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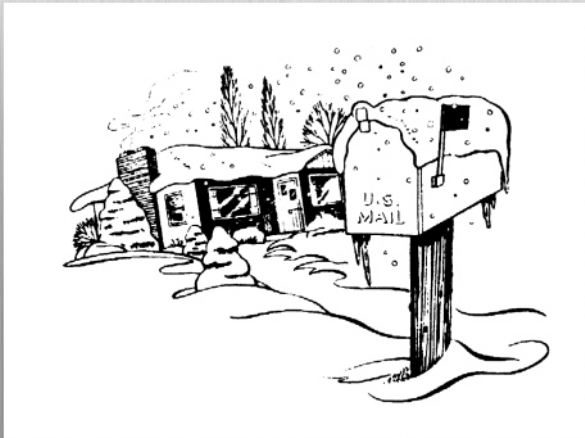
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Amanda's Best Gift



By Mrs. Paul E. King

AMANDA'S BEST GIFT By Mrs. Paul E. King

Amanda Cruthers slipped another length of wood into the opened lid of the cook stove, then just as quickly she closed the lid and slid the tea kettle closer to the front and the pot of slowly-simmering beans farther back toward the stove's reservoir. Turning slightly, she looked through the shiny-clean south kitchen window that faced a lovely mountain five miles across the valley. She saw that the snow, which had begun to fall earlier in the day, was

coming down faster and heavier now. In fact, from the mountain's edge across the valley, the wind seemed to be driving it in sporadic sheets toward her door and the nearer mountain, which stood majestic and beautiful less than a quarter of a mile from her front porch.

She was thankful for the cook stove that kept the house toasty-warm with its consumption of wood, which was furnished and supplied by a nearby neighbor. The Lord had been good to her; so very good. While Josiah lived, she never worried or wondered if or when she'd have another load of wood: Josiah was a good provider for her and their five children. When he passed away, less than two years ago, she became anxious as to how and from whom she'd be able to get her yearly supply of dry and properly-cut lengths of wood. Realizing that worry was like doubting God, she simply turned the matter over to the Lord, and that very day Amos and his wife dropped in to visit her, and Amos told her that they would see to it that she would always be well supplied with all the wood she'd need. And he had kept his promise. He had acres and acres of timberland.

She whispered a prayer for Amos and Sally Ann now, recalling the tears in their eyes each time she thanked them for the wood and told them she was praying for them.

Amos took Josiah's death very hard. He loved Josiah, who was as a father to him. And since her husband's Home-going, Amanda noticed numerous changes in Amos; a change of attitude and a softening process, to name but two. There were times when she felt that Amos and Sally Ann were not far from becoming Christians, so changed was their way of thinking since witnessing Josiah's glorious and triumphant crossing.

Amanda sat down in the rocking chair in the kitchen now and picked up her knitting needles. Her gifts to the children and their spouses, and the grandchildren, too, were all homemade. Gifts of love, they were, every one of them -- sweaters for the adults, each of them, as well as foot warmers. Ties for the men, cobbler aprons for the ladies.

For the grandchildren, there was always a delightful assortment of beautiful and exquisitely made stuffed toys -- dolls, teddy bears, mice, dogs, cats and rabbits, turtles and frogs, each dressed in accordance to sex, whether boy or girl. The toys were the delight of the still-young grandchildren, and Amanda's greatest joy came in making and dressing her friendly and

loving looking creations. But children needed clothing, too, she knew, and her gifts to them came in the form of beautiful new dresses and suits. Having been a seamstress for many years of her early life, her workmanship still bore the mark of a professional.

Her needles clicked out a merry little sound as her fingers worked quickly and expertly with the lovely yarn. She offered a heart-felt prayer of praise to the Lord for the privilege of still being able to work and to keep busy. Life without Josiah was lonely indeed; what would it be like if she couldn't work and stay busy!

At thought of her husband, she sighed deeply. How Josiah did love Christmas! It was almost like his new year began in December instead of January the first. He had often exclaimed, "Oh Amanda, my love, I'm so happy. I'd like to have a voice as big as a fog horn, so I could shout from the housetops an the highest hill that the Blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, forgave old Josiah Cruthers of all his sins many years ago in the early part of December. Oh, I love Christmas; love it! God's Son -- His only begotten, beloved Son! -- took up residence in my heart in the beginning of December and on Christmas Eve He sanctified me wholly and became King of my life. What a Gift! A Heavenly, Divine Gift!"

Amanda brushed quick tears from her eyes, recalling her beloved's words and his excitement over experiencing the new birth and heart holiness. He was a shining example and a joyous witness to the reality of his radical heart change. And, were he still living, Amanda knew that he would be working in his basement wood shop making cribs, cradles and chairs for the grandchildren, and his voice would be singing the songs of the Lamb and praises to His name.

She noticed the intense silence now and felt like it was going to suffocate her unless she did something to overcome the feeling, so she began to sing about the blood. There was power in the blood; wonder-working power. And as she sang, she felt the Divine Presence in the room with her. Oh, she was not alone; not ever: constantly, she had the Abiding presence of her Comforter, the Holy Ghost. Joy bubbled up in her soul as her song rose higher and higher: she was not alone. Ah, no. And as for silence, God was in the silence. Yes, He was.

She glanced through the window and saw that the snow was falling with intensity. The valley was totally and completely obliterated; nothing could be seen but the wall of rapidly falling snow outside her windows. This was not a squall, she realized, as she watched through the windows: this was a full-fledged snowstorm. A real blizzard.

Ten days. Only ten days till Christmas, she mused silently, hoping most of the children would be able to get home. Several, she knew, wouldn't make it, since it was the year to spend Christmas with their mate's parents and family. And this was only right and fair, she knew. They would come home between Christmas day and New Year and, always, the time together was lovely and wonderful.

Amanda's needles clicked merrily as she worked. She enjoyed the soft sound; it was "companionable," she felt. She heard the wind tear around a corner of the house and knew that the snow, which had been lying down like a sleepy, obedient and tired-out child, would now be driven in gusts across the land and would drift into huge drifts, blocking lanes, roads and highways. She could well be drifted in for days, she realized, recalling storms of other years. But little matter; her Heavenly Father's watchful eye was ever over her, looking out for her; caring for her.

She leaned her head against the back of the rocker and closed her eyes to rest them for a brief time. She must have dozed, or fallen asleep, for she was awakened with a loud banging on the kitchen door. Who would be out in a storm such as this? she wondered, as she got to her feet and placed her knitting carefully into a wicker basket beside the chair before going to the door.

Scarcely was the door opened when a voice exclaimed, "Oh, thank God, we found the house! Thank God!"

"Amos Tommas," Amanda cried, "what are you doing outside in such a storm?" Then, seeing Sally Ann, she chided, "And you, too, Sally Ann! Why, you could have frozen to death. Look at that blizzard; you can't see your hand in front of you! Now come inside and thaw out a bit and then maybe you can tell me what you're up to."

Amos clung to Sally Ann like she was the most precious thing he had. Quickly, Amanda freed them of their heavy snow-laden outer garments then

she made a pot of steaming-hot peppermint tea and, making them sit down in chairs in front of the warm stove, she knelt down and removed their icy-cold boots while they sipped the tea.

"Oh, thank God!" Amos exclaimed again, in a barely whispered exclamatory note.

Amanda sliced thick slices of freshly-baked bread then buttered each piece generously with butter made from the dairy herd of Amos and Sally Ann. "Eat this," she said kindly. "It will give you nourishment and strength. And these sweaters will help to warm you up," she added, as she wrapped Sally Ann in one of her warmest and buttoned a heavy one of Josiah's around Amos' neck.

"Thank you, Amanda," the couple remarked.

"You are so kind," Sally Ann said between chattering teeth and sips of steaming-hot tea.

"And who is more kind and generous to an old lady than you and Amos are!" Amanda exclaimed softly. "Wood to keep me warm; butter and eggs and milk and meat to feed me and sustain me, and visits to see that I am all right. May God repay you a hundred fold," she added.

"No. No," Amos cried, rising up from his chair and standing with his face to Amanda and his back to the stove. "God owes me nothing," he said, as great tears spilled down his ruddy cheeks. "I owe Him everything. Everything! Almost, Sally Ann and I didn't make it here in this storm. We started out earlier this morning for supplies from the nearest town. Everything went fine until we tried getting up our lane a couple hours ago."

Amanda listened in silence, wondering who else might be lost in the storm. "Visibility is nil," Amos declared "I managed some-how. . . ."

"God:" Sally Ann exclaimed. "It was God, Amos.

Otherwise you'd never have seen the big iron post at the end of our lane. For one brief moment we saw it, Amanda. Only a moment -- when God seemed to pull the wall of impenetrable snow aside to let us know it was time for us to turn up the lane.

"That's so," Amos verified. "And somehow. . . ."

"God, Amos dear," again Sally Ann said. "Not somehow, but God!"

"That's right. That's right," Amos cried, wiping the tears with a big red handkerchief from his pocket. "God got us at least halfway -- or more up our lane, when we plowed into a snowdrift that stopped us short. I knew we couldn't get any farther. We sat for a while, wondering and debating what to do. Then we decided to lock the car and try to get home."

Amos paused. Again he wiped the tears from his cheeks and his eyes. Then he trembled.

"It was frightening and frightful," he said after a brief silence. "We hadn't gone far until we knew we were lost. Worse still, we knew we'd perish unless we found shelter soon. I told Sally Ann not to let go of my hand. She clung to it fiercely, until a strong gust of wind knocked her down. I called her name, only to be mocked by the wind that knocked her name down my throat with its icy fist or thrust it beyond her hearing with its own rumbling noise. Panic boiled up inside of me; I dropped to my knees in the snow and began grappling with the drifting snow, searching, searching -- for a hand, a boot, an arm. But I felt nothing. Nothing.

"Oh, Amanda, I thought I had lost her. It was a nightmare. I thrashed in the snow like a man gone mad, calling her name, searching for her. Almost, I got up and ran. Where to? Anywhere. Just anywhere. If Sally Ann was dead, I didn't want to live. And then, in that wild, fierce, blinding blizzard, I heard Josiah's voice. It was as real and as clear as when he told it to me years ago; 'Amos,' he had said, 'the day is coming when you're going to need God. You'll be in something so deep and dark and dreadful that you won't know what to do nor which way to turn. Today, you tell me you don't need God. But you do, Amos. Oh, how much you do! Your eyes are blinded by sin, my dear boy. But remember my words: When the storm hits, call on God; He'll be there.'"

"I stopped my thrashing and grappling and got silent. 'God,' I cried quietly, 'I need You. Help me, please. I'm a poor, lost, stubborn sinner grappling my way in sin and thrashing around in an empty life, save me,

please. Give me something real; something worth living for. And please help me find Sally Ann, Lord."

"Well, Amanda, that was the first prayer I ever in my life prayed, and God heard it. Oh, how He heard it! In an instant of time, I was converted. Saved! My heart was filled with peace and joy like I never knew was possible. On my knees in the snow, my heart, which was itself once a raging, seething storm, was now at peace and rest with its God and was incredibly calm. And trusting, too. I knew I'd find Sally Ann. I knew it. For Josiah and you often told us it wasn't God's will that either of us should perish and be lost but that He wanted us to be saved. And there, amid the roaring blizzard and the storm, with my heart as quietly at peace and rest as if it were listening to the first sweet song of the larks on wing; I waited, with a wonderfully sweet and unwavering faith in God. And then I heard a voice, ever so faint, but a voice nonetheless. Still on my knees, I crept slowly toward where I was sure it had come from, praying and trusting as I went, on my knees.

"In a brief lull in the storm, I heard my name. Again I moved forward, on my knees. Reassuringly, I called Sally Ann's name, but I was sure the wind was carrying my voice away from her. So I waited for another brief lull in the storm and the sound of her voice, It was a long wait this time, and when I heard her faint call somewhere to my left, I got to my feet and almost leaped to where I had heard it. In a glad moment, were in each other's arms, crying, sobbing, hugging and praising the Lord. Sally Ann was shouting, 'I'm saved, Amos! My sins are forgiven. Saved!' and I was telling her the same. I tell you, Amanda, we had a camp meeting right there in the snow." Amanda wept for joy.

"We thought of you then," he continued, "alone in this blizzard. And praying for Divine guidance, we got to our feet and started out in what we trusted was the right direction. And here we are, safe and sound, and all because of the miraculous power and leadership of our blessed Lord and Savior. I only wish it were possible for me to tell Josiah what happened to Sally Ann and me today. I would tell him how I received the greatest Gift ever in the month of December. Oh, what a Gift!"

"He knows, Amos," Amanda said joyously "Yes, he knows. And today -- this very minute, in fact -- there is great rejoicing in Heaven; not one, but two, sinners have repented and been born again! Yes, there is great rejoicing in Heaven, and I am sure Josiah's voice is mingling in among those joyous

shouts. And as for me, you have given me the greatest gift possible -- the answer to many fervent prayers."

Amos took his big, red, work handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the fastly-falling tears from his cheeks, too full of holy joy to say anything. What peace was his, and what a Savior!