COME, CLIMB THE HILL WITH ME

By Mrs. Paul E. King

The day was perfect. Like a rare and expensive gem, perfect. The air was neither too hot nor too cold; just an in-between moderate temperature, and the sky... well, the sky was indescribably clear and blue, like the blue of the pond water near by. In fact, the pond reflected the sky, making its own blueness appear a shade or so deeper and even more beautiful.
A gentle breeze swish, swished across the tall meadow grasses and from a nearby hill came the lilting, bubbly song of a mocking bird, sitting somewhere high on the topmost branch of a tree. The man looked from his chair on the porch to the road, that went by his house and down to the stately but old covered bridge, then went up, up, up and around the hill.

"My boy," he called, "come, climb the hill with me. The hour is still early; the day is a diamond; gem-like. The bird songs call to me and the hill beckons. Come, my son, come. There are things other than work that are also important."

With a quick and light step, the boy, less than a man but no longer a child, was on the porch and standing beside the chair, his bright blue eyes eager with anticipation and excitement.

"I'm ready, Father," he replied, with a spontaneity and an eagerness that never ceased to amaze and thrill the father.

They stepped off the porch in perfect step, the father beaming down upon the head with its much-worn straw hat revealing wisps of brown-red hair sticking through.

"I think I like the early morning best of all, Father," the boy remarked as they walked into the "belly" of the covered bridge and paused to listen to the rushing water as it ran beneath the sturdy, heavy and durable beams and planks. "God seems ever so near then."

"He is always near, my son, when we love Him. Always. But the morning..., well..., like you said, God is very near." 

"I like these walks with you, Father. It's the most special part of my day. It... it's wonderful!" The last sentence came out in little more than a whispered exclamation of ecstasy.

"I suppose it's one of my most cherished and special times too, my son. Just the two of us. Ah, what pleasure!"

"Do you suppose God feels the same way when we spend time alone with Him -- in praying and reading His Word, Father?"
"I'm sure He does, Son. Yes, I'm sure of it." They emerged through the opposite end of the bridge and followed the road, now tree-shaded, now sunny-bright. Grasses grew tall and gangly and lithe; flowers bloomed brightly and, others, less brightly but muted beautifully in various and sundry shades and hues, each adding to the totality of the beauty.

As if attuned to the other's impulses and feelings, they stopped simultaneously as a warbler trilled out an exquisitely glorious song from a tree above their heads followed by a busy little chickadee, whose delightfully happy but softly-muted chick-a-dee-dee-dee song twisted the corners of their mouths into delighted smiles.

In a silence of total contentment and inner peace, they moved forward, followed for some distance by the saucy little chickadee whose curiosity -- or whatever-kept him flitting from bush to bush and, all the while, chattering his little chick-a-dee-dee-dee song.

The hill rose before them, steep and mostly tree shaded and challenging. The father looked at the boy with questioning eyes.

"I can make it, Father," came the instant answer. "My legs aren't quite so short as they were when you first brought me up here. But oh, how strong your shoulders were! And how I loved to ride upon them. Why, Father, the view was ever so much more beautiful and magnificent from your shoulders."

The father smiled fondly down upon the lad with the much-loved, badly-worn old straw hat on his head. How old was the hat? Not that it mattered. Not at all. What did matter was simply that, from the day he bought it and put it on the boy's head--two? three? four years ago?--it had been a most prized possession, reposing on the bedside chair at night and the first thing on in the morning.

"It makes me feel like you, Father," was the beautiful but simple reply when asked why he wore it always, except, of course, to go to church.

With the freshness and the strength of youth, he climbed the hill with ease and with speed, hurrying ahead of his father then pausing near the top to turn and smile down upon the approaching figure.
At the top, they stood, inhaling and exhaling the brisk, clean freshness of the air.

"The view, Son! Look at that view! It makes me wonder what Heaven will be like Did you ever seen anything like it!" the father exclaimed as tears of gratitude and joy flowed down his sun-browned cheeks. "And to think, that in His love for us, the Heavenly Father made this all for our enjoyment. All this lavish beauty! For US!"

So far as the eye could see, mountains lapped and overlapped and valleys spread before them, dotting the green carpeted landscape with grazing sheep and cattle and well-kept farms. Streams and ponds and a river sparkled in the sun, and from somewhere in the valley they heard the ringing of a bell. A breakfast call from a farmer's wife, no doubt.

They stood there, the father and his son, saying little but sharing and experiencing many things and many feelings, the bond between them growing ever stronger and deeper. At length the lad spoke:

"Oh, Father," he cried joyously, "was ever a son happier than I[ I love coming with you. Anywhere But climbing the hill most of all. Like you've often told me, every life has its hills to climb and its valleys to pass through. But look at this view from the top of our hill! Oh, Father, it's worth the climb. Worth every straining, hurting muscle and every nearly exhausted breath. And Father, it's never dreary so long as you are by my side, climbing the hill with me. I don't mind the climb. Not at all."

The father took the sun-browned hand in his own and squeezed it gently, fatherly, lovingly. Then he patted the top of the battered straw hat where a tuft of hair had crept through, and he smiled. "You are learning your lessons well, my son," he remarked softly, in his gentle manner and way. "May God help you as you learn the harsher, bigger lessons of life May His gentleness make you great and His grace keep you meek and tender and humble"

They stood a while longer, drinking their fill of the awe-inspiring handiwork of God; then they turned, slowly, and started their descent down the hill, with the boy saying he wished he had a pair of brakes upon his shoes.
The dear, old familiar covered bridge came into view and with a shout of glee and a burst of laughter, the son dashed ahead, his limbs as nimble and swift as some wild creature. At the bridge he turned, smiling, and waited for his father.

"Will there be any trout?" he asked, looking down expectantly into the rapidly-flowing, clear, gushing water.

"I can't say exactly, my boy; but there should be. Yes, there should be. We'll sit on the stone and watch for them after we're through the bridge."

"It's cool in here," the boy remarked, ere they were halfway through the bridge.

"We are shaded from the sun by the roof of the bridge," the father explained sweetly. "Just so, God is a refuge for us; a refuge from the storms and the heat of life. David wrote that 'He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High, shall abide--or lodge--under the shadow of the Almighty.' He promised to hold us in the hollow of His hands and to cover us with His feathers and to hide us beneath His wings."

The boy was deep in thought for a while. Then, suddenly, he said, "We serve a great God, don't we, Father?"

"There is none like Him, dear boy."

At the rock, they stopped then sat down on it, their keen eyes probing the gushing stream of water for trout. In a short while the boy's index finger pointed to a darting creature. His eyes were agleam with happiness.

"That was a big one, Father!" he exclaimed with a radiant face as the trout swam away.

And so it was a "big one" indeed. They laughed together. Their camaraderie was cemented by little things; ordinary things: things passed by and overlooked by the average passerby.

The years passed by, as years have a way of doing, and the winters' snows gave way, in time, to the refreshingly welcome breath of spring--one after another. And then the summers. The boy grew into a man. A fine young
man. His climb up the hill with his father was memorable. They climbed it as man to man. One's steps were slower, feeble, and the breathing harder and more labored; the other's steps were strong and long and rapid, his lungs seemed like a giant bellows, inhaling and exhaling deeply and with great ease.

"I shall miss these walks, Father," he said as they climbed the hill the day before leaving for his third year of Bible School.

He paused and waited for his father to catch up with him. "I'm sorry," he apologized, when the elder man was in step with him. "I forgot that years have a very decided way of slowing one's steps. Are you all right, Father? Are you well?"

"As well as a man my age can be, I suppose."

"Shall I stay home and . . . and work the land? It's too much for you anymore. For you and for Mother. I'll stay if. . . ."

"Nonsense, my son! Do I not have His promise, 'As thy days, so shall thy strength be?'"

Another year passed Another winter, too. And then came the spring. And graduation. What a graduation! No son ever looked finer. Nor more noble. No valedictorian address could ever have been more Christ honoring nor Christ-uplifting:

"All that I am today -- or ever hope to be --" the son said, humbly and meekly, "I owe, first of all to the Lord, and then to my parents. Where do you find a father such as mine; a father who takes time and makes time to climb hills with his boy and to go fishing and camping, sowing, dropping and planting the seed of the Word with everything they do together? . . . ."

The journey homeward was pleasant, but taxing and tiring on the father and the mother. The father especially.

"This long trip has been a bit too much for you, Father," the son remarked, keeping his eyes on the road.
"We wouldn't have missed it for anything, my boy, your mother and I. Our cup of joy was full as we watched you and listened to you up on that platform. You've kept tight hold of the faith, Son. This blesses my soul"

The hot winds of summer gave way to the gentler, cooler winds of another autumn. They stood together at the top of the hill, the stooped, gray-haired, kind and loving father and the tall, broad-shouldered, God fearing, strong young man.

"The climb is getting too much for you, Father; it's to taxing your strength beyond what you can do anymore" Plainly, the son was concerned.

The father smiled up into the face of the young man. "Age does make a difference," he admitted, struggling for breath.

An agonizing pain gnawed mercilessly inside the son's heart all the way down the hill. His father, . . . he . . . he . . . time was running out for him. It . . . it was almost . . . gone. Oh no! No! His whole being shrank from the thought. Not his father! "Please, kind Savior, no!" he prayed in a whispered breath.

The night was beautiful; the air deliciously fragrant and clean with fall's delightful air freshener and the soft, sweet perfume of late blooming honeysuckle and roses. They sat together on the porch swing, the two of them; the mother remained inside, knitting, the night air was too much for her arthritic condition.

"You're tired, Father," the son remarked, noticing the head nod with dozing. "Why don't you go to bed?"

"I believe I will, Son. Yes, I believe I will."

"I'll help you inside."

The strong, young hand all but lifted the tired man to his feet and guided him gently -- oh so gently! -- to the door and up the step into the sitting room.

"Father is tired, Mother," the young man stated soberly. "I'm going to help him to bed."
"I'll come too, Son," she replied, putting her knitting down and, simultaneously, brushing a tear away. "Your father may need a doctor." Concern registered in her loving voice and anxious words.

"No, my dear, not a doctor. A bit of rest will be welcome," came the softly-faint reply. "I tire so quickly and so easily anymore," he added, smiling into the face of his beloved.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, the son commenced removing his father's shoes and socks. Then he unbuttoned his shirt.

"Let me . . . lie down . . . dear boy. Please. I . . . I feel strange."

"Father. . . ."

"It's here; my time has come . . . to . . . part . . . company with . . . this world. Yes. yes, this is . . . my hour . . . of triumph. Very soon now, I'll be Home: my sojourn will be over. Oh, rejoice with me . . . ."

"Father! Father! I . . . I . . . " The young man's voice broke.

"My boy, this is no time to weep; it is a time for rejoicing. All my life I have lived for this day. This hour. That's it, cover my feet now that you have laid me down on the bed. My feet are so cold."

Loving hands -- kind hands and gentle -- placed a heavy blanket over the man's body, making sure his feet were tucked in snugly and warmly.

"Son, come here. I can't see you well anymore."

"I'm right here, dear Father." Tearfully the son leaned over the form of the reposing parent and fondly caressed his hand while holding on to his mother's with the other.

"It's so beautiful. Oh, so beautiful! And such singing. Why, I never heard singing like that before. And . . . and . . . dear ones . . . they're coming to greet me: a host of Heavenly beings are waiting for me! Oh, can you not see them?"
"Father. Father . . . please. Whatever will I do without you? Who will climb the hill with me? And. . . and . . life's hills? You always helped to make them seem small and . . . and insignificant."

Seeming to gain a modicum of strength, the father opened his eyes and gazed at his son. "I leave you entirely in the Lord's keeping. Go in His strength. Where I am going, there are no hills to climb: nothing exerting or tiring. Oh, I wish you, my dears, could see and hear what I am seeing and hearing. But you will. Yes, one of these days you will. Be faithful to God and to His cause. This parting is only for a little while. Follow me, my son, no longer up a hill but through the gates into God's Eternal City. And take good care of you mother. No man has ever had a better helpmeet. I must go now. The beautiful, shiny-bright beings are beckoning me to come. Oh, it is wonderful! Wonderful! I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. Oh, be faithful! Be. . . ."

A smile broke over the face. The spirit winged its way into the Beautiful city.

"Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord . . ." the son quoted reverently as he gathered his mother to his manly bosom.