

Selah

Written by Christopher M. Nemelka

The Johnson family lived way back in the big woods of Kentucky. Few people knew much about the Johnsons because they lived so far away from town. In fact, very few people had ever seen any of the Johnsons, except for the father who would come to town sometimes to buy some things his family needed from the town store.

It wasn't until the Christmas of 1920 that I came to know the Johnson family.

Because they stayed at their farm in the woods, none of the Johnson children were known by the other kids in town. When Mr. Johnson came to town, the town kids would follow him up and down the street making fun of him and calling him names. "There goes Mr. Nobody who has ten weird kids," the children would say. Mr. Johnson would never pay any attention to the rude children. He would buy the things he needed, and leave as quickly as he came. The town's grown-ups weren't much nicer to him either. They thought he was odd because he kept his family so far away from Oaksdale.

I thought Mr. Johnson was strange also. You see, my father was the mayor of Oaksdale. Dad would always talk about how strange Mr. Johnson was, and I would laugh with the other kids when Mr. Johnson came to town. I was a spoiled sort of kid

who got everything he ever wanted for Christmas. I was always the leader of the games we played at school, and everyone seemed to like me.

One day, a couple of the Johnson kids came to town with their father. My friends and I watched them walk close to their father as they bought the few things that they needed at the store. While they were in the store, my friends and I made a bunch of snowballs to throw at the Johnsons as soon as they left the store. I put a big rock in my snowball, and bragged to my friends that I was going to hit a man right square between the eyes. We all laughed at the prospect of it coming true.

The Johnsons came out of the store and the snowballs flew. Like I had promised, my snowball went straight for its target. At the last second, Mr. Johnson ducked. The snowball missed him, and hit his young daughter right in the head. She fell to the ground with a thump. As she lay there in the snow, I noticed the white snow turn bright red where her head lay. Mr. Johnson bent over the little girl and put his big hand underneath her bleeding head. He took off her bonnet and held her head close to his chest as big tears swelled in his eyes and fell down his cheeks. He whispered quietly to his little girl, but she didn't move. Ever so gently, Mr. Johnson lifted his little girl into their horse buggy and drove off into the woods.

My friends laughing and praising me for the great shot I had made, congratulated, "That will teach those weird Johnsons not to come into our town again." As my friends went away laughing, I stood there solemnly. I couldn't get the image out of my head of Mr. Johnson leaning over his little daughter in the red snow. Mr. Johnson didn't get mad at anyone. He didn't yell or curse. He didn't complain to anyone. He just lifted the limp body of his daughter into the buggy and disappeared into the big woods.

The rest of the day, I barely moved. I didn't eat my dinner that night or did I want to talk to anyone. That night I cried. I cried harder than I had ever cried in my life. I knew if I hadn't put that rock in that snowball, the Johnson girl wouldn't have been hurt. Now I wished the snowball had hit me instead.

No one saw Mr. Johnson again. A whole year went by and nothing was heard of the Johnson family. Some say they moved. Others said that Mr. Johnson had died and left ten children with their mother in the woods. All that year I thought about the hurt girl. I wasn't the same at school. I didn't play any games anymore. I didn't want anything for Christmas or my birthdays. My parents asked me what was wrong, but I hid the sorrow of my guilt deep inside me.

That year had been 1915. Five years passed, and nothing was ever heard from the Johnson family. I eventually was able to put out of my mind the image of the Johnson girl and her father, but never again did I throw another snowball.

It was now the Christmas season of 1920. I had started a delivery business in our small town of Oakdale. I was quite successful, and very popular with the townspeople. When my father decided not to run for mayor, I decided to run in his place. I won the

election, and everyone was proud to have me as their mayor. Once again, I was loved and respected by the people of Oaksdale.

On Christmas Eve that year, I was hired to make a delivery to a farm on the other side of the big woods. I had never made the trip before, so I wanted to get an early start. As I left to make the delivery, I noticed that the skies were bright and clear, so I didn't worry too much about getting caught in a storm on my way through the woods. I thought I would make the delivery and return home in the early evening to the Christmas party that the town was planning to have for my family.

I left early, and had traveled about two hours, when the sky became blacker than a miner's coal bin. My horses were a little spooked at the impending storm, which seemed to appear out of nowhere. It didn't take long before the weather took a turn for the worse. Before I knew it, a blizzard had set in. Never have I since experienced a snowstorm like that one. The wind was blowing so hard my horses could barely breathe. The snow became blinding, and the horses could no longer see where they were going. All of the sudden, one of the horses stepped into a small ravine and broke loose from its reins. This spooked the other horse, which reared up and ran the opposite direction, tearing the horse cart to pieces. I tried to calm the horses, but my voice was swept away by the cold wind.

All alone, I began to shake with cold and fright. I had no idea where I was. I couldn't see in any direction, and was afraid to move, not knowing what I might run in to. Though I couldn't see due to the blowing snow, I knew I had to keep moving, or I would freeze to death. I crept on, falling and stumbling with every step. I fell down another ravine, and lay there awhile, wondering what else I could do. When I tried to get up, I couldn't move. I had broken my leg. I desperately tried to crawl anywhere, but the snow would give away and cover my almost frozen body. It seemed like hours, but before long, I could no longer feel my body. I lost hope, and went to sleep—never hoping to awake again.

The next thing I felt was the gentle hand of a girl rubbing my forehead and whispering very softly. "You'll be fine," she assured me, as she brought a cup of warm liquid to my lips to drink. I could hear other voices in the background, but couldn't understand what they were saying. I must have gone back to sleep, because the morning sunlight awoke me, and I looked around at the unfamiliar house.

Asleep in a chair at the side of the bed, was the beautiful girl who had nursed me the night before. As I admired her beautiful appearance, I noticed that something seemed wrong with the left side of her body. She was paralyzed on that side. In spite of this, I fell in love with that girl. Never before had I felt "in love," but knew I loved this girl. Other than me, no one else appeared to be awake in the house.

I looked around the house, and noticed very humble surroundings. There was a small stove with wood placed neatly beside it. Though there were not very many furnishings, the home appeared very neat and tidy. In a far corner, I noticed a Christmas tree decorated with the humblest Christmas ornaments I had ever seen. There were no

presents under the tree, but as it stood alone, it gave off more Christmas spirit than any I had ever beheld before.

My leg was wrapped, and it hurt each time I moved it. When I tried to move my leg, I woke up the sleeping girl at my side.

“How do you feel?” she asked tenderly.

As my eyes met hers, my love for her intensified. I turned away from her embarrassed at my thoughts I was having. “Where am I?” I asked. “Who are you?”

“My brothers found you in the snowstorm last night,” she responded. “You were half frozen to death.” She then told me how her brothers had been out in the storm searching for the family cow, when they stumbled over my partially snow-covered body. She told me that they brought me back to their house and that she had dressed my wounds.

“I felt as if I should care for you myself,” said the girl. “I have been with you ever since.”

Just then, the house seemed to awake with life. Two broad-shouldered boys tromped through the door shaking snow from their coats and carrying a bucket of steaming cow’s milk. From the upstairs came two girls and four other boys. These seemed to be the younger kids, who excitedly hurried over to the fireplace, where I noticed ten old stockings hanging from the mantle. Each one had a bulge in it, which reminded me that this morning was Christmas Day.

A small boy quietly came down the stairs, and realized his brothers and sisters were investigating the contents of their stockings. He excitedly rushed over to get his. His stocking seemed to have more in it than any other, and before anyone else emptied out their Christmas stocking, all waited for the smallest child to dump out his.

From the smallest child’s stocking came a small acorn carved into a soldier’s hat, which fit neatly on the head of a small wooden soldier carved from a hickory branch. There was a rock with a small heart scratched into it. There were dried cranberries made into a little bracelet that fit perfectly around the small child’s wrist. Finally, there was a pinecone that had been shaped into a flower and tied with a small ribbon. Overjoyed, the small boy thanked Santa Claus for the wonderful gifts that he had received.

When the small boy finished looking through his stocking, the others eagerly investigated their own. From the stockings came the simplest handmade gifts I had ever seen. Each was handcrafted from the simplest materials, and each brought great joy to the person receiving it. Never before have I witnessed such gratitude for such humble gifts. If I had pulled these gifts from my Christmas sock, I probably would have ungratefully thrown them all away. Yet at that moment, I wished that I too could have one of those humble gifts.

One of the older girls brought a sock over to the girl who sat at my side. “Merry Christmas, Selah,” the girl said to her sister.

Selah reached out for her sister’s hand, and gave her a tender kiss on her forehead.

“Thank you my dear, but do we not have something for our guest?”

The children looked at each other, and then down at their own gifts. No one moved for a long time. Finally, the smallest child came over to the side of the bed where I was lying. He took out the pinecone flower wrapped in the ribbon, and put it on my chest. The small child smiled and said, “Merry Christmas, mister.”

My throat tightened up like a noose as I tried to express the gratefulness I felt. As I tried to speak, I could feel the wetness of my own tears cover my face. I could not say anything. I smiled and cried. Selah looked around for a dry towel to dry my tears. When she couldn’t find one, she unbraided her beautiful hair and wiped away my tears with her soft hair. I touched her cheek as she continued to wipe mine. I could tell she could not feel my touch, for I had touched her paralyzed side. As I drew my hand away, she caught it in hers and gently squeezed it as she quietly smiled.

The other kids sat around joyfully discussing how each of them had made the gifts that they had given each other. I just sat looking at Selah.

“Who are you guys? And where exactly am I?”

“My name is Selah Johnson,” she said. “These are my brothers and sisters. Our parents passed away about five years ago right after my accident.” Selah lowered her head and turned away, trying to keep the paralyzed side of her face from my sight.

“What happened to your parents, and what caused your accident?” I asked.

Selah didn’t look up.

“I am sorry. I don’t mean to pry.”

“That’s all right,” Selah said. “My father took me and my younger brother to town about five years ago when...”

I gasped for air. My chest tightened up with pain. Selah Johnson. Five years ago, with her father! Dear Lord, I did this to Selah!

“What’s wrong?” Selah asked.

I couldn’t answer. I grabbed for Selah’s hand and sobbed. “I am sorry, I am sorry, I am so, so sorry, Selah,” I cried.

“It’s all right,” Selah replied. “I must have slipped coming out of the town store, for I don’t remember anything else. My father said it didn’t matter how it had happened, only that God had his hand in it, and there was nothing we could do. All I know is that we never went back to town again. My father and mother became ill, but we were forbidden to go into town for a doctor. They soon died, and we buried them behind our house.”

Words could never express my feelings at that time. Since the roads to town were all snowed in, I spent that Christmas with the Johnson family. Never before and never after have I had a Christmas quite like that one.

Selah Johnson became my wife, and my love for her is beyond the love that any man could have for a woman. I am still the mayor of Oaksdale, and the people love my Selah.

I have never told Selah what I did to her. I believe God and her father had a reason to keep it from her, and so do I. I know that Selah would love me the same even if I told her I was the one who had thrown a snowball with the rock in it that caused her paralysis, but since her father forgave me, I know God has.

Thank you Lord. I love my Selah.