

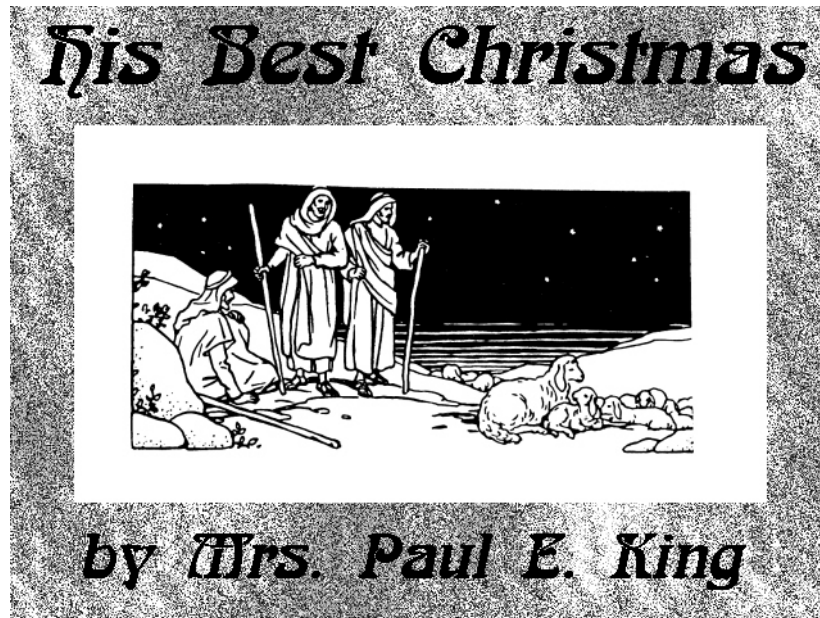
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HIS BEST CHRISTMAS
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Dusk filled the dormitory rooms with an early gloom and Eric felt its grip most of all. With a sickening sensation deep in the pit of his stomach, he walked to the window in his room and looked down upon the park across the street from the school's buildings. An eerie silence filled the building. Save for the periodic fizzing sound coming from the hot water radiator in the room, all else was silent.

He felt lonely. Left out, too. Of all the students on his floor, he alone had no place to go for Christmas. The others had left for home in a flurry of excitement and laughter earlier in the week. There were a scattered few on floors beneath him who, like himself, remained behind, some because of their employment and a few who were spending Christmas day with friends in the city.

He stood in front of the window for a long time, thinking. Wishing, too. Longing, even. His father was wealthy. He was good to Eric. This the young man had to admit. Everything he needed was more than adequately supplied. Always. He had need of nothing. Monetarily, that is. His hunger and desire for love and for the fellowship of his father in the home setting, however, was the one thing he missed most and in which he was sorely lacking.

Tears formed in his eyes. The memory of his mother, ever fresh and warm, like a softly-burning candle flame, came floating sweetly back to comfort him. He was eight, almost nine, when she died. But the memory of her love and of her kisses showered upon him remained fresh and new somewhere inside his being. It was her memory . . . the memory of a true mother . . . that kept him going when days were dark and when the going was rough. Too, it was the memory of things which she had instilled into him that held him steady and kept him morally sound and clean when temptation came across his pathway.

The young man grasped the cablegram inside his pocket and caressed it tenderly, wishing for all that was within him that it was his father's manly form which he were caressing instead of the cold, crackly, rattly paper. Not that the message wasn't loving and caring; it was. It was just that paper was paper. Just that. No more, no less. His father? Well, he was Dad.

The mere thought of the word.., the name, or title... did something for Eric. He was proud of his noble father. But oh, he missed fellowshipping with the man whom, on earth, he loved most of all. And he saw such a very little of him! Always, there were far-away business trips to be made for his company.

"But just this once!" Eric exclaimed aloud to himself. " Why couldn't you have refused just this once?"

Tears spilled from his eyes. Thanksgiving and Christmas should be family-together times, he felt.

A bus rattled to a halt in front of the warmly-lighted park and a flurry of merry laughter floated from the sidewalk up to where Eric stood in front of the window. He watched as the group of young people got off the bus and walked a short distance into the park. How happy they looked! Not a frown on a single face.

The bus pulled away from the curb and several cars pulled up and stopped. More young people stepped out, equally as happy as those from the bus.

Eric, watched, fascinated. The longing in his heart deepened and intensified. How he wished he could be a part of a group of carefree young people! But his life had been spent in schools. Exclusive schools. Training schools. Prep schools.

He saw the young people form a semi-circle around one of the warm glowing lamp posts, boys standing in orderly fashion behind the girls and the girls taking their positions as per instructions from a young man who was, apparently, the song leader. And, wonder of wonders, every girl wore a dress. Not a single pair of slacks on one of them.

Eric was curious now. This group of young people was different, without a doubt. Every boy had a hair cut that was a hair cut. Like most of the schools which he had attended demanded of their male students, he thought.

He stood motionless, watching, as though glued to the spot. Smiling faces. Happy people. Outbursts of merry laughter. It was almost too much for him. The longing inside his being heightened and deepened. Then, suddenly, a chorus of voices floated up to his listening ears. Such beauty! What marvelous harmony! It was almost like the magnification and the multiplicity of one voice reproduced and blending harmoniously into the first recording.

Eric wept. But little matter that he did; he was alone: no prying eyes were in the room to see. He who had been taught composure and how not to become emotional or, at least, not to demonstrate one's emotionalism, was

crying. And for some strangely unfamiliar reason to him, he was not embarrassed by his emotional outburst of weeping. It came too naturally.

A group of people, listeners, had formed around the semi-circle of young people, Eric noticed. Some had even joined in with the singers. How very beautiful the Christmas carols sounded! He had heard them year after year, but never had he heard them sung from the heart like the young people were singing in the park beneath his dorm window.

On an impulse, he grabbed his navy blue, all-wool topcoat from its hanger inside the neat, orderly clothes closet. Each of the students attending the school had a warm navy blue topcoat, matching their equally meticulous navy blue suits. Another of the school's requirements and stipulations for its men. And always, there was the attending white shirt and navy tie. But requirements and rules and regulations had been a way of life with him from childhood and, never once, did he have difficulty accepting the imposed rules. Truth of the matter was, it was an easy thing for him to do. Hadn't his very own father told him that, all through life, there would be rules and regulations which he would encounter and meet and that, if he made up his mind to adjust willingly to them, he would be successful in his chosen vocation in life. "No matter what avenue of business you pursue, Eric," his father had told him, "you will encounter rules and regulations. This is life, Son. There's no escaping it."

And, since his very successful businessman-father had said it, he had believed and accepted it, asking no questions whatever. After all, the verity of the statement was proof-positive because of the one who had told him.

It felt good to get out into the cold night air; the brittle cold cleared his mind of his gloomy, lonely thoughts, and the depth of feeling with which the carolers sang transported him out of himself and his immediate surroundings into another realm.

Eric was totally and completely preoccupied in what he was listening to. So preoccupied, in fact, that he didn't notice two small children come up and stand behind him on the snow-covered ground. It was the little boy's voice that caught his ear. Cautiously he glanced down at the pair.

"I tell you, Jenny," the little boy was saying to his sister, whose hand he held on to tightly, "Jesus will send us some food."

"And a dolly for three-year-old Betsy?" the little girl asked with earnestness. "Did you ask Jesus, Bobby? I did."

"Yes, I asked Jesus."

"And what did He say to you?" the little girl asked. "Did you hear what He said?"

"Well, no, I didn't hear Him talk; but I know He's going to do it, Jenny. Every single bit of what I told Him we needed. And, Jenny, Mother's going to get better too, see if she doesn't. 'Cause I know if she gets food to eat . . . eggs and cheese and oranges and milk and meat . . . she'll get well. She gives her share of the bread to you and Betsy and me. She thinks I don't know what she's doing, but I do! I saw her do it. She nibbles on a tiny bit so we think she's eating. She's hungry, Jenny. That's why she's so weak and sickly. But listen to that singing, would you! It sounds like I believe the angels sounded when they came to the shepherds the night Jesus was born."

"It makes me feel so happy that I want to cry, Bobby. Let's close our eyes and pretend we're shepherds and that we're listening to angels."

Eric could stand to hear no more. Laying a kind hand on Bobby's thin shoulder, he said softly, "Pardon me, Bobby and Jenny, but could you tell me where you live?"

"See that brownstone apartment building right there?" he asked, pointing to a building nearby.

"I certainly do," Eric answered. "And that's where you live! I see a star in one of the windows. . . ."

"That's Sally Brown's apartment. She's old and almost deaf. But Sally's good to us. She gives us bread every week. She said the good Lord wanted her to share what she had with others in need. She's poor, too, Mister."

"Call me Eric, will you, please? So you live on the second floor too? Maybe next door to Sally Brown?"

"Across the hall from Miss Sally, Eric."

"Now, you must have a last name, same as I do; don't you Bobby? My last name is Cromwell. What's yours?"

"Kollier. Ours is spelled with a K instead of a C. Mother said most Kolliers' names are spelled with a C. Only, ours is the K."

"Thanks, Bobby. That's interesting. And I believe you are the very first K Collier I have ever met. But I like the way your Kollier is spelled. Now, you enjoy yourself here. It's been so nice meeting you." And with that, Eric hurried away to the department stores, his mind spinning with excitement and plans. He had noticed the overworn, thin coats on the children, the mittenless hands and the bootless feet. He was touched and moved with compassion.

Once inside Hardy's Department Store, Eric removed his warm topcoat, folded it inside-out and carried it across his arm. Then he hurried into the children's department. The Girls', first of all. He picked out a red coat and hat set, a pair of mittens that matched, a pair of warm boots and a pair of shoes. "Send these up for special gift wrapping," he told the store clerk who knew him. "I'll pick them up as soon as I shop some other departments here and have them gift-wrapped them also."

In the Boys' Department, Eric found a warm coat, hat, gloves, boots and shoes and had them sent upstairs for special wrapping. For the mother, whom he didn't know, but gleaned (by Bobby's conversation) that she must be thin and small, he bought a warm, cuddly robe, a pair of equally warm house-shoes in size small, and a lovely, warm, pale pink shawl, a warm blanket and a big box of candy, all of which were specially gift-wrapped.

The Toy Department presented a problem for him: which doll should he buy? The room was filled with too many beautiful dolls from which he was expected to choose.

"This one with the long golden curls and the old-fashioned dress and bonnet would be my choice," the young clerk told Eric. "I think she would delight any little girl."

"Have it sent up for gift wrapping then, please," Eric said. "And also the dark-haired beauty next to it. And now, how about a tractor and truck set in heavy steel for a little boy? Something good."

After the toy purchases were made, Eric hurried into the Children's Department, where he found a warm coat, hat, mittens and a robe for the three-year-old, Betsy, whom, the clerk told him, would probably wear a size 4; "Allowing for longer wear," she added. Again, it was sent up for the special wrapping.

As he took the elevator up to the third floor where the beautifully-wrapped packages awaited him, tagged and ready to be distributed to the family, Eric felt almost dizzy with happiness. Money was no problem for him; his father saw to it that he had an ample supply. But never had he felt such an ecstasy of joy over spending it as now.

Remembering Bobby's talk about a Miss Sally, Eric had the girls at gift wrapping call downstairs and have a medium size warm robe and a black shawl sent up for wrapping.

Calling a cab, he loaded the gifts into the back seat and on the floor. Giving the cabbie the address of a supermarket, they sped away. "Wait here for me," Eric said. "I have some groceries to buy before we get to the apartment."

The carolers were gone by the time Eric and the cab driver pulled up in front of the brownstone apartment building and a few snowflakes were sifting lazily out of the gray sky. Eric, carrying armload after armload of packages and groceries up the flight of steps to the landing which connected Miss Sally's apartment and the Kolliers, felt like he had never felt before.

After he had paid the cabbie and tipped him well, the young man almost flew up the stairs. Knocking softly on the Kolliers' door, he waited like an excited child. Bobby, dressed in a thin, ragged sweater and patched pants, opened the door.

"It's Christmas time, Bobby!" Eric exclaimed. "So I'm wishing you and all in the house a Merry Christmas. A few days early, perhaps, but that doesn't matter. May I come in?" he asked, lifting the packages up from their place on the floor in the hallway and holding them out to the astonished boy who cried, "Mother! Mother! Come, see! Jesus sent us presents!"

There was a flurry of excitement in the room as Jenny and Betsy came running to the doorway, followed by their thin, frail mother.

Eric introduced himself and, as he carried his many gifts and groceries into the sparsely-furnished but clean and neat apartment, he said, "Jenny, go over and bring your Miss Sally here. She shall have a share too."

It was, without a doubt, the most wonderful Christmas Eric had ever experienced. The tears of joy and the heartfelt thanks of Mrs. Kollier and Miss Sally, along with Betsy's exclamation that "God sent you!" were far more than any of the most expensive gifts he could have received.

While Mrs. Kollier and Miss Sally put groceries on each of their shelves, Eric read Luke's account of Jesus' birth to the children upon their urging that he do so. He was strangely moved upon. A tear slid from his eye. Betsy saw it.

"Do you know Jesus?" she asked quickly. "Do you love Him? We do." Her enormous blue eyes probed his face for an answer.

"I . . . I guess I can't say that I do know Jesus, Betsy," he admitted honestly. "But I'm sure it would be wonderful to know Him and to love Him."

"Oh it is! And you can know Him too," came the instant reply. "Now, while Jenny and Bobby and I pray, you ask Jesus to forgive you for all your sins and then ask Him to come into your heart."

And in a simple, trusting way, the three children began to pray for their kind benefactor.

Eric was moved to tears. His heart, too, was moved. In the only way he knew how to do, he said tearfully, "Lord, save me. Be merciful to me a sinner."

So sincere and earnest was the desire, coupled with the heartfelt plea, that God answered immediately. Eric knew his sins were all taken away and that he was a child of God.

"See, I told you you could know Jesus!" Betsy exclaimed sweetly.

"Yes, you did," Eric answered. "And Betsy and Bobby and Jenny, I do know Him now. He just came into my heart and told me that I am His and He is mine. Oh, I am so happy. Just think of it; Jesus was born anew in my heart! And all because of you!"

"You gave to us," Bobby said, "now Jesus gave to you! He gave you His salvation and His forgiveness."

"And this is the best gift anyone could have!" Eric exclaimed between his tears. Suddenly, he realized that he was not alone anymore: he had a Companion-Savior and beautiful new friends. Christian friends! What wonderful gifts! he thought happily.