

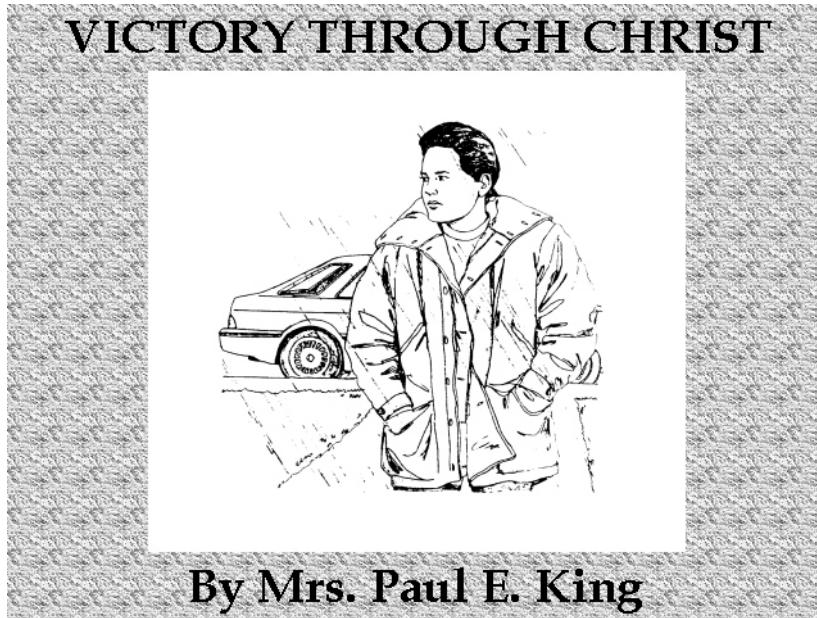
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VICTORY THROUGH CHRIST
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Troy stood for a long while on the sidewalk in front of Brooke's house, wanting to go in but not sure that he was welcome. Oh, Brooke had invited him, to be sure; but Troy doubted the sincerity of her invitation. Not that he had reason to doubt it, mind you; Brooke never was insincere. Only, lately, he had doubted everything, it seemed. And everyone.

He shrugged, then turned back toward the car, feeling the bitterness of the past three months wash over him like acid. He was sliding behind the steering wheel of the classy little red sports car when he heard Brooke's soft voice calling to him and the next thing he knew, she was standing beside the car, her head stuck inside the partially-opened window, saying pleadingly, "Don't leave, Troy. Please don't. Come on in. Give us a chance. We love you. We care. We honestly and truly do."

Troy felt the bitter cynicism tumbling up from deep inside him and, sharply, he retorted, "No one loves me. No one. So why should you care? Or say you care? Cut the pretense, Brooke."

"Pretense!" The word came out in little more than a half-stifled sob. "Pretense, Troy? If only you could believe us. We do love you, and we do care. Not a single one of us has the least little bit of pretense. We know how deeply you're hurting."

Troy's lip curled in sarcasm. "How could you know?" he asked, more harshly and sharply than he planned on asking.

Brooke's reply was a barely whispered response. "We know," she reaffirmed between tears. "We really do know, Troy. Please get out and come inside. We want you."

Troy looked at the face so near to his and saw pity and empathy registered in the dark eyes. Slowly he raised himself from the seat and got out of the car.

"Your car is beautiful, Troy," Brooke added, for want of something else to say.

"Thanks. Sometimes I hate it."

Brooke sighed.

"But of course you wouldn't understand the why of my profound hatred," Troy remarked bitterly. "It was my last gift from him. Something to remember him by, he said, when he slid the keys into my pants pocket."

"It's hard, I know," Brooke said as they walked up the sidewalk together.

"Hard! That isn't the word for it!" Troy exclaimed as he stopped walking and slammed a clenched fist into the open palm of his other hand. "He killed something inside of me, that's what he did when he walked out of Mom's and my life and took off with that little bit of a butterfly. Something to remember him by, he said! I tell you, I hate the car! And if it weren't that I needed it so badly I'd get rid of it. Who wants a car when the father who was his ideal discharges a bomb that shakes the very foundations of the home and tears it apart! That bomb shell of announcement that came out ever so smoothly from him that he was leaving us for another woman and had filed for divorce, did something to both Mom and me. Life will never be the same again. Never. It's made a skeptic out of me. A bitter, hateful skeptic."

"I understand," came Brooke's soft reply.

"Stop saying those kind of things, Brooke. You don't understand. You can't understand. You only add to the bitterness of my heart."

"But I do understand," Brooke insisted sweetly. "Now come inside, please."

Troy swallowed hard; his breathing was labored and heavy from the overwhelming anger he'd just felt and displayed. He was adamant; he stood like one rooted to the spot. "Go on in, Brooke," he said. "I know you think I'm stubborn, and of course you're right in your assumption. No one can help me. No one!"

Brooke's dark eyes shimmered brightly with tears. "I thought that too one day. But I was wrong. All wrong. Now please come inside with me."

Her eyes begged him to obey and slowly he made his way to the door where he followed her inside. Noel Langley met them with a tray full of icy-cold, filled-to-the-top, glasses of lemonade. He was on his way from the kitchen to the small family room with the refreshing beverage. "Hi Troy," Noel said cheerily. "Sure glad to see you. We're all in the family room. All, that is, except Brooke's mom, who is 'slaving' away in the kitchen, finishing up the hot chicken sandwiches and fresh-from-the-oven cookies. Um-m! You're in

for a treat, my friend. Come on in to the family room with me, please," and Noel nudged Troy gently with the tray.

Brooke walked to the family room with Troy; then she excused herself and hurried into the kitchen to help her mother.

Troy was immediately surrounded by friends -- Stacie Melon, Andrea Hollister, Shawn Franklin, Curtis Hands, and, of course, Noel.

"I'm sure glad you're here!" Shawn exclaimed with a smile. "Brooke's mom is the greatest, I promise."

"The greatest what?" Troy asked, not exactly wanting to turn loose of the bitterness he felt churning inside him but sensing a camaraderie among the group that was highly contagious.

"The greatest everything," came an immediate response from Andrea and Stacie, who laughed together when their sentence was finished.

"All great minds run in the same channel," Andrea teased, when the laughter finally subsided.

"I was thinking the same thing," Stacie quipped with a smile.

Troy studied the faces before him, then he asked, "What is this? I mean, why are we all here? I thought when Brooke asked me over that it was just a sort of friendly church kind of gesture. You know, an invitation to come to church thing. Kind of . . . well. . . ."

"I know what you mean," Curtis said quickly. "And we'd all sure love to have you coming to church with us. But. . . ."

Troy interrupted with, "Do you all go to the same church? I mean, well, is it the church where Brooke's family attends and goes?"

"It sure is," came a quick reply from the group just as Mrs. Evans and Brooke entered with the enticing food fare and the announcement that it was time to eat.

Troy was impressed with the sincere and from-the-heart prayer of thanksgiving for the food and the Christian fellowship which Curtis prayed. There was a ring of genuineness to it. He had never heard anything like it before, and when the conversation turned to spiritual things, as they were eating, he was even more impressed.

"I know one thing," Andrea remarked joyously and victoriously, "and that is that the blessed Holy Spirit sanctified me wholly and burned out every single bit of bitterness I had in my heart toward my dad. You can't imagine how bitter I was."

"You, bitter, Andrea?" Troy asked, incredulous. "Why would you be bitter? You have no reason. If your dad had done you like mine did to Mother and me then you might have reason to be bitter. Sometimes I feel like this bitterness will consume me. It positively and absolutely overwhelms me. How could Dad do what he did? I tell you, the little flip of a butterfly that he ran away with and left us for deserves every bit of the punishment God can send her. He left us devastated, Mother and me, and . . . and . . . I hope God will send fire down from Heaven and. . . ."

"Don't say it, Troy! Please, don't say what you were about to say!" Noel pleaded as tears fell down his cheeks.

Troy was white with anger. "But he deserves to be punished," he cried. "If you'd see what it's doing to my mother maybe you'd understand."

"We all understand," Brooke said brokenly.

"How can you?" came Troy's quick question.

"Troy," Brooke said softly, as she wiped tears from her eyes, "each of us who are here know how you are suffering and what struggles you are going through and what battles you are fighting inwardly. This is why I asked you to come. We have all gone through and experienced what you are going through. Only, with Christ living and ruling and reigning in one's heart, there is no bitterness, such as you are experiencing now. Hurt and extreme grief and pain, yes; bitterness and hatred, no."

"I know how you feel." This came from Andrea and Noel and Shawn -- in unison.

Troy was incredulous. "You . . . you mean . . . I . . . I mean, are you saying that . . .that. . . ."

"That each of us here is living with a single parent," Brooke remarked, filling in the answer to the question marks registering on Troy's face.

"Surely not . . . not . . . you!" Troy exclaimed in disbelief.

"Most surely, me!" Brooke replied. "Eight years ago. And I loved my father as much as a child can possibly love his or her father. This is why Mother moved here; she felt it would give each of us a new start, away from where we experienced the pain and the grief and hurt."

Again Troy was incredulous. "Surely not your father!" he cried, staring at Brooke, whose home life he had always imagined and believed was one of total and complete happiness and solidarity. He had never once stopped to think why he had not seen Mr. Evans whenever he saw Brooke and her mother. After all, the man was the bread winner, wasn't he? His work, therefore, forced his absence from the public in many cases. Or so he had reasoned.

"My father, yes, Troy," came Brooke's soft reply. "But Mother -- thank God for Mother! -- and her deep faith in Jesus and her many prayers and fastings for me, helped me over my bitterness and shock and into the saving grace of the Savior and His sanctifying power. This is what got me through. I anchored my hope and my trust to the Rock Christ Jesus, who became my Heavenly Father. I learned to go to Him for strength and comfort when I thought my little world was falling apart and going to pieces. Through Him and in Him, there is victory over anything and everything we may have to face. I have proven this to be true."

"I had nothing -- or no one -- to lean upon," Noel said sadly. "And had it not been for Brooke and Mrs. Evans and, later on, for Curtis and Stacie too, it frightens me when I realize what I might have done. I hated my father with profound hatred for leaving mother and me, I'm sorry to say. But with Mrs. Evans and Brooke praying for me and with me, and showing me from God's Word, the Bible, that I'd go to the lake of fire and burn forever and ever unless I repented and got right with God, well, I did a complete turnaround: I

got converted -- forgiven for every single sin I had ever committed and been guilty of. I tell you, I've been changed, Troy. Wondrously changed!"

Troy sat forward in his chair now, eager to know more. "Did it . . . change your feelings toward your father?" he asked eagerly, searchingly.

"Did it ever! I've been able to pray for my father ever since; to pray for his salvation, with love in my heart. I hate his sin; it broke up our home. But I love my dad."

"If Jesus hadn't helped me," Andrea said, "I don't know where I'd be today. Thank God for my grandparents! When both of my parents took off with new lovers, my grandparents spared me the anguish and misery and pain of deciding which parent to live with by taking me into their home for keeps. Grandma got me through the trauma and pain and heartache of those early years by prayer and more prayer and still more prayer; and by love and more love and much more love. She led me to Jesus, who not only saved my soul and forgave my sins but filled me with God's Holy Spirit in sanctifying power. Brooke and Stacie and I became close friends, possibly because each of us shared similar heartaches, heartbreak and grief and pain. This is why we try to help others who are hurting. We understand and we care. And Mrs. Evans' home has become an oasis for us. We meet here twice -- sometimes more -- each month for prayer and Bible study and fellowship. We want you to join us, Troy."

Troy was silent. He was amazed. He looked around the group and realized that, truly, these friends understood how he felt. They knew -- first hand -- what he was going through and without any doubt whatever, they cared. His eyes met those of Shawn's, and suddenly he understood the meaning of why it was always just Shawn and his father, never his mother: she was the deserter.

He felt something strange happening to him; something much like when ice begins to melt, only it was inside his heart that the feeling was taking place. He sat in awe of the feeling. God! Yes, God was working. Moving. Asking him to come to Him for victory over bitterness. For healing. And cleansing --

"I'm ready, Lord!" he cried out loudly as he got to his feet then dropped to his knees, weeping brokenly and saying tearfully, "Please pray for me, will you? I must get rid of the load in my heart. . . ."

Like one body, the young people went to prayer, and the little family room with its very modest furnishings became the Throne-room of Heaven as still another one prayed through to victory through the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.