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THE CHRISTMAS SURPRISE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Margaret Ann heaved a little sigh as she settled near her mother.

"My little girl's all ready for bed?" Mrs. Kinner smiled, trying hard to conceal the hurt in her heart.

"Do you think Jesus will send me what I asked for, Mother?" the blue-eyed girl asked anxiously.

"He said, 'What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them,' honey. Now run along to bed and trust the Lord.

I know we're poor, but I know we have a wonderful Heavenly Father who watches tenderly over us and who owns everything."

Laughing happily, Margaret Ann ran through the doorway into her small bedroom. "I do believe, Mother," she called from the bed. "Goodnight, Peter and Mother, and may the Lord grant each of us our desires."

"She has such simple faith," Peter said after some time. Tears glistened in the youth's tender eyes as he excused himself and hurried to his room upstairs.

The house was suddenly very still and quiet. "Please, dear Lord, don't disappoint her." Mrs. Kinner prayed as she took the rag doll from its place of hiding and worked feverishly to finish the few last details on the soft cuddly toy. "And help Peter not to be too disappointed. Fill him with Thy presence anew and afresh until he'll not notice the few gifts."

On and on into the night hours the tired, overworked mother sewed. She must finish the new shirt for Peter! He needed clothes so badly. And Margaret Ann's rag doll must be finished. Save for the homemade taffy she was able to make, there would be no sweets. She let the tears fall now -- unrestrained. Not that she hadn't told the two children the blessed Christmas story over and over, and not that they didn't know the true meaning of Christmas! Ah no! But there were so many things both needed. And Margaret Ann had wanted a kitten for as long as she could talk!

The midnight hour had long since passed, and the clock on the mantel struck the quarter hour. Mrs. Kinner looked up from her sewing. It was a quarter till two! She must hurry!

A muffled footfall on the porch sent the poor woman quickly to the window. Outside, everything was dark and sleepy-looking. A loud knock suddenly sounded. Who could be at her door at this hour of the morning! She

stifled a quick urge to call Peter. God would protect her, she knew. Hadn't He cared for and protected her all these years since her husband's untimely death when Margaret Ann was still a tiny infant?

A loud "Meow" sent her hurrying to the door. Silently, carefully she opened it. A great box fell immediately inside. Not a soul could the happy woman see. Carefully she dragged the big box inside, calling a soft, heartfelt "Thank you" to the person who had delivered it and whom she knew couldn't be too far in the shadows.

A soft, cuddly, fat, blue-gray kitten bounced happily out from its prison box and looked pleadingly up into her face. Mrs. Kinner picked the beautiful creature up in her arms and stroked it tenderly, praising the Lord with every new stroke. Still cradling the furry little creature in her arms, she hastened to unpack the box. There were five new shirts for Peter, and a pair of new wool pants and dress shoes, a warm scarf and gloves, overshoes, a pair of ice skates, a beautiful new Bible, and many other articles of great use to the growing boy. On and on she went, deeper and deeper down into the great box. Dresses for Margaret Ann, shoes, too, and stockings, and the finest china doll the mother thought she had ever seen. She wept freely -- great tears of joy and thanksgiving to her God, as she unpacked all necessary clothing articles for herself. How unselfishly her Heavenly Father had provided! At the very bottom, in a heavy wooden box by itself, was a crate of apples and oranges. She must get to bed so she could be ready for the excitement of the new day which was almost upon her! Leaving the almost finished shirt (she could make the buttonholes after Christmas, now) and the last few hand stitches on the rag doll, she made her way into Margaret Ann's little room and very tenderly and quietly placed the fat little kitten on the braided rug by the bed, then tiptoed to her own room.

Margaret Ann was the first to awaken. "Mother! Mother!" she exclaimed with childish glee, "Jesus did answer my prayer! He did! He did! Oh, Mother! Come look! See my kitten? She's playing with a ball of your yarn!" Again a loud peal of laughter followed, after which the child picked up the small furry bundle in her arms and cuddled it close to her, then knelt by the bed and prayed a prayer of thankfulness that left the mother utterly astonished. Never had she heard such elegance in thankful, childish simplicity and sincerity!

Peter ran quickly to the bottom of the stairs and stared in wide-eyed wonder. Then, reverently, he bowed his head and let tears fall unashamed.

Their God had answered prayer! A soft knock on the door just then sent Peter scurrying back upstairs.

"A present for you, ma'am," a strange man greeted the astonished widow as he pushed a washing machine inside.

"You -- you -- must have the wrong address, Sir. I -- that is, we could never afford such a washing machine," and her hands flew to her throat at sight of the shiny white thing.

"You Mrs. Kinner?" the man asked.

"Yes, Sir," and the mother's voice trembled.

"It's for you, then. A blessed Christmas to you and yours!" he called as he departed.

With trembling hands she closed the door and turned to face the washer. A bright red tag fluttered slightly -- "To my dearest Mother. With all my love, Peter," it read.

"Peter! Why -- why -- how could you, my son?" and Peter stood in the stair doorway now.

"It's not new, Mother. But it's the very best I could do. Old Mr. Petersimes had this and never used it since his wife passed away. So I asked him if he'd sell it to me. He said I could have it for twenty-five dollars and --"

"But where did you get the money, Peter?"

"I've been saving for nearly a year, Mother. I did many odd jobs for Mr. Petersimes that you knew nothing about -- after my regular work hours were finished. I really wanted to get you a brand new one, but they were all too expensive."

"Oh Peter, this is beautiful! Thank you, my Peter. I love you. The love that prompted this gift of yours is the most beautiful thing of all.

"Now, come. There are many things for you to see and to open -- sent to you by our Heavenly Father," and the meek little woman led the way to where the big box was. Before either child looked at the lovely items in the box, the mother read the simple message on the tag: "A gift for you, prompted by the proddings of your Heavenly Father."

Together the happy family knelt for praise and thanksgiving before opening the box together.