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**A SPECIAL CHRISTMAS EVE**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

It was Christmas Eve, the time when every mother and father should be home with their offspring. And I wanted to be home. Believe me, I did. I would have been, too; only, answering telephones and keeping records as a unit clerk for the hospital was as necessary and as important on Christmas Eve as on any other night. Tell a child this, however. . . .

Lights shone faintly from the lobby as I walked to the fountain for a drink of cold water.

Along the shiny-clean hospital corridors I saw holly wreaths hanging from the doors. A bit of holiday remembrance and cheer from a relative or friend of the patient inside the room, I mused, my mind on Lois and Jared, seven and six respectively. And on Dick, too.

I sighed with longing. And loneliness, too. Dick and I were as close to each other as any husband and wife could be. After twelve years of marriage, we were still as much in love as the day when we were married. We often told each other that our marriage was, indeed, made in Heaven. When Lois arrived, our joy was at the bursting and overflowing point. Then Jared came along and we felt we were doubly blest and highly favored, which, indeed, we were.

On the way back to the office, I paused in front of one of the many windows and looked outside, my heart and mind at home with Dick and the children. Christmas Eve! I thought, feeling sad and lonely for my family. And what a lovely Christmas Eve it was! Snow was falling from an overcast gray sky and powdering the earth in a fluff of sparkling white. From tall apartment buildings across from the hospital, colored lights blinked and twinkled and winked through windows festooned and garlanded in greenery, and from the tower of a cathedral the Christmas bells chimed in such beauty and haunting melody that my heart found solace only in tears.

I turned from the window and fled down the hall to the office, wondering why I hadn't given up working when Jared was born. I would have much rather been a steady, every-day homemaker than a unit clerk. By nature, I was a typical Biblical home maker, or "keeper at home." But we hadn't counted on our firstborn's heart problem. The bills from Lois' many surgeries had mounted phenomenally. Astronomically, really. I was forced into working to help liquidate the debts. By God's help and His grace, if things continued going the way they were at the present time, between Dick and me the bills should all be paid within another year or less.

I sat down at the switchboard with a sigh. What was a debt of money compared to the health of a little girl! I reasoned with happiness and joy. Lois was well and strong and perfectly normal since the last surgery; that was all that mattered. I . . . and willingly . . . I would work. Her health and

wholeness was worth far more than all the money in the world The debt was large; the surgeries and medical supplies and medical care and attention costly; but Lois was alive. And well!

I bowed my head for a silent prayer of thankfulness to the Lord, and when I raised it I saw Frank, the maintenance man.

"It's quiet tonight," he said, sticking a wrench and a cloth into his hip pocket. "Always quiet like this on Christmas Eve, though. I've been working here for thirty some odd years and I've yet to see it any different on Christmas Eve. Seems like all the sick folks get well for Christmas. Kinda' strange," he said. "And funny, too. But then, I guess if a body got sick enough to need a hospital he'd be sure to come. But it beats me, the way a hospital can get so sure-enough quiet at Christmas time. Ever stop long enough to think about that?" he asked, looking at me in that strangely-quizzical way of his.

I smiled at Frank. Good-hearted, ever-ready-to-help Frank. He was every bit as lonely as I. No, he was more lonely than I. His wife had passed away two years ago. He lived alone in a neat yellow-shuttered bungalow in the east end of town.

"I guess I haven't given much, if any, thought to that," I admitted. "But you're right; there are very few patients here. Comparatively speaking, that is. They discharge as many as possible the day before Christmas. Some will be returning, of course. Then too, the doctors hold off admitting new patients until after the holiday season. After all, who wants to be confined to a hospital bed over Christmas?"

Frank clicked his dentures together and ran his finger over the desk in a mechanical sort of way. "Some have no choice, Alice," he stated flatly, addressing me.

I knew his mind had taken its walk back to two years ago. Edith had died just before New Year's Day. She had been hospitalized for five weeks prior to her decease Frank had remained by her side all through the Christmas season Being childless, they had only each other to love and to care for.

My heart welled up in pity for him. "That's true," I said, feeling sad with remembering "This time of the year must be extremely painful for you," I added in a soft voice.

Frank brushed a hand across his eyes. "One learns to cope," he answered sadly "And knowing that Edith's safe in our Father's Home... well, this eases the pain and the loss. Now you have a nice Christmas Day with your family," he said, turning to go.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm sure I will. But what about you; where will you be going? What do you plan to do? You're all alone now. . . ."

"In one way, yes; in another, no. Alone, I mean."

"Oh I know you have the Lord with you at all times," I remarked. "In this sense you are never alone. But why not come over and enjoy Christmas dinner with Dick and the children and me, the Lord willing? This way you'd have a bit of physical contact; besides, we'd be delighted to have you."

"I'll be going out to Edith's grave, God willing," he replied, giving me a grateful look, however.

"But after that, what?"

He smiled sadly. "I bought a chicken. . . ." His sentence trailed.

"You'll have dinner at our house, Frank," I stated kindly. "A woman's baked goods will taste good to you again. Not to mention the stuffed turkey and all the other things."

"I'll be there," he answered quickly. "God willing, I'll be there."

"Two-thirty, Frank," I told him.

He smiled, nodded his head in assent, then shuffled away with his tools.

Almost instantly, my mind traveled home to Dick and the two children. As I had come down the stair steps, dressed in my white uniform, Lois wrapped her slender arms around my legs. "Don't go tonight, Mommy," she had begged. "This is Christmas Eve! Who will give Jared and me our Christmas cookies and milk?" she had asked as tears swam in her blue eyes.

I pulled her into my arms and hugged her close, my tears mingling with those on her long eyelashes and cheeks. "Daddy will give you your cookies and milk," I had answered, feeling all crushed on the inside. Oh, how I wanted to stay home with my family!

"But we need you!" Lois had sobbed "Oh Mommy, I love you so! I miss you when you're gone," she had added as her voice broke with another sob.

With little to do now, Lois' plaintive plea for me to stay home haunted me. Then the phone rang. It was Lois.

"Mommy, I love you," she sobbed. "I shouldn't have made you cry. But Mommy, this isn't a nice Christmas Eve without you. I wish you didn't have to work."

"I know, honey; and I wish I didn't need to work, either. On Christmas Eve, especially. Yes, and I love you, too."

Tears washed my cheeks as I put the phone down.

"It isn't easy, working on Christmas Eve, is it, dear?" a voice near me said.

It was Hattie Douчек. She had wheeled herself down the hall from 326 and was sitting there, silverhaired and frail, in front of my desk.

"Forgive me for eavesdropping," she apologized, "but I couldn't help overhearing. That was one of your children, wasn't it?"

"My seven-year-old. She wishes I wouldn't need to work She wants me home. I want to stay home. Always! With my family. Tears were running down my cheeks.

Hattie's eyes brightened "I remember when mine were that age," she said, with a far-away look in her eyes "Christmas was so special. Children help to make it very special, don't they?"

"I miss them so!" I cried. "We've always been together on Christmas Eve." I dabbed the hot tears with my handkerchief. "I'll miss out on the reading of St. Luke's recorded account of the Angel's announcement of Christ's birth to the shepherds, and of the singing of the Heavenly host and, finally, the family prayers, where we all offer a prayer of thanks to God for sending Jesus to be our Savior And we always go to the Christmas Eve service at our church, too. But tonight I covered my face with my hands and sobbed. "It's all a part of our lives for this beautiful and very special evening, which means so much to us."

Hattie sighed. "I understand," she said. "And I, too, remember. We had a custom. . . ."  
Her eyes again took on that faraway look of long-remembered and fondly-cherished memories of a beautiful yesteryear.

The children were small, she said in a softly-reminiscent voice. "We lived near a lovely

stone church. Every Christmas Eve, at the same time, the village sexton rang the bell. Loudly.

Joyously. Jubilantly. It was almost like we were hearing the Angel chorus singing our Savior's

birth to us. 'Let's make a wish,' Greta, our oldest, cried, one early Christmas Eve. 'The one who hears the bell first shall make a wish.'

"The other two children went along with her suggestion. Talk about three good children!

They were almost, if not altogether, as quiet as the proverbial church mouse is fabled to be. And

when, at the usual and precise time, the bell rang, all three children shouted simultaneously, 'The bell! The bell!

"Greta looked at me and said simply, 'Now what do we do, Mother; all three of us heard the bell at the very same time?'

"'Yet only one was supposed to make a wish?' I queried, smiling down into a pair of the biggest, most beautiful and honest looking eyes God ever gave to any child.

"'Yes,' Greta replied.

"'That's simple, honey,' I told her. 'Each of you make a wish.'

"Three pairs of shining eyes smiled up into my face and three sets of arms hugged me soundly. Then the children disappeared to make their special wish. Each year thereafter, it became a custom with them."

"If I had my wish. . . ." I smiled with longing.

"We all have our wishes, don't we, dear?" Hattie said. "If I could make wishes come true I'd make a lot of people happy tonight. You, especially. And I wouldn't be here. . . ."

Hattie sighed resignedly. She had a spreading, wasting illness. She knew she would never have another Christmas, but she was content in the peace-giving, peace-sustaining knowledge that God did all things well and never made any mistakes. What's more, she was contentedly-happy with her life. She and her late husband had raised their three children and had seen them happily married and successful. Greta lived only a short distance from the hospital and was a supervisor on one of the floors. She visited her mother often. Daily.

We talked on for a while longer as she remembered Christmas after Christmas. Good times, sacred, God ordered times, funny stories, warm evenings together, she in a blue chenille robe, Ed, her husband, in a prickly maroon woolen one, the children in warm flannels with her homemade booties on their feet, a burning fire, corn popping and chestnuts roasting in the big oven.

We smiled together, laughed and cried together, each lost in the splendor and the beauty of Hattie's Christmases.

There was a moistness in her eyes as Hattie turned, when the phone on my desk rang, and wheeled herself down the hallway to her room. Hers were happy tears, I knew.

I returned to the report I had been working on and tried desperately to forget about not being home with my family. My work was important, I knew; and knowing that in my small way I was fulfilling a need in helping humanity, I set to work with a will.

Half an hour passed. I had been busy answering phone calls and filling out blank spaces

in the log book. About eight-thirty Greta whisked by the desk, giving me her usual sunny-bright smile.

"Just stopping in to see Mom," she informed me cheerfully without stopping. "Sure wish I could take her home with me. For Christmas, at least," she said over her erect shoulder.

Wishes! I thought, recalling Hattie's revelation of the yearly family custom in their home, inspired by a Christmas bell and a little girl's desire and dream.

I was filling out another line on the logbook when I heard the beauty of a bell. It was coming from down the corridor-hall; from room 326.

I looked up from my work in wonderment. Shelly Ewing, one of the R.N.'s, poked her head around a door across from me and laughed.

"Sounds great!" I exclaimed. "Maybe we should each make a wish." Again Shelly laughed. "A wish? How's that?" she asked. "And what is it? That sound, I mean?"

"It is a bell." I laughed with Shelly. "And as for the wishing part, well, ask Hattie about it sometime. You're a mother; you'll understand: Children do the cutest, sweetest things sometimes."

Just as I finished speaking, Hattie came wheeling out of her room. She was ringing a bell. Her thin face was glowing. Keeping pace with the gliding chair, was Greta.

"It's been a custom," Greta said with a mischievous smile on her face. "And I made my wish. Even though it won't come true. . . ."

There was sadness in her eyes as she finished. I knew what her wish was. Hattie, reading Greta's expression, said lightly, "I quote; 'If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.' Again I quote, but from a true and unfailing Book this time; 'To everything there is a season. . . .'" "A time to be born, and a time to die; . . . She paused momentarily. "A time to weep, and a laugh; . . ." she continued.

"I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever: Nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.' That's the end of the quote," Hattie said. "And now, since this is definitely not the time to weep. . . ."

"But the 'time to laugh,' " Greta said, breaking into the conversation. "We are going to be happy and joyous tonight, Alice. Mother and I want to do something special for a very special and worthy person."

I was not prepared for what was coming. But I was overwhelmed with gratitude and joy when Greta said, "Go home and enjoy Christmas Eve with your family."

"But I can't, Greta. My shift isn't over till 11:30." Greta smiled. Then I saw that she was wearing her white uniform.

"You can go home," she told me with a smile. "Mom will sit with me at the desk and we'll spend Christmas Eve together. I've cleared it with the night supervisor."

Tears sprang to my eyes. I hugged Greta and Hattie soundly. "Thanks," I said, barely able to control my voice. Then I headed for the coat room after my coat.

I slid behind the steering wheel of my car and looked toward the hospital. Faint lights shone through the windows and smoke spiraled heavenward from its mammoth chimney stacks. Soon its halls would be silent, its structure razed for parking, as the new, almost-completed, tall, white-brick hospital was opened for patients. Computers would replace antiquated machines, as well as numerous personnel. The medical and nursing staffs would be increased and everything would be different and strangely new. But always, there would be some Hatties and Gretas who would bring cheer when cheer was needed.

I turned the key in the ignition and started for home, my heart singing its joyous thanks and praise to God.

It was a perfect Christmas Eve. Snow lay white along the roadsides. Tall green pines loomed majestically beautiful in the woods. Smoke curled upward from the chimneys. And in the homes I passed I could see the warm glow of candles and the multi-colored lights of decorations on trees. In my heart, too, a light was shining; Jesus the Light of the world.