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HE HEALETH THE BROKENHEARTED
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Priscilla Anna Townsend: 6 pounds, 9 ounces. Born to Peter and Anna Townsend on the 6th day of May in the year of our Lord, 199. . . .

Priscilla clutched the paper to her as bits of the charred remains fragmented and dropped to the rough-hewn, burned, board floor at her feet. Tears swam in her eyes as she held the remnant of her birth certificate in her

hand. She would have to contact the court of records, or whatever, and have a copy issued to her if and when she ever found the time to do so. She knew her age: she was barely eighteen and this was all that mattered. For the present, at least.

There was ever so much work to be done and the slender, auburn-haired girl wondered how it would all be accomplished, if ever. And before the colder weather set in, too.

The thought of winter and its colder temperatures, less than six months away, brought Priscilla rudely back to the work at hand. Carefully, and almost tenderly, she placed the birth certificate in the plastic box along with the other few papers which she had unearthed and considered important as she drew them from the charred remains of the gutted farmhouse.

"Joel," she called to her 13-year-old brother, "have you located anything? And what about you, Peter?"

Peter stood in the blackened doorway of what had been the living room. His face was smudged and black; only his enormous brown, honest eyes looked familiar and twinkly-bright.

"I found this," he replied, holding up the cane. "And I'm right proud that it withstood the flames. Reminds me of Father," he added. "Rather, of Father's courage and his great strength. Someday he'd have walked without it again. I know he would have! Father's unfailing faith in God always brought him through."

"Brought us through," Priscilla declared as she reached out and touched the smoke-blackened but sturdy object held lovingly in Peter's hand.

"Why did God let it happen?" Joel stood in the middle of a pile of charred and blackened rubble off to the side. His fists were clenched in anger and frustration. Where was Father's faith in this fire? Surely, God could have prevented it. And what made Mother think she could save Jonathan and the baby when both their rooms were filled with flames? Why did Mother go after them? It doesn't make sense. I mean, here we are, all three of us, adrift on the sea of life, and parentless. And just when we needed them most. At least, when I did."

Priscilla brushed a grimy-black hand across her brow. What could she answer her intelligent but strong-willed brother, she wondered. Peter came to her rescue. Kind, gentle-hearted 15-year-old Peter.

"God is too wise to give us anything but what is for our good and His glory, Joel," he replied. "I've consoled my hurting heart countless times with this fact," he added, "knowing that He knows the whys and the wherefores of this seeming tragedy."

"Seeming tragedy? What ails you, Peter? Seeming? Be realistic: it was a tragedy of the worst kind, no seeming about it. What could be worse than losing one's father and mother and younger brother and baby sister in less than an hour's time? Tell me, what could be worse?"

"Not knowing that each was in Heaven and was finished forever with earth's trials and heartaches," came Peter's instant and quietly soft answer. "We know where Father and Mother and Jonathan and Esther are, Joel. They're waiting for us to join them. Let's not miss it."

Joel walked slowly back into what had been his father's tiny office where all the farm records were kept, saying nothing more.

Priscilla sighed, feeling the weight of responsibility for her two brothers settle in upon her. It was hers now, to oversee and protect them; to guide them Heavenward like her father had done all his life; to comfort and love them like their mother had always done. To feed and clothe them. To make the home a place of happiness and joy; a haven where love abounded and Christ was King and Lord of all.

The realization was overwhelming. Quickly, she sent a silent prayer heavenward for help and for strength and wisdom, the plans for her own once promising future put completely and entirely out of her mind. How quickly one's life could change! she thought, remembering that, had there been no fire, she would have been going away to Bible school in the fall.

She trembled as she recalled the night of the fire. It still seemed like a frightful nightmare. If only the electrician had been able to get out when her father had called him and told him that he wanted the wiring checked out thoroughly in every part of the old house. Oh, if only! But such was not the case: the day he was to have arrived never came: the house went up in

flames the night before the electrician was to have arrived the following morning.

The flames had spread quickly. Her father had died of smoke inhalation, they learned. Her mother, brave soul that she was, had managed to drag his body from the bedroom to the big maple in the corner of the yard to keep him from being burned up. Then, realizing that Jonathan and Esther were still in their beds and seeing that her three oldest children were safely outside, she rushed back into the house, aflame with fire, after the two youngest ones, only to lose her life in her attempt to save them. What a brave, dear mother! Priscilla thought as tears flowed from her eyes.

Her thoughts went to her father then, and his injured leg. He had been home from the hospital less than two weeks after having had surgery on the badly injured limb in an accident where he worked. The therapy he was undergoing was painful and still too early in its post-operative stage to have revealed any or much progress in the use of the leg, hence the cane, for future use. There was no sign whatever of the crutches he was using when and if he walked. They were burned up completely.

"Here are some of the record books," Joel said, as he came toward Priscilla with an armload of blackened books. "I found them beneath a pile of ashes. Maybe we'll be able to use them for future references after they're cleaned up, if this will be possible. Father kept wonderful records of our milk cows, when we had them before he went to work at the plant in town. I used to read these records from cover to cover. I loved the system Daddy had and used."

Peter came over to Joel, exclaiming, "what a find, Joel! By all means, we must clean them up if we can, and use them. Especially those on the farmland that Father let the Dickersons farm for him when he sold the cows and quit farming to work in town. We'll know what to expect, as one source of income, by going over Father's well-kept records. I realize that some years will show a bigger income than others, depending on weather conditions and such; but we'll have a general idea of things by looking at those records. Here, let me see one, please," and Peter lifted one off the top and carefully opened it.

"I can't believe it, Peter!" Joel cried. "Only the outside looks burned!"

"It's smoke damage," Peter answered. "And Joel, we're going to clean that off, you and I, the best we can, and Father's records will be our guide for what to expect and what we must do for the Dickersons, if anything, as our part for their farming this land."

"We don't do anything, Peter. I mean, Father rented the land to them to farm. This is what they wanted. I know: Father and I often talked about these things. And like I said, I loved to read Father's records. I had hoped to someday take over for him -- when I was grown and out of school. That's why Father always got me a book about farming or agriculture for my birthday and for Christmas. He knew I loved this place and . . . and the cows he sold. I wanted to farm, and now . . . well, I . . . I . . . God mustn't care one bit about us or He'd not have allowed this to happen. Why did He let it happen? Why?" He dropped the books at Peter's feet and ran away.

A cloud of gray ash dust swirled around Peter for a while, nearly choking him with its charred stench. He wanted to call out to Joel, or follow him even. But he decided against it, feeling it was safest and best to allow his brother to grieve privately for a while. God, and only God, could heal the hurt and the pain in the heart of the bereaved. He was finding this out for himself. And he was sure his sister was experiencing the same. What a brave soul she was! So much like their mother. If only Joel were not so bitter.

Joel and he were as different as daylight was from darkness, Peter knew. Their differences, however, had never divided them in their affection one for the other nor had it brought a barrier between them. For this, the young man was grateful. Joel possessed ever so many good qualities; he was blest with many talents and his mind was brilliant. He had been reading since he was five. What an amazing mind God had given him! Peter thought silently as he picked the books up and carried them over to a box he had brought for this very purpose.

"Oh Peter," Priscilla remarked, "maybe it would have been best if Joel had gone home with Uncle Ben and Aunt Mary. They wanted him. Uncle Ben would have been kind and good to him and . . . and he would have treated him like his son."

"They wanted all three of us, Priscilla . . ." Peter stated, allowing the sentence to trail off in space.

"I know. But since I'm old enough to make it on my own, I felt I should not accept their kind invitation. And it was kind of them, Peter. And very generous too."

"I'm glad Joel didn't go, even though they almost insisted he do so after you and I declined. Uncle Ben's too easy going; he'd have allowed Joel to do what he wanted to do and to do as he pleased. Uncle Ben and Father were as different as Joel and I are, Priscilla. You will have to be strong and firm, like Father, when you discipline him and guide our brother. I want you to know that I'll be praying for you. God is going to help us, Priscilla."

Tears smudged the young woman's face. "I'm scared, Peter!" she exclaimed. "So scared."

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It was late when Joel returned; darkness had settled itself in around the summer house like a softly comforting blanket. Crickets chirped, night birds sang and the faint scent of old-fashioned roses sneaked in sweetly through the curtained windows of the house, used before the fire as a summer kitchen for canning, freezing and "putting up" vegetables, fruits, pickles and such, but was now the roof over their heads.

"Your supper's waiting for you, Joel," Priscilla said softly as her brother entered the door. "And look at those record books, would you!" she exclaimed, pointing to the shelf above the table.

Joel stopped where he was; his mouth opened wide in awe. "Who . . . who . . . I mean . . . well, they're like always! I mean, they look . . . clean. Almost like they're new!" Tears swam in his eyes. Almost reverently, he walked to the shelf and took one down and looked at it. "Thanks, Peter," he cried, as he clutched the book close to his heart.

"Thank your sister, too," Peter replied. "She did as many as I did. And they do look new, now don't they?"

"It's as though the Lord's giving us a message or a . . . a token," Priscilla said.

"Like what?" Joel asked, still holding the record book closely to his bosom.

"Like He's going to make much good come out of this if we'll permit Him to do so. Just look at this dear little house," Priscilla remarked. "Whoever thought it could be made into such a cozy little place. Why Joel, we have two bedrooms and a sort of sitting room right here in the kitchen, plus, we have a good, almost-new roof over our head and ever so many jars of canned goods down in the little basement, with the potatoes and carrots, squash and cabbages. We are blessed.

"The bedrooms may be small but they're nice and adequate. Peter did a wonderful job of partitioning off that big room where Mother stored her pots and pans and other paraphernalia for canning. Even those things are better off down on the shelves Peter built for them in the basement.

"I think we have a lovely little house," Priscilla continued. "The Lord didn't leave us homeless. This little house was far enough away to not be burned up like our big house was. Oh, the Lord has been good to US!"

"I . . . know," Joel said hoarsely. "I only realized how good He was and is to us while I was out in the far field. I cried until I couldn't cry anymore," he admitted. "I told God I felt like He didn't care at all about us; that He was unfair in allowing the fire to happen just before the electrician was to come and that He surely didn't love us or He'd not have taken Father and Mother from us."

"Oh Joel, no! You didn't accuse Him like that, surely!" Priscilla cried.

Tearfully and truthfully, he said, "I did. And what a wicked and foolish thing to do! I felt Him come down to where I was, there in that field, and instead of killing me on the spot, I felt Him wrap His arms around me. It felt something like Dad used to do when I was hurt or in pain."

"He loves us so much!" Peter exclaimed, as he wiped tears from his eyes.

"I found that out in the far field this evening," Joel admitted brokenly. "I want both of you to know that I was born again -- converted -- out there. It took some confessing and repenting on my part, but I did it, and now the

stubborn Joel is made new in Christ. I could almost hear Dad's voice praying for me."

Priscilla threw her arms around her brother and wept for joy, praising God for answering prayer. There were many things yet to be done and needing attention, she knew, but the greatest one of all was taken care of in the far field. When Joel was wholly sanctified, she knew he'd be a power for God.

Kissing him on the nose, she said, through her happy tears, "Don't you think it's about time you eat?"

"I do, Priscilla, and I'm finally hungry: the first time since the fire."

"Miracle number two," Peter remarked, as he sat beside Joel at the table and opened another one of the cleaned farm record books. God was already at the work of healing!