

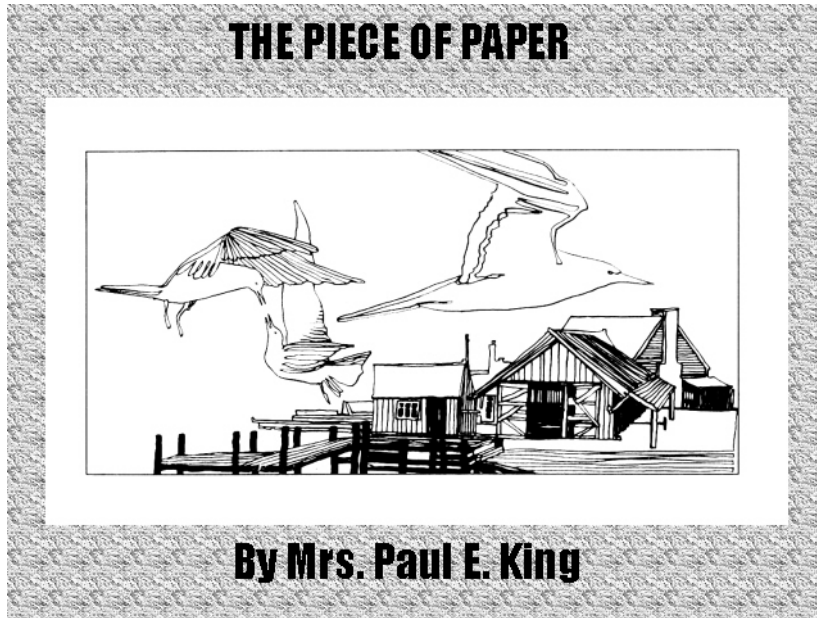
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**THE PIECE OF PAPER**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

He hurried along the sidewalk, head down, his spirits low; so low, in fact, that he was at the very bottom of the slough of despond and in the deepest spot, too. Crowds of people milled past him, pushing, jostling, shoving him; he was oblivious of them all as he flowed aimlessly along with the throng going his direction.

Life had been hard and harsh and cruel to him, hammering blow upon relentless blow upon him. For so long as he could remember, he had been hungry. There was never enough food to satisfy the appetites of the family. His father and mother worked long, hard, tiring hours in the tomato and lettuce fields as the crops came in and were ready for harvesting. The children also. Still, when the money was counted and the shopping was done for the barest of necessities, the dollars never stretched far enough for an adequate supply of food.

He had taken it all in stride, bowing to the humble acceptance of his lot and, like his other three brothers and two sisters, he had become accustomed to the gnawing pains in his stomach.

He jerked his head up quickly as he passed a small, open-air eatery. The aroma of the food whetted his appetite until he felt he would go mad. He paused, tempted momentarily to beg for only a morsel of food, but his mother's words came suddenly to mind; "We are poor" she had told her children, "but not beggars. You must never beg!"

He was ready to leave when he heard loud cursing. "Here," a man said to him, "pick that up; you may have it."

He looked at his feet; still wrapped partially in a napkin was the largest, juiciest sausage sandwich he had ever seen.

"Take it if you want it," the man remarked before turning to the waitress and demanding angrily, "Now, you will prepare me another sandwich and be less careless when you pass it out to me."

"Th . . . thank you! Thank you! Much!" the hungry young man exclaimed, picking the ambrosial smelling sandwich up from the sidewalk and very carefully brushing the dirt off the napkin.

"Here," the same irate man said, thrusting several clean napkins at the starved looking young man. "Toss that dirty napkin away."

"Th . . . thank you, kind sir. Thank you, much!"

A young woman, well-dressed and extremely fashionable looking, looked the dark-skinned youth over. "You are hungry, I can see. Wait a

minute, please" she said kindly, ordering a bag full of the delicious smelling gourmet sandwiches which the small but always-busy eatery served.

"Take these," she said, when the order was filled and she handed the heavy bag to the wide-eyed young man. "And here's something besides:" she added, pressing a bill into the callused palm of his hand.

"I . . . I . . ." Tears spilled from the dark eyes. "Thank you! Thank you! Much! Yes, very much!"

"And thank you," the woman said kindly. "You have made me very happy today by allowing me to do something for you"

She disappeared in the crowd. He stood as one hypnotized. Then, feeling the crowd pushing to get up to the eatery, he slipped away, feeling richer than he had ever in his life felt.

He walked toward the bay, only now his motive for going there was changed; instead of hurling himself into the deep water as he had planned, he would find a quiet spot, eat the sandwich which had fallen to the sidewalk; then he would hurry home and present the heavy bag to his kind mother who was expecting yet another child.

He thought of the bill then, clutched tight-fistedly in his hand. His eyes stared in wonder and awe. Was this real? he wondered as he blinked and winked his eyes. But, yes, it was real. So real, in fact, that he felt like running and jumping for joy. Fifty dollars! Fifty dollars! Why, that was more than his father could make in ever so many days!

Very, very carefully, he pushed the treasure deep into his left pocket -- the right pocket had too many holes in it from stuffing the smooth stones, which his little sisters found as they worked, into it.

He touched the bill briefly again, making certain sure that it had found the depth of the pocket, then he concentrated on eating the still-warm sausage sandwich, eating ever so slowly and savoring every bite he took. He had never, not in all of his young life, tasted anything so delicious and good. And for once, the enormous size of the delectable thing had filled his stomach.

He left nothing behind except the soiled napkin which he deposited in a can left there for that purpose. The extra napkins would be taken home along with the sandwiches in the bag, he decided. They never had napkins in the small building they called home. How elegant his mother and sisters would feel, wiping their mouths daintily as they ate their feast of sandwiches. He wished there were enough napkins, to go around, one each, to his brothers and his father, also. But the man hadn't given him that many.

He walked with his face toward the wind, his eyes alert, shoulders erect, and his head held high. Today he would have something more than a few dollars' earnings to place into his father's hand! And besides that, he would have the very special gift to give to his mother, who would, he knew, divide the contents of the bag equally among all in the family. Oh, he felt good. Good! Today, life had become suddenly good to him for a change. Oh that it would continue thus! he thought.

He had turned at a corner and walked some distance down the street before realizing that it was not the street he should have been on. He heard music and paused momentarily to listen when he spied a little paper come fluttering down the sidewalk to where he was. It fluttered one last time, like a tired little bird, then lay still at his feet.

He looked at the silent thing for a while, marveling at the unusual events of the day. Then he stooped down and picked it up in his hand.

The title captured his attention instantly and immediately: Peace, Through Jesus Christ. And it was written in Spanish! His language! He would be able to read what was printed on the pages, two of them, exactly. Oh, what a marvelous thing; written in Spanish not English. He could read, and read well, in Spanish.

Feeling as though he had found hidden treasure, he began immediately to read. Perhaps because they had been too poor to buy books or reading material, or simply, maybe, because the small, folded piece of paper had seemed to flutter to him from out of nowhere, he held it reverently, gently and ever so carefully in his hand as he read. Treasure. His. A private treasure. All his own!

Tears filled his great, dark eyes as he read it -- from start to finish. What did it mean? What was it trying to tell him? It was sad. Very sad. Why would anyone die for another.

He read the title again: Peace, Through Jesus Christ. He had heard that name; heard it often, from the lips of profane men and women who worked the long rows beside him and his parents and brothers and little sisters. But they had used the name derisively and profanely and angrily. His mother had never allowed any of them to use it thus. Why, he did not know. He only knew she said it was not right to curse and swear. If Mother said it was not right, this was enough for him -- it was not right!

She had seemed to know how to settle so many things in his mind. Only, today he could not have told her his intended mission in going to the bay and walking far, far out on that lonely looking and desolate pier. It would have broken her heart, and she would have done everything within her power and reason to stop him.

He read the paper through again. Then a third time. Tears ran copiously down his ruddy, sun-bronzed cheeks. Oh, if only he could understand the meaning of the wonderful things he had read.

"Help me, please!" he cried aloud to no one but himself, not realizing that he had uttered his first-ever prayer to God.

He hadn't seen anyone, and the tall man who, like the little paper, stood suddenly beside him, shocked him. "May I help you?" came the kind, softly-spoken question in flawless Spanish.

"Yes. Yes" the young man cried eagerly in his native tongue "This" he said, holding up the priceless treasure of paper in his hand, "What does it mean?"

"Come inside;" the tall, compassionate man invited, leading the way into a small but neat mission. "Are you hungry?" he asked, once inside.

"Only to know more . . . about this," came the quick reply. "I . . . I feel so . . . so strange; like someone is . . . is pulling at my . . . my heart. And sir, I'd like to know what I must do to... to respond."

"It's all inside that little paper; confess your sins to the Lord Jesus Christ and ask Him to come into your heart. Sit down, please, I'll tell you the wonderful story, my dear friend . . ."

He sat, for over two hours; listening, hearing things almost too marvelous and wonderful to be true But he knew it was true; every bit of it.

"I believe," he cried softly. "I am ready now to pray and ask Him to come into my heart"

They knelt together then; knelt in the simple little mission chapel and prayed.

Smiting his strong, young chest, he cried penitently, "O Thou Christ Who died for me, be merciful to me a sinner"

A simple prayer, it was; simple, and few of words; but the Throne Room of Heaven heard the sincere plea and cry. Instantly the message was received and the answer dispatched -- Forgiven! Born again!

He looked up into the kind face of the tall, lean man kneeling beside him. "I understand the paper now," he cried joyously, "with my heart. My sins are forgiven! I've had a heart-wash; a change through the blood He shed out of love for me. Oh, I want to laugh and cry and shout. I'm free. Free. Poor, but rich and free through Jesus Christ. And now, I must be going. I feel I'll burst unless I can tell others of what Jesus did for me. Thank you, sir. Thank you. My parents and other family members must hear about this great salvation."

"Come back soon," the tall man said, wiping tears from his eyes. "Here's a little card giving you the street and address of the mission:' he added, pressing the rectangular card into the outstretched hand.

"I thank you, sir. I'll be back. With God's help, I'll be back. And I'll bring my parents and brothers and sisters with me."

With the tall, lean man's blessing, he picked up the heavy sack of sandwiches. Then, clutching a brand new treasure -- The New Testament and The Psalms -- along with the "tract:' as the kind man had called the piece of paper, to his bosom, he hurried out of the mission door.

Once outside, he broke into a fast run. He couldn't wait to get home with the good news that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Life was no longer hard; it was glorious. He must share the glad tidings with others.

The intensity of the conviction burned inside his heart like a flame. He wanted to shout to the world that Jesus Christ could and would save and deliver from sin and set one free and fill his heart with joy.

He was almost breathless by the time he reached the humble little hovel called home. He was shouting, "I'm new. New! Jesus saved me. I have a new beginning . . ." Then he remembered this was the first day of the new year. How wonderful! A new heart and a new beginning for a brand new year.

Seeing his mother's bewildered look, he rushed to her and, picking her up in his strong arms, he began going 'round and 'round. Then he remembered the heavy sack. "Here, dearest Mother," he cried happily. "Gather Father and the children 'round to eat. Then I have much to tell you. Good news! Oh, such wonderful news! Plus, I have a surprise -- deep in my pocket"

"You' re changed!" came the mother's tearful reply as she hurried inside and opened the heavy bag.