

That Thine Alms May Be In Secret

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*That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.
--Matthew 6:4*

Most folks in Steelville were just a little bit afraid of Big Sam Edwards. Sam had lost his job when the steel plant had cut back, and he hadn't been able to find work during the past six months. He was a proud man; and now, with Christmas coming, he made a few telephone calls to important people telling them that he didn't want any "do-gooders" trying to help his family at Christmas. He gruffly warned, "I'll be staying up on Christmas Eve, and if anybody comes around trying to leave anything at the door, somebody's going to get hurt."

On Christmas Eve, when his wife, Kathryn, and his children had gone to their beds, Sam sat in his small front room with a shotgun draped across his lap. He became so weary that around two o'clock he fell asleep.

The next morning when he awoke, there in front of him he saw a whole pile of toys, a large ham, a small Christmas tree, and an open Bible. For a few seconds, he felt a surge of joy. But then he became angry. To himself he muttered, "I warned them, and somebody will pay for

poking their nose into my business." Just then the children came into the room. Seeing the toys, they shouted, "Look, Daddy! See what Santa left us!"

Sam jumped from his chair and quickly stepped between the children and the toys. "Don't touch those things!" he shouted. "This is not our stuff, and somebody is going to pay for sneaking in here and leaving it. That's breaking and entering, and I'm not going to put up with it."

Sam went quickly to the telephone and called his long-time friend Sheriff Walt Durrant. After several rings the sleepy sheriff picked up the phone. Sam blurted out, "Sheriff, you get over here. Somebody broke into my house. I want them arrested." He hung up.

Sam looked over to the corner of the room where his children were standing in a huddle, gazing longingly at the pile of toys. "You kids get back to bed," he said. They didn't move, but fixed yearning eyes on their mother, who stood behind them. She didn't know what to do. During the past few discouraging months, she had more or less given up on helping Sam. If she voiced her thoughts, it always started an argument.

Sam sternly repeated, "I said get back to bed. It's too early for you kids to be up anyway."

The children reluctantly retreated. Kathryn went into the kitchen and started cooking some oatmeal. Breakfast might be the best meal they were going to have that day.

Thirty-five minutes later, Sheriff Walt Durrant knocked on the door. "Come in!" Sam shouted.

The sheriff opened the door and said cheerfully, "Merry Christmas." Sam's only reply was a look of disgust.

"Now, what's happened here?" asked the sheriff.

"Somebody broke in last night and left all of this stuff on the floor, and I want them arrested."

"Well, Sam, that looks like pretty good stuff to me. Did they take anything?"

"No, they didn't take nothing, but I'm fed up with all of the do-gooders in this town. I can take care of myself and my family. I don't need help from nobody. Besides, didn't I tell you to keep those meddlers away from here?"

"Were you gone away last night when they did it?"

"No, I was sitting right there in that chair."

"Well, Sam, you know nobody could have come in here without making a big racket."

Sam, more angry than ever, replied, "They might have made a big racket, but I guess I slept right through it."

"I guess you did," the sheriff drawled. "Funny thing is, when I drove down your lane from the road, I could see that nobody else had been down here since the big snow last night."

"Well, somebody drove or walked in here. Now you find out who it was."

"I told you, there's not a track out there. The snow quit falling last night around nine, and nobody has been in here since then."

"Sheriff, there must be some tracks out there."

"Go see for yourself, if you think you're so smart. See if you can see where anybody came in here."

"I'll show you," said Sam. "I don't know why we pay taxes for a blind sheriff like you anyway."

Together the two men went outside. Sam wandered down the lane searching for some tracks other than those left by the sheriff, but there were none.

He returned to where the sheriff stood. "Let's go around the house," he said. "There will be some tracks out back."

Together they circled the house, but all around it the snow was as smooth as a calm lake. Not a mark on it.

Sam, more irritated than ever, shouted, "Somebody's raked over the tracks."

"Nonsense," said the sheriff, "nobody has been here. I don't know where that stuff came from, but I know this--nobody brought it here."

Sam didn't know what else to say or do. The sheriff spoke as kindly as he could. "Look, Sam, I've got Christmas waiting at home. Why don't you just take the stuff and enjoy it. Forget where it came from. Just be grateful."

Sam's voice was choked with emotion as he replied. "Sheriff, I'm not grateful for nothing, except the stuff I provide for my own family."

The sheriff replied, "I know, Sam. But you'll get work soon. Things will get better." He drove away.

Completely mystified by what had happened, Sam came back into the house and sat in his chair.

Kathryn spoke softly. "Sam, what does it matter how it got here? It's here."

Sam's only reply was, "I just can't figure out how somebody came here without leaving no tracks."

Little four-year-old Katie, who was standing nearby with the other children, excitedly said,

"Daddy, maybe there's some tracks on top of the house."

"I don't think so, honey," Sam replied gently.

Then it hit him like a light. Some troublemaker had actually rented a helicopter and landed on his roof!

A few minutes later Sam propped his old wooden ladder against the side of the house, and to the amazement of Kathryn and the children he almost ran to the top. Up there he looked carefully around. "Nothing," he muttered. Little Katie called up to him, "Are there any reindeer tracks?" Sam paused and looked down at her and the other children. Then he winked at Kathryn and said with a chuckle, "Yeah, I think I can see some reindeer tracks over by the chimney."

Suddenly Sam had a feeling that he had not had in years. He shouted out, "Well, what are you kids waiting for? Those toys are for you, you know!"

Soon the ham was cooking in the oven. The children were playing with their toys. The miniature Christmas tree was on the table. Unnoticed by his family, Sam picked up the open Bible. A verse was underlined. He softly read: "That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly." Never before or since has more joy been packed into one little house or into one father's heart than there was at that moment.

From then on and through the years everybody in town knew that Sam had changed. During the next thirty-six years almost everyone had been touched by one of Sam's kindnesses. He'd done everything from helping Arnold Conder build a house to being the chief cook at the annual old folks' dinner. On his sixty-eighth birthday he was honored as the city's most generous citizen. Sheriff Durrant, his closest friend, was appointed to present him the plaque.

Sam wasn't much of a public speaker. As he accepted the award, he awkwardly said, "I don't do no more stuff for others than anybody else around this here town. I just wish I could do like Jesus said in the Bible. I wished I could do something good and do it in secret so nobody would ever know."

As the years went by, in almost every conversation he had with Sheriff Durrant he would say, "You remember, don't you, Sheriff--that Christmas when there was no tracks nowhere? If I could do something good for someone and leave no tracks, that would be the merriest Christmas of all for me." The sheriff would smile and say, "Maybe someday, Sam."

All in the community mourned when Sam's wife died. By now the children were all grown up and married, and had moved to larger cities to get work. They and their children visited Sam as often as they could, but most of the time he was alone.

Now it was once again Christmas Eve. Tomorrow Sam's house would be filled with his children, his grandchildren, and even his two-week-old great-grandson. It was a family tradition for all the family to come home on Christmas afternoon. But tonight he was alone. He would have gone to visit some friends but his eyesight was such that he could no longer drive, and his arthritis made walking a lot less than pleasurable.

At about five o'clock the Gentrys had come over to sing Sam a Christmas carol. They were a young family who during the past summer had moved into the old Conder home across the hayfield from Sam. Their two young children, five-year-old Lexie and three-year-old Ben, had taken a special liking to Sam, and he to them. The family made it a point to give Sam a ride to church every Sunday. The children loved him to tell them stories about when he was little. They and their mom, Marinda Gentry, came to visit him often.

This Christmas Eve tears moistened his cheeks as first Lexie and then Ben hugged him and said, "We love you, Grandpa Sam. Merry Christmas." Just before they left to go home he gave Lexie a doll and Ben a ball. He had wanted to make each of them something, but his hands were not now his servants as they had once been. Sam watched them through his front window as the little family departed down his driveway toward the country road that led the one block to their home. A heavy snowfall had begun.

Sam, who had difficulty in sleeping anyway, had decided to stay up late this night. As he prepared for bed he looked out of the window and saw that the gentle snow had covered all of the fields in the country neighborhood with a soft smooth whiteness. The snow by then had stopped falling. The winter scene reminded him of that mysterious "trackless" night so long ago. As he let his mind wander in a multitude of memories, he was suddenly jolted back to reality. Looking out across the field toward the Gentry house he saw an orange glow. To his horror he realized that the Gentrys' house was on fire. Hurrying from his chair he scooped up a jacket on his way to the back door. He quickly climbed the wire fence that separated his house from the hayfield. His pains forgotten in his fears for his friends' safety, he hurried toward the burning house. There he found a group of people standing together near the mailbox. The firetruck had just arrived, and the hurrying men were unrolling hoses and exchanging shouted instructions. No one saw Sam approach, all eyes being on the leaping flames. Mrs. Gentry was screaming, "Bennie is still in there!" The boy's father shouted, "I'll try again!" but two men grabbed him and shouted, "You can't go back! It's no use!" Unnoticed by anyone, Sam ran around and entered

through the back door. He couldn't see because of the thick smoke but that didn't matter because he knew the layout of the house, since he had helped build it. Flames were everywhere. He could feel the heat biting against him. The smoke choked his lungs. Suddenly he heard a faint cough. He blindly made his way toward the sound and found little Bennie lying on the floor. He scooped the crying child up in his arms and, running through the flames, made his way to the back door. Once outside he held the boy close to his body and looked heavenward. After coughing violently for several seconds the child began to cry. He placed little Bennie down on the snow and told him to go out front to the mailbox to his mother.

Now for the first time Sam could feel the pain. His lungs seemed to be on fire and his skin felt as though he had been immersed in boiling water. He wanted to be home. Home was where he wanted to die. Without consciously knowing what he was doing, Sam, as if carried by the angels, crossed the snow-covered field, climbed the fence, and staggered into his home.

A fireman found Bennie crying and making his way through the snow. Soon the little boy was in the arms of his mother, who embraced him as she wept with love and gratitude. As she held him, Bennie repeated over and over, "Sam, Sam, Sam." Overwhelmed with emotion, the parents didn't register this, but someone else did. The former Sheriff Durrant, now too old to be a regular lawman, but always a volunteer, stood up straight, and a look of wonder crossed his face. "Sam," he said softly to himself, and he walked back a few yards so that he could see across the field. Just as he did, he saw the light go on in Sam's bedroom window.

The sheriff walked back to where he could watch as Doctor Jones looked at the boy. After just a minute the doctor said: "He looks fine, other than his curly hair is mostly gone. But why don't you drive down to the hospital, and I'll come down and we'll have a good look. Then we'll find a good place for you to stay until the house can be rebuilt."

The sheriff tapped the doctor on the shoulder and said, "You rode out on the firetruck. Why don't you let me give you a lift down to the hospital." As the old sheriff and the doctor pulled out of the Gentry lane, the sheriff said, "Let's just stop in and wish old Sam a Merry Christmas. It will only take a minute." The doctor replied, "He'd be sleeping, wouldn't he?" "No, I don't think so," the sheriff replied. "I think he stays too busy to sleep much."

As they pulled down Sam's lane, the sheriff said softly, "No tracks in or out."

"What's that?" asked the doctor.

"Oh, nothing."

The deep new snow on the doorstep was undisturbed. The two men knocked, but there was no response. The door was not locked. The sheriff pushed it open and entered. The doctor said, "Let's go, he's asleep. Let's not wake him."

"Sam," shouted the sheriff, as he moved further into the house. "Let's look back here," he said, as he walked toward the bedroom.

A few seconds later they switched on the light and found Sam lying fully dressed on his bed. He didn't stir as the sheriff said, "Sam! Sam! are you okay?" At the same time, the doctor took Sam's limp wrist in his hand. There was a faint pulse. He put his hand on Sam's forehead. "He looks flushed," he said softly. "Feels like he has the flu that's all over town. He's burning up with fever."

The sheriff moved closer and said, "I can smell smoke, can't you, Doc?"

"Yeah, it must be on our clothes," replied the doctor.

The sheriff spoke again, "Sam, can you hear me?" There was no response. "Sam, have you been over to the Gentrys'?"

"What are you talking about, Sheriff?" the doctor asked. "This man's one of my patients. He can hardly walk."

The sheriff leaned down so his face was only a foot away from his old friend and asked, "Sam, did you go to the Gentrys'?"

"What's wrong with you, Sheriff? I told you he can't walk much, and he's sick, and besides, when we drove in here I noticed that there wasn't a single track out there in the snow."

An almost indistinguishable smile crossed Sam's face. A smile that only someone like the old sheriff could have seen. Then his head fell to the side. Sam Edwards had died. The doctor placed his fingers around Sam's wrist, and after a few seconds he said: "He's gone. The flu didn't do it on its own. My best guess is his old ticker just plain gave out on him."

"Maybe too much strain?" the sheriff asked.

"No, just too much age," the doctor replied.

Near two in the morning, the sheriff had the Gentrys settled in at the local motel. Warren Anderson from the mortuary had come an hour earlier and had taken Sam's body away. Now the sheriff came back to Sam's house. There was something he felt he had to know.

Sheriff Durrant parked his car just in front of the dark and quiet house. In his heart he felt certain that in some miraculous way Sam had gone to the burning house. Soon he would know. Were

there tracks out back and across the field? Had Sam saved the boy and brought the greatest joy a family could ever know?

As the old sheriff's boots crunched into the cold snow, he felt for a moment he could hear the angels singing. He paused and looked up at the stars.

He spoke softly as he looked up. "Oh, heck, Sam! You and I both know there ain't no tracks out there. Besides, I need to be home. It's Christmas."

As the sheriff opened his car door, he looked back at Sam's house. He'd miss his old friend. A tear ran down his cheek, and he felt he heard Sam's voice saying, "I finally did it, Sheriff. Merry Christmas."

Already there was a rumor in town that the life of a little child had been saved by a miracle. Sheriff Durrant felt satisfied with that.