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THE MEANEST MAN
By Mrs. Paul E. King

"Hey, Bob, wait up. Wait! Slow up!" Randy shouted loudly, panting for breath as he fell in step with Bob. "Say, you're really hoofing it, old pal! Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"Hurry! Huh?" Bob queried, hardly hearing what Randy was saying.

"I said, where are you going in such a hurry?" Randy repeated, accenting the "where." "I can hardly keep pace with you. What's wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, just something pressing on my mind."

"It must be important," Randy ventured.

"It is," Bob said quickly. "Very important."

A smile broke across Randy's face, making his freckled cheeks dance in all directions. "A . . . a date?" he volunteered. "Cynthia Marshall. I know." He whistled a long, loud whistle. "She's a beauty, Bob, and she's wild about you."

Bob cast a long sideways look at Randy. "Are you kidding? Me date at my tender sixteen years? No. Guess again. I like Cynthia. Like her a lot. Better than any girl I've ever met or known, but the dating part is out till I'm older. Dad and Mother say my mind can change a dozen or more times till Miss 'Right' comes along. That is, if I want and do a lot of open, unbiased praying, God will, in His time, lead me to the right girl for me. So I prefer to take their advice and not rush my years. After all, the teen years are exciting years."

Randy laughed heartily. "Oh Bob, you funny, funny boy. We're not living back in the twenties or thirties, you and I: we're in the nineties, man. The hilarious nineties! When boy dates girl and girl dates boy at the ripe old age of twelve . . . or even less! It's all around us. Look at the junior high students. . . ."

"I prefer not to pattern my life after the majority of them, Randy. Look at the dreadful 'messes' some of them are in, too! Drugs, theft, immorality..., just to name a few of the evils."

Randy walked along in silence for a while, kicking up leaves as he went. "Where are you heading?" he finally asked. "I can't feature anyone in such a grand mad rush to get home."

"I'm going to Mr. Riddlestone's house."

Randy stopped dead in his tracks. "Not the Mr. Jacob Riddlestone surely?"

"The one and only. The same!"

"Are you crazy, Bob? Clear off your rocker? You know his reputation."

"I do."

"Then . . . then why are you going?"

"Love, Randy. Love in my heart for the old man. It's because of the 'new' heart Jesus gave me that I must go to Jacob Riddlestone."

Randy searched Bob's face eagerly. "I can't understand you," he finally commented, a puzzled look on his face.

"You profess to love the Lord, Randy; surely, you should understand."

"Of course I make a profession but that doesn't mean I'll have to go to Mr. Riddlestone."

"Doesn't it?" Bob asked without preamble. "Doesn't it?" he repeated again.

Randy seemed agitated. "Of course it doesn't. I didn't make the old man like he, is. Neither did you. He's just a mean old wicked man. That's all, and neither you nor I had anything to do with his getting that way. He's been like that long before your time or mine and he'll die that way. . . ."

"Not if I can do anything about it, he won't die that way!" Bob said, a shudder escaping him as he thought of the old man's end without God. "'The meanest man in town.' That's what people call him. But God doesn't look at him like that, nor in that way."

"How do you know He doesn't?" Randy countered. "Luke 19:10 tells us, 'For the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.' That sure sounds like it means old Jacob Riddlestone to me. He's lost, Randy, and unless someone takes an interest in him and loves him he'll go to hell sure enough. Jesus Himself said, 'I am come, not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance' Matt. 9:13. Then in I John 3:8 we are told, 'For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.'"

"And you mean to tell me that you're going to risk your life by going into the devil's territory, Bob? It is the devil's territory, you know."

"Right you are. But Jesus was manifested that He might destroy the works of the devil."

"And you're not scared, Bob? Not at all? Why, no telling what the old man will do to you."

"This Holy Love . . . the Pentecostal power burning within my heart since my recent conversion then sanctification . . . won't allow me to do less than to go to him and tell him about Jesus and what He can do for him."

Randy let out a long shrill whistle. "More power to you, old pal!" he said, walking away. "But I'm sure glad it's you and not me!" he called across his shoulder.

Walking along in silence, a load of books under his arm, hot tears coursed their way down Bob's cheeks. The boy's burden for the lost became almost unbearable. Where were the professors of Christianity who cared because souls were lost and dying and going to hell? Had the Christians been so taken up with the secular, the material, until they no longer wept and prayed over the lost like his father and mother did over him till he was converted and sanctified? he wondered.

Before he was aware of it, he was in front of Mr. Riddlestone's neat yard with its imposing, well-stained high board fence. Signs, posted at various strategic places warned, 'No Trespassing' and 'Keep Out' in strong, large, clear black lettering.

Bob gulped hard and stared momentarily at the signs and the imposing fence; then, prayerfully, he opened the gate and started down the neat, beautiful flagstone walk toward the door. It would never be said of Jacob Riddlestone that he was a careless, negligent, good-for-nothing man about his house, lawn or garden. All were kept with meticulous care. In fact, once inside, Bob thought the surroundings looked like something from House Beautiful Magazine. Neatness, cleanliness, and orderliness was the order of the entire place.

He stepped lightly on to the first of the front porch steps when a gruff voice stopped him.

"Where'd you come from, you young upstart? Can't you read? Didn't you see the signs?" Mr. Riddlestone pointed a long bony index finger toward the stained, redwood fence.

"I . . . I . . . yes, sir, I saw the signs. . . ."

"Then why did you enter? Out with you! Out!" the man shouted angrily, wielding a rake over Bob's head. "Out, I said!" he ordered, bringing the rake closer.

Bob stood as one paralyzed, praying for wisdom and just one opportunity to testify to the lost man.

"Mr. Riddlestone," he began, "please, you must listen to me. I came here because I love you. I've been praying for you. . . ."

"Out with you!" the old man shouted again, brandishing the rake over Bob's head. "Out!"

"I've been so burdened for you, Mr. Riddlestone. Over your soul, I mean. Are you ready to die and meet God as you are?"

"Why, you young smart aleck! Just who do you think you are? My soul's my own business. You let me worry about that! Now, out you go and . . . and never come back! Never!"

Tears flowed freely down Bob's cheeks as he started backing down the flagstone walk toward the gate. "I love you, Mr. Riddlestone and I . . . I'll be praying for you until you get converted. Don't go to hell. Please, don't go to hell."

The old man's face was white with anger. He muttered something beneath his breath. Bob guessed he was cursing him. At least it sounded like that.

Closing the gate, he started walking in the opposite direction for home, feeling miserably like he had failed in his God-given mission. What . . . just

what . . . could he do to reach the man? He wouldn't let him go! He couldn't! And he would not give up that easily.

A thought suddenly struck Bob. He thanked God for giving it to him. The printed page! A little tract! And he could easily slide it between the fencing. Mr. Riddlestone, neat, fastidious gardener that he was, would surely notice and pick it up . . . if for no other reason than to keep his lawn beautiful!

Thus Bob's tract ministry began. Carefully and prayerfully he chose and selected tracts with pertinent messages, and every few days he did a hasty detour to the fenced-in yard of Jacob Riddlestone . . . "the meanest man in town" . . . with a fervent prayer and a heart-cry to God for the old man's salvation. Slipped between the fencing, the silent messengers were on their way.

Weeks and months dragged into a year. One year into two, still Bob continued his ministry, his faith unwavering and unshaken.

It was his father who called him into the living room early one October evening. "Have you seen the paper?"

"No, I haven't. Why?"

Handing the daily paper to his son, Mr. Hardesty said simply, "Read this."

Bob settled himself on the arm of his father's chair and began reading. "Why . . . why . . . Oh, Dad! Mr. Riddlestone's dead! I wonder how it was with his soul! I prayed so earnestly for his conversion. I loved that old man, Dad."

"Read all of it, Son." There was a light in Mr. Hardesty's eyes.

Bob read through the obituary. Beneath it, in bold italics, a small notice was inserted.

"Requested by Jacob Riddlestone in his last hours," it read, "to the boy who prayed for him and cared about his soul: 'The meanest man in town' became the 'meekest man in town' . . . through Jesus Christ his Lord and Savior. 'Old things are become new.' Thank you, young man, for loving and caring. Not a single tract went unread; not a single prayer and tear was

wasted. Because you cared, I found this new life in Christ and life eternal. I'll meet you in Heaven."

Tears were flowing like rivers down Bob's cheeks as he finished. They were tears of joy. "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil," he quoted reverently.