

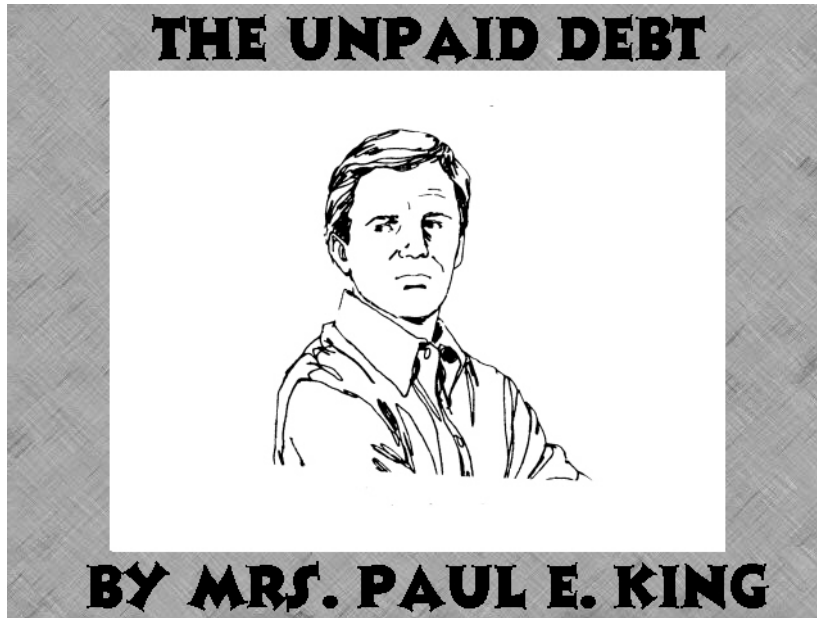
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THE UNPAID DEBT
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Chad spat contemptuously on the ground. Why did everybody feel he needed help? He was no longer a child. He was a man. A young man of 19 with plans and a dream. He'd see that those dreams came true, too. What's more, he'd do it alone. It bothered him no end the way Uncle Jack kept asking him could he be of some assistance? or did Chad want to stay with him and Aunt Ellen now that Dad was dead?

At thought of Dad an unwilling sob burst from him. He tried unsuccessfully to change the sound into clearing a frog from his throat. Blinking his eyes clear, he started up the draw along the fence, fencing pliers and a pocketful of staples on his person. The fence shouldn't need more than tightening or mending, he reasoned, making a quick mental calculation of how secure it had been the last time he had checked it.

He zipped up the hood of his sweat shirt. The air was chilly and held a threat of cold rain. More likely than not, he would encounter rain as he climbed the butte to the north of the grazing stretch.

As he followed the seemingly endless stretch of fence that kept the herd of Black Angus secure within the grazing limits of the ranch, Chad hit the fence with a stick every few yards to judge its tightness. Occasionally he stopped and pounded in a staple to strengthen a wire before moving on.

He loved the ranch as much as Dad had loved it. At thought of his father, another sob tore his body. Why did God allow it to happen? he wondered bitterly. Why? He needed Dad. Dad needed him. They needed each other and they had depended so much upon each other.

Blinking back the tears, Chad kicked a rotted fence post and made a quick mental note to replace it before the winter storms set in.

His had been such a wonderful life until a week ago. Is that all the longer it was? It seemed like eons ago. He remembered hearing his father's faint but desperate call sometime during the night. With panic gripping his heart, he rushed from his room to his father's bedroom. Dad had propped himself up with pillows. His face was ash-gray in color.

"Chad," he said between gasps, "Chad, I . . . I believe I'm dying. . . ."

Chad remembered all too vividly the instant constriction in his own throat at hearing the dreadful and terrible words.

"Chad, come close, my boy," Dad was saying. "It's getting hard for me to see. . . ."

"No! No, Dad! Don't talk that way!" Chad heard his own voice cry out in anguish, unnaturally loud and high-pitched. "I need you, Dad!"

"Calm yourself, Son. Calm . . . yourself and listen to me. Here," he commanded, motioning for Chad to sit on the edge of the bed beside him. "Give me your hand."

Chad remembered, with a hurt and pain in his own heart too deep for words, how, upon obeying, he immediately noticed the icy coldness of his father's work-worn hand as it held his warm one in great tenderness.

"I'm going to ask something of you, Chad. Something I should have pressed upon you long ago. Give your heart and life to the Lord Jesus Christ and meet me in heaven. . . ."

He remembered sitting motionless and immobile on the edge of the bed. The grip of the dear hand tightened then relaxed repeatedly. Silence reigned in the room. It was a silence so oppressive and gripping that it was frightening.

"Promise me, Chad!" The voice was weak but urgent.

"I . . . I . . . can't promise, Dad. Not promise, it truthfully. God was unfair to us. To you and me. . . ."

But Dad had raised a hand of restraint. "No, Chad. Never!"

"But He was!" he had persisted, near hysteria with fright and bewilderment now. "Why did He take Mother when we needed her so? And . . . and why would He take you from me now?"

"One question at a time, dear boy. Perhaps," and a sob tore Dad's heart as he began. He grasped his chest in pain as a seizure of coughing pursued.

"Don't talk, Dad," Chad said tenderly, grabbing a religious paper from beneath the beloved much-used Bible and fanning his father, trying to make breathing easier for him. "I'll call Doctor Shilling. He can help you."

"No, son. It's no use. My hour has come. Doctor Shilling told me it could well be like this."

"You . . . you mean you've known your heart was weak and you haven't done anything about it?" Chad asked in exasperation.

"I've been on medication. But medicine can only do so much when one's heart is weak and worn out. Doc told me this would happen. I hate to leave you alone, but I could die a whole lot easier if I knew you were saved and that your mother and I would meet you again in Heaven. She's there, Chad. That's why God took her so suddenly . . . to draw me after her to Heaven. Her death is what turned me to God. Your little sister's there, too. They're all there but you and me, my boy, and I'll soon be there. Promise you'll meet us there!"

Chad turned and fled from the room. He couldn't promise. He couldn't. How could God be love and allow this to happen to him? What about the future? The ranch? His college training . . . majoring in agriculture? What about his father's request? Could he not promise . . . if it would make Dad's dying easier?

With his shoulders held erect and steeling himself and his trembling body, he walked back to the bed. "Dad," he began, "I . . ."

He stopped short and stared at the bed. With one hand resting upon the pages of the opened Bible, the other across his heart, and with a smile of joyfulness and peace upon his lips and his face, Dad had died.

Alone with his thought now, the painful memory of that night and of the funeral came back to haunt him. Why didn't he promise Dad when he was in the room with him? But, conscience haunted, as he checked the fence for holes, that would have been lying and his father and mother had taught him that all liars would have their portion in the lake of fire.

Fear gripped Chad's heart and an icy chill played up and down his spine. This chill that he felt . . . it was more than the cold biting wind.

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow. In spite of the cold air and the tingling cold chills racing madly up and down his spine, he was perspiring. It all seemed so unfair. Why couldn't Dad have lived until

the ranch was completely paid for? He would have had some leisure then and could have enjoyed what he had worked so hard for.

At thought of the ranch, Chad remembered that the note at the bank was coming due. "A couple more payments, Son, and the ranch is ours. Yours and mine," Dad had said tiredly but exultantly to him a little over a week ago. "God has been good to us, Chad. I feel terribly ashamed when I remember that I wasted the best years of my life in sin and for the devil. Yes, dear boy, God has been good to us. Far better than I deserve."

Chad had gritted his teeth, remembering. How could Dad say that!

Walking on, he remembered his father telling him where the money was for the payment of the note that was coming due. "We'll sell part of the herd for the final payment," he'd said, "and then you must enroll in college. No more staying home because you feel I need you. There'll be no excuse then, Chad," and Dad had slapped him soundly on his broad shoulders, grinning in the pleasant way he had.

He would take the money to the bank tomorrow, Lord willing, he decided. The very first thing in the morning, to be sure.

The air was brittle and biting cold now. He was certain he was about to encounter freezing rain.

He was near the summit of the steep butte when he heard a sound that alerted him to trouble ahead. The rain had begun. It pelted his face with ice-like pellets. The cry he heard was insistent. He was almost running now.

At the top of the butte he paused. Then he saw it. Following the fence, he neared the helpless calf caught in the jagged barbed wire. Nearby stood the mother cow, her dark unfathomable eyes staring at him, begging, pleading with him to help her young.

Chad eased up to the frightened calf in its wire prison. Crooning softly, he slipped the pliers out of his pocket and began snipping the wires.

The calf, unaccustomed to man, struggled to free himself but the wire, cutting and rubbing into its flesh, caused the struggling to cease. Trembling with fright, the calf lay still. A few more snips of the wire and the little fellow

was free. On tottery, trembling legs, he rushed to the side of his mother and soon both had disappeared, swallowed up somewhere on the more than two sections of land his father had owned.

Chad knew the little creature would live for he was not severely injured nor hurt.

Trying to close the hole until he could get back with wire to do a thorough job of fencing, something hit him hard inside. What a fool he had been! And how very blind and stubborn, too. He was like the calf; but his imprisonment was not a wire fence: it was selfishness and pride!

He had a great debt to pay to Dad, to God and to Uncle Jack. Uncle Jack had wanted to help him; but he had refused the man's help! He swallowed hard. The little calf would have died in his wire prison had he resisted help. He, too, would die. He needed help. From God and from Uncle Jack.

Bright tears surfaced quickly. God had wanted to help him all along. He wanted to lift the burden of sorrow and hurt from his heart since his father's passing but he hadn't allowed Him to do it. God wanted to be his Companion and his Guide. His strength, too. And his Savior!

On the flat surface of a rock, Chad erected his first altar. "I'm helplessly, hopelessly lost!" he wailed. "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner!"

With a shine on his face and with perfect peace in his heart, Chad started homeward. There were so many things to do before he enrolled in college. One of the first was to get sanctified wholly, like Dad and Mother had been.

Another was to pay the note at the bank and then see Uncle Jack about caring for the ranch until he was through his college training.

He was whistling softly as he opened the gate and started across the yard toward the door of his house. What was the tune? he wondered as he whistled it through again. It was something Dad used to sing . . . about the Lord knowing the way through the wilderness and all one had to do was follow. Well, even though he didn't know the exact words, he would follow.

Simply follow. He had an All-wise Leader and Companion now. What more did a fellow need!