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**MORE THAN LOAVES AND FISHES**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

"Well, well, well!" Mrs. Ella Samples exclaimed when she saw Tabitha Crosley almost even with her gate beneath the white rose arbor of her front lawn. Tabitha's head was down; her eyes were looking at the pavement beneath her feet.

"Well, well, well!" Again Mrs. Ella Samples repeated the exclamation.

Tabitha's head jerked up. She straightened her shoulders as if standing at attention.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you, Tabitha," Mrs. Samples said apologetically. "But I couldn't allow you to pass my gate without giving me even so much as a cheery hello. You know how I look forward to visiting with you, even if it is for only a few minutes each day. There's something about a familiar voice and a friendly smile that helps to take the keen edge of hurt and grief away from me, now that Jacob's in Heaven."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Samples," Tabitha remarked. "I didn't notice that I was passing your place."

"One doesn't actually see too much looking down, Tabitha, does one?"

Tabitha felt herself blushing in shame. "I found a dollar once," she added lamely.

"Once," Mrs. Ella Samples said. "That was a rare find, now wasn't it, Tabitha? Ever any more after that?" she queried.

"None. A penny every now and then. . . ."

"A penny, eh? Look up, Tabitha. What do you see? Pivot your neck around a bit: there's beauty, beauty, beauty. Everywhere you look, there's beauty. What do you see?"

"Oh Mrs. Samples, I'm sorry."

"And right you ought to be. Look at these roses. Did you ever see this arbor more loaded with blooms? Why Tabitha Crosley, I'm almost speechless over their beauty. And inhale of that perfume, my dear. Oh, who but God could make anything so lovely and perfect! Look at the sky, my dear; a perfect robin egg blue and cloudlessly clear. Look what you almost missed by having the downward look."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Samples."

"Are you, Tabitha? Truly, are you sorry?"

"Well . . . well . . . I . . . I . . . Oh you wouldn't understand. No, you would not understand."

"And what makes you so sure that I wouldn't?"

Tabitha took a deep breath then exhaled it quickly. "It's just that everything's going in reverse for me."

"Reverse? How's that?"

"See? It's like I said; you don't understand. You can't understand."

"Were you on a special errand, my dear, or would you have time for a cup of hot chocolate and a toasted English muffin?" Mrs. Samples asked after studying the tawny-haired teenager.

"I'm not on a special errand, Mrs. Samples. But I don't think I'd care for hot chocolate at this precise moment. Thank you kindly, though."

"Tabitha Crosley, are you trying to put me off? Since you're not on an errand for your mother, and since I feel you have time to spare, this beautiful morning, you come inside with me; you and I need to have a little chat again. I may be an old woman but you must never forget that my mind is still young enough to remember when I was a young lady your age."

"But you won't understand, Mrs. Samples; I know you won't. Even God doesn't seem to care about me anymore. If there is a God. . . ."

Mrs. Ella Samples gasped in shock and fear as Tabitha's sentence trailed forebodingly.

"If there is a God . . ." the aged woman parroted in utter amazement and disbelief. "Tabitha Crosley," she said sternly-sweet, "whether you want an English muffin and hot chocolate or not is incidental; it's beside the point. You may partake or, if you so choose, you need not partake. One thing is certain, however. . . ."

"Yes, Mrs. Samples?"

"You are coming inside, where you and I can talk things over."

"But it won't do any good, Mrs. Samples; I know it won't. You'll only be wasting your time and . . . and my time. You won't understand."

"Your time, by your own admittance, has no particular schedule attached to it, my dear; and my time is indeed flexible, as you know. I'm always available to help anybody who needs help. Today -- now especially, and you particularly -- all else will be put aside until you are once again in a right relationship with God. Come," Mrs. Samples said, throwing the white gate open wide and motioning for her young charge to enter.

Tabitha stood for a moment in rebellion.

"Come, Tabitha. You need help badly." And Mrs. Samples placed a hand on the slender shoulders and urged her inside.

Tabitha sat down on the wedgewood blue bench in the nook of the cheerful kitchen. Always, she had thought that Mrs. Samples' little cottage home was the prettiest and the most cheerful place she had ever seen. She delighted in going there; and go often she did. It had been a haven for her from her earliest years of recollection; both Jacob and Ella Samples were like real grandparents to her. She loved the dear old couple; loved them dearly. Taking advice from them was easy because she knew that they, like her parents and her real biological grandparents, wanted only God's best for her. Lately, however, she had begun to resent Mrs. Samples' godly counsel and careful advice. Was it because the kind neighbor always remained in full and total agreement with her parents, perhaps?

Sitting on the bench in the breakfast nook now, Tabitha winced, knowing that she had answered her own silent question. Why was it, she wondered, that one sometimes resented and turned away from the one who told them the truth? Especially when love was the prompting factor for the statements of truth.

She reached out and touched the pretty wedgewood blue sugar bowl and matching pitcher in the center of the breakfast nook table. She had always admired it and wondered why Mrs. Samples used it each and every day instead of saving it for special occasions and special guests. Then she recalled that the dear lady had once remarked that, to her, all her guests

were special, and that no particular guest deserved less or more than another. Each was, therefore, treated like royalty.

Mrs. Samples set a plate of freshly toasted English muffins, yellow-gold with melted butter, on the table near Tabitha. Then she placed a dainty but elegant dish of cut glass beside the muffins and filled it with ruby-red jelly that was crystal clear and beautiful.

"Your hot chocolate, child," Mrs. Samples announced sweetly, as she set a delicate china cup full of steaming, sweet smelling hot chocolate on the saucer before Tabitha.

Tabitha started to protest but the tantalizing fragrance of the steaming-hot liquid won out. "Your hot chocolate mix has always been my favorite. It's superb."

Mrs. Samples smiled. Then she slid gingerly into the seat opposite Tabitha and, bowing her head, she offered grace. "Thank you for the compliment," she said as she passed the muffins to her guest.

Tabitha took a buttered half, thanking Mrs. Samples as she did so. Then she spooned some of the ruby red jelly over the still-hot muffin and bit into it. It was delicious; simply delicious, she had to admit. But then, everything her neighbor made was delicious and tasty, she reminded herself.

Mrs. Samples waited until Tabitha took the second half of the muffin then she said kindly, "And now, my dear, are you ready to explain why you said what you did about God? That was a dreadful thing to say about Him. Have you forgotten that He is Omnipotent and Omniscient and. . .?"

"I haven't forgotten," Tabitha replied, breaking into the dear woman's unfinished question. "But where is God? Why is everything going in reverse for me? Doesn't He care at all about me?"

"Slow down, child; slow down. You have a full-fledged case of me it is this beautiful day, and that's too bad."

"I can't help it, Mrs. Samples; I'm upset. I guess that's obvious. First and foremost, Dad cut my allowance in half. Straight down the middle, in half! Imagine it!"

"His weekly paychecks aren't what they used to be when the plant was operating full time, are they?" came the softly-asked question.

"I knew you'd not understand, and that you'd side in with dad," Tabitha said bitterly. "I asked him for extra money to buy a sweater I saw in the store window and I was turned down flat. To make matters worse, I'm not going to be able to go to that youth gathering over in Pennville. And just a little while ago I got a letter from Deanna, telling me she's not coming in at all for the summer because her parents can't afford to buy her a plane ticket this year. God just doesn't care one bit about me."

"Is that why you stopped 'serving' Him?" Mrs. Samples asked, biting into her muffin and looking ever so soberly at Tabitha.

"Well He's certainly not taking notice of me, so why bother?"

Mrs. Samples put the unfinished part of the muffin on her plate, looking into Tabitha's face as she did so. "I get the picture," she stated emphatically. "It's another case of serving for loaves and fishes; a duplicate of a Biblical account. . . ."

"Why, Mrs. Samples, how can you say such a thing?" Tabitha was incredulous.

Reaching for her Bible, which was still lying on the table from her early morning reading, the sweet-faced woman turned to St. John 6 and began reading from verse 24 through 27:

"When the people therefore saw that Jesus was not there, neither his disciples, they also took shipping, and came to Capernaum, seeking for Jesus.

"And when they had found him on the other side of the sea, they said unto him, Rabbi, when camest thou hither?"

"Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled.

"Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed.'

"Now, my dear child, what do you have to say? So long as things were going your way, you claimed to have loved the Lord. But now that hard times have come to your father's once ordinarily adequate paycheck, and since a few minor disappointments and not-so-pleasant experiences have come your way, you're no longer interested in God and spiritual things. Yours has been a, 'Lord, You continue to provide the loaves and fishes and I'll follow You; but if the loaves cease, count me out.' Oh, my dear, dear Tabitha, how you must be grieving the Lord's heart! Were you ever truly born again? Have you ever experienced the new birth; a radical heart change? Have you?"

Tabitha was speechless. "I . . . I . . ."

"When were you converted, my dear?" Mrs. Samples prodded gently but persistently. "One who is truly born of God follows the Savior out of deep love and adoration for whom He is and not for the loaves and fishes. This latter is pure farce; it's a sham. And God hates it, because it's deceitful. Worse still, unless it is confessed and repented of, it will land one in the lake of fire."

Tabitha felt trapped. She tried sipping the hot chocolate and couldn't swallow it: it seemed to stick somewhere inside her throat. Mrs. Samples' sudden silence and the impact of her every word only added to her misery. And more than once, she -- Tabitha -- had been told by her older sister and two older brothers that she was spoiled and headstrong. And despite their pleas and kind entreaties for her to change, she had continued on in her own way. She felt they should all be thankful that she was faithful to attend each and every church service and that she never complained about having to go, like some of her friends did.

"Well, Tabitha . . .?"

She set the dainty china cup down on the matching saucer, feeling the penetrating, probing blue eyes of her neighbor upon her. "I . . . I've never experienced the new birth," she admitted candidly.

Mrs. Samples' blue eyes filled with tears.

With the confession of never having been born again, and seeing the tears in the elderly woman's eyes, Tabitha felt her defenses crumble and fall. Fear took hold of her: she didn't want to lose her soul and be doomed forever to the lake of fire. No indeed she didn't.

Reaching across the table she took hold of the wrinkled hand. "Pray for me, Mrs. Samples," she said brokenly. "I want to be born again." And, quickly, she slid off the breakfast nook bench-seat and was on her knees on the floor with Mrs. Samples kneeling beside her.