

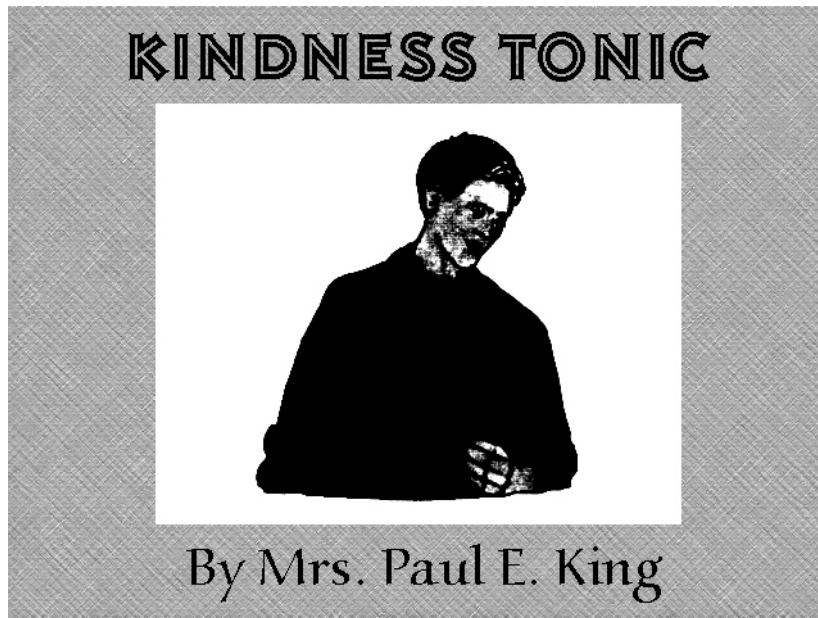
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KINDNESS TONIC
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Sam walked briskly down the alley talking long smooth strides. His long legs carried him far when he was in a hurry . . . like now.

In spite of the soft air and a sky as deep blue as his mother's valencia growing in the garden, he had a strange, uneasy feeling: one of those what-am-I-doing-here-anyway? feelings.

Only a week ago he wouldn't have had this feeling; he'd have known perfectly what he was doing there, and have felt perfectly natural doing it. Taking a short cut to school, chasing after a ball on the vacant lot next to Hefners', running after Mr. Mullick's Boston bull that had a yen for exploring the neighborhood . . . especially the garbage cans! Or maybe he'd just be studying and watching Mother bake pies and cakes, bread and cookies, or thinking of ways a sixteen-year-old could earn money after school, instead of paying a call on Mrs. "NebNose" as he labeled her now.

His hands clenched at thought of her. "NebNose! Indeed!" he exploded aloud. "Well . . . I'll tell her a thing or two! She'll know she's had a caller when I get through. And it won't be a friendly pastoral call like Father makes either!" he asserted in hot indignation.

His footsteps quickened considerably as his angry thoughts took him down dark, deep, ugly trails. He clenched and unclenched his fists in unison with his angry thoughts. "Good morning Sam-u-el," he could just hear her say when she saw him.

"Samuel indeed!" he muttered aloud to himself knowing how Mrs. Crotchey abhorred anyone who shortened a child's name, like say, from Samuel to Sam.

A derisive smile curled his lips. Well, it was none of her business if his folks called him Sam . . . just plain old Sam... instead of "Sam-u-el," as she pronounced it. He detested her pronunciation, but knew there was nothing he could do about it. Nothing he could do to remedy it. A fellow couldn't just walk up to her and say, "Mrs. Crotchey, call me Sam, or Samuel, quick like; no long drawn out syllables. Please!" No, he couldn't do that!

He could do something about this other thing though. And he would. Yes, indeed! Her tongue had wagged once too often. He had not (repeat, had not) sat on the third seat from the rear of the church holding hands with Patricia Sterns and he hadn't cut up either! It was time some things were squared up, he deeded.

"Now, Sam-u-el, you are the minister's son!" he could hear her say it again as on so many other occasions. Every Sunday of their natural lives, Samuel and his two sisters and brother heard the same statement --

reminding them that they were "minister's children." He was getting tired of it: hearing the same thing over and over again and again . . . ever since his father had come to pastor Daleview church some better than three years ago.

"I'm tired of hearing that, Dad!" He had complained mildly to his father one day. "Why should we have to be any better example than anyone else's children? Were human beings too. She doesn't need to treat us as if we're creatures from outer space or somewhere else."

"God puts no difference between the preacher's children and the members' children, Son," Sam's father answered softly. "He requires the same from all. 'Except ye be converted and become as little children ye can in no wise enter into heaven' was written for both preachers' families and members as well. The same applies to, 'For this is the will of God, even your sanctification.' This is God's requirement for all of mankind, Sam. God doesn't make any difference. But beware, my boy . . . your attitude! Pray a lot and be kind to her. . . ."

"But she's a troublemaker Dad," Sam remembered having persisted. "She's constantly craning her neck or turning her head to see what she can see so she can gossip through the week. The young people are all fed up with her. She tells things that aren't SO!"

"Pray a lot, Sam. Bitterness of soul is a dangerous and deadly poison. Don't allow it to seep into your heart. Ever!"

Don't allow it to seep . . .! Sam unclenched his fists, aware at the same time of what he was planning on doing. It shook him so hard that he stopped dead in his tracks.

Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. Mopping his brow, he exclaimed in shocked surprise, "Why I . . . I almost did it! I . . . almost hit Mrs. Neb . . . I mean, Mrs. Crotchey! And me a new Christian, too!"

The last thought struck a full blow to his tender and sensitive heart. "Oh, Lord!" he lamented aloud, allowing hot tears to wash his eyes. "I . . . I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. Forgive me! I never realized I had such a wicked temper. Help me. Help me, please."

He thought of the church then. He would go to the church and pray until God sanctified him. He needed to be cleansed and made pure and clean. He saw it as plainly as he knew he had a face and hands and feet. He didn't want to grieve God out of his heart and life. This uprising within was dreadful. Awful!

He ran toward the church. Taking the steps two at a time he rushed through the swinging doors and fell weeping across the altar. "Oh, God! Oh, God!" he moaned, groaned. "Let me die! Let me die! I loathe this inbred sin. Cleanse me and make me pure within. Oh, God. . . ."

Several hours later, Sam walked through the doors to the outside. Peace, complete, and soul-rest flooded his heart and life. He was filled with Divine love. Perfect love! Oh, it was wonderful.

He deliberately walked down Ash Street. Taking sure steps, he walked up on Mrs. Crotchey's porch. At the door he paused. It seemed too still and quiet. Then he knocked. Before he had time to knock the second time, the aged woman stood inside the screen door. "Why Sam-u-el!" she exclaimed in a grating kind of voice. "What brings you here?"

"I . . . I . . ." Sam stuttered, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other and knocking a clod of dirt off the porch. "I've come to ask your forgiveness. I got really angry . . . on the inside . . . over the things you said falsely about me. But I'm sorry, Mrs. Crotchey. I love you, now that I prayed and prayed until the Lord took all the carnal nature out of my soul and sanctified me wholly. I . . . did you need any errands run today? What about the garden? I can pull weeds and hoe and. . . ."

Mrs. Crotchey was stunned momentarily. But only momentarily. Straightening to her full height (Sam was surprised how tall and commanding and domineering she looked as she did so), she bristled. "And just what kind of performance is this?" she asked, plainly ruffled. "If you think I'll be easy on you and change my story . . ." she allowed the words to sink in, deep and meaningfully.

Sam smiled and felt like shouting outwardly so calm and unruffled was his soul. "I just thought I might be able to lend you a hand in the garden. . . ." (He dare not say that he had noticed how badly the vegetables were being smothered by the tall weeds! Ah, no. Mrs. Crotchey would be offended.

Terribly offended. She was moved quickly and easily in the wrong direction by the slightest provocation.) "I'm at your service, if I can help. . . ."

She stepped outside. "See here, young man, if I need help I'll hire it! And don't think you can bribe me into changing my story. You're fooled if you think that! Now you may go, SAM-U-EL!" In a still more grating kind of voice, she taunted, "You are to be an example! Good-day" With that, she stepped quickly through the doorway and slammed the door in Sam's face.

A heavenly smile righted Sam's face. "Thank You, blessed Jesus, for the sweet Holy Ghost!" He smote his breast with his hands in joyous rapture. The "want to fight and get even" was gone. Oh, it was pure rapture -- this inner soul-rest and boundless peace and joy.

The days that followed were days filled with much praying and faithful watching for opportunities to do good to Mrs. Crotchey. A deep love and pity for the old woman welled up to overflowing proportions in Sam's heart. Here was a soul for whom Christ died. A soul who needed help in spite of her profession.

She had few friends. Little wonder Sam thought, as he was passing her house one evening. She had rude manners, a hatefully mean disposition and she was full of idiosyncrasies, with a tongue that was ever eager to spread gossip and herald rumors. But she has a soul! he told himself sadly. A never-dying soul!

He walked with bowed head, his hands thrust deep into his slack pockets, praying. It was then that he first heard it. He kept walking . . . past the house, still praying. Again he heard the sound. Where was it coming from? Who was it? Or what? Sam paused, straining his ears for recognition of what it was, or who and where, when he heard it again. It was a cry for help. A pitiful moan almost.

It seemed to be coming from somewhere in or near Mrs. Crotchey's yard. Opening the gate, he hurried across the lawn. He paused, listening. The evening was peaceful and still save for a lone bird calling and trilling a love song to its mate or a soft lullaby to its babies. "I know I heard something," Sam said, half aloud. "Or did I? Perhaps it was a cat or dog." But no! There it was again; so faint that it was barely audible.

"I'm coming, Mrs. Crotchey!" he called loudly, suddenly recognizing the old woman's voice and rushing back to the house. "Where are. . .?" Before he could finish his question he saw her. She was pinned beneath the outside cellar door.

"I'm here," Sam soothed, just as if he were a long-looked-for grandson. "Try to relax. I'll soon have you free. Oh, you poor dear! You are suffering." He worked gently but feverishly.

"I . . . I'm hurt-ing! Oh-h Sam-u-el!"

Sam never noticed the long drawn-out pronunciation. His heart was praying, crying out to God for the woman's salvation. She was hurt badly. She must not die in her present state!

As if reading his thoughts, she began slowly. "I . . . Sam-u-el, I beg your forgiveness. I've made life miserable for a lot of people, including you. I've done a lot of thinking lying here, pinned down like this. I made . . . some promises to God, Sam-u-el. I asked Him to forgive my sins and to save me; and He has. Can . . . you forgive . . . me?"

"With all my heart, I forgive you, Mrs. Crotchey. Here, don't move! I'll have this heavy thing off you in short order now. This door should have been fixed long ago. I'll take care of it for you soon, Lord willing."

As if she hadn't heard what he was saying, Mrs. Crotchey's voice said wearily, "you really got sanctified, Sam-u-el! I knew it that day you came here and apologized and asked could you do something for me. It showed all through you. I want to thank you for those melons and peaches you had the grocer man deliver to my door; and for paying Mrs. Cart to wash my windows."

Sam's mouth flew open wide. Who had told Mrs. Crotchey? He had done his "alms" not to be seen of men.

"You are surprised, aren't you, Sam-u-el?" a faint smile played at the corners of the aged woman's mouth. It vanished as quickly as it had come as she was seized with a paroxysm of pain. "Oh-h-h!" she moaned.

"There! You're free, Mrs. Crotchey. Now lie still while I call an ambulance. You need to be x-rayed. I don't think there are any broken bones but it pays to be sure." He hurried inside to the telephone. He was back by her side as soon as he had the message relayed.

"You'll soon be comfortable," he soothed. "And don't worry about the house. I'll see that it's well locked up and taken care of."

"Sam-u-el the old woman said in a weak voice with closed eyes, "your 'kindness tonic worked."

Sam swallowed Kindness tonic! And all the while he had thought she was growing steadily harder.

"Your changed life and attitude has had a great bearing upon me," she continued in her weak little voice. "It discomfited my spirit and made me see that I had nothing more nor less than a profession of religion, all dry and shriveled and . . . and dead! But I'm forgiven, Samuel. I want a sanctified heart too. Pray for me, please."

"Indeed I will, Mrs. Crotchey. Indeed I will!" he called, as the ambulance hurried away.

After he had closed the windows and locked the door, Sam stood on the back porch surveying the aged woman's surroundings. "Better hurry home and tell Father" he said aloud.

"There's plenty of work to do over here. I'll have to weed that garden! The girls can give the inside of the house a thorough house-cleaning and I must do something about that old-fashioned, outdated heavy cellar door."

Tucking the key and his hands deep in his pockets, he started home, singing joyously: "Perfect submission, All is at rest. . . ."

THE END