

YOUNG PEOPLE'S PAGE

"Let no man despise thy youth"—I. Timothy 4-12

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PRAYER SAVED US FROM STARVATION

By Sabra Lee Corbin

Hot. Sultry. A heavy, suffocating heat enveloped the whole city. I was ten that year, and my sister was five. We were "stage children." All our short lives had been spent in the theater, which was our world—we knew no other.

Looking back now, through the vista of years, how sharply our three figures are etched upon my memory! There was my mother—young, dark, spirited. There was Laurel, my sister—a tiny, blond, angelic-looking child. And there was me, already growing too tall for child's parts.

So far we three had had our ups and downs, but never anything quite so bad as this! We lived, I recall, in a furnished room on Twenty-third Street, and every day we walked through that merciless heat to the agents' and the managers' offices which, in those days, were confined to the Broadway area between Thirty-eighth and Forty-eighth Streets. We walked because we must save every penny. And always we received that same, bland answer, "Nothing doing today"; and always the return to that furnished room—a little wearier, a little more hopeless, a little more frightened.

There was no one to whom we could turn for help. Our friends, like ourselves, were "troupeers." Some were away on the road or in summer stock, and those who remained in New York were as badly off as ourselves. We were confronted with the spectre of starvation and eviction, but I think we would have died rather than ask charity.

One day my mother, sick from the heat in the stuffy room and terrified at our meager store of funds, sent me to "do the offices" alone.

"There just might be something," she murmured.

It was a very worried little girl who started out that July morning on an all-too-familiar pilgrimage. How hot it was! If you didn't pay your rent, you were disgraced. Money must come from somewhere! It must! It must!

I had walked ten blocks and now I was passing a church, the doors of which were open. It looked dim in there, dim and cool and quiet. It would be a pleasant respite from this incessant heat, the glare, the noise.

A little timidly I entered and sat upon one of the back pews. I sat there for a time, just resting, just thinking—about life and God. Why did God make things so hard for us? Why did other little girls have so much—seashore, and coolness, and real homes, and no worry, and big yards to play in? Was there a God? If there were, then what was the matter with Him? Hadn't I prayed to Him night after night to let us get work? Didn't He want to hear—or was He deaf? Didn't He care about us, we three? But—why, there had to be God! And yet, where was He? What kind of a God was He to stand by and not give people jobs and contracts and things that you just had to have?

How curious it seems now, that such bitterness, such starkness, such anxiety should be associated with a child of ten! And yet, as I sat there, it seemed as if slowly, gently, all that bitterness, that rebellion, that anxiety seeped out of me. Very softly, I began to cry.

And that helped. Because at home, all of us in one room, you often felt like crying. Only you

didn't. Because that only made things harder for your mother, and sometimes your little sister, seeing you cry, would cry, too. But here—here it was different. Here you were alone with God—and God wouldn't mind if you cried.

Suddenly the tears ceased. Alone—with God! Was I? Was I really?

I knelt.

"Oh, God, please send us some money! You can do it, God! You can do anything! Please, God, see that we get the money—today! Please! Please! You know, God, we only have somewhere around two dollars, and there are three of us, and the rent's due tomorrow. And you know how landladies are, God! So, you see, dear God, we've just got to have it today."

I went on like that, just putting the whole thing before God, talking it out with Him quite simply. Then I sat back at ease in the pew. I had a curious feeling that I had actually talked to God, that He had heard, that He was kind, that He was friendly, that He was interested. I made no conscious effort to attain this bright, calm faith. Yet now in looking back I realize that I was unwittingly obeying a great spiritual law which Jesus, Himself, had emphasized. "Believe that ye have received!" Something, some way, I had already received. Everything was beautifully taken care of.

I did not continue my journey to the managerial offices that day. Instead, I started blithely homeward. God had heard. God would not fail. The money would come, and it would come—today! Perhaps it was already at home, waiting for me!

How had it come? I didn't know. I didn't question. That there was no earthly source from which it could come made no difference.

I almost ran all the way home.

I opened the door of that stuffy room. How clearly I see it now! The scarred wall paper. The one-burner gas stove hidden behind a screen. The two folding couches that made lumpy beds at night. The threadbare carpet.

No, it was all too evident that the money hadn't come—not yet. My mother lay on the couch, a wet towel on her head, her pretty face pale and pasty from the heat, her dark eyes bright with desperation. My little sister sat on the floor, wearily, playing with paper dolls.

No, no money yet. But, I told myself stubbornly, God heard me! And He's good! God wouldn't let me down. He'd been there in that

church and I'd talked matters over with Him—and there just wasn't anything in the world to worry about!

Wearily my mother reached for her purse and dumped its contents on the couch beside her. Pennies. Nickels. Dimes. She counted it slowly, thoughtfully. Then she looked up and tried hard to smile.

"Children," she said, "we have one dollar and seventy-eight cents. Sabra, you take your sister and go to Coney Island. You children will be out of this heat for a while, you'll get some fresh air. Here's twenty cents for carfare. Then, around six o'clock, Sabra, you buy a five-cent hamburger, one for you and one for Laurel. Start back home at eight-thirty."

"But how about you, mama?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm all right. You go on now. Go right down to the beach and stay on the sand where it's cool."

One dollar and seventy-eight cents! All we had in the world, and no apparent source from which more could come, yet she could spend thirty cents of that slender capital that her two children could get a breath of cool, fresh air!

I took my little sister by the hand and we started off for Coney. At that time they had open street cars. These open cars were very popular and usually crowded because no matter how hot it was, you were sure to get a stiff breeze once the car was in motion. The cars were open on both sides right down to the floor. Rows of wooden benches ran the full width of the car. It was a cheap and pleasant means of transportation.

With one hand I hung on to my sister, with the other hand I clutched my handkerchief which had thirty precious cents tied in one corner.

The first car was too crowded, and we waited for the next. Standing there, I was tempted to tell my sister that we really had nothing to worry about any more. I wanted awfully to tell her about how I had gone into a church and told God all about us. But I didn't. Somehow I couldn't. I know now that I was obeying another great spiritual law—"Tell no man; * * * pray to your Father which is in secret!"

Presently the next car came along. Except for one entire row, it was full. Quickly I hoisted my little sister on board and climbed up after her. The car started. Ah, what a glorious breeze! I took off my hat to feel the wind in my hair.

It wasn't more than two minutes after we boarded the car when Laurel spoke to me. I had been so thrilled by the breeze that I had almost forgotten about her.

"Sister!" she whispered. "Sister!"

I turned to see her staring at me wide-eyed—and there in her little hand was a twenty-dollar bill!

She had found it on the floor of that car, a twenty-dollar bill folded neatly.

Think of it! The bill was not in a purse. It was on the floor of an open street car—another second, perhaps, and it would have blown away.

It didn't seem strange to me—not then. I simply closed my eyes and said, "Thank you—Father!"

A miracle?

Now that I'm older, wiser, I wonder.

Was it some responsive, all-knowing, all-loving universal Force impelling my mother to subtract from that grimly hoarded little capital thirty precious cents to send us along that particular future.—H. S. W.

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