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THE ANONYMOUS GIVERS
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Fred Haskett turned away from the big window inside his very prosperous and almost always busy hardware store lest Arlan Reed see him. That Arlan and his wife and four boys were coming into his store, Fred had no doubt, and the mere thought of it made him nervous and set him to pacing the floor like a caged animal. Even now, he could hear Arlan; "May we have a word with you, Mr. Haskett, please? Privately."

Fred ran nervous fingers through his already scant and thinning chestnut-brown hair and paced back to the rear of the store. Entering his ample, well-kept and nicely furnished office, he slumped into the leather chair behind his desk and buried his face in the palms of his hands, dreading the encounter with the Reeds.

He shouldn't let it bother him, but it did. After all, he gave too. And didn't he allow the Salvation Army to place a kettle in front of his store so those passing by the store or entering and leaving could hear the ringing of the merry sounding bell and drop of their means into the kettle? Why, he had even allowed another group to place a sizable box inside the store and collect used toys for the less fortunate children in the community. Wasn't that giving, or doing? Besides, each and every Christmas of his nearly twenty-four years of married life, he had given Jan ten dollars to drop into the offering plate as it was passed to collect the tithes and offerings of those attending.

Fred squirmed a bit uneasily in his expensive leather chair at thought of the tithes, which, the minister said the Bible stated, were to be brought "into the storehouse."

One thing was sure, he told himself now, and that, simply stated, was that he was not responsible for the preacher's salary nor for the church bills: he didn't go often enough to soil the carpet nor to help to wear out the pews. So why should he pay his tithe? Let those who attended regularly worry about the upkeep of the church and the parsonage; about the salary of the preacher and the condition of the church bus.

Fred jumped when he heard the light "tap, tap, tap" upon the door. Getting quickly to his feet and taking a long, deep breath, he swung the door ajar. "Yes?" he asked brusquely and a bit impatiently as he saw Arlan and his family

"A word with you, Mr. Haskett. In private, please," Arlan said with kindness, the tone of his voice soft and well- modulated.

"Step inside," Fred invited, apologizing for the lack of seats for all.

"We'll be only a few minutes, Mr. Haskett," Arlan stated. "You're a busy man: we'll not take much of your time. It's two families, this year, Mr. Haskett.

Two, instead of one. And no one must know about this but you, and my family, of course. No one! Promise?"

Fred faced Arlan. "You can't do this, Arlan," he cried. "You're in need of things yourself."

Placing a hand upon Fred's shoulder, Arlan said, "I can do it. I must do it. The Knowleses: they're in dire circumstances. His health's gone. Mrs. Knowles quit her job so she could stay home and take care of her husband. The children are in need of clothing : warm clothing. We'll be doing something about that when we're through here, God willing Now, promise that this will remain in strictest secrecy and confidence."

"You can't do this! You can't, Arlan. Think of your own needs; your family's needs."

"Your promise, Mr. Haskett, please?"

Feeling like he would suffocate, Fred gave his promise, adding, "It doesn't make sense: your family and you need the money. Your house needs repairs and. . . ."

"The repairs are coming along," Arlan stated frankly, breaking into Fred's ranting. "In time, Lord willing, the house will look like new . . . like its roof. And this is where the Knowles' need comes in. Since you have begun handling lumber and such like things in connection with your hardware business, I want you to have everything that's needed to cover the roof on the Knowles' house over there the day before Christmas Eve. Here's what's needed, Mr. Haskett. Our pastor has everything listed on this paper. Have it there, with a big red ribbon tied on one of the bundles of the shingles and a tag with this message on it: To the Knowles family. With love, from Christian friends.

"Please have your men unload everything out in back of the house except the bundle with the ribbon. Put this at the front door so it will be seen by the family when they return from the Medical Center in the city that evening, Lord willing. A crew of workmen will begin work on the roof, weather permitting, the day after Christmas."

Beads of perspiration formed on Fred's face. True, the temperature had been typical for their part of the country, but it wasn't the 69 degrees that brought out those beads. No indeed: Fred just couldn't understand the meaning of Arlan's generosity.

"You'll go broke, Arlan!" He all but shouted as he slammed a fist into the open palm of his other hand. "Why do you do this? You need every penny you can earn," he cried. "I know you do."

Smiling kindly, Arlan said softly, "I told you we had two families this year, Mr. Haskett. I want the best and safest heater you have to be taken over to old Mr. and Mrs. Owens. Theirs gave out, we learned. Some days it gets cool here; the nights can be downright chilly-cold. Get that over as quickly as your men can get it there. Like the shingle bundle, dress the heater box up with a big red ribbon and a tag bearing the same message as the bundle of shingles, only with the Owens' name on the tag."

"Do you realize what this is going to cost you, Arlan? This is no hundred-dollar thing you're doing.

"I know what I'm doing, Mr. Haskett; know it almost to the penny. The cost, I mean."

Fred felt color rising to his cheeks. "And what will your sons think of you?" he blurted out angrily. "This money should be spent on them."

The boys gasped. Then, almost like one voice, they exclaimed, "No! No! We're proud of our father. He's home with us now. . . ."

Looking from the boys to their father, Fred wondered what the meaning of the statement was.

"I see the time has come for me to explain," Arlan said as tears swam in his sky-blue eyes.

"I was quite a wicked man," he stated sadly. "I made good money. Big money. But I spent it almost completely on liquor and tobacco and gambling. I was a slave to all three vices; bound and fettered tightly by and with the chains of sin. My family suffered greatly because of my sin. Generally, the

bar tender got most of my pay check before I got home: the bar tender and the gambling joint.

"I saw very little of my boys during all of those dreary, wasted years, and the money that I either gambled away or spent on alcoholic beverages would have brought us almost anything we had wanted. Why Mr. Haskett, what I spent on cigarettes alone during those years would have kept us nicely and comfortably for a long, long time. I was a four-pack-per-week smoker. Think of it; four packs each and every week went up in smoke! It's a marvel of God's goodness that my liver's not full of cancer, and my lungs too.

"It was my dear wife's faithfulness to God and to the marriage vow she made to me that finally got to me. I knew I was slowly and surely killing her. I could see the pain in her eyes and on her face when I'd come home week after week with most of my paycheck gone; spent on me: on my vices and soul-destroying habits. It tore my heart to see her thus. But I was helpless to do anything about it. Oh, I tried. How I tried! I even made New Year's resolutions that I'd quit my drinking and gambling and smoking. How utterly wretched and weak I felt when I succumbed and yielded in spite of my good resolves! I was a slave, I tell you, Mr. Haskett; a slave and a servant to sin and its evil vices.

"Five years ago, things changed. Oh, how they changed! It was Christmas Eve. I had worked overtime at the office, filling in for a colleague who wanted to go visit his mother in the next state. Instead of stopping in at the bar, I decided that, for once, I'd go home and be with my wife and our sons. After all, it was Christmas Eve, wasn't it!

"Instead of being greeted by my loving wife and four eager and excited sons, and candles glowing softly from the windows, I came home to a house in total darkness. Where was everyone? I wondered, feeling panic churn and boil up inside of me.

"I changed masters that night, Mr. Haskett. You see, I knew the scriptures. I was sure the Lord had come for His Bride -- the blood washed, cleansed and holy -- and that I was left behind to go through the Great Tribulation, as recorded specifically in the Book of Revelation. I purposed within my heart that I would go to Heaven, even though it may and would mean martyrdom to get there now, with the rapture of the church having taken place and the Great Tribulation staring me in the face.

"When my wife and our sons returned home that night, after having gone to a Christmas Eve prayer service, they found husband and father home for a change. Home, and saved, and brand new in Christ. From that night to this, my friend, I have been the kind of husband and father God intended for me to be. I have been liberated and set totally and completely free from the shackles that once had bound and enslaved me. Oh, how wonderful and glorious it is to be free in Christ.

"This giving and doing for others, Mr. Haskett, is our way of expressing our great love and overwhelming appreciation to the One who came to earth to be our Savior-Redeemer. The money I save by not drinking and gambling, or smoking, is now being used to help those less fortunate than we. It was our sons' idea that we make a very special love gift to Jesus for giving their father back to them, and that we not tell the recipient from whom the gift came.

"We have been blessed beyond any describing since doing this. Our sons, instead of being selfish and grasping and clamoring for gifts for themselves, now see how much they can contribute toward our Christmas giving from their paper routes, their care of lawns and whatever other legitimate jobs boys their age can find to do."

"But you need the money," Fred declared in a more subdued voice, feeling miserly and little and shriveled on the inside. Especially since his wife had, on numerous occasions, called him "Mr. Scrooge the Second."

"Here's the paper with the requirements for the roofing needs," Arlan said, handing the paper to Mr. Haskett. "The pastor has it all down in black and white. He and a roofer friend went over when the Knowles had to go to the city to the doctor there. Give me the figures for both the heater and the roof, Mr. Haskett. I have the check book here. It's cash again this year."

"But what about your boys' Christmas, sir?"

"This is Christmas for us," the oldest son replied, manly-like and with a hint of joyous rapture in his voice. "We'd rather have Father home with us, and give surprises to others, than any gift we could receive," he added factually and positively.

Fred looked at the family for a long while, then he sat in the chair behind his desk and began figuring up the bill, saying, after a second check of the figures, "Sure you want to go through with this? You don't have to, you know. It's going to be quite expensive."

"I realize this, Mr. Haskett. Total it up, please. . . ."

Long after Arlan and his family had taken their leave and were gone, Fred sat, thinking and mulling over in his mind the things Arlan had said. Then he wondered if the transforming power of God might not be the very thing that he needed. It may even help him in his giving, so that Mrs. Haskett could never again call him "Mr. Scrooge the Second."

Tears formed slowly in Fred's eyes. Maybe . . . yes . . . maybe. . . . Slowly, he got to his feet. Then he knelt beside the chair in prayer.