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THE LEAST PLACE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Janice leaned back hard against the cushions of the car seat. Her hands gripped the steering wheel fiercely as the car followed a serpentine trail along the side of the mountain. "I do hope Mark doesn't waste his entire summer down here among these people!" she exclaimed to her mother. "He's entirely too sentimental."

Mrs. Cranston tore her gaze away from the breathtaking scenery of the mountains and stared at her daughter. "Mark's no sentimentalist . . . per se; he's dedicated to a cause, Janice. A needy and urgent cause! God, and His will, are first in Mark's life. I'm proud of him."

"Well, I hope he doesn't expect me to live in these . . . these hills and lose my identity. I'll nurse in City Hospital . . . or . . . or nowhere!"

Mrs. Cranston gazed fixedly out the window. "Knowing Mark and his unselfishness, I'm sure I'd dare say he hasn't asked you to relinquish your duty at City Hospital."

"That's true enough, Mother. But he has asked me to marry him and if I consent I'll have to go wherever he chooses to go."

"Correction, dear girl . . . where God chooses for Mark to go! It's not a matter of Mark's choosing. Rather, it is God's leading. When one is fully and completely dedicated and surrendered to God as Mark is, it is no longer 'I' but God." Mrs. Cranston stressed her sentences with emphasis, praying secretly that Janice would see the difference. Although her daughter professed to being converted and sanctified wholly, Mrs. Cranston felt uneasy about the latter experience.

Janice sighed tiredly and shifted a bit on the seat. "These roads make me dizzy. I feel like I'm going in circles."

"Just keep your speed low and we'll make it fine. It can't be much farther, dear."

"Whatever possessed Mark to follow the little Henry boy down here is beyond my thinking!" Janice exclaimed again.

"But you told me he'd need a lot of physical therapy after he was released from City Hospital, Janice. I'm sure this is why Mark came down."

"But on his vacation, Mother! What a vacation! You'd think he'd be so full of doctoring that he'd enjoy a three weeks' respite."

"I'm certain Mark could use a vacation, dear; but his heart is with his suffering and ailing patients. It may be just as well that he came down. Joe

Henry's pleased as he can be, I'm sure. And too, how else would the boy get well? There's no one around here who could do what Mark says needs done. These are poor people."

"I know that, Mother. And I am proud of Mark's generosity and his kindness. I'm proud of his doctoring ability, too. It's just that, well, I have a strange kind of feeling that Mark will be down here permanently and. . . ."

"And you are too good to bother with people who are too poor to dress nicely; fancy, I mean . . . and too poor to pay! Is that what you're trying to say, Janice honey?" Mrs. Cranston's voice sounded suddenly very tired and disappointed.

A flush stole up Janice's face. "I . . . well, Mother, you just don't understand. Mark's meant for bigger things than . . . to waste his talents on a . . . few."

"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these . . . ye have done it unto Me."

Janice concentrated on her driving and made no further comment.

Mrs. Cranston settled back to her favorite pastime of watching the beautiful scenery. Scripture after Scripture flooded her thinking as she saw the mighty handiwork of God unfold before her. "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God," she quoted half-aloud.

"What'd you say, Mother?" Janice asked, breaking the peaceful silence.

"I was quoting a Scripture verse, honey. These beautiful mountains make me realize a bit more just how Almighty and great my God is. This is such beautiful country!" she exclaimed.

Janice blinked her very blue eyes and pushed on the brake just as a doe and two spotted fawns crossed the road in front of her. "Whew! That was a close call for three very beautiful creatures!" she exclaimed, clutching the steering wheel hard. "I'm glad we're almost there."

"You brought the things Mark said he'd need?" Mrs. Cranston asked anxiously.

"Everything, Mother. Say, isn't this our road?" she asked, coming suddenly to a crossroad.

Mrs. Cranston consulted the crudely-drawn map Mark had mailed them. "This is it," she said. "Turn right, and in another ten minutes we should be in Joe Henry's front yard, according to this drawing."

The pair laughed as Janice turned on to the gravel road.

In less than ten minutes, they came to the cabin. A boy, younger than Joe, Janice judged, ambled out to meet them. He was about six, barefoot, his faded overalls patched all over and a ragged shirt clinging to his skin. A flock of hens scratched in the dust before a sagging porch and, nearby, two milk goats were tethered to a stake.

Mrs. Henry, hearing the sound of a car, hurried to the porch. She was small and fragile looking but was dressed meticulously in a plain blue calico dress. Her dark eyes looked appraisingly down on Janice and her mother as they stepped out of the car. "Sure glad to see you all," she called pleasantly from her place on the porch. "Come in. Come in! I'm Joe's mother. Doctor Severn, he's a restin' a spell. Told him he had to," she said in a motherly fashion, laughing pleasantly as she led the way into the kitchen.

Janice, repelled by the poverty she saw, decided to unload the things she'd brought for Mark to use on Joe, then leave as quickly as possible.

The splintery wood floor, though scrubbed to immaculate cleanness, was still all splintery, she noted. It smelled clean with the fragrance of homemade soap. She liked this.

"You all must be starved!" Mrs. Henry interrupted Janice's thinking with her kind words and her warm hospitable nature. "The chicken's all already to dish out and the corn bread's still hot. . . ."

"Mrs. Henry, you . . . you mustn't do this!" Janice put up a restraining hand. She wanted to say, "You can't afford it. That chicken was one of your

best laying hens. You can't . . .!" But the dear woman was busy spreading the table with her very best.

"Let me help you," Mrs. Cranston said, stepping to the stove beside Mrs. Henry and offering to mash the potatoes. "I presume this is your younger son," she said, smiling down on the lad who stared in wide-eyed wonder at the two strange women who had come into his life so suddenly.

"That's Jim," Mrs. Henry explained. "We have three other children. They're in school . . . two girls and another boy. We're right proud of our family," she added with a broad smile. "Don't have much earthly goods but we do have the children and we give them lots of love and kindness. Joe, he's a sleepin' right now. Doctor's orders."

"Love and kindness are two things which no amount of money can buy," Mrs. Cranston said. "My daughter and I will be most happy to meet the other members of your family. Doctor Severn thinks highly of you people."

"'Tis no way whatever that we can tell you how much the doctor means to our family. For sure, God must have sent him to us. Joe never would have walked again if the good doctor hadn't come. And to think he's a doin' it for free! My husband and I, we just can't understand it!" Mrs. Henry took a corner of her ample apron and wiped the tears from her eyes as she talked.

"Of course you're grateful!" Mrs. Cranston replied. "And Doctor Severn's payday is yet to come. God will take care of him."

The meal was delicious and, in spite of her earlier feelings, Janice marveled at how heartily she was able to eat. The atmosphere was permeated with love. In a way, it made her feet a trifle uncomfortable and out of place. Her mother and Mrs. Henry were conversing like old time friends who hadn't seen each other in a long time. Why wasn't she able to share their "oneness"? she wondered.

It was mid-afternoon when Mark entered the kitchen from a side room. He looked relaxed and refreshed and greeted Janice and her mother warmly.

"It's good to see you again!" he exclaimed. "You brought everything?" he asked anxiously.

"It's still in the car, Mark. I had planned to unload it and bring it inside but Mrs. Henry set a meal fit for a king before us and I have been thusly hindered," she said, laughing lightly and starting for the car.

Mark fell in step beside her. "I'm so glad you're here, Janice!" he exclaimed softly and meaningfully. I hope you like the Henrys and the mountains as well as I do. Somehow, the two go together. And to think, with no doctor for miles around! I believe I've found my field and station in God's plan for me. I hope you will feel free to join me, my dear. You still haven't answered my question. . . ."

"Mark, please! Not now. Give me time. I . . . I . . . there are some things. . . ."

"Like City Hospital," Mark answered nonchalantly, unloading the equipment Janice had brought.

Standing by the car, watching Mark carry the things into the clean but poverty-stricken house, Janice shuddered. She loved Mark, but her entire being rose up in strong rebellion at the thought of spending a lifetime here. She wanted to run.

She glanced back at the encircling mountains in all their green beauty of midsummer. Something about the mountains seemed to defy her anxiety, her rebellion and distaste. The timeless mountains with their stern balsams and fir standing rigidly erect and straight and tall seemed to mock her feelings. Hot tears stung her eyes.

It was now late evening and Janice had hoped to have been on her way long ago. The Henrys would not hear to it, however. "Your mother and you can sleep in the girls' room," Mrs. Henry said stoutly. "They won't mind sleeping on a pallet on the floor in the kitchen." Janice shuddered. Sleep on a hard board floor! Before she had time to protest, a little boy was beating on the door and crying for help. "Please, Miz Henry, is the doctor here? Sam, he's bad sick! Got a fever that won't go down none an' . . . an' he's havin' spasms."

Mark stepped up to the boy. "I'm the doctor, son, and I'm still here. Where is Sam, and who is he?"

"Sam, he's my brother, Doctor. He's to home. Can you come? Quick like? Maw, she's worryin' a heap."

"Of course I'll come. What's your name?" Mark asked, hurrying into the little room off the kitchen after his medical bags.

"I'm Oscar Jones. Kin you hurry, Doctor? Sam's awful sick. Wish we had a nurse that could sit up all night with him till the fever'd leave."

Janice surprised herself by stepping up beside Sam. "Tonight your wish will come true, Sam," she said. "I'm a nurse, and I'll go with you and Doctor Severn and see what I can do to help."

The walk down the mountainside was tiring but exhilarating, too. Sam's speed nearly exhausted Janice. Twice she tripped and would have fallen had it not been for Mark's steadying hand on her elbow.

The house which they entered was in worse circumstances materially than the Henrys', but Janice, working capably and efficiently beside Mark, was soon so lost in her work that she could just as easily have been on duty in City Hospital. She watched Mark listen through the stethoscope then whip out a needle. Gently he called to her, "Janice, give the boy a gentle rub with the alcohol you'll find in my bag."

"What is it, Mark?" she asked in a whispered tone of voice.

"Pneumonia. He's had it for several days, unfortunately. All we can do is to stay with him constantly . . . and trust and pray."

Janice looked at the contorted face of the unconscious child as he fought for breath. She began rubbing the spindly, feverish legs and as she did so a great love for these people flowed into her heart. God had made them too. He made one as well as the other. Shame, guilt, and remorse filled her heart. She stumbled out to the sagging porch and sank wearily onto the topmost step, her head dropping into her hands. From a distant ridge, a whippoorwill called lustily. It was soon answered by what seemed to Janice, dozens of other whippoorwills. The night air rose and fell with their happy but different song.

A quarter moon, riding the indigo blue sky in a lazy, reclining-type position, topped a stately fir and peeked down upon her in a melancholy sort of way.

She wished her heart were as peaceful and serene as the setting all around her was. Maybe . . . maybe I'm not fully and wholly yielded! She thought, remembering the resistance and rebellion that arose in her heart at thought of living and working among these people.

"Yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God" Rom. 6:13.

The verse seemed as explosive as dynamite to her awakened heart. When one was totally and unreservedly yielded he no longer had a claim on his life. It belonged to God . . . to be used as an instrument of righteousness unto Him!

Janice walked down the three steps and stood in the dust-filled yard. Raising both hands heavenward she cried, "I yield, dear Lamb of God! All of me. Take me. Fill me with Thy burning, cleansing, refining fire. Burn out the self-life. . . ."

Half an hour later she walked into the house. She had had her personal Pentecost. Now she could and would give Mark an answer.

All night she and Mark worked over the critically ill six-year-old. Mrs. Jones, her hands clasped tightly in prayer, sat on a three-legged stool near the woodburning stove where she could have a good view of her boy at all times. Janice touched her arm lightly. "I'm praying too," she said simply but compassionately.

They were women sharing, Janice thought. Little matter if it was City Hospital or here. God needed workers here! And now! Janice's heart was saying a continual "Amen" to God. Suddenly, the cabin became a hallowed place. It would ever be thus. She had met God here.

By mid-afternoon of the following day, Sam's breathing became more regular. He glanced up at them for the first time in days, smiling sleepily. Janice hurried out to the sagging porch and, wrapping her arms around a post, sobbed, "Thank You, dear Lord. Thank You!"

"Why are you crying?" a boy's voice asked suddenly.

Turning, Janice saw Oscar with a molasses pail full of plump, juicy blackberries.

Janice smiled into his innocent young eyes. "Women do strange things sometimes," she said brokenly. "I . . . I'm crying because I'm happy, Oscar. Sam's going to get well. God has made him well. The Lord willing, he'll be picking berries with you in another couple weeks."

Oscar's eyes grew big with wonder and delight. "And me an' Sam'll bring the very best berries to you, Lady Doc and to the Doctor man."

"And we'll be proud to have them, Oscar."

"Did . . . did I hear . . . right, Janice? Or are my ears deceiving me?" Mark asked, stepping suddenly near to Janice.

"Your ears aren't deceiving you, Mark."

"Then . . . then your answer is 'yes'? You will marry me?"

"The sooner the better, Mark. We've got to get located down here. These people need a doctor."

"And a nurse!" Mark exclaimed, giving her hand a tight little squeeze.

"Hooray!" Oscar shouted. "Maw, we're gonna' have a wedding'. Maw!"

Mark started to say something but Janice raised a hand of restraint. "Why not have it here, Mark? I don't want anything costly or fancy and these are our people. This is our field. Why not?"

Mark's eyes were shining. "Nothing could make me happier," he said softly.

"Then it's settled," Janice said. "Next week, the Lord willing? Say, Wednesday?"

Mark nodded in agreement.

Oscar shouted with glee. "Hooray! Sam you're a gonna' see a for-sure weddin'. The Lady-Doc an' Doctor-man's bein' married! I'm gonna start spreadin' the news." Away he ran, up the mountainside.

Mark and Janice looked at each other in amusement and delight. "They're wonderful little boys, aren't they, Mark!" she exclaimed happily. "There just are no 'least places' with God. They're all 'high places' of service."

"Right you are, Jan dearest; and they're ours to win for Jesus," he said hoarsely.