob to open the door. From a nearby cottage home smoke curled upward from the chimney, filling the air with its pungent aroma. She hoped that the fire in her own stove had not gone out entirely. She had been gone a long while. It would be cold inside if the fire was out.

She opened the door and stepped inside. It was warm. Almost as if the stove had been replenished and filled with wood. She turned in amazement, sure that the wood she had put in had long since burned itself down to red-hot embers if not ashes. And then she heard a sound from the hallway. Turning, she came face to face with David.

"Mom!" he cried, rushing to her and flinging his arms around her. "Oh, Mom, I love you so! It's so good to be home. I hope you don't mind that I came on in when you weren't home. I knocked, but no one answered. So I unlocked the door and came in. I've always held on to the key, Mom; I knew that someday I'd come home again. You don't mind, do you?"

She was speechless with awe. Love flowed from her face like the tears from her eyes. In a whispered voice she cried, "Mind! Mind, David? Oh, you know the answer! My son! My son! Welcome home!"

She pulled back from his arms and stared at him. He was taller, thinner, and lined some in the face, but his eyes and his hands were steady. "David!" she whispered tenderly, letting him crush her once more to his strong, manly bosom. "Thank God, you're home!"

Wordlessly, they embraced, his tears wetting the soft hair beneath his chin, her tears wetting his shirt.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he said, drawing back and cupping her face between his hands. "I know I hurt you by leaving and by getting in with the wrong crowd. I knew better, Mother; knew I was in for trouble by turning away from

God and His wonderful saints. You especially. But I was devastated by Dad's death. Instead of running to the Lord for help, I turned to the wrong crowd. I was miserable, Mom. Believe me, I was."

"I know, Son. I know."

"The best news of all is that I got back to God. One night, recently, I came home to my room from work feeling so utterly wretched and miserable that I didn't know what to do. I sat down and began to think. Everything that I had tried had brought me only misery and heartache and discontent. This was an undeniable fact; one with which I just could not argue. Nor deny, either. I had a sudden, deep longing for God. Oh, how I wanted Him! then a Voice whispered sweetly to me, 'I've been waiting for you all this time to come back to Me.' And, Mom, I began to cry like a baby. I couldn't stop crying."

"Go on, David," the mother encouraged, while happy tears fell from her eyes.

"I fell on my knees and begged God for mercy; begged Him to deliver me from all my sinful habits and to forgive me for all my sins. And He did it, Mother. In a moment of time, He forgave me of my sins and gave me peace. Oh, such wonderful peace! I was free from every chain that sin had bound me with, and I've been free ever since. I broke off with the old crowd, quit my job, packed my things into the car and headed homeward,"

"To stay, I hope."

"If you'll have me, Mother. I'll find work around here, God willing, and help to support you."

"If I'll have you! Oh, David! David! You are the answer to my fervent prayers. Of course I'll have you. You are home where you belong."

"I need you and your strength, Mother, and the strength of the church. There is strength by associating with other Christians. I only realized this after I had allowed myself to go back on God. If I had clung to God and stayed close to you and to my pastor, and been ever faithful in going to church, I would not have gone down spiritually."

Feeling younger and more alive than she had felt since Robert died, the mother said softly, "You must be hungry. Let's get supper. You may set the table while I prepare the food. Then, too, there's Thanksgiving to think about. We must plan for it, the Lord willing."

"And this time there'll be turkey and all the trimmings, Mother," David said brightly and cheerfully as he pulled bills from his wallet. "I unpacked my suitcases and put everything in my room in the closet and the drawers. I was sure you wouldn't mind."

"Your homecoming is the most wonderful Thanksgiving you could ever have given me, David." She sighed happily as she tied a bright apron around her waist and opened the refrigerator door to get a chicken out for frying. God had answered prayer in a marvelous way. Yes, a marvelous way! This would be a very special Thanksgiving Day.