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DILIGENCE REPAID
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Terry hopped on his bicycle, waved a cheery farewell to his mother, then rode down the shady street before heading out of town to the Braker's Strawberry Acres Farm. It was still early in the morning and already the sun was hot. The weatherman had set the temperature reading in the high nineties for the day and Terry had no doubts in his mind that it would reach

that, and maybe even go up to the 100ø mark, It was sticky-hot, denoting the fact that the humidity was high.

It wasn't long before he left the small town behind him and was pedaling out across the countryside. How he loved the peaceful valley and its farm-dotted hillsides with their herds of dairy cows grazing contentedly in the lush green pastures. Everything God made was, indeed, very good, as the Genesis account stated it.

A little breeze ruffled Terry's hair and whispered ever so gently as it swished across his sun-browned cheeks but even the breeze was warm. Little matter; at least there was a breeze, and this was something for which to be thankful. He knew he'd welcome the breeze out in the strawberry field.

He thought of Vernon Stall and Calvin Brestle then and he wondered if they'd be out to the Strawberry Acres Farm. He had told them about Mr. Braker's need of pickers. They had laughed at him and said if they couldn't get anything better than that "hot, back-breaking" job they'd sit the summer out.

Terry smiled, happy because the Lord had opened the strawberry picking job for him. It was seasonal, he knew, and the wages wouldn't be nearly so good as his after-school job in Jason's Print Shop had been. Still, it was a job; and this was a dire necessity now since Mr. Fullmer of Jason's Print Shop had closed the shop down completely for a total remodeling/renovation. True, he would have his job back when the place reopened, God willing, but he couldn't be idle for those four to five months either. He liked being busy; also, his widowed mother needed the money to keep their bills current.

He was most grateful that he was old enough to help provide for her. Thankfully, the house in which they lived had been paid for before his father's untimely death. Still, there were taxes to be paid yearly as well as the monthly electric bill and the water and sewer bills. Their own personal needs were simple and, always, with every pay check, the tithe and offerings came out first. God had seemed to "stretch" the remaining amount of money until his mother's and his every need was always met.

His eyes became moist with tears as he recalled instance after instance where God had blest and multiplied what money remained over after the

tithes and offerings had been given. He had seen miracle after miracle. How his faith had been strengthened! How precious was his Heavenly Father to him!

Terry passed through a small hamlet and knew he had only two more miles to go till he would be at the strawberry farm. He would get paid for every box he picked, he knew; maybe no big or great amount, but the more he picked so much more he would earn. He was anxious to begin.

Mr. Braker saw Terry as he rounded the bend leading up the poplar lane to the farm. Terry had barely braked to a stop in front of the big fruit stand when Mr. Braker called out, "Morning, Terry. That's what I like; ten minutes early. I don't wonder that Mr. Fullmer wants to keep you on. Well, you know our policy -- the customer gets a full, rounded quart. Only ripe, choice berries all the way through the box. And pick the rows clean. I mean, pick all the ripe berries as you go down the row."

"Thanks, Mr. Braker, I'll do it. Do you have enough pickers? I told several of my classmates that you were needing help, if they were interested."

"We've had quite a few pickers, Terry, but some we had to let go; they didn't obey orders. Guess it's this way in every business, though. Have a good morning. It's going to be a hot one, that's a for-sure thing. I'll put you in the south field. You'll only have to work till noon today. The fields over there" he explained, pointing to the west, "are for the customers who enjoy doing their own picking."

Terry took the empty containers and the carrying trays in which to put the filled boxes, then he hurried away to what Mr. Braker called the south field. He was rather amazed to discover that there were no others there to pick. Still, the time for picking was nine o'clock, and since his pocket watch told him that it was now precisely that, he felt that others would no doubt be joining him shortly.

Terry was delighted to discover that the plants were loaded with plump, fat, juicy-sweet red berries. What a wonderful, wonderful way to earn money! he thought, working swiftly and expertly but carefully. He loved the outdoors with all that was within him and now he was receiving the double benefit of enjoyment in God's great outside world and the privilege of earning money.

He felt truly blest, listening to the beautiful, clear, melodic bird songs and the voices of happy little children floating to his listening ears from the You-Pick-Your-Own field of berries.

The Lord's presence was so real that Terry could scarcely contain his joy. Over and over he lifted his voice in praise to God. He was so thankful -- for everything. He was alive and he was well and strong; he had a wonderful, God-fearing mother, and a much-loved father who was waiting for him in Heaven. He had good food, a good home, nice, neat clothing to wear, a bicycle to take him to and from work and a job for so long as the strawberries were in season. Oh, the Lord was so good to him!

He was deep in praiseful thanksgiving when he heard Mr. Braker's voice from behind him.

"You're quite a picker, Terry!" the man exclaimed.

"Thought I'd come down to see how you're doing and drop off some more empties and carrying trays for you. Also something to drink."

"Oh, thanks, Mr. Braker. I'm really quite thirsty, but I had no intention of quitting for a drink. Say, this lemonade's delicious. Tell your wife for me, please. And did you ever see nicer berries! In no time at all, it seems, I have a carrying tray full of well-rounded quarts. Aren't they beauties!"

"This year especially, Terry. Oh, by the way, a couple of fellows came by, said you told them pickers were needed and they were interested. When I told them how much I paid for each quart picked, they snickered. Then one of them said they'd try it. I gave them some empty quart containers and a couple trays and sent them to a field that wasn't quite all picked yesterday. They only worked a little while, as I had suspected they would. Soon they came up to the stand; four quart boxes were filled. My wife dumped the berries out and went over them carefully and quickly: on the bottom were green and pale pink berries!"

Terry gasped. "Surely they didn't expect to be paid!" he exclaimed, realizing that for the most part all four quarts were a loss to the Brakers; one couldn't eat green strawberries, nor even the pale pink ones.

"I was only too happy to have them gone and out of the field. Yes, we paid them; not that they deserved it or were even worthy of pay. But we're honest people. If they had picked longer, however, and the berries had all been like the four quarts were we'd have had to do something different. They were told what to pick; they knew what we demand. Well, I'll have to move along. I'll take some of these trays up to the stand for you, Terry, then I'll send our oldest son down to bring the others up. You're doing a great job. I appreciate this more than I can express."

"Thanks, Mr. Braker. And thanks again for that refreshing and delicious lemonade."

"You deserve it, Terry"

The sun beat down upon Terry with intense heat but he scarcely noticed it, so intent was he in doing his job well. Too, he realized that there were still many rows of beautiful red, fully-ripe berries to be picked. Unless he got them picked, they would soon be spoiled and unfit for human consumption. He worked with a will; he had one goal -- to finish picking all the berries in the south field.

As fast as the trays filled and were carried away by Mr. Braker's son, so quickly were empty boxes and more trays provided for the solitary picker in the south field. Terry's back and shoulders ached, but he felt a satisfaction that was beyond describing in knowing that he was accomplishing what was expected of him and that it was being done according to the expectations and wishes of his employer.

"Don't do a half day's work for the Lord" "he sang softly,

And expect a whole day's pay.

Only what's done for the Lord will last
And count on the judgment day.
How can we sit idly by.

Knowing souls are doomed to die?
Don't do a half day's work for the
Lord
And expect a whole day's pay.

Well, he thought, I've tried to give God my very best and I carry the same thing through in my secular work.

It gave one a good feeling to know he hadn't shirked responsibility. Yes, an unusually good feeling.

Terry got to his feet and tried to straighten his back; it felt bowed and aching and sore. He stood for a little while. Then he flexed his muscles and straightened his shoulders. He had accomplished the task; he had reached his goal And it was only 12:35! He felt like singing, so happy was he.

As he neared the big fruit and vegetable stand, Terry was surprised to see all the cars there. Strawberry Acres Farm did a good business, he knew, but he had no idea it stayed this busy.

Mr. Braker met him before he reached the attractive building. "Terry" he remarked, "I . . . I can scarcely believe what my son has told me; but I know John doesn't lie. Only, well, I . . . I've never had anyone who picked the south field all by himself in a single morning. I'm amazed. It . . . it's almost unbelievable. And the trays are beautiful. Beautiful! I knew I could count on you to handle those berries carefully; that's why I put you there.

Terry smiled. "They're deliciously-sweet, Mr. Braker. I discovered this from the few I ate."

"You should have eaten your fill, Terry; I expect this of my pickers. That field brings in a lot of money for us; the berries are the sweetest and the biggest. It was a new strain of berry to me, when I heard about it. I decided to try it and I've never been sorry. I have two more fields planted in the same kind, only they're not producing yet.

"Terry" Mr. Braker continued, "I'm going to pay you more than I quoted to you. And when strawberry picking time is over, I'd like for you to help me here in the market. Good, dependable help is hard to come by."

Terry sucked his breath in quick-like, tears swam in his eyes. "Oh, Mr. Braker, you are God's answer to my mother's and my prayers" he remarked joyously.

Mr. Braker brushed tears away from his eyes. "You can't imagine how busy we are here" he said. "I'll be able to use you steadily, six days a week, right through November, Terry. And I'll pay you well, too."

"Thank you, kind sir. Thank you. God certainly does look after His children. God bless you, Mr. Braker."

"I know you're tired and you must be hungry, too. Go over to that meat counter and pick out whatever you want; I've instructed Darla to wrap up some cheese and meat for you to take home to your mother. And she will make you a sandwich to eat now."

"But Mr. Braker, I . . . I . . ."

"These are my orders, Terry. Please! You have obeyed my other orders to the minutest detail; as your employer, I want this order carried out accordingly. Then when you have finished the sandwich, I will be driving you home in the pick-up truck. Your bicycle is already on the truck. Also I have put twelve quarts of berries in the truck. Your mother will enjoy some preserves, I'm sure, as well as shortcake."

"Thank you, Mr. Braker. Thank you" Terry answered, too overwhelmed to say more.