

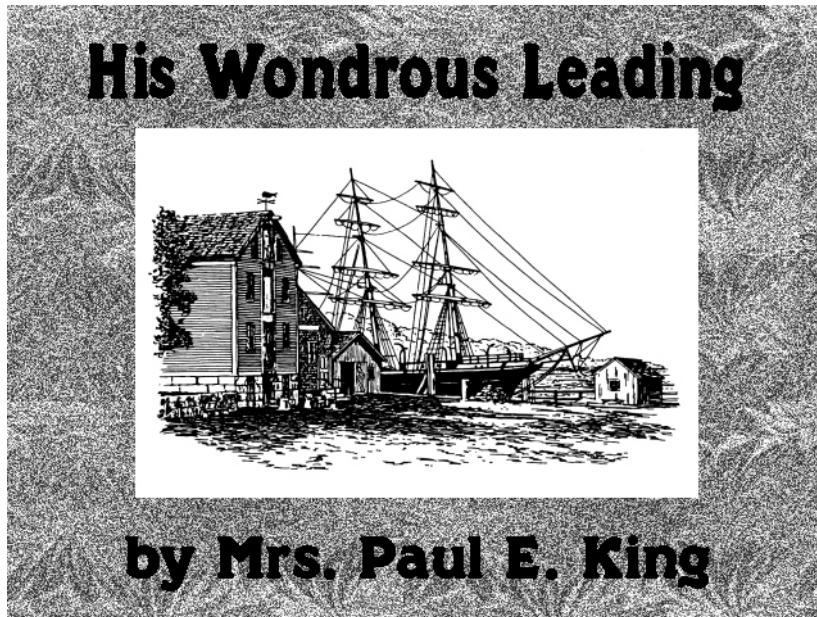
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**HIS WONDROUS LEADING**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

(A sequel to "The Thanksgiving Tree")

(Chapter 1)

Long after he was home and back in his thriving little gift shop, working, Joel's heart seemed to be an oasis of music . . . heavenly music. Over and over, he lifted his eyes toward Heaven and offered praise to the Lamb of God

slain for his sins. Oh, it was wonderful and glorious to be back in God's fold! And his dear father, God bless him, had received him and loved him as though he were just returning from a long vacation or job assignment instead of the fact that he, Joel, had disappeared and gone away that he might be free from the parent's Godlike influence and conduct and live life the way he wanted to.

But it didn't pay, he soliloquized now with sadness and remorse in his soul over having so long wounded and pained the only living mortal who really loved and cared for him and about him. How very foolish and deceived he had been! And him with a college degree behind his name, too! But these were, in many cases, the truly deceived ones: "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. . . ." So stated Romans 1:22. Isaiah pronounced a woe "unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!" (Isaiah 5:21). He had read the verse numerous times when he was "in the faith." He knew what the Word stated. But in his much learning, he had cast aside the principles and the oracles of God for the new teachings and book learning which he was receiving in college in pursuit of his degree.

It made Joel feel weak all over, recalling his wickedness and gross sin of turning his back upon Christ. True, he hadn't gone out into sins of immorality, drunkenness, drugs and such like things. But he was, indeed, the chiefest of sinners: He had literally turned his back upon the Savior, whose "precious blood," as Peter described it, was shed and spilled for his salvation and his redemption. His was the most wicked and the most heinous of all sins. One could do no greater evil or commit no greater sin than to reject the Savior: it was the greatest and most wicked of all.

Tears flowed down his manly cheeks and the amazing thing was that he wasn't ashamed of them anymore. The Almighty had softened his heart wondrously and the Holy Spirit, in His purging, cleansing, purifying flame and power, had sanctified him thoroughly and wholly, completely and entirely removing and extirpating that awful pride which once caused him shame and embarrassment when he shed tears. He had thought then that such was a sign and indication of unmanliness and weakness, and he was not unmanly or weak. Now, however, with the hammer of God's Holy Spirit crushing his heart to bits and the Divine Spirit reducing him to ashes, as it were, tears were often a part of him. For, was it not a broken and contrite spirit which God's Word said He would not despise? Indeed it was.

He dusted the shelves and shined the crystal in preparation for the day's influx of customers. It was wondrously amazing how God had changed his attitude toward his place of business -- he no longer thought of it in terms of his, nor regarded himself as its sole owner; now, it was viewed with new eyes and was God's business. True, he was buying the shop, but it belonged to God, and he, Joel, was running and managing it for God's purposes. The business no longer "ran" him; he ran it. Previously, before he had returned to God, he was obsessed by it. Now he was free. His priorities were straightened out and set into motion toward spiritual things. God, and His cause, came first now. In all things.

Joel's thoughts traveled to his beloved father and an overwhelming surge of love engulfed him for his parent. The time they had shared together over the Thanksgiving season was like when he had been a small child. They had prepared the feast together, talking, laughing and loving all the while. His father had seemed to grow younger in the days while he was home; the burden of his son's lostness was removed from his dear heart with the return of the prodigal, and the weight of not knowing where he was nor where he had been was gone by the very presence of the son himself.

Oh, what grief he had caused his father! What anguish and tears! Joel realized it now and it caused his heart to melt to tears. The Word stated that foolishness was bound in the heart of a child. Only, he was a young man and was no child when he treated his father the way he did. His had been open rebellion and resistance to what he had been taught as a child.

But this was all in the past. It was covered now by "precious Blood": Jesus' blood! Oh the joy and peace in knowing this! Like the Apostle Paul, he must forget those things which were in the past and press forward toward the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. There was much for him to do for Christ. In his sphere, and according to his abilities and talents, he had a field in which to work and labor for the Lord. It may not be like another man's labor or work, but it was his field. God expected him to do his job well, for His glory and for the spreading of the Gospel.

He began praising the Lord, a thing his father had told him to do when the enemy-adversary of his soul began harassing him and bringing up his past sins.

"God provided us with weapons, Son," the dear man had said. "We are not left defenseless. Ah, no! Every child of God has a storehouse full of Heavenly artillery. It's at his disposal for use whenever and wherever needed. The devil can't stand against the weapons of prayer, praise, and faith. He may come in 'like a flood,' Joel my boy, but God's Word declares that 'the Spirit of the Lord shall raise up a standard against him.' So praise the Lord for your great deliverance and for so great a salvation, and the enemy will take his departure."

As Joel worked, he followed his father's advice and soon his mind and thoughts were occupied with things other than his past rejection of the Savior. Constance Starr, for one, took up many a moment's thinking.

Where was she? Joel wondered now, as he had done on so many other occasions. Why had she not returned to the quaint little gift shop as she had said she would do if and when he had found the plaque which she wanted? These, and many more questions paraded through his mind as he busied himself in his place of business.

He hurried to the drawer, where he had filed her name among others who were customers of his, and turned quickly to the S's: Sale; Sarver . . . Scarborough . . . Smoker . . . Spell . . . State . . . Starr . . . Starr! Ah, there it was; Constance Starr.

He realized, as he located her address, that he was not familiar with the small town and its street. But a map would help him. He loved maps. They intrigued and fascinated him. Many an hour was spent in crisscrossing the country via maps. He studied the various interstate roadways . . . where each had its beginning and its ending . . . and knew which major cities each touched or passed through. It was one of the most pleasant and informative pastimes he knew of and he delighted in doing it.

Before opening the door for business, Joel drew a map out from another drawer and opened it quickly. Scanning it with an accustomed eye, he soon located the small town where Constance Starr stated, via writing, that she lived. Then, folding the map neatly, he tucked it back among the others in the drawer.

He must pay her a visit, he decided. There was a reason for her delay in returning to the shop, of this he felt certain. She was not one of those

casual "lookers" who paid a visit to every shop in the block and said they wanted this certain thing or that certain thing but seldom, if ever, bought anything. No, Constance Starr's inquiry after the very-different plaque had been a sincere and from-the-heart request. Hers was not a put-on; it was real. She was a Christian, and Christians did not feign things like that.

Joel's day went along smoothly. Truth of the matter was, that, since returning to the Lord, everything seemed to be so much better and brighter than before. And why not? he thought, smiling: a conscience void of offense toward both God and man certainly bore its fruit of peace and rest. Joy, too. This would make any man's day brighter and happier and fuller, he mused with inner contentment.

His thoughts ran, all day, from God to his father to Constance Starr. Each of the latter two seemed to be beautifully intertwined to God and with God. His father, bless him, had promised to visit him in the near future. No amount of persuasion or talk on Joel's part, however, could influence the dear man to come and live with his son.

"My roots are down too deeply, Joel," he had said when Joel had tried to persuade him to sell out and move in with him.

"I want to spend the remaining days of my life here. I have a wealth of memories built around this place. I was raised here, as you will remember. My parents died here, after having raised their family here. Old though the house may be, it is laden with the fragrance of precious and sacredly-sweet memories from out of the past: memories of my boyhood days and of my growing-up years with my brothers and sisters, and memories of my bringing my bride -- your mother -- into the circle of our family, where we . . . your mother and I . . . cared for my aged parents until God called them Home to be with Him. And then God sent you into our lives to make them more beautiful memories."

That the house had been built for durability no one could deny. It had withstood the hammer of time admirably and nobly. Proudly, even. Its gingerbread ornamentation was even now as enhancing and attractively-beautiful as ever as it had been. His father had kept it well painted. Always. The house had a peculiar charm about it and a look of open invitation. Whoever built it had an eye for beauty of the old-fashioned kind. And Joel was thankful for this.

His father had remodeled the dear place for his bride and had added modern conveniences which only added to the beauty of it all. And, like his father had said, his roots were too deeply implanted to be uprooted and still be completely happy. All of his life, his father had lived there. Joel supposed this would be quite an unusual record. In the life of the average man, he moved at least once or twice. Not so with his father: His roots were deeply intertwined with the soil and the fields, the garden, the lawn, the house.., everything. He knew the old homeplace like the palm of his hand.

Joel smiled as the door chimes notified him that he had a customer. Thoughts of his father were now some of his sweetest and dearest thoughts. No longer did he push them aside and try to forget. Now, they were a cherished and treasured thing. Being born of God and made new in Christ worked wonders in a man's heart and life, he thought, as he greeted the couple who entered his store. . . .

(Chapter 2)

Long after locking the shop door for the night, Joel's thoughts wandered to Constance Starr. He had hoped to be able to drive over to the town where she lived after closing but pressing book and paper work had dictated otherwise. His stay with his beloved father over Thanksgiving had left him somewhat behind in his business matters. But this was of no great consequence to him: he had taken care of the most important matter of all in his life while he was home; his soul had found its rest. Nothing was of greater importance. Too, God's Word said, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." He had sought first things first; God would help him in the secondary, less important, affairs of his life.

He worked late into the night, and when the final bit of paper work was completed and he had his devotions for the night, Joel showered and went to bed, tired but extremely happy

Sometime during the night, he was awakened by a sense of urgency for Constance. A heavy burden settled in upon him. What could it mean? he wondered. Where was the young mother, and what was happening to cause the heavy burden upon his heart? Questions tumbled in ceaseless succession over his brain and through his mind . . . Where? What? Why?

He tossed the covers back and got out of bed. He must pray for Constance; this much he knew. He may not know the whys and the wherefores of the heavy burden nor how great the trial, God could bring it all under control for her. But he must intercede. Burdens were not given to be cast off lightly nor to be pushed aside as something of little or no importance. No indeed: They were given by God . . . entrusted to an individual . . . to put the weapon of prayer into motion. He must be faithful. And he would be faithful! He felt wonderful, knowing that he was in a close enough relationship to God and with God that he could be entrusted with a thing so sacred as to help bear another's burden by praying and interceding in her behalf.

The gray clouds of an overcast dawn were riding the sky when Joel felt like he had finally pushed through and touched God for Constance and her problem, whatever it may have been. He got up from his knees, praising the Lord for victory through Christ. It had been his first major wrestling with God in prayer since his conversion and subsequent entire sanctification experience, and the glorious experience had given him a new depth in grace. It was wonderful and blessed. His soul had gotten new vitality and he experienced a marvelous sense of spiritual growth.

He straightened the bed covers and tidied the room, then he prepared a hearty breakfast before dressing and leaving for work and his place of business. There were things he could do before opening the door for business, and there was no better time in which to do those things than when one was alone and free from interruptions.

Snow had begun to fall when he left for work. It was coming down heavily, he noticed, as he eased the car out of the driveway onto the street. It would bring the skiers out, he knew. Consequently, many of them would come into the village for eating and just pure browsing when they were through skiing. He knew their pattern; he was a keen observer and a quick learner.

Many came down to the village from the crowded cities for a day or more of getting away from hectic, pressure-filled schedules and routines. It was a revitalization sort of thing for them. Some came for the sheer pleasure of enjoying and imbibing the quieter, simpler, less complex way of life and of living, if only for a short time. And always, the quaint little shops saw an upsurge in business and in sales.

True to the usual pattern of things, when there was a light, powdery snowfall especially, the village streets took on the air of a busy town and, all day long, Joel's little shop had a steady influx of shoppers and customers. Mainly, they were women who, while their husband or friend took to the slopes, decided to do some shopping of their own.

Financially, the day was a good one for Joel who, since his conversion, paid not only his tithe . . . a tenth of all his earnings . . . into the church but gave good offerings as well. All that he had belonged to God. Everything! He was only the steward over that which God had given him the ability to get and to acquire.

He was weary and tired when the key turned in the door and he locked the shop up for the night. But he was extremely happy, as well. His days now had meaning and purpose: Christ was the center of his life; his everything.

Instead of eating in the village or at his apartment, Joel left immediately to seek the residence of Constance Starr. He was thankful that there was very little drifting of snow. This could make driving more dangerous and hazardous.

As he drove, the weariness of his long prayer vigil during the previous night and early morning began to make itself felt. He should have lain down and rested an hour or so, he soliloquized as he opened the window slightly to allow the cold, brisk air of winter to chase away the drowsiness and revive him physically and to sharpen his mental faculties which, presently, seemed as sluggish and fatigued as his body did. Perhaps it wasn't a good idea at all to go see Constance, he thought. But the gentle prodding of his dearest Friend had made it seem totally imperative that he do so.

With the knowledge that he was being obedient to the promptings of the sweet Holy Ghost and that he was fulfilling a Divinely commissioned order, Joel straightened his shoulders and inhaled deeply of the fresh air; then, praying for a Heavenly touch upon both body and mind, he drove on, singing and making melody in his heart unto the Lord.

He made a quick stop at a roadside restaurant for a cup of hot chocolate and a tuna salad sandwich on rye, then finished the rest of the drive in good time, in spite of the falling snow.

He drove through the main part of the small town, watching street names as he drove. And, suddenly, he felt extremely shy. True, he was coming to see Constance because he had felt there was a very definite reason that she had not returned to the shop for the plaque. And, true, he had wanted to thank her personally for being God's human messenger, used by the Holy Ghost, to arrest him and shake him out of his spiritual lethargy and lostness and get him started on the road back to God's fold. But, also, deep inside his being, he realized, suddenly, he had had a growing, silent attraction for the young mother.

He drove to the edge of the town and pulled off the road then stopped the car, his thoughts doing a pleasant playback of their meeting in his shop. God had had it timed and planned, this he knew. His scheduling of events and times and places was perfect. Absolutely perfect! Always perfect! Only, until just a few moments ago, Joel had not realized that he had a romantic attachment for the gentle young woman.

It shook him. Almost frightened him, too. He had not taken the time in college to do much dating: his books, and his studies, had consumed his time. On several special occasions, he had taken Becky Grenfell out. But, for the most part, he did little socializing. He had gone to college to get a degree and, having set his sights on the goal, the social part of college faded into total oblivion for him. Unlike many of his peers and counterparts whose main purpose in college seemed to pivot and center around the social whirl on campus, he established and maintained a strict schedule of study and work. Seldom did he permit or allow anything to disrupt or hinder his schedule.

Where was Becky? Joel wondered in a pleasant, quickly-passing way. And what was she doing? She was a sensible young woman. Quiet, too. Like himself, Becky seemed to stay pretty much to herself. And, he thought with sudden perception, Becky never took up with the "in" crowd nor went along with all the newest, latest fads and crazy things that seemed to pop up in a never ending way at the school. Could it be that Becky, too, had once known the way of truth and righteousness and holy living?

Joel looked out into the falling snow, remembering his college days. He was not ashamed of anything he had done while he was there. True and loyal to his dear father's teaching, he had conducted himself as a gentleman around Becky Grenfell. Always, in her presence, he had manifested and put

into practice the old-fashioned but never out-of-style courtesies which would always be in good taste and would never go out of style with those whose training had made it a natural, normal way of life and of living and with whom it had become a habit. Women of refinement and of grace still appreciated having the car door opened for them, on their side of the car, and being helped into their coat, and their chair being pushed gently into the table after being seated. He knew all these things; practiced them, too. So why should he feel shy at the thought of seeing the young mother and of being in her presence? She was a woman of refinement and grace, and he knew how to act around a lady and how to treat her. Besides, now that he was made new in Christ and, like Constance Starr, was born again and sanctified wholly, being in her presence should be a natural and easy thing.

Realizing that thinking was getting him nowhere, he started the car and drove until he came to her street. Like the others in town, he noticed how neat and attractive the houses on the street were. It seemed to be a quiet little town. Perhaps retirees, for the most part, lived in the houses on its tree-lined streets, he mused, as he checked the house numbers, trying to locate her number in the darkness.

Here and there an occasional porch light was on, revealing house numbers. It was by this that Joel found the young woman's house. His disappointment was great, however, when he pulled up in front of the house and discovered it was dark. She was not home! Had he been mistaken about coming?

He sat for a while, wondering what to do. Then he hurried from the car and walked to the door where he checked the house number with that which she had given him. It was her residence, without a doubt. He knocked on the door and waited hopefully, thinking that, maybe, she and the little ones may have retired early. But no sound came within. Nothing whatever. He pushed the door button and, again, he waited. Nothing. Where could she be? he wondered.

He turned to go when he noticed a light on in the house next to that of Constance Starr's. The neighbors would know if she was ill, he thought, taking quick, brisk steps off the porch.

At his first knock on the door, the porch light was turned on and a woman's voice said, "Who's there? What do you want?"

"Is Mrs. Starr all right?" Joel asked quickly. "I'm a friend."

"Mrs. Starr is all right," the woman replied as she opened the inside door and surveyed Joel through the glassed-in storm door. "She has a sick little boy, though. He's been near death several times. The people who take care of the little girl take her to the hospital waiting room every day so mother and daughter can be together for a little while."

"Wh . . . what happened to the boy? Will he live?" Joel asked, with great concern.

"Until early this morning, they gave her no hope. But sometime between midnight and daybreak there was a change for the better, Mrs. Starr said, when I spoke to her on the phone. They feel he may live now."

"Thanks be unto God!" Joel exclaimed. Between midnight and daybreak! he thought. That's when he had wrestled with God in prayer! Oh, it was wonderful!? Wonderful! God had intervened; He was answering prayer: the little boy would live!

Suddenly, Joel felt extremely happy and blest. "Where is the hospital?" he asked quickly.

The neighbor, a congenial and amiable woman, gave him the necessary information and, after thanking her graciously and kindly, he was soon on his way to the hospital.

(Chapter 3)

In less than an hour, Joel pulled into the hospital's parking lot. It was still snowing but he hardly noticed it, so anxious and intent was he upon getting to Constance and her sick son, the twin to the little curly-headed, fair-skinned girl. How long had the child been ill? he wondered. What was his illness? Did Constance have anyone nearby to support her during the long, heart-breaking ordeal? Was there, perhaps, another man in her life?

The last question troubled Joel. He had given this no previous thought. He knew only that she was a young widow with two small children. He didn't know the children's names, even. And why should she not have had a fine

young male friend, if she so desired? he asked himself candidly. After all, she was not bound to her first husband; death had freed and liberated her from the binding "Till death do you part" contract.

Joel hastened his footsteps, his mind in a whirl. How foolish and stupid he would feel if, when he reached her side, he would find a young man there to give her moral support in this time of crisis. In a way, he supposed he was being highly and greatly presumptuous, thinking that she would need him and even want him.

He felt like turning around and hurrying back to his car in the parking lot and going home, as the myriad questions and thoughts paraded through his mind in a troublesome way and manner. He didn't want to make a fool of himself, this was a sure enough thing. Still, what did he have to lose? Nothing. Absolutely and positively nothing. And, if nothing else, he must tell her what had taken place in his heart and what had happened to him; how he was changed completely and totally. Radically, even. Yes, this he must tell her, for she was partly responsible for its happening.

He hurried in through the heavy, sliding glass doors of the hospital and, looking around, he spied the information desk across the room. Taking brisk strides, he crossed the room and stood in front of the desk.

"May I help you, please?" a middle-aged woman asked, as she looked up into Joel's face.

"The little Starr boy, please," Joel answered.

"His name, Sir."

"I don't know his name, Ma'am. His mother's name is Constance, though." Joel felt embarrassed; his cheeks burned hot from its flame. Still, how could he have known the name? Their mother called them "Dear little ones," as he recalled.

"I need his name, Sir. We have a number of Starrs listed in our files."

Leaning over the desk top, Joel said, "I'm sorry, Ma'am, that I didn't get the boy's name. He'd be in pediatrics, however. No, I'll change that: he'd be

in the Intensive Care Unit, I would imagine. He's been in a critical condition for some time, until early this morning. I must see the child, and his mother."

Making a rapid, and successful, check of the files, the woman handed Joel a visitor's card. "Second floor, to your right," she told him, adding, "You may not get to see the child, however. ICU, you know."

"Thank you. If I can see his mother and lend her only a fraction of moral and spiritual support and help, my journey will not have been in vain," Joel said, walking quickly toward the elevator.

It was quiet in the hospital; Joel marveled at the silence and the un-busyness that existed. A quick look at the clock revealed the why of this to him; it was almost closing time!

He stepped into the elevator, pushed the button for two and was soon up on the second floor. Stepping off the elevator, he turned right and hurried down the hallway to the ICU.

Lights burned dimly and softly-low inside the waiting room. Joel paused in the doorway and looked around. It was empty. He stepped inside and looked around. Finding the intercom on the wall, he pushed the button and waited.

"Yes?" A busy sounding voice queried over the speaker.

"May I see the little Starr boy, please?"

A long pause followed his question. Then, "His mother is with him. Yes, you may come in."

"Thank you," Joel replied, feeling unsure of himself. He walked from the waiting room to the two large doors, which seemed to open of their own accord as he approached, but which, he knew, had been opened by someone from within.

"In the bed across from the nurses' station, to your right," a white-capped, white-uniformed nurse said, pointing, as he entered.

Feeling weak from emotion, Joel approached the bed silently. Constance sat on a chair, her back to him, holding the child's hand, her head resting lightly against the tiny, upturned palm. For a long moment, Joel stood and watched the two. It was almost sacred, he thought. Too sacred to intrude upon or to break the beauty of what he was beholding. How like God's love was the love of a mother for her child! he mused silently. Reverently. Tears slid from his eyes.

He stepped closer to the bed; to the chair. Mother and child were asleep. It was a beautiful sight. The child was asleep, no doubt, from his life-death struggle and battle; the mother from utter and sheer exhaustion, now that the life-death conflict was past and vital signs were stabilized. Or moderately stabilized.

Joel stood, head bowed, tears falling. He wanted to call her name; to touch her hand. Her head. She looked like an angel. A very tired angel, he thought. Only, angels, he knew, didn't get tired. Not ever. They were constantly healthy and strong; Creatures from the Eternal City, where all was life and health and perpetual joy and eternal youth.

The little boy heaved a long, heavy sigh, tossed his head lightly upon the pillow then began his natural, normal rhythmic breathing again. The mother stirred ever so slightly, then raised her head and looked at her child. "Thank you, my kind Father!" she exclaimed in a tender whisper as she caressed the little hand lying within her own.

Joel stepped up to the chair. "Constance!" he exclaimed. "Are you all right?" Tears shimmered in his eyes.

Turning, she looked at Joel in surprise. "Oh!" she said. "You . . . you are Mister . . . Mister. . . ." Groping for the last name, she finally gave up as she remarked openly, "I know I've seen you before but your last name eludes me. It was at the dear little shop in the village."

"You are correct. And please, just call me Joel. I have your plaque."

"I'm sorry," she said apologetically. "I had fully intended to return to the shop, but Jonathan became ill. . . ." Her voice trailed meaningfully. Her gaze turned to the tousled head on the pillow. "He . . . he almost left me," she stated, in little more than a whisper.

"Yes, I know."

"You . . . do? How?" Constance looked at Joel in surprise.

"Your neighbor told me."

"Oh, it was dreadful, Mister. . . ."

"Joel, please!"

"I'm sorry. I'll try to remember. For days, Jonathan lay near death. Something to do with measles," she said. "Then he got pneumonia. They gave me no hope. Until last night. God worked a miracle, Jo . . . Joel."

"Yes, I know. We serve a great God, and wonderful."

"You . . . you are different," Constance said, looking up into Joel's face.

"Very different, Constance! Radically so. And I owe it all to Jesus. But you were the human instrument He used to disquiet my soul and make me do some real soul searching. Over the Thanksgiving season, I got back to God."

"Oh, that's wonderful, Joel. I prayed for you every day since I talked to you about your soul." Tears shimmered in her eyes. "You will never know what a battle I fought, wanting desperately to ask you how things were in your soul . . . between you and God... and my natural timidity and shyness almost preventing me from venturing the question. The gentle Spirit of God prodded me on, however, and with His help, I asked you."

"And the timing was perfect," Joel replied softly. A nurse stepped over to the bed. "Your son has passed the crisis," she said softly and kindly to Constance. "He will be all right. Why don't you go and get something hot to eat now?" To Joel, she said, "Take her to a restaurant and buy her a full-course meal. She has eaten very little since the boy came in here. We don't want her becoming ill. The children need her."

"Thank you," Joel said. "I appreciate knowing this. And, since Jonathan is going to be all right, I think your suggestion is an excellent one. Where is a good restaurant? I'm not familiar with this area."

"Two miles north of the stop light outside the hospital's main entrance, you will find an excellent restaurant."

Constance looked up at the nurse, a pained expression upon her face. "What if he awakens and I'm not here?" she asked.

"Jonathan will be fine," the nurse assured her. "In fact, I think you should go home and get a good night's sleep tonight. You haven't been to bed for days. A physically run-down and ill mother isn't able to care for her family properly."

"Oh, do you really think I should?" came the quick question. "I am tired and weary. But what if Jonathan should need me? Or cry for me? Would this . . . could this . . . cause the fever to return and . . . and hinder his healing progress?"

"Your son is going to get well," the kind nurse declared in a positive tone of voice. "A miracle took place before our very eyes last night. Between the midnight hour and the breaking of dawn, we witnessed it. So believe me when I say that Jonathan is going to get well and that he will live. A Higher power than medicine has taken hold: God took your son's case in hand and has performed this great miracle. For all of us to see and witness, I may add. It has made a believer out of me. I used to hear my grandmother talk about the great and mighty miracles which God did, and which He performed for Grandfather and her and their big family. But I thought such things happened only in their day and in their generation. God changed all that for me. When I saw His miracle take place before my eyes, right here in this very bed upon which your son is lying, I believed! I know now that God's power is still just as strong and just as powerful as it has always been and will ever be. But He needs someone to release that power, through prayer and fasting and waiting upon God . . . like my grandparents did."

Constance reached for the nurse's small hand. "You are a Christian then?" she asked, in an excited tone of voice, her face aglow with expectation and anticipation.

"Since early this morning, yes. Thanks be to God for the miracle. I was once a sincere and real Christian. Schooling, and the pressures of life, took their toll on my spiritual life; I backslid. But this is all in the past. Today marks the beginning of a new year for me; I'm pressing my way upward on the King's Highway. Now run along, and do as I say; you need rest, little woman. Go in peace. Entrust your son to the keeping of the One who brought him back to life for you. He's in wonderful hands, Life-giving hands!"

"Thank you," Constance said, wiping the tears from her eyes and getting to her feet. "You have made me extremely happy by what you just said. My son's grave illness has been a blessing in disguise. Perhaps, even, a God-ordered illness."

"No 'perhaps' about it, Mrs. Starr! Drop the 'perhaps' and let's say, it was, very definitely, God-ordered. For me, if for no one else. The ways of God are past finding out. Just this morning, after I got converted and was reading my Bible at home, I read where Nahum declared that, '... the Lord hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.' This was your storm . . . one of them . . . and, all the while, God had His way in the storm."

Constance stood, weeping softly. "All I can say is, God is good! 'He doeth all things well.'" She quoted the scripture reverently.

"Yes, like Nahum stated farther down in that first chapter, 'The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him.' Years ago, this was one of my favorite scripture verses. That's why I chose Nahum for reading this morning. But run along now. Come back tomorrow, God willing, and not before. This is an order!" And the smiling nurse gave Constance a gentle shove as she hurried back to the nurses' station.

(Chapter 4)

Joel marveled over how at-ease and relaxed he felt in the presence of Constance Starr. His fears were groundless and needless, he realized, as he walked to the parking lot to get the car and bring it around to the hospital's main lobby where Constance was waiting inside for him.

It had seemed such an easy and natural thing to hold her coat while she gracefully and easily slid her arms into the sleeves; such a "right" thing to open the door for her and wait till she was through; such a tender, gentlemanly gesture to touch her elbow lightly and escort her gently along the hospital's long corridor, onto the elevator, and into the large waiting room on the first floor.

Joel felt a warm elation at the thought of taking her out to dine. They would be alone; just the two of them. Maybe his unpracticed tongue, in the ways of women, would be unloosed and he would be able to say some things which he felt should be said, now that he belonged to God, like she did. He wouldn't think what to say nor how to say it, he decided, since, generally, every one of the pre-planned speeches left one totally speechless and "took flight" when encountering reality and coming face to face with the individual.

Unschooling and unpracticed though he may be in courting, love had its own language, he knew; its own tender ways of communicating. He would trust his unlearned ways to the wisdom and the guidance of his All-Wise God, who was his wisdom, his righteousness and his power. There was safety and security in doing this, he realized. One step at a time was all he was asked to take. One step; then another. And another. Thus the journey of life was made on one's way to Heaven . . . one step at a time. And, if one chose Heaven's Divine Commander to lead the way . . . one step at a time . . . one never made wrong choices or decisions and one never got off the Highway to Heaven.

Joel drove the car from the parking lot, up along the long, winding drive to the hospital's main entranceway where Constance waited inside the doors. He touched her elbow lightly and helped her into the car. Then, closing the door, he walked to his side of the car, slid easily behind the wheel, and drove away.

"It is good to see you again," he told Constance as the hospital faded from their view.

"I'm still not sure how you found me, nor how you knew I had an ill child," Constance replied in a soft tone of voice. "This, too, is a miracle."

"I'm sure it is," Joel answered, casting a quick glance her way. "But God has all kinds of surprises for His children."

"You don't understand," she said, speaking in an almost whispered tone of voice. "I... I asked God to send me someone. I . . . I've felt so all alone through this . . . ordeal. This time of anxiety and.., and of fear."

"You have never been alone, Constance: we have an Ever-present Friend and, through the Holy Spirit, a Constantly-Abiding Comforter, as well. He dwells in us and is with us always. Under all circumstances and through all trials and tribulations, too."

"How very true! And how blissfully comforting and wonderful is this thought! But I needed someone special: a human, flesh and blood person."

"Your parents, are they not. . . ."

"They're dead. Both of them. And my one brother and two sisters live thousands of miles away. Oh Joel, I longed for one of them to be near me; to stand with me during this frightening experience. And tonight, God sent you. You'll never know how much this has meant to me." She was weeping now.

Joel, too, was moved to tears. He wanted to touch her hand; to tell her how he felt; instead, he said convincingly, "God did send me. As surely as I know my name is Joel, so surely did He send me." Then he asked quickly, "Didn't people from the church stand by you? This is what Christians are told to do, to bear one another's burdens."

"Oh, the Christian people have been marvelous. I don't know what I would have done without them, and their prayers and support. But I longed for family; for someone else. God fulfilled this desire and this longing by sending you. Your testimony to the saving power of Jesus Christ has done something wonderful to me.

I will continue to witness and, by God's power in me, I will overcome this shyness and this timidity. Thanks for coming, Joel. Since God's miracle in Jonathan's life, and now the miracle of your salvation. . . ."

"And subsequent entire sanctification," Joel said, interrupting her sentence.

"Oh, you didn't mention that before. Or did you?" she asked, with a radiant look upon her face.

"It's a reality, Constance. Like the nurse in the hospital, I, too, was once a devout follower of the meek and lowly Nazarene -- Jesus Christ. When you met me, I was a wicked backslider. Not wicked in the sense of being immoral, or an alcoholic or a cigarette smoker or drug user; but wicked in the worst form and sense of wickedness; that of being a Christ-rejector and a traitor. Your question, so poignant and pointed, shot an arrow of conviction and condemnation into my heart. It went so deeply and was lodged so securely until I couldn't get away from it, nor release it. Not until I confessed my sins, repented of them, and came to Christ for forgiveness, in deep contrition and remorse of soul.

From that night to this hour, I have had a wellspring of never-ending joy and peace. My soul's deepest needs have been fully and completely satisfied and met."

Constance continued to weep. "You make me so very happy, Joel. Forgive me for crying; I can't help it: these are tears of joy, and, yes, even of thankfulness to God for saving your soul and sanctifying you through His precious blood. To think that I had a part.., a small part.., in bringing you to Christ is overwhelmingly wonderful. Without a doubt, God does, indeed, take the 'weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty,' as the Apostle Paul wrote in I Corinthians 1:27."

"You were God's human instrument, used to probe and to stir my complacent heart and soul. And by no means are you 'weak.' "

Drying her tears, Constance said, "It's strange, Joel, now that I look back upon that day in the village where your little shop is located. It's strange, but strangely-wonderful, I can see now. I had no intentions of driving that far in search of the plaque. None whatever. I had gone to one of the towns nearby where I live. Not finding anything even remotely close to what I was looking for, I began driving, just to take the twins out into the country for a nice little ride before letting them take their nap for the day.

"I had never been to your little village before, although I had heard one of my neighbors make mention of it during a conversation relating to excellent seafood. When I noticed the sign with the town's name on it, I

realized that I had driven quite far and that I was at the town where my neighbor had declared she had eaten the most delicious and excellent seafood ever.

"I drove into the village-town, parked the car and told the children we'd rest our legs a little while by getting out and going into a few of the little shops. That is how I came across your place of business. Naturally, I began searching for the plaque."

"It is waiting for you," Joel replied, wanting desperately to reveal the entire, beautiful "saga" of her request for a plaque with a tree and a kneeling man at the base of the tree. But he decided against telling her: he would keep the little secret tucked sweetly away in his heart until a certain day and for a special time. Then he would bring the secret out of its "jeweled case" and he would "break the vial." Its "perfume" would "fill all the house." She would be extremely happy and overjoyed.

"All the while I was in your place of business, I had the amazing feeling that God had directed me there," Constance said. "I couldn't understand it. Still, I was convinced that a Force greater and mightier than I had led me there. Today, I know why. Blessed be God forever and forever. You are now ready for Heaven and I am by far the stronger for having obeyed and witnessed to you, even though it was in the form of a question."

"It was a Holy Ghost directed question. And now, here we are. This is the only restaurant I have seen on the drive out here, so I presume it is the one which our nurse friend had reference to. There have been quite a few quick food stops but no restaurant that I have seen until this one."

Joel parked the car, noticing the lovely landscaping of the area surrounding the restaurant. Evergreens and low-growing bushes, dressed in white and decked out in snow jewels, looked like something from a picture postcard. The restaurant, too, was a thing of beauty on the outside. He was sure the interior was equally lovely and attractive.

He was thankful the nurse had directed him to the place. He felt he could take Constance in without fearing what he may find inside. There were no liquor signs flaunting their deadly, habit-forming drinks and no neon lights advertising dancing and night entertainment. Nothing at all like that. One sign

alone was posted: Grandma's Kitchen, it stated. Beneath the fetching title, in equally quaint writing, were the words, Where Good Eating Is A Habit.

"If those words mean anything," Joel said, as he helped Constance from the car, "we're in for a treat. I wonder what a grandmother's cooking tastes like. I can't remember mine. Neither one of them. They passed away before my time. But I'm sure it must be great to have grandparents one can remember."

"Oh, it is, Joel! Mine are gone now; but I have some of my fondest recollections centered around my grandparents. We used to do so many fun things."

"Like what?" Joel asked, opening the door and helping her into the restaurant.

"Where shall I begin!" Constance exclaimed, looking suddenly very much like a small child whose eyes were filled with the excitement of pleasant and beautiful memories.

"Start anywhere. I'm sure I shall enjoy everything you tell me. I may feel a bit deprived, however," he said, teasing her. "In all seriousness, though, it must be wonderful to have a storehouse full of good and pleasant memories built around and upon one's grandparents. I wish I could tell you that I have some. But such was not my lot. God saw fit to take mine Home to be with Him before my time. But I shall be getting acquainted with them as soon as I enter Heaven, for There we shall know even as also we are known. Won't this be glorious! No one a stranger in Heaven!"

"Yes, it will be, Joel. Sometimes our mind cannot grasp these things to their fullest."

"And this is as God intended it to be, I am sure," Joel remarked. "It will make Heaven all the richer and the greater when we get there."

A hostess approached them then and, smiling, they followed her into the lovely dining room where she seated them at a table for two, set in a vine-hung alcove with a window that overlooked snow-laden evergreens outside.

## (Chapter 5)

It was a time for rejoicing when, a few days after Joel's first visit to the hospital, Jonathan was released and Joel himself had the honor of driving both mother and child home, where Jennifer, the twin, was waiting with a woman from the church.

Jonathan's recovery was rapid and beautiful and Joel, who now made twice-a-week visits to the home, was as thankful and happy as Constance was. He loved the children. As his love deepened for Constance, so his love for the children increased. He found his work taking on a new and greater meaning for him. He wanted to be the best provider possible for the day when they would all be his to care for. His entire life took on a new dimension since he declared his love to Constance and She, in turn, told him that she loved him. He now had both a spiritual and a humanly-physical purpose for which to live his life. It gave ever so much meaning to his daily routine of work. He delighted in it.

He had kept the house a secret. This would be her other surprise for Christmas, God willing. By the time they were married in early April, as planned, God willing, it should be ready for occupancy. This would give Constance time to pick out wallpaper and to choose the carpeting she wanted, and such like things, Joel mused, as he worked in his place of business.

He hung garlands of evergreen in the shop, put an enormous wreath on the door and strung tiny lights on a fragrant fir tree near his desk and the cash register. The shop must be equally as attractive as his apartment was, he thought, smiling as he worked.

He hung the last tiny angel on the tree, secured the last cluster of satin-covered red balls to a branch, then he hurried to wait on several customers who came into the store. If someone had told him a year ago that he would be converted before another year roiled around, and that he would have fallen in love, he would have told them they didn't know what they were saying, that such things were far from his mind and his thinking. Now, however, as he waited on customers, or no matter what he did, Christ was uppermost in his thoughts and his father and Constance were close behind.

"You look happy today," one of the customers remarked to him, placing her carefully chosen items on the counter.

"I am," Joel commented brightly. "This Christmas especially; I have found Christ the Lord. He has come to live within my heart. Imagine this! One so Divine, so holy, so righteous, living within the heart of such an one as I! Gift wrap?" he asked quickly.

"Please. And I want a gold bow for the bigger box; a green one for the smaller."

Joel rang up the sales, then boxed and gift-wrapped each item with care. Someday soon, God willing, his bride would be doing this job, he thought happily as he positioned the enormous gold bow prettily on the carefully-wrapped box. It would be wonderful to have Constance and the children with him throughout the day. The empty room at the rear of the shop would make a beautiful play and sleep room for the twins during the day. Already, it was partially done. This, too, was a secret, but only until the job was completed and finished. Too, Constance would need only to be in the shop whenever she chose to be there, or to do so. It was she who had said she wanted always to be a part of him and his work and that she would be with him in the quaint little shop.

Joel's heart felt full; almost too full for him to contain his overflowing joy and happiness. He tucked a small angel into the customers' bags, stating cheerily, "Something for you to remember this Christmas by . . . the angels' message to the shepherds. God bless you. May yours be a blessed, Christ-centered time of year. And all year long, as well."

The days that followed were full and busy days. His little shop had a steady flow of customers. Twice, Constance surprised him by driving over and gift-wrapping the customers' purchases for him. The twins were left with their Sunday school teacher who was having rehearsal daily for her class of small ones, who would be giving the Christmas story in verse and in song shortly before Christmas. For lunch, they ate the nutritious and delicious sandwiches which she had prepared. They sipped her own specially-blended fruit punch and enjoyed her calorie-laden cream puffs for dessert. After closing, he took her out for a seafood dinner before she left for home.

They were so much in love, Joel thought, marveling at God's goodness in sending her to him. Yes, in all fact and actuality, God had sent her to him. God saw that each would be good for the other and, by His appointment, He allowed a circumstance and a thing unplanned to happen to bring them across each other's path.

In all his busyness, Joel didn't neglect his beloved father. Twice, since his beautiful conversion, he made a weekend trip to the home place to visit and be with his parent, going with him to church then leaving late in the night for home. True, it meant closing his shop up earlier than usual on Saturday, and losing business. But money was no longer his god; his dictator. His father's presence was of far greater worth to him than all the money in the world. And Constance, bless her, had not questioned him each time he told her that he would be going out of town for the weekend.

He could scarcely wait for December 18th to arrive: his father would be driving up to spend Christmas and New Year's day with him. Joel felt as excited as when he was a small boy and had gotten a new toy from his father. Also, he was excited over his numerous secrets. Several times, he had almost let the one secret slip to his father, as well as to Constance. But he had gotten his tongue in check and kept the secret well-guarded in his heart. The right time was approaching. Fast.

His father didn't wait for him to get home from work the evening of the eighteenth but came directly to the shop. Joel was delighted to see him. It seemed that since his conversion, years of heaviness had dropped of his father. He looked younger and more robust and healthy each time he saw his parent.

"I like your little place of business, Joel my boy," the father commented, walking through the store, looking around and noting the carefully-selected and wisely chosen gift items. "Your mother would be proud of you, Son. Yes, she would."

"Thanks, Father. I feel God must have all the glory and the credit for it, however. You did an excellent job of teaching and training, dear father. So you, too, deserve some honor and thanks. Are you tired? Do you want to go to the apartment and rest? Here's the key." And Joel extended the house key to his father.

"I'm not tired, Joel. Thanks though. I'd rather stay here with you. We have so much 'catching up' to do. Besides, I'd like to help you. What may I do?"

Joel laughed. "Dear, sweet Dad!" he exclaimed. "Always wanting to stay busy! For now, you browse around. If you see anything you think needs done, it's yours to do. But it's almost closing time for another day. I have a roast browning in a small oven at the back of the shop. Thought you may enjoy tasting some of your son's cooking for a change. It won't be like Mother's I'm sure; but it will make us a good meal. I put plenty of potatoes and onions and carrots around it."

"Onions! Um-m! It's bound to be good, Joel. And what about the garlic; did you forget it?"

"I expected that, Dad," Joel said, laughing. "No, I didn't forget the garlic. Don't you smell those delicious and delightful odors?"

"Well, coming to think of it, yes, I have smelled it. But I thought it was coming from elsewhere. And, now that we're talking about food, I'm hungry, Son."

"Good," Joel commented. "So am I. We'll soon close the shop for the night and head home, roasting pan and all, and eat. The table's set and waiting for us."

Rushing over to Joel, the father said, "I'm as excited and happy as I can be, Son." With tears in his eyes, he declared, "Much more of this and I believe I'd burst with happiness and joy; we're together! For the first time in years, we'll be together for Christmas and the New Year, God willing. Oh, Joel, my heart is full. I love you, Son."

"And I love you, Dad. More than ever!"

The days that followed were pleasant and wonderful days. Joel, instead of going to see Constance twice a week, now went only once, explaining to her that he had a relative visiting him and staying with him over Christmas and the New Year.

"Bring him along," Constance told him. "I'll be delighted to meet any of your relatives."

"I asked him to come," Joel told her. "But he insists that it would be in bad taste and is highly improper to do such a thing."

"Bring him along over for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, Joel. I insist that you do so," Constance told him on one of his visits.

"I already told him this, my dear," Joel answered. "I said that neither you nor I would have it any other way. And the dear soul, bless him, said he wouldn't miss that for anything. Especially so, since I'd soon be marrying this wonderful young woman."

"What does he like to eat, Joel? Tell me, please. I'll make things especially for him."

"What does he like to eat? Everything, dear Constance. Everything. So whatever you may have on your menu will be special to him. He's easy to cook for, and he never complains."

"He sounds like a great man. Who did you say he is? And did you tell him about the cantata at our church on Christmas Eve?"

"He is a great man, this dear relative of mine. And, yes, I told him about the cantata. He's as excited as a child, to be going with us to hear it."

"Oh, Joel, that's so sweet of him! And me a perfect stranger, too. I know I'll love him."

"You will; I promise! Very much!"

Joel closed the little shop at noon on December 24th. "We'll have a few hours of rest and quiet, Dad," he said, as they walked together into his apartment. "We'll leave for Constance's home around four; this way we'll not need to hurry to get there. I'm expecting the roads to be busy with traffic, and I don't enjoy having to rush under these kind of conditions. Furthermore, it's dangerous. The cantata begins at seven."

"That will be fine, Son. And I must admit that I'm anxious to meet my future daughter-in-law and her little family. I'm sure she's a worthy woman or you would not have chosen her."

"You'll love her, Dad. And as for the choosing, I like to remember that it was God who put us together. Now rest awhile; we may be late getting home tonight, God willing, and I don't want you exhausted for tomorrow."

"I'll be fine, Joel. This is such a happy time for me that it's hard for me to sleep. I just want to praise the Lord then praise Him some more for answering prayer and giving you back to me, after those long years of silence. But I'll do as you say, and rest for a while."

The drive to Constance and the children was pleasant and beautiful. Joel's car barely had time to stop when the door opened and the twins rushed out to wrap their arms around his legs. In one great swoop, he gathered them up in his arms, then, waiting for his father, he hurried to the door and to a smiling and radiant Constance.

Once inside, he put the twins down. Turning to Constance, he said, "My dear wife-to-be, meet the relative; my father. Dad, meet Constance, your future daughter-in-law, God willing."

Constance stood like one who was hypnotized. Then in a joyous, glad and happy voice, she cried, "Oh, you dear, dear soul! You kind and wonderful man! I love you, my Thanksgiving Tree Man!" And she rushed quickly into the pair of open, waiting arms.

"My dear daughter!" Joel's father exclaimed. "I know now who you are. Oh, I am so happy. Yes, so very happy. For you, and for Joel." Turning to Joel, he said, "I see you have excellent taste. What a beautiful surprise for an old man. I'm almost overcome with joy. Let me sit down and absorb the reality of all this: you, my dear girl, are going to marry my son! The Lord be praised!"

"Yes, dear man. And because of you, I became converted and was sanctified wholly. Through my search for a plaque depicting a man kneeling at the base of his 'Thanksgiving Tree,' I met Joel in his dear little shop one day. I spoke to him about his soul; the sweet Holy Spirit troubled him until he repented of his sins and was gloriously converted. Oh, the ways and the

leadings of God are wonderful and amazing. My soul is blest. I will magnify my Savior and His wondrous name."

"His name is Wonderful!" the father cried with hands upraised to Heaven." 'He doeth all things well.' 'I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul shall make her boast in the Lord. The humble shall hear thereof and be glad.' Blessed be God forever and ever. Oh, you children have made me so happy. I shall be gaining a lovely daughter and two beautiful grandchildren. The Lord has blest me indeed!"

Constance was telling him now just how much he had influenced her spiritual life, and how she thought she would have to wait until she reached Heaven to tell him about it. Then, in a happy cry, she exclaimed, "And just think about it! Here you are, in my living room. And God is giving you to me to be my father-in-law!"

Tears swam in Joel's eyes. He wanted to tell Constance how he had grieved his father and broken his heart and, in a sense, disappeared and dropped out of his life for some years. But he knew his father would not want him to mention it: it was in the past and he, Joel, was forgiven. Now he must forget it, so his dear father had told him.

How much like the Heavenly Father his dear parent was! Forgiving and forgetting! And maintaining an unwavering and steadfast love.

He smelled fragrant odors coming from the kitchen and his heart could scarcely contain its feelings. Within a few months, this would be a daffy, natural and normal thing . . . coming home from work to a loving wife and family and the wonderful bonus of fragrant kitchen odors. He was rich indeed. God had honored him greatly since he had begun to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. And tomorrow, the Lord willing, he would drive them all back to the village to the house he was having readied for them. His father also. Already, the two lovely rooms, reserved for his beloved parent if and when he desired to move in with Constance and him, were nearly completed. He, Joel, would make up to him for the wasted, pain-filled years. Yes, by God's help, he would.

He walked into the kitchen and lifted a pot lid. Constance wouldn't mind, he knew. Then he began humming softly. Jennifer and Jonathan ran to

him, begging to be held. Stooping, he picked them up, one in each of his arms. He felt fulfilled. Richly so!

The End