

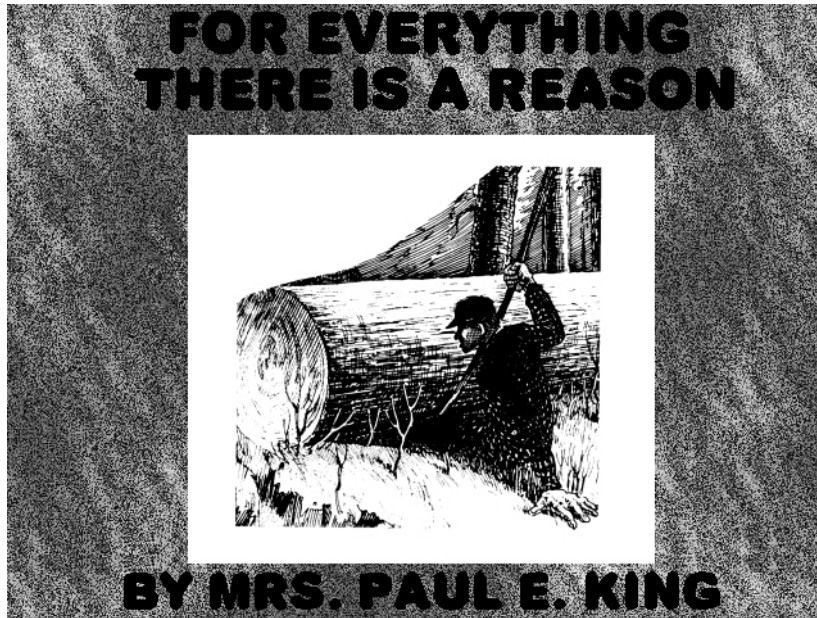
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FOR EVERYTHING THERE IS A REASON
By Mrs. Paul E. King

A breeze drifting down the hollow behind the mill provided relief from the afternoon's heat to the small crowd gathered around the porch of the boarding house. Standing before them was a man of average height, wearing a pair of baggy trousers tucked into leather boots. A blousy, collarless shirt was half-tucked into the well-worn, faded brown trousers.

His lean body hinted of strength. Piercing blue-gray eyes, creased and weathered at the corners, made everyone feel he was speaking to them personally. An amenable character was Percy Stokes. Well liked and much respected too. Honest as the day was long, and upright. Everybody in the logging town loved him and respected him; all except Millard Ford, that is. Millard seemed to hate the ground Percy walked on. But then, Millard didn't like anyone, it seemed. A loner, was Millard.

"You did a great job, fellows," Percy declared, tucking the shirt in around the waist of his trousers and smiling as he complimented the hard-working men for their labor. "Maybe we'll all sleep better tonight if this breeze keeps picking up and cools things down somewhat."

The slap of the screen door behind Percy drew everyone's attention to a pleasant-faced, smiling, rotund woman. "Supper's on the table," she announced proudly as she wiped her hands on the ample apron tied around her waist. "Wash up, then come inside. Percy, you may have the honor of carving the turkey Ben shot during spring gobbler season. A right smart size that one was. Never saw a gobbler wearin' a longer beard than that one. Ben wants for you all to enjoy it, seeing as it was his first one. Now hurry. I made squirrel pot pie too. Millard likes his squirrel pot pie, don't you, Millard?"

Standing off to himself, Millard merely grunted before heading to the long line of wash basins filled with warm water, lined along one end of the porch.

Percy groaned within himself. Edith tried so hard to get behind the wall of the surly man; so hard to reach inside him and find out what his problem was. She wanted to help him; so did he. But in spite of every loving attempt to do so, Millard stayed locked up inside his shell of hate and behind his wall of unsociability and surliness, or whatever it was.

Percy followed his wife inside, saying softly, "You tried, hon. One of these days the wall will come tumbling down. Don't let it discourage you."

Patting Percy's hand, Edith said with a twinkle in her eye, "No way, Pers. No way. It will take more than Millard's outer shell to discourage me. I'm not easily discouraged. I'd never have come here to this isolated, out of the way logging camp with you if I'd have been a woman given to discouragement and self pity. Where you lodge, my dear, Mrs. Percy Stokes

lodges and is happy and content. Why Pers, we are blest, you and I: we have God and each other and we have Ben. Yes, after all the long years of waiting, God sent us Ben."

Percy kissed his wife, exclaiming, "What a boy! And what a great God to send us a child after all those years of hoping and praying! Well, I'd better clean up then get to the business at hand. Too bad Ben isn't here to enjoy his turkey."

"I wanted to keep it till he came home for the holidays or, even, for next summer, so he could enjoy it with us. But he said he wanted the men to have it, that he expected to get another one when he got home for gobbler season again, God willing. Can you believe he's in his second year of college already, Pers? My! My, the years seem to fly by."

That little shaver didn't stay little long, Edith: he grew up so fast. But this is life. The Bible tells us that one generation passes away and another takes its place. We're in the generation that will soon be passing away; our son is in the one that will be taking our place. I'm thankful I'm ready to meet my Lord and my God."

"Amen," Edith said, as she took the golden crowned biscuits from the oven and put them in gingham covered bread baskets, then set them on the long row of tables in the dining room for the men to enjoy. How they did like her biscuits, and the wild plum preserves she made each year!

She smiled to herself. It was quite a chore, this feeding and cooking for nine men besides her husband. But she had to admit that she liked doing it. Others had greater and nobler talents than hers, she frequently avowed, laughingly, but "none has a talent more satisfying," she'd say teasingly, as she set the loaded meat platters and bowls of heaping vegetables and gravy on the table for the ever-hungry men.

God had truly prepared her for this life with Percy and cooking for the men who worked for and with him. With twelve children in the Mobrey family, and her being one of the oldest, Edith had been used to preparing large quantities of food. Her mother, who was also her excellent teacher in culinary art, often told her that her special talent was in the preparation of food. She loved cooking and baking; loved using her imagination and talent for putting the right things together to create delicious masterpieces of tasty excellence

in the kitchen. Her mother was her greatest encourager, taste-tester and praiser.

There was no finer mother on earth than hers. She missed her. The twice-yearly visits home weren't nearly enough. But her wedding vows, made before God to Percy, were stronger and more binding than any longing for home could ever be. Edith was thankful beyond words that both her parents were in excellent health and that they were still living and were very active, both in the work of the church and on their farm. Truly, she was blest by God.

Edith smiled as the men took their seats around the crudely-built, hand-hewn and sturdy tables. Built for durability, they looked pretty and downright attractive adorned with her cheerfully-bright gingham cloths covering their solid surfaces, upon which sat the bowls and platters of steaming, tantalizing food. One of her greatest joys was to watch the food disappear from the containers. It was like an unspoken, silent but much-appreciated compliment from the working crew to her for the excellent meal she'd prepared.

Percy offered a prayer of sincerest gratitude and thanks for the food and immediately thereafter the men partook. Their good humored banter and hearty laughter was something Edith always enjoyed. They were all so much like one big happy family. All, that is, except Millard.

Edith cast a stealthy glance in Millard's direction, noticing, as she did so, that the man had spooned almost the entire contents from within the big bowl, which she had placed in front of him, onto his plate. She was pleased. She felt highly honored and greatly complimented, since she had hoped that Millard would empty the bowl. There was plenty for everybody and there was always an abundance of squirrels in the woods for making more.

And of wild berries, too, Edith thought, thankfully, as she cut into the freshly-baked blueberry and wild blackberry pies and spooned still-warm cobbler into dessert dishes before whipping the thick, cold cream into delicious snowy-white mounds. The two jersey cows that she milked twice daily were as much a part of her life as was everything else in the camp. Gentle cows they were, giving her all the milk she needed for cooking and for the men to drink, as well as for making butter and for whipping the cream into thick, luscious mounds for the cobbles and pies.

Edith smiled as she recalled Percy's exasperation over her insistence that she have her own milk cows and chickens to provide fresh eggs and milk daily for her cooking and baking needs. The chickens were quite a bother at first, not wanting to go into the hen house at night, where they were safe from the many predators that stalked around their fenced-in yard in hopes of a tasty meal. But after a while it became a habit and they settled down on the roosts in their own safe house, where they were locked in for the night.

With supper ended, Percy began singing one of the hymns he had sung in church before moving into the far north woods. Edith and several of the men joined in the singing, adding the various parts to make a beautiful four-part harmony. Handkerchiefs were pulled from hip pockets and tears that trickled down bronzed cheeks were wiped away. Each night, after supper, while not making it mandatory that they remain, Percy had let the men know that he would have family worship for all. It was a time of spiritual uplift for Edith and him. Generally, all the men remained. Millard, never.

Edith remained in the kitchen longer than usual when family devotions were over, making a new batch of sour dough starter and scrubbing vegetables for the pot of soup she planned to make from the rich beef broth cooling inside the refrigerator. Not until Millard's voice sliced into her culinary thoughts was she aware that the tall, strong man was there, standing close to her. For a brief moment, fear seized her. Then she smiled at him and asked kindly, "Are you still hungry, Millard? Want more pot pie, maybe? Or another piece of pie? There's even a smidgen of cobbler left."

"Thanks, but no, Mrs. Stokes. You're a great cook."

Edith was filled with glad surprise. Shocked? Without a doubt! Millard had never conversed with her before. Never! Her heart leaped for joy.

Millard stared off in the distance for a while. Then he asked, "Do you know what it's like to be rejected, Mrs. Stokes?"

Dropping the long, slender, golden carrot which she was scrubbing, back into the water, Edith replied kindly and truthfully, "I guess I don't, Millard. No, I don't know what it's like. That must be an extremely painful thing. I feel so sorry for anyone who isn't loved. Oh, how that would hurt!"

The man studied Edith's face for a long time: so long, in fact, until she felt uncomfortable.

Grabbing the vegetable brush from her hand and scrubbing carrots furiously, Millard said, "I've got to talk, Mrs. Stokes. Do you have time to listen, please?"

"All the time you need, Millard. Shall we sit over by the table?"

"Thanks. No. I can do better, I believe, if I can work while I bare my heart. My mother died with pneumonia when I was thirteen. My two sisters were four and five. A brother, between the girls and me, passed away with pneumonia the year before Mother. He was nine. We were such a happy family before Mother died. I had a wonderful mother, Mrs. Stokes. You remind me of her," he added, as he brushed tears from his face and continued scrubbing the carrots.

"Thank you, Millard. I feel honored, receiving such a compliment from you. I wish I could have known your mother."

"She was a woman of piety and prayer and of great faith. Life was never the same after she died. Father married seven months later. The woman was completely opposite of our mother and, worst of all, she hated me. From the day she set eyes on me, she hated me, so she told me. I tried to please her, Mrs. Stokes, believe me, I did; and I continued doing my regularly assigned work and chores just like when Mother lived. Nothing I did pleased her. She was mean to me, and more than once she beat me with whatever she could get her hands on at the time."

"Oh, Millard, I'm sorry! Why did she beat you?"

"I asked her the same question. Her answer was always the same -- 'I hate you! You are not welcome in this house. I want you to leave. The sooner, the better. I do not like boys!'

"Those were her exact words, Mrs. Stokes. If I had been mean and lazy and unkind to her perhaps I could have understood the why of her ill treatment toward me. But I wasn't; not ever: I remembered my mother's words about reaping and sowing, and I wanted no part of harvesting a crop of like nature as hers.

"I spoke to my father about it but he took her part; and when he hired me out to a farmer in a distant valley and I was forced to move away from home, I thought I'd die. In fact, I wanted to die. Always, when I was still at home, my gentle and kind mother's love and her words of wisdom, still speaking to me from the grave, gave me courage and the strength I needed to plod on and persevere. You see, I had been born again back then."

Tears rolled down Edith's cheeks.

"The farmer and his wife worked me hard. I had all I could eat but my heart felt dead; I was starved for love and a kind word now and then. I shriveled up inside. Instead of clinging to God, I became bitter and discouraged, not understanding my father's change of heart and attitude toward me, especially since I had always been obedient and honest and upright and we had never had one bit of friction or trouble between us before in our lives.

"I worked two years for the farmer, then I left. Going to a small town, I found work in a paper mill. I rented a tiny efficiency apartment and stayed there for six years. When the plant closed, I moved on. That's how I came to be here -- through the ad in the newspaper, requesting help in the logging business."

Edith wept. "What about your sisters; was the stepmother abusive to them?"

"Fortunately, and thankfully, no. She loved the girls. She doted on them. I was happy for them. Three times I tried to contact my father and each time I was told he no longer lived where we always did. I don't know if he was transferred to another plant or what. The reason I am here now is because I want you to pray for me. Love has a way of triumphing. It penetrates the heart of stone and breaks through the walls of granite, then grips the bitter heart in its tender but vise-like hold until it conquers.

"Tonight I'm ready for a change. I want to surrender. This bitterness has hurt no one but myself. I want freedom from its destructive tentacles. Your kindness and patience and gentle love, so like my mother's, has broken me down."

"Oh, Millard! Millard!" Edith exclaimed, weeping brokenly. "Percy and I have been praying for this."

"I know you have. Night after night, during Mr. Stokes' family devotions hour, I stood outside, listening to everything, wanting to be different but too proud to confess my need. I want God's forgiveness and my Heavenly Father's love. I'm ready to surrender. Now."

A joyous "Praise the Lord!" from the dining room let the pair know that Percy was there, ready to lead the way in prayer for the repentant sinner.

As she dropped to her knees beside a sobbing Millard, Edith cried, "Oh Lord, help this young man. Save his soul. And please, dear Lord, help me to ever reflect Thee and Thy love and to always remember that for every hard to understand action and attitude, there is a reason."

In sincere motherly and Christian love, Edith began interceding for Millard's salvation.