

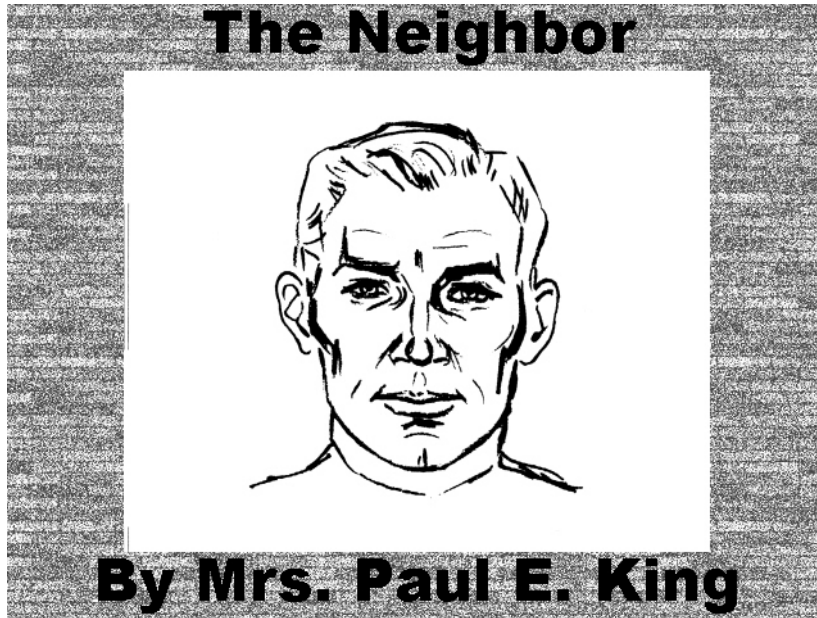
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THE NEIGHBOR
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Lana Mercheson slipped the meat loaf into the oven for baking then went to finish setting the table for supper just as Tyler's voice floated through the open window to her ears.

"Please, Mr. Potts, don't throw it; you'll break it. I'll come over and get it. Please . . ." he begged, with the sound of tears in his voice.

Lana dropped the silverware on the table then hurried to the back door and out to the porch. "What's wrong?" she asked tiredly.

Tyler ran to her, crying and broken hearted. "Mr. Potts smashed my airplane. I don't know how it got over in his yard; honest I don't, Mother. Oh-h-h!" he wailed. "My beautiful airplane. I told him I'd come over and get it but, instead, he tied a rock to it and gave it a terrible toss and.., and he smashed it," whereupon Tyler held up what was once his favorite model that hung on a slender string from the ceiling of his bedroom and moved gently by the slightest wisp of a breeze that floated in through the opened windows. He had other models floating gently from his ceiling, to be sure, but the plane with the pale blue body and the wings with red stars was his very favorite.

"Why did you take it down?" Mrs. Mercheson asked gently. "And why take it outside, of all places, Tyler?"

"Because Troy Potts wanted to fly it. Troy's my best friend, Mother. He brought his big new red fire truck over for me to play with while he played with my airplane. You know how nicely Bluebird sails with the wind when a string is tied to your finger and holds it. And now Bluebird's wrecked. Oh, Mother, what can I do to . . . to fix it?"

"Nothing Tyler. Absolutely nothing. Bluebird is ruined." Looking at the chain link fence that separated and divided the two back yards, Tyler asked innocently, "Why doesn't Mr. Potts like us, Mother? Troy's ever so nice: I wish Mr. Potts was nice to us, like Troy is."

Lana Mercheson felt a lump pop up in the middle of her throat and for a while she couldn't speak.

"Didn't you hear me, Mother? Why doesn't Troy's daddy like me? I like him. I want him to like me."

"I heard you, Tyler. Isn't it grand and wonderful that Troy is your friend?" she asked brightly, with a smile, in spite of the humongous lump inside her throat.

Brushing tears from his sun-bronzed cheeks, Tyler said sadly, "Sure is. But I wish Mr. Potts liked me too." Then, very sadly and seriously, he asked again, "Why doesn't Mr. Potts like me?"

"I don't know why, Tyler. But maybe he does like you; maybe he's nervous and . . . and upset. Some people's nerves make them act differently than they like to be and do. And sometimes, when people aren't Christians and.., and don't love Jesus, they get very upset with people who do love Jesus. We must pray for Mr. Potts, honey."

"I do pray for him, Mother, every day," and Tyler cradled the shattered plane in his arms like a sick puppy then carried it into his bedroom and spread it out on his bed, trying to fit the split, broken and shattered pieces together.

Lana hugged him and told him she loved him then went back to the kitchen to finish setting the table while tears ran down her cheeks.

She hated to admit it, but Mr. Potts was mean. Cruel, even. why? she wondered. There had to be a reason; what was it? Ted and she had never done anything to make him hate them. They had tried hard to be good neighbors, minding their own business and never prying into that of their neighbors. They always shared the vegetables and fruits from their yard and garden with the neighbors; the Potts particularly and especially. Evalene Ports always seemed so appreciative and thankful. Evalene was a gentle hearted woman, and kind.

Lana prayed as she worked, asking the Lord to send His light through the tightly-shut, dark windows of their neighbor's poor lost soul. Suddenly she remembered something, something that brought her hope. Troy! Why hadn't she thought of this before? she wondered in amazement. Two years ago, it was: maybe a few months over two years.

Tyler had come to her like a bouncing rubber ball, jumping up and down with joy, saying, "Mommie, Mommie, Troy's going with me to church on Sunday. I'm so excited I can't keep still. I've asked him and asked him and now he may go. Oh, Mommie, isn't it wonderful? Mrs. Flanagan told our Sunday school class that Jesus can use little boys and girls to bring souls to Him the same as He uses big people. And I've been asking Jesus to save Troy and I just know he's going to be saved."

And saved he was, Lana recalled now: two Sundays after he began going with them, he gave his heart to Jesus. He was changed; remarkably so. The bond between their son and Troy seemed unbreakable and solid. Gradually (now that she looked back) Mr. Potts' attitude changed: he became cantankerous and mean, to Tyler especially. Sometimes when Ted or she spoke, he ignored them completely and entirely; other times he'd answer, but grudgingly and harshly.

Was he jealous of Troy's attachment to Tyler and Ted and she, or was he angry because of Troy's conversion and sanctification? Conviction, maybe? Was Mr. Potts under conviction? she wondered, as fresh and bright new hope sprang into her heart. "Oh, let it be, Lord! Let it be!" she cried aloud.

After supper Ted and Tyler retired to Tyler's bedroom for a while, seeing what could be done with the Bluebird, if anything. Lane prayed as she washed and dried the dishes. She felt blest in having a happy Christian family. Her heart went out in love and pity and compassion for Evalene Potts. Was Elwin Potts unkind to his wife? she wondered.

She prayed and wept silently as she worked, longing for their neighbor to know and experience the glory and the joy of experiential salvation. And the blessings of a truly Christian home, too.

Ted came out to the kitchen with Tyler. They were laughing.

"Daddy said he's going to get me another model, Mother," Tyler declared. "The Bluebird's wings are crushed. So is her body. Daddy's going to try to find another one just like it, though, God willing," And the boy bounded way to play.

A week later, as Tyler and Troy were playing in Tyler's back yard, Mr. Potts started shouting loudly at Troy, ordering him sternly to come home immediately and play in his own yard.

Troy looked at Tyler; Tyler looked at Troy. Then, obediently, Troy left for home, saying softly, "I love you, Tyler."

"I love you too, Troy. Maybe you can come back later. We'll tell Jesus about it," Tyler said in simple, trusting faith in God.

As Tyler watched Troy hurry alongside their house, he cast a quick glance over to the Potts' yard. He saw Mr. Potts sway, as though he was dizzy. Then he dropped to the ground, grabbing at his heart.

"Troy! Troy! Hurry!" Tyler cried. Then he rushed inside, crying, "Daddy, come quick; something's wrong with Mr. Potts. Hurry!"

Together, Ted and Tyler rushed over the Potts' yard. "Call for an ambulance," Ted told both Evalene and Lana, who stood nearby, crying, "I'm afraid he's had a heart attack. . . ."

Evalene Potts rushed inside, sobbing great, loud sobs.

"Let me make the call for you, Evalene," Lana said, leading her neighbor to a nearby chair as she dialed the emergency number and relayed all necessary information,

"I'll take good care of Troy," Lana said as Evalene stepped inside the ambulance for the ride to the hospital with her husband.

"Please, Lana, please, pray for Elwin."

The door of the ambulance closed with the tearful plea while the waft of the siren and the disappearing flashing lights seemed like shadowy ghosts to haunt the early evening.

"Let's go, Ted. I feel I should be there for Evalene. We'll take turns watching the boys. They're no trouble at all. A few good books and a favorite toy for each will keep them well occupied. They play well together, as we both know."

"I was going to suggest the same thing, Lana. We've been praying earnestly for Elwin's salvation; they need us tonight. Yes, he may just need us. Strange though he is, and different, and harshly severe and critical, tonight may be the night. Unless it's already too late."

The drive to the hospital was made in almost total silence. Tyler and Troy, sensing the seriousness of the situation, spoke little. They sat huddled together in the back seat like frightened little puppies. Lana noticed their heads were bowed in prayer.

Ted parked in the hospital's emergency parking lot and, together, they hurried inside. Lana found Evalene in a frenzied state and worried nearly sick over her husband's condition. Lana's presence soothed and quieted the neighbor woman.

As they wheeled Elwin Potts from the emergency room to the elevator for the intensive care unit, he opened his eyes. In a weak voice, he said, "Please, Sir, I want a moment alone with my neighbor, Ted Mercheson."

"Not long, Mr. Potts," the orderly advised, as Ted came alongside the gurney.

"Ted," Elwin Potts began, "I want you and your family to forgive me for being such a wicked neighbor. I've been downright mean and hateful and nasty to you. To Tyler especially. I'm sorry. Forgive me, will you? And . . . Ted, I . . . I'm scared. I'm . . . not . . . ready . . . to die. I don't want to die! Oh, forgive me. Pray for me, please. . . ." He was sobbing.

Taking Elwin Potts' hand in his own, Ted said kindly, "Of course you're forgiven. Freely forgiven. And Elwin, Jesus came that you might have eternal life. Confess your sins to Him while I pray for you. Ask Him to come into your heart." And Ted began to pray.

"It's' all right!" Mr. Potts suddenly claimed. "The Lord Jesus Christ has forgiven me. I'm not afraid anymore. Thank you, Ted. Go home now, all of you, and get some rest. I'm going to be all right. I've been so troubled spiritually and so miserable in my soul until it brought on this attack, whatever it is.

"It made me mean and hateful to the only neighbors who really cared about me and my soul. The only way I knew to react to this troubling and disturbing feeling was to be ugly and nasty to you. Each time you showered my family and me with kindness and true Christian love, it made me all the more angry and upset That's why I deliberately broke Tyler's plane. I reached across the fence, grabbed it roughly, tied a rock to its wing and sent it into the

air, not caring that it was Tyler's favorite nor, even, that I had smashed it. But I'm sorry. Tell Ty I'll buy him a new model when I get home."

"I've already promised Tyler that, God willing, I'll get him another model as nearly like the Bluebird as I can," Ted told his neighbor.

"Then tell him he's got a brand new neighbor and that things are going to be different when I get home, God willing. I'll make it up to him some way, Ted. He's a real missionary. Tell him so for me."

"I certainly will, Elwin. God bless you. We'll be praying for you."

Smiling weakly, Elwin Potts said, "I hope to see you soon, good Neighbor. Until then, God bless you!" And he was wheeled into the elevator for the third floor, with his hands raised heavenward.