

MAKING CHOICES



Mark Of Excellence



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Mark knew it would happen soon, and it did. There was always something that called attention to his hateful problem and reminded him again of his misery.

Here he was, at Summer Camp, where he had looked forward to coming for the whole, entire year. The bus ride was great....he and the other fellows had a lot of fun yelling at each other and deciding what was the most fun part of going to camp. Then they had stopped for hamburgers and that was fun, too. And just think, there would be three whole weeks of nothing but fun. Maybe.

Getting settled into the huge dormitory room was fun, and he even managed to get through the afternoon devotional service without getting too upset.

But now, after they had eaten dinner and before the evening devotion, his group counselor, Mr. Stanley, handed out the sheets of camp stationery and told them, "You know how parents are when their kids are gone to camp. They want to hear from you. Well, we're going to take care of that little matter right now. You have ten minutes to write to your parents and then we have things to do."

Simple enough, wouldn't you say? Well, sure, but which parent should he write to? Mom brought him to the bus, but that was just this morning. Surely she knew he was still all right. He hadn't seen Dad since last week, but Dad would be picking him up when the bus brought them home. So which one?

He was chewing his pencil, trying to decide and a large chunk of the pencil, right around the lead, came off in his mouth. Then the lead dropped out of the pencil onto the floor.

The counselor handed him another pencil. "Just a short letter right now,...." and he glanced at Mark's name tag, ".....Mark. Later on, you can write a long letter and tell them all the things you're doing."

Should he tell him and get it over with? Might as well. "That isn't what my problem is, Mr. Stanley. It's just that my parents are not together and I can't make up my mind who to write to."

Mr. Stanley nodded, understandingly. "Easy to correct," he said as he handed him another envelope and another sheet of paper.

A voice from the back of the group spoke up. "Me, too, Mr. Stanley. I need another sheet of paper, too."

Mark looked back quickly and saw the boy Mr. Stanley gave the paper to. Didn't know him. He was obviously from another church. Mark made a note in his mind to make friends with that boy, just as soon as the letters were over.

The letters didn't take long. Mr. Stanley gathered them up and the boys went outside.

Mark saw the other boy was waiting by the door for him. His name tag said his name was Cory.

"Mark?"

"Yeah. And you're the other guy who needed two sheets?"

"I'm Cory. I had just decided to put both names on it and send it to one of them and have that one send it on. I'm glad you said something. I don't know why I didn't ask for another sheet. This same thing happened to me last year."

Mark nodded, "This is my first year. My first year to come to this camp and my first year to need two sheets."

"Ohhh! I know what you mean. It's really rough that first year."

"You mean it gets better after a while?"

"Well, sometimes it seems like it does. Maybe you just get used to it."

The two boys looked at each other and then looked at their feet. What else was there to say about that subject?

Then Cory said, "Hey, let's go look around the camp. Sometimes they add something new. This is a really fun camp, once we get the letters over. Every

year I get to learn something new, that I never did before. Last year they brought horses and taught us to ride. Of course, I managed to fall off, but I didn't break anything serious. Dad said they shouldn't have taught me, though, because all year long I've been wanting a horse. We have no place to keep one, and couldn't afford one if we did."

"I've never ridden a horse, except for the tiny ones in the park where they put little kids on their backs and take their pictures. My mom has this really dumb picture of me on the horse. Here I am, not even big enough to walk and I'm sitting up on that little old horse." The remembrance of the picture made him grin. Cory grinned, too.

"I know what you mean. My mom has a picture of me holding a football before I can even sit up straight. There I am, leaning against that football, drooling all over it." He walked on a few steps and added, "Yuuuk!"

Cory, who acted as guide, pointed to a field. "That's the baseball diamond, and there on the other side is the football field."

"Football? Oh, boy!"

"Yeah, but they won't let us play most days. If the temperature gets hotter than something, I think 90 degrees, or there about, we can't play. Except for a little while after the sun goes down. Can't play soccer much, either. Same reason."

They walked on. They passed by the tennis courts, and the three swimming pools, each with the heavy wire mesh fence around it. "How good you can

swim, tells you which pool you can swim in," Cory explained. "That big one over there is really deep."

"I can swim good. I can even dive a little. My dad does a lot of scuba diving. I'm going to get a lot better in the next few years. Dad says sometime we can go to some of those islands and dive in the ocean, when I get good enough."

"Really? I've never dived. Except in a pool. That pool in the middle is a good one. It's shallow around the edges and deep in the center, more like a lake, and it's big. Most of us like it best."

They leaned against the pool fence and gazed wistfully at the cool, blue water.

"Mark?"

"Yeah?"

"When your dad makes promises, like taking you diving, does he always keep them? Or does he forget about them a lot of times."

"Yeah, well, no....I mean, I don't know. He hasn't really done any of the things he says we'll do, but maybe there hasn't been enough time, yet. We always have fun together and he said he wants to do a lot of stuff. So I guess he will. He's pretty busy, though, and he has other friends. Sometimes when I'm with him, I just go place with him and his friends.....like fishing or something. Sometimes his friends have kids and we play together."

"Oh." Cory was leaning against the wire mesh of the pool fence. He turned to look at Mark, and there was the print of the chainlink fence across his forehead. It had made a row of pink X marks that quickly faded into the brown of his skin. "I guess maybe things will work out better for you than they have for me. I try not to think about promises my dad makes to me. They sound like fun and I look forward to them, but we never seem to get around to doing them. Dad is awfully busy."

"How long has it been?" Mark asked. "I mean, how long have your parents.....?"

"Been divorced?" offered Cory.

Mark nodded, biting his lower lip.

"It's been three years. Seems like a lot longer. You know, I used to not want to say 'divorced'. I would say all sorts of things like 'they were not living together,' or that my dad was 'away'. I finally decided that this was the way it was so I might as well call it by its right name."

Mark nodded. That made sense. He watched the tiny ripples in the water splash against the side of the concrete pool like waves against an ocean shore. Tiny, little splashes. He guessed the filtration pump was stirring up the water.

"One of the worst problems I have," Cory told him, "is that everything I want to play with or wear is at the wrong house. I have a shirt that only goes with one pair of shorts and for three weeks the shirt was at one house and the pants at the other. I was afraid I would outgrow them before I got them together."

"That happens to me, too. Toys, mostly, and my bicycle. I sure don't like it."

There was a light, cool breeze blowing. It was sending a foam soft-drink cup scudding along the walkway. The breeze clapped the cup against the metal mesh of the fence and held it there a second. Then it dropped to the grass.

"Oh, there's another thing that we do here." Cory told him, grinning. "We are 'permitted' to police the grounds every morning. We are in groups and we fan out over all areas and pick up every little bit of trash. They tell us we don't have to, of course, but if we don't choose to do that, we will be 'permitted' to help out in the kitchen. All sorts of bad stuff happens in there, like peeling potatoes, so it's amazing how many of us 'want' to pick up trash."

A piercing whistle sounded from a number of points all over the grounds. It sounded like an oversized fire drill. Mark was startled, and looked around to see where the noise was coming from.

Every building and dorm had a buzzer, and they were getting a perfect stereo effect, making the sound come in from all sides.

"The buzzer means we go to assembly, now, for evening devotion," explained Cory.

"Oh," was Mark's unenthusiastic reply. He would now have to go in there and hear them talk about how great God was. He would listen to people tell each other how much they loved Him. They would tell about the things God could do for them.

Only a year ago, Mark would have enjoyed being part of the devotion, telling how much he loved God, but that was before.....

It was before God let certain things happen in his life. It was before he learned that God either could not, or would not, answer prayer. Whether He could have, or would have, really made no difference in the matter. The bare fact was that He had not given Mark the one thing he had asked for.....and people said God answered prayers!

People had been telling him ever since he was big enough to hear, that "whatever we asked of God," He would give us, if we only had enough faith to believe He could.

Well, it just didn't work that way.

Mark and Cory were now walking toward the Chapel. Groups, pairs and single persons from all over the camp grounds were gathering in toward the Chapel, also. There would be so many people in there, surely they wouldn't miss him if he didn't go in. His mind began to race around, searching for a reason not to go to devotion, or maybe for a place to "hide" until it was over. He just didn't want to hear that same old stuff anymore when he knew it didn't work. He already had enough.

He must have been lagging behind, because Cory chided him, "Come on, Mark. We've got to step it up. If we're the last ones in, we have to sit in the back or maybe stand up. I like to get up front where I can see."

Mark walked a little faster at Cory's urging. There seemed to be absolutely no place to hide. No way to avoid getting more "church". Guess you had to expect to get a lot of "church" when you came to a church sponsored summer camp.

In the Chapel, Cory hurried to the front and crowded the others down the bench to make enough room for himself and Mark. They were very close to the speaker. Much too close.

A few minutes later he was glad he was close. The kids in the back didn't get nearly as good a look at the object lesson as he and Cory did.

The speaker was talking about people being close to God, and the things that keep them from achieving that closeness. He had a magnet which had a picture of Christ on it. And he had blocks of metal which he had named names like John, Tom, Mary and Sue. As he moved the magnet, (Jesus), close to the blocks of metal, they moved toward "Jesus".

Then he told how some people can keep the power of God from drawing them. He put some weights on the blocks of metal. At first, they moved slowly toward the magnet as it approached, but then the speaker added more weights. Now, no matter how close the magnet came, the blocks of metal did not move. They were still made out of the same kind of metal, and still had just as much pull, but the other force, the weights, pushed them toward the table harder than the pull of the metal toward the magnet.

It was a neat story. Then he began to take off the weights and finally the metal reacted to the magnet again and slid close to it.

Then he began explaining.

The Bible tells us, 'Lay aside every weight, and the sin that does so easily beset us.' (Beset, he said, means to surround or harass.)

"When we live in a world like ours, there are many sins easily available and just like dirt, they rub off on us when we get close.

"There are also lots of things going on with these weights to keep us from being close to Jesus. When we look aside and see what a lot of other people are doing, sometimes we want to do those things, too.

"We must continually examine our thoughts and actions to see if they might be weights. If we are not as close to Jesus as we once were, or as we would like to be, then there must be some weights holding us back.

"Now, what might those weights be? I want one suggestion from a girl as to what a weight might be."

Hands shot up all over the chapel. The speaker picked one.

The girl he chose told him, "I think maybe 'looks' would be a weight. A lot of girls and some boys might care more about how they look to each other than how they look to God."

"Excellent! Excellent!" praised the speaker. "Now for a boy."

Another group of hands went up, Cory's included. The speaker did not choose Cory.

The boy he chose suggested, hopefully, "Maybe going places and doing things are a weight, aren't they?"

"Could be. Whay kind of things would this person be doing?"

"Fighting?"

"Possibly. However, anything we do, even things like swimming and playing ball, or even eating, could be things that take our mind away from God if we let them. If our days are filled with activities of any type, and if we do not set aside a time for communication with God, these activities can easily become a weight.

"All right, fellows and girls, I'm going to dismiss you to go back to your dorms. You need to have your evening prayer and get right to sleep. There are a lot of things to do tomorrow. Good night, now."

As they worked their way through the crowd, Cory nudged Mark with his elbow. "I think I had a better suggestion. I wish he'd have picked me."

Mark resisted the urge to ask him what he would have suggested. He really wanted to know, but that would seem that he was interested in talking about God, and he definitely was not. But he still wondered what Cory would have said.

They went all the way to the dorm in silence. They got their soap and towels and headed for the shower. There was a long line. They stood and waited, and Mark could stand it no longer.

He turned to Cory. "What is it you were going to say?"

"Huh?"

"Back there. In the Chapel. What were you going to suggest?"

"Oh, that. I was going to say that one kind of weight might be forgetting to let God take care of problems. When we try to work things out for ourselves, we can get them all messed up. When we do things ourselves that we should have let God do, then it is like saying that we are smarter than God and don't need God. And that could keep us from being close to Him. Don't you think that would have been a good one?"

Mark took a long breath and let it out. "Yeah, pretty good." In fact, it was excellent, Mark knew, but he really didn't want to talk about it anymore.

Then a guy came out of the shower and it was Cory's turn. Mark leaned against the wall and waited. He was really tired. Do you suppose, he thought, that I have been trying to help God? I only asked God for something that should have happened anyway. I have a right to that. Don't I?

Then it was his turn in the showers.

Back in the dorm, some of the fellows were already in bed, some were chatting about tomorrow's fun, and there were a number of them kneeling beside their bed. Maybe, if he just messed around a while, no one would notice that he did not pray. Why should he kneel down beside his bed? He had nothing to say to God.

But Mr. Stanley seemed to be everywhere, seeing everything, so Mark knelt beside his bed for a minute.

The next morning, after breakfast and morning prayers, the boys were free to do what they wanted to do.

The baseball game was full by the time they got there, and also the swimming pool was pretty crowded. They could wait a few minutes and get a tennis court, or there was a complicated ring toss game they could join.

Mark and Cory were trying to decide which, when, at the same instant, they spied the stacked bales of hay with the bull's eye target attached. There was an instructor and several boys gathered around it. The instructor was holding up a bow and some arrows and saying something.

At the same instant, Mark and Cory shouted to each other, "Let's go over there," and they raced to the target.

"....and the string fits right in here. It has been treated with beeswax to make it tough and strong. Now this little place is cut out for setting the arrow. See the little arrow rest?"

"And there is the target we will try to hit. You always try for the bullseye in the middle. See, the inner circle says 'Excellent?' The one around it says 'Pretty Good' and the next one out says 'Cruddy.'" The boys chuckled.

"But look at the corners," the instructor pointed out, "They say 'Needs help.' So our shooting can be Excellent, Pretty Good, Cruddy, or Needs Help. For the benefit of the two boys who were late, my name is Mr. Sharp, just like the arrows. And now one of you boys may try to shoot."

All hands went up and all voices begged. Mr. Sharp selected one. He demonstrated to him how to hold the bow and the arrow and pull back the string. He looked good. Then he let go. The arrow fell from the string and hit the ground beside his feet. The boys laughed and teased him.

"Loosing your grip there, man?"

"Them's heavy arrows!"

"But he did hit something. He hit the ground."

They all laughed. Mr. Sharp took the bow and handed it to the guy who said the first boy had hit the ground. "Let's see you show us how it's done."

The boy took the bow and arrow and fitted it on the string. He pulled back the string and let go. The string twanged into place, but the arrow was still in the boy's hand. Everyone laughed again.

"Hey, you planning to throw that like a dart?"

"You got jelly on your fingers? You're supposed to let go."

"All right, boys," admonished Mrs. Sharp. "How many of you know how to shoot a bow and arrow?"

Silence.

"Then let's keep our remarks down until each of you have a turn. It's not so easy as it looks."

So they took turns. "Hold the bow high in the left hand. Now, hold the string in the right hand. No, not the arrow, the string. There, now, that's better. Look at that, now. That's good."

One by one they tried for the feel of the bow and the string. They could feel the pull and strain on their shoulder muscles, and their back and arm muscles. They got tired very quickly.

"Now that you've all had a turn, we'll form pairs. I like the buddy system for beginners. Your buddy helps you remember the rules and you help your buddy. Just like most sports, two is better than one. If something happens to one person, chances are the other will be able to get help. So now, find your buddy."

The boys paired off with the ones closest to them, and, of course, Mark and Cory were a team. The boys were handed a bow. The instructor chuckled. "You know what, boys? In all the time I have instructed, this is the first time the

class came out even. Always we have had to try to find another person to team with the odd man.

"Now, all together, without arrows, we will point to the target. Turn sideways. You never shoot straight ahead. Pull back the string and hold it as long as you can. We'll see how strong you are."

The boys pulled their bowstrings and held them for a few seconds. Then one by one let go, chuckling in embarrassment that they could hold it no longer.

"Sure did think I was stronger than that," Mark told Cory.

"Sure, but I think we held out longer than a lot of the others," encouraged Cory.

"All right, we do it again. This time we hold it a minute. Keep holding until you hear my signal."

Most of them did. "Getting better. Tomorrow you will be really sore and that might affect your arm, so today we do a lot of practice shots. Tomorrow, we will have to do lots of warm-up exercises."

"Aw, no!" was the response.

Mr. Sharp passed out the arrows. "Now, one at a time, we will shoot toward the target. Probably no one will be able to shoot that far the first time. So, here we go, one at a time.....starting from the west end."

The boy on the west end pulled his bowstring tight, held his breath and bit his lip. Then he let go and the arrow fell on his foot. He picked it up and looked at Mr. Sharp with pleading eyes.

"It gets better," smiled the instructor. "Next."

The next boy did little better. The very best shot of the first round was about ten feet. All fourteen boys were a lot smarter, now. They knew there were a lot of things they did not know. How could they do something that looked so easy and fail so miserably?

Round two was only a little better. Round three was about the same. By the time they reached round eight, someone had shot an arrow as far as the bales of hay behind the target. A cheer went up from everyone. If one of them could do it, so could the rest!

"Two more rounds and that is all for today. We have some shoulder exercises we have to do. Even then, you're going to be really sore tomorrow. You've used muscles today that you have never used in this way before."

On the next round, Mark and Cory and two others got their arrows as far as the haystack. On the last round, there were five who shot that far.

"Good group. Before the three weeks are over, you will all be hitting the target somewhere. Maybe not in the bullseye, but somewhere," Then they did ten minutes of strange, shoulder swinging exercises that made them look like so many gangling birds with flopping wings.

"See you tomorrow. Why not go swim, now. That's good exercise for your arms and shoulders."

They were off in a cloud of dust, chattering excitedly.

"Boy, that was fun! I'm going to ask my dad to get me a bow and arrow. I think I could be really good at this!"

"Me, too."

The boys swam until lunch. They ate mountains of food, and certain "lucky" ones were retained to clear up the tables, but Mark and Cory escaped this time.

What to do now? They walked out to the baseball diamond, and it was full again. There were a lot of benchwarmers, so there was not much chance of being part of that game.

In a covered pavilion, there was a piano and a group of campers who were singing. Most of them were girls. Mark and Cory wandered over, trying not to get too close, just in case it was something they didn't want. But they weren't careful enough. The girl with the shiny black hair and the red dress saw them.

"Hey, there's two of them. Make them come in."

Two of what? Mark and Cory looked at each other.

The lady at the piano stood and called to them. "Come help us, boys," she invited. "We could use a few more voices for the three part round."

In the dimness of the shaded pavilion, they saw a few other boys. Probably it was safe to go in. Mostly there were girls, but the other boys seemed to be doing all right, so Mark and Cory slipped into the shade and gathered around the piano. Anyway, it was a lot cooler here than in the hot sun. The girl with the black hair grinned and handed them a sheet of typed words.

"That's your part, right there," and she pointed. "You start when I do.

They sang for almost an hour, and it was really fun. Especially because it was too hot to do anything else.

Mark and Cory went back to the target range.

"Wish we had the bows so we could practice. I don't feet a bit sore,"

"Yeah. Me, too."

The bales of hay were stacked six bales wide and five bales high. The stack looked like the wall of a large room. Right in the middle was the target.

"Let's climb up there and walk across the top."

"How can we get up there?"

"We can climb up the ends and put our toes here, between the bales."

But the bales were too hard and tight and there was not enough room for their toes. Then Cory looked up and yelled.

"I know how. See that tree? See those limbs that come all the way out? We'll, we just climb up that tree and come out this limb and drop down on it."

"Hey, yeah!"

And up the tree they went. Mark reached the limb first and let himself down and dropped. He landed on the top of the six-bale-high wall of hay. The wall wobbled and swayed a bit, but he hung on.

"Move over, I'm coming down," called Cory, and he swung from the limb like a monkey, landing with a thud and a wobble on the wall. With the motion of Mark trying to get out of Cory's way and Cory dropping so suddenly, the wall really wobbled. A jiggle went from end to end and the whole wall began to sway. Then the bales leaned, all together, and the wall began to topple. Straw bales, boys and the target all went down together. As the wall fell, it flung the boys far out on the grass, away from the flying bales of hay.

Mark groaned. "Boy, are we in trouble! Look what we did! They're going to be mad at us for knocking down their hay wall. Huh, Cory? Cory! Hey, Cory?"

Cory had not gotten up. Mark crawled over to take a look at him. Cory's chin was puckered and his lips were tight shut.

"What's the matter, man? Did you hurt yourself?"

Cory didn't say anything. He just looked miserable.

"You stay here and I'll go get somebody." Like a shot, Mark was gone, and in a minute he had returned with two young men and a young lady, all in white uniforms. One had a folding stretcher.

They began to press here and there on Cory, asking, "Does this hurt?"

"Mostly my arm, I think."

"Move your fingers." Cory did.

"Now turn your hand over, like this."

"Ouch!" yelled Cory.

The medics looked at each other. "How about your legs. Do they hurt?"

Cory shook his head, but then said, "Well, yes, that one hurts. Just a little."

They felt his ankle. "Just a sprain. No big problem there."

"Better put him on a stretcher, though, till we find if there's anything else broken."

By this time a crowd had gathered. Everyone had stopped what they were doing and were crowded around Cory.

"Stand back, everyone," the medic requested. The others backed off but Mark stayed. After all, this was his friend.

The young men carried Cory on the stretcher and Mark walked with the lady. He waited in the office and looked at a book and finally Cory came limping out. He had his arm in a sling and his ankle was wrapped, and he was grinning.

"It wasn't such a good idea that I had, was it?"

"Arm broke?"

"Cracked. Also the collar bone. Foot is just sprained."

"Hurt pretty bad?"

"No, the pain isn't so bad. I just wish it hadn't happened so soon. I usually get hurt, every year, but I'd rather it would be the last day. Now I can't swim or learn to shoot."

"Shoot? Oh, the bow and arrow! You can't, can you? And I can't either because you're my buddy."

Disappointment flowed down over him, but he tried to hide it. His friend was feeling badly enough. "Aw, there's other things we can do. It was pretty fun singing with those girls, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, but we can find another partner for you. There'll be somebody out of this bunch of kids that wants to learn."

"Maybe, but they won't be as good as you," Mark insisted, loyally.

At that instant the buzzers sounded. The whole campground echoed from the noise. It was loud to make certain-sure everyone heard the noise and had no excuse not to be in Chapel.

The boys were forced to walk slowly because of Cory's ankle. The Chapel was crowded to standing room only.

"Do you think you can stand up that long?" Mark asked. Maybe he and Cory could be excused. But, no, Cory insisted he was fine and it didn't hurt very much, now.

Actually, if you were in the back of the Chapel, it was better to be standing. You could see better. And if one had to attend, one might as well get a good look at the object the speaker brought.

The speaker had two cups. One was a big, big oversized coffee cup and the other a tiny coffee cup which was part of a set of doll dishes. It was so small they could hardly see it.

The speaker asked them, "What is the most important difference between these cups."

Hands went up everywhere, and the speaker chose a camper to give the answer.

"The size," said the chosen girl. "They are alike except for the size."

"You're right,' he told her, "and that's the object of tonight's devotion. We will use two Scriptures: 'Ask and ye shall receive,' and the other Scripture is a part of the 23rd Psalm, 'My cup runneth over.'

"Now, if you were thirsty which cup would you use?"

A chorus of voices yelled, "The big one!"

"Right. If I had a quart of water and poured it out into the big cup what would happen? It would run over, wouldn't it? A lot of water would overflow but the cup would be full.

"Suppose I poured a quart of water into the tiny cup? The same thing would happen. A lot would overflow and the cup would be full.

"This is the way it is with the love of God. He has much more love to give us than we could ever hold. When we ask Him, He fills us completely.

"Some of us may have more of God's love than others, because those persons allow God to give them more. We might say, they have chosen a bigger cup. God is able to give us all we want, so it seems that some of us want more than others.

"I'm going to leave you with a question. Do you know of any reason why we would want a great lot of God's love, or why we would let so much of it flow over the edge of our hearts and not be used?

"Perhaps some of us need to think of getting a larger cup."

Then he dismissed them back to their dorms. Cory had to take a "sink" bath, instead of a shower, because of the ankle wrapping and the arm cast.

There was no way Mark could conveniently avoid night time prayer. He knelt by his bed and bowed his head, but he had no words. He kept thinking of the cups. How big was his cup? Had he let a lot of God's love fall over the side? Or did he have the lid on his cup so nothing at all could get in? That was probably it, but he still had no words to say to God.

He slipped into bed and pulled the sheet over his head, pretending to be asleep. He didn't want to participate in the "after the lights are out" whispering. He heard Cory hop on his good foot and sit on his bed. He pretended sleep until he heard Cory lie down.

Finally he went to sleep.

The next morning, Mark woke up early. He lay in the bed thinking, waiting for the "wake up" buzzer. It was going to be a real chore to avoid confronting his feelings about God for the three whole weeks of the camp. In fact, in a church summer camp, God seemed to be everywhere.

As light filtered into the room, Mark could see Cory in the next bed. He had moved his pillow from his head to the sprained foot. It must have been hurting a lot during the night.

Then the "wake up" buzzer blasted into the morning stillness and the dorm came alive. The boys raced each other to breakfast, while Cory limped along with Mark at the rear. They hurried to morning prayer, and Mark and Cory were last.

They had asked and asked, but had found no one who wanted to learn archery.

"Maybe you will have to be without a buddy," Cory decided.

But that was not to be. When they gathered around the target, the instructor told them, "Looks like I lost a student yesterday," and he rinned at Cory. "I'm really sorry about that and we did manage to get our target built back. However, I do have a buddy for Mark, who will be along in a few minutes. Now I want everyone to just hold your bow and pull back the string."

"OUCH!"

"AWWW!"

"Mr. Sharp, I can't move my shoulder!"

"Remember, I told you that you would be sore," the instructor grinned. "We'll just take it slow and easy. No jerking. Just pull the bow string taut and hold it till I say let go. One, two, three, four, five, and now let go. Good. Now once more. The slow warm up is important."

A girl came running across the grounds toward the archery class and stopped, breathless, beside Mr. Sharp.

"Well, Mark, here's your buddy. Tracy, that is Mark."

There was absolute silence as the boys stared, open-mouthed. A girl! Then someone snickered, and someone else whistled.

"Hey, Mark! What do you think of your buddy?"

"You ready to quit, Mark?"

"You'll have to get awfully good to make up for having a girl buddy!"

"Girls? They can shoot a bow and arrow? I don't believe it!"

Mr. Sharp said nothing. He just smiled.

Mark said nothing. What was there left to say? Finally all of the boys who wanted to say something got it said.

Mark looked sideways at Tracy. She was a little bit shorter than he was but she wasn't skinny, like some of the girls. She wore jeans and track shoes and a bright red tee shirt. Her long blond hair trailed halfway down her back and she had a wide band of freckles across her cheeks and nose. Her wide blue eyes twinkled as she looked at Mark. Her smile was friendly and her whole manner was one of confidence. There didn't seem to be anything shy or bashful about Tracy.

Somehow, she didn't look like a "weak, little old girl" that the other boys seemed to be indicating she was. Her feet, in the scuffed track shoes, were firmly planted and her arms hung down confidently while she waited to be handed a bow. Of course, she would have to start from the beginning the way they did, but that was not her fault. Really, thought Mark, she didn't look half bad. She didn't squeal or giggle and she didn't cry or get mad when the boys made remarks.

Everyone now had a bow and arrow.

"We'll start with our newest member and see how we do today."

"Ladies first, Mark?"

"Hold her arrow for her while she pulls the string, won't you Mark?"

"Stand behind her, Mark, so you don't get hit!"

Tracy looked neither right nor left. She planted her feet a foot apart, toes pointing cross-ways to the target. She placed her arrow in the arrow rest and pulled the string. She extended her left arm out, aimed at the top of the haypile and lowered bow and arrow together, smoothly, in one continuous motion. When the arrow came in line with the target, she let go of the string with a twang. The arrow struck with a thud into the straw bales about two inches outside the target.

"Aw, I missed," she told them, as she looked around the group of boys.

They were speechless. Did she expect to hit it? The first time? Did she think she wouldn't miss the first time? No one had even reached the haystack yet! Mark was so busy staring at her he almost forgot to take his turn.

"Mark," Mr. Sharp suggested, "you might try your luck now."

Mark tried to remember all the instructions of yesterday. The pull on the string sent twinges of soreness shooting through his whole arm and shoulder but he pretended they were not there. He aimed slightly high as he had seen Tracy do, and let the arrow fly.

It left him with a swish and flew toward the target but nosed down before it reached the target. It came to rest pointing downward in the bale of hay just below the target.

"Very good. Next," said the instructor. Everyone did better today but no one hit the target. Cory sat on the sidelines and watched.

Tracy didn't seem to be with anyone else so when the archery session was over, she went with Mark and Cory to the pavilion where the group of campers were singing around the piano.

"Where did you learn how to hold a bow like that? You were better than any of the rest of us and this is just your first day."

Tracy grinned. "My new daddy shoots animals with a bow and arrow and he showed me a few things. I really wasn't interested in it until I came here to camp. It's not much fun shooting when you can't hit anything, and when the

other person you're shooting with hits the bullseye all the time, like when I practiced with my dad."

"Well, you're sure better than we are."

"It's just practice. I guess all it takes is the "want to" and the "practice". I'd really like to be good at it. I just didn't like being such a bad shot, all by myself."

Cory chuckled, "Well, you've sure got company now!"

After the music session, Tracy was still with them. Cory was walking a little better this morning, but his arm was still in the sling.

"Say, you guys don't have to stay with me just because I'm a cripple." He grinned at them as he pretended to hobble along. "You could go have fun without me."

"Naw, that's all right," Mark assured him. "I don't really see anything I want to do, right now."

"Me, neither." echoed Tracy.

"Good, then, because I have an idea. We could check out bicycles and ride out on the bike trails. I've been steering a bicycle one-handed since I was five."

"Hey, that's a good idea! Let's do that."

Tracy looked from one to the other of the boys. "Can I come, too? I'd love that and I think I know someone else who would like to go. Would that be too many?"

"I guess not. Who is it?"

"It's Darla. She got here late, too. She was considering archery, herself, if I didn't find a partner." Tracy's feet seemed to have little springs under them in her eagerness to be on the bike pedals. "I'll go get her," and with that, Tracy disappeared.

While they waited for Tracy and the other girl, Mark commented, "Did you hear her say her "new" daddy showed her how to shoot with the bow and arrow?"

"Yeah, I guess she's one of us."

"She seems happy about him. I don't want a new daddy. I just want my old one to live with my mama." And he added, only to himself, that his daddy would be living with his mother if God had only kept His word. That made it really God's fault. And if God didn't do this for him, how could he believe God could do any of the other things he had always thought God could do? And what good was a God who didn't keep all of His promises?

"What 'ya thinking about?" Cory wondered. "You look like you're a million miles away."

Well, maybe he was. How far away was God, anyway? But he told Cory, "I wish those girls would hurry so we could get started."

"Me, too," Cory agreed.

And here they came. Tracy's long, yellow hair flowed behind her as she ran and the bouncy curls of red-haired Darla framed her face like little springs. She had even more freckles than Tracy. They looked like girls who would be able to keep up and not squeal and cause trouble. That part was good.

"Let's go," suggested Mark, impatiently.

The lady who checked out the bikes to them, cautioned, "Now you all four must stay together, I repeat, stay together and stay on the trail. Never, never get out of the sight of the trail! The woods are very dense in places and some people have gotten lost. Be back in two hours. Does anyone have a watch?"

They looked at each other, but Darla held up her arm with a wrist watch on it.

"Very good. Now **STAY TOGETHER** and be back in two hours. And have fun!"

They jumped onto the bikes and with one-armed Cory in the lead, they pedaled to the beginning of the trail.

The bike trail led into a deep valley. It was narrow, only about one bike wide in places. There were trees on either side with trunks as big around as a garbage

can. Velvet green moss grew around the trunks of the trees and sometimes up on the limbs.

"Look, moss really does grow on the north side of trees!"

"Then we could find our way back if we got lost."

"But even if we know which way is north, how do we know which way is the camp?"

"Yeah, we twisted and turned so much till all I know is to follow the trail. I don't know where I came from or where I'm going." Tracy chuckled. "Guess I'll just have to trust the person who made the trail. Seems like that person knew where both ends are."

"Hmmm, sort of like God," Cory commented.

"Like who?" Darla wondered.

"Like God. See, Jesus made the path to heaven. He knows about heaven and also about earth, and He knows about humans because He was one. So we have to stay with Him if we want to get to heaven. He said He was the way, and people who try to get to heaven some other way, just won't make it. Like we would be if we went over there," and Cory was pointing to a valley full of trees so dense and dark it looked like it was evening there, since no sunshine could reach the ground.

The girls were silent, but Mark said, "Let's not talk about God. Let's just have fun."

"Okay," agreed Cory, "but I thought it was fun talking about God."

They pedaled down the hill into the valley path and across the neat little bridge. It crossed up and over the sparkly stream, just like a picture in a story book. There was a concrete picnic table with benches on either side, just on the other side of the bridge.

"Let's stop here a minute."

"Yeah. Oh, look at those darling little white flowers! And look at the ivy. See how it goes up this tree and out on that limb and over to that tree over there. Funny, it didn't stay with the tree it climbed."

"It's because their limbs are so close together," decided Mark. "You can hardly tell which leaves belong to which tree."

"Yeah, and when the wind blows one limb, it blows the other. I'll bet if one died and fell down, it would break limbs off some of the others."

"Hey, look, that's what happened there. See how that tree is broken off up high, and the top of it fell down over here? It's about all decayed away. It's already crumbly and broken up."

"Look where we are. The bikes are way down there. We weren't supposed to get away from the trail."

"We sure got away from the trail in a hurry."

"That must be why the lady kept telling us to be careful."

"Let's go see the rest of the trail."

They pedaled, huffing and puffing, up the hill. It became steeper and steeper and finally all four campers were walking and pushing the bicycles.

"Call this a bike ride? It's kind of like we're giving the bikes a 'people' ride!"

"I hope the bikes are having fun because I'm not."

"Maybe we're almost to the top."

"I see a tower."

"Hey, yeah, I remember that tower! I came up here last year with a nature guide and a bunch of boys. I forgot about it. We can climb up it and see just about the whole world."

"Whole world?"

"Well, the most important part of it. The place we're in!"

The tower really wasn't very high, but being on the top of a hill as it was, it seemed high and they really could see "just about the whole world."

"Look at the flag over there."

The United States flag and the Christian flag furled and plumed in the brisk breeze. They looked like tiny minatures in the distance.

"Funny how things look so little when you get far away from them."

"The whole earth looked little to the men in the space shuttle, I'll bet."

"Yeah, and the whole universe must look little to God. No wonder He can take care of us. We must seem like very small problems to Him."

Mark drew in a deep breath and sighed. God, again. He knew he shouldn't have said anything, but he just couldn't help it.

"Yeah, I think our problems may seem so little to God that He can't even see them. Or maybe, they don't even matter at all."

The other three campers turned to stare at him, but he didn't look back. He knew they were looking at him, but he stared at the two flags. The wind rolled, twisted, straightened out, and then rolled them again. The breeze slacked and they hung limp for a second, and then they filled with air again, twisting, buckling and rolling.

Then Cory could stand it no longer. "What's with you, man? You got some kind of beef against God? Sometimes you sure act strange for a guy that came to a church camp."

Mark didn't answer. He just looked at the flags. The silence hung heavily around them.

"Let's go finish the trail."

"Boy, it's going to be fun riding down that hill we huffed and puffed to get up."

Their feet clattered on the metal steps of the tower and they pedaled back to the wooded trail and started down. They didn't go as fast as they thought they might because of the twists and turns.

When they reached the stream of water again, there was another bridge. It was a flat one, this time, and it had little wooden handrails. Beside it was a huge log stretched across the stream. A footpath led through the trees and over it.

"Let's stop here. I want to cross the log."

"Me, too."

"Good thing that log isn't wet. That makes them really slick when they have moss on them like this one does."

They parked the bikes and ran to the log. The old tree roots were still on the log and they climbed up through them. Darla was in the lead, then Tracy. Mark was next, followed by one-armed Cory. The girls were on the log, now, and Mark had just crawled through the tree's roots when it happened.

A tiny brown head appeared from nowhere, and two twinkly eyes blinked at Darla.

"Snake!" she yelled. "Right there!" She pointed toward the reptile and backed away suddenly, bumping against Tracy who was looking down at the water. When they bumped, she lost her balance and fell over the side of the log into the shallow water. Right behind her came Tracy with squeals and flapping arms.

What a splash! Cory just barely got to see it. Flying feet, hands and red curls, together with long, yellow hair all got mixed up together. Then big splashes of water joined the act! There were squeals and giggles while they got their footing and stood up in the 12 inch deep water.

Darla remembered, "Guys, there's a snake up there!"

"Where?"

"Over there by that old limb. See it?"

Both boys burst into laughter. "That's a lizard! Just a little old brown lizard. There he goes. See, you're so noisy you scared him away."

"Well, I didn't really see the back side of him, and its face looked like a snake."

The girls slogged and sloshed to the bank. "Maybe we'll walk the log some other day. We need some dry clothes."

Across the noisy boards of the bridge they went, rattling the planks, clickkity-clack, behind the bicycle wheels. Into the woods again and around the big tree trunks. They saw more moss, ferns and flowers but didn't stop. Wet swim suits were one thing but wet shorts, tee shirts and track shoes that slogged, were quite something different.

"You know, if we can't borrow some shoes, we're going to have to stay inside until these dry."

"Oh, that's right. Or we'll have to wear them wet."

"Wonder why they won't let us walk outside barefooted?"

"Insurance regulations, I'll bet."

"Huh?" said someone and all three looked at Cory.

"Oh, it's just that my dad is an insurance agent and I hear him talk. That's what he wants me to be someday but I don't know. I think I'd rather be an astronaut."

"Yeah, me, too," agreed Tracy.

"I want to be a fireperson," offered Darla.

"Fireperson?"

"Yeah. I don't think I'll ever be a man so I can't be a fireman."

They all laughed.

"Just around the next turn was the campground. They checked in the bicycles and the girls ran to their dorm, conscious of everyone staring at their soaked clothing.

When they came out, they were outfitted with different shoes. But they didn't have to borrow them. The dorm mother took them to a closet almost filled with shoes. Every size, shape, color and style were there, all in a heap.

"Where did these come from?" the girls wondered.

The dorm mother shook her head and sighed. "Every year, the pile gets bigger. I don't know how girls can come here with a pair of shoes and go back without them, and they never put their names in them. They never come looking for lost shoes. If this keeps up, we may have to build a special room just for the shoes. Find a pair that fits you, and get on back out to play." She left them.

After a bit of giggling and trying on, they found a comfortable fit and left the shoe room.

Then the girls drew kitchen duty and Mark and Cory did not see them again that day.

They went to devotion. They got there early so they could have a front seat. Mark decided if he had to be in there, and it seemed that he did, he had to admit

this guy was interesting to listen to. They might as well be up front so they could see what he had in his hand.

This evening he had a spring flower. In fact, he had three of them. One was yellow, one was yellow and green striped and one was yellow and peach striped.

He held them high and turned them around so everyone could see. "Are these flowers alike?" he asked the campers.

Hands shot up everywhere. "No, they're not alike. You can tell by looking at them."

The speaker challenged, "But I picked them from the same plant at the same time."

"But they're still not alike," a boy with a loud voice insisted.

"What's different?"

He picked a girl this time. "The colors are different," she told him.

"How can you tell?"

She giggled. "I can tell by looking. They look different."

"Well, now why do you suppose they look different when I picked them from the same plant? Does nature grow different kinds of flowers on the same plant?"

More hands. He chose another girl. "Nature didn't do that. You did!"

"Me?" he asked, in pretended innocence. "What did I do to make them different?"

"You put their stems in something. Maybe ink."

"You're right. But it is not the stems that are different. How do you account for that?"

More hands. He picked a boy. "The stem sipped up whatever you put it in and it shows through the flower. I did that one time. If you leave them in the ink too long, they die."

"You're right. This ink shows through because the stems sipped it up, and if they sip up enough, it kills them. These flowers remind me of Christians. When people are born, they are without sin, but because of the sinful nature they are born into, they soon do things that are not pleasing to God.

"The sinful nature that is in their hearts begins to show through. Their sinful nature changes them from what they were. They can't help it. That is why God permitted Jesus to come into the world and be a human person, just like we are, so that we, through faith in him, can keep ourselves from being changed by sin.

"All of this has happened now, and the way has been made to remove this sin so that we can be what God planned for us. But we have to do something. We have to want this sin to be gone and we must ask to have it removed, through Jesus' sake, and then something more. This part is very important. We must

have faith to believe it has been done. When we do that, we are on the road to becoming what God had planned for us.

"Now, see these flowers? I put all three of them in the ink, even this one that still looks natural. The difference is that I took it out very soon after I put it in. It didn't have very much time to draw up the liquid that would have changed its color. The others did.

"That is a very important fact. The flower that was removed from the ink quickly, shows fewer marks of the ink than those which stayed longer. This can happen to people.

"It is important for a person to decide very early in life that they do not want to be "marked" by sin and that they want their sinful nature changed to one that is like Christ's, or, we say, they wish to become a Christian.

"It is good to become a Christian at whatever age we are, whenever we hear the message of salvation, but it is better to become a Christian while we are young and have not committed sins we will be sorry for, even after they are forgiven.

"For instance, a person who commits murder can become a Christian, but the murder has already been committed. The person they killed is still dead, and a prison sentence still must be served. It would have been so much better to have found Christ when he was your age, then the murder would not have happened. There are a lot of things other than murder that leave a scar on people's lives.

"Hate is one of them. Hate, down in the heart of a person, can change him from what God intended him to be, into a very different person. What is another?"

Hands went up. He selected a boy.

"Jealousy is one, isn't it?"

"It surely is. The Bible says jealousy is as cruel as the grave. Another one?"

This time he selected a girl. "How about cheating?"

The speaker nodded. "Yes, cheating is a form of lying and the Bible says all liar's shall have their place in the lake of fire.

"There is another sin that can cause a change in us and it might surprise you to know what it is. It is the sin of unbelief. The Bible says the unbelievers will have the same punishment as the liars."

"Unbelievers," thought Mark. "Is that like me not believing God can answer prayers? Or that maybe He doesn't want to?"

The speaker went on. "This has been summed up by the wise King Solomon when he said, 'Remember, now, thy creator in the days of thy youth while the evil days come not'.

"So we remember that whatever is in our hearts will, sooner or later, show up in our lives, unless it is removed by the blood of Jesus."

Then he dismissed them to the dorm.

"You're awfully quiet," commented Cory. "Are you getting sick or something?"

"Nope, just thinking."

"About what?"

"Oh, a lot of things."

Cory said nothing. When a guy says he's thinking about a lot of things, it is a sure thing he's worried about some special thing and he doesn't want to talk about it. Yet.

Mark finally got through his prayers and into bed. This was getting painful. It was incredibly hard to talk with Someone you didn't believe in, and hard to pretend in front of the other boys. He was feeling so bad, he was beginning to wish he hadn't come. If it just wasn't for those devotions, this camp would be fun. But there were the devotions, every day, and everyone one of them seemed to be just for him.

The next day, back at the target board, Mr. Sharp passed out the arm guards. They were little oval pancakes of leather with straps so the bowstring wouldn't scrape their arms. "If you think a skinny little string won't hurt you, you're wrong. So we will all wear them today. Also, today, someone will hit the target. I feel it in my bones. I will give each of you three arrows but you will not shoot

at the same time your buddy is shooting. You watch your buddy and your buddy watches you. Got that? Nobody is going to point at anything but the target.....even for fun. Got that?"

Everyone nodded quickly. Even Cory who watched from the sideline nodded. And Darla, who had come to watch Tracy, nodded.

"Too bad you don't have a partner," Cory sympathized with Darla.

"Not me. I don't like stuff like this. I just came with Tracy. She's lucky she got Mark because I wouldn't be good at this at all."

The instructor again. "Now that I have your attention, I'll tell you. We will have a contest this year. Each activity from swimming to singing will have a contest and a playoff. Those in first place in each event will receive a ribbon commemorating their efforts. We are calling the ribbon, the Mark of Excellence. In our event, there will be two ribbons, one for each member of the team."

Cheers went up, with everyone shouting and jumping up and down.

"Quiet," yelled Mr. Sharp and the noise died down. A little.

"I want to add, that to get a ribbon in archery, it will be absolutely necessary to hit the center ring at least once to qualify to try out. So, now you may shoot at will until all arrows are gone."

It didn't take long. They gathered up the arrows and shot again. And again. Some of the boys were regularly hitting the hay bales. Three archers had actually hit the target board. There had been one "Pretty Good" and two "Cruddys". Tracy did the "Pretty Good" but had not been able to hit it again. Mark was still shooting the hay bale.

"But you're getting better," Tracy encouraged. "The arrows are going straighter and not falling down. Twenty-five feet is a long way."

But Mark would not be consoled. "I just can't hit it. I just can't."

Mr. Sharp stopped to watch Mark. "Son, you have a good stance and a strong pull but you'll never shoot straight the way you're doing it. Aim at a cloud and come down. Concentrate on the pupil of the bullseye. When the arrow lines up with the twinkle in the bullseye, let her fly. Now try it. Remember, you must concentrate."

Mark tried. The arrow flew over the top of the hay bales. Darla ran to the backside of the target to get the arrow.

Mark wailed, "I'll never do it! I just know I'll never do it."

"Mark, you're going to do it," said Mr. Sharp, firmly. "You did the right thing but you just let go too soon. Keeping looking at the bullseye and when you see the point of the arrow looking at him, too, then you release. It's in the timing and a lot of practice takes care of the rest. Try it again. Aim at a cloud and come down. Ready?"

Mark pulled the string taut, aimed at the sky and slowly lowered the bow. When he saw the point of the arrow in line, he let go. Twang!

"Look at that! Look at that!" squealed Tracy. "You made a 'Cruddy'!"

A "Cruddy"! That was all, but Mark grinned and picked up his last arrow.

Load the string. Aim at the cloud. Come down and twang. Look at that! Another "Cruddy"! Hey, he was going to be good! They gathered their arrows for another round.

Tracy made two "Cruddys" and a "Pretty Good". Mark took a deep breath, aimed at the cloud and lowered slowly. Another "Cruddy," Got to get better. Aim again. Twang! A "Pretty Good"! Hey, look at that! Steady, now, Mark told himself. Aim high, come down, twang!

A cheer arose. Mark was afraid to think. Maybe he had just imagined it. He had to look away and then look back to really believe it, and even then, excitement bumps were raising up on his arms. An "Excellent"! Mark had shot the first "Excellent". Tracy was jumping up and down and dancing in a circle with Darla. Why were they so happy for him? Puzzling! Girls were strange! And fifteen minutes ago he had been ready to quit.

They gathered the arrows for another round. This time he made two "Pretty Goods" and a "Cruddy." Too bad!

Mr. Sharp stopped to watch him. "All you need now is practice, Mark, and we have a full week before the contest. Mark, archery and a lot of other games are a

lot like life itself. First you have to KNOW the rules, and then you have to FOLLOW them. Just learning them is no good unless you follow through. You are strong enough to be a good archer, but a person has to make up his own mind to be a good sport. Remember how everyone cheered for you when you made "Excellent?" That is good sportsmanship. And it's just as important as winning."

Mark listened but didn't really believe it. Nothing was as important as winning, surely. And why did Mr. Sharp single him out for that little sermon?

An idea that had been playing around in his mind began to grow. As Mr. Sharp was putting away the arrows and the boys were gathered around, chattering about the contest, Mark wandered away. He stepped behind one of the buildings and walked on. He had heard about as many sermons and lectures as he could stand. The next devotion was one that he could do without.

He walked beside the storage shed containing the pool equipment, dodged a wayward Frisbee, continued past the shallow pool and on. A lot of girls were sitting in the water, flipping splashes at each other. One yelled, "Hey, Mark," but he pretended he didn't hear. He knew where he was going and he wanted to get there before it was too late.

He eased past the pool and on toward the girl's dorm. Nonchalantly, he walked past the big tree with the benches under it. No one spoke to him. No one even saw him, except....

"Hey, Mark, where are you going all alone?" came the voice of Tracy. "I wondered where you disappeared to so quick."

Oh, boy, there goes my plan, thought Mark. He had to think of something.

Then he was rescued by Tracy's question. "I looked for you because I wanted to talk to you about the contest and you sneaked off. I'll bet we can win. Don't you think so?"

"I dunno."

"Where's Cory?"

"I don't know. I'm not his Siamese twin," Really, he didn't know. Cory might be anywhere by now, so it really wasn't a lie.

"Then where are you going?" Darla insisted, nosily.

"Well, if you must know, I'm going to walk down that bike trail for a little ways."

"Do you care if we go with you?" asked Tracy.

"It's almost time for devotion. We'd have to hurry," Darla pointed out.

"I don't have to hurry."

"But if you don't hurry, you'll miss devotion."

"Can't you hear nothing!" Mark almost shouted. "I said I don't have to hurry."

"You're going to cut devotion" Tracy looked at Mark, then at Darla. "That's what he's going to do. He's going to cut devotion."

"I didn't know we could do that." Darla puzzled.

Tracy shook her head. "We can't. Or we're not supposed to. Can we go with you?"

"I don't understand," Darla said. "Why are we doing this if we can't?"

Tracy's eyes sparkled. "Don't you see? We're going to sneak out. It'll be fun."

Darla hoped it would. And Tracy's enthusiasm had almost convinced Mark.

Mark, Tracy and Darla ran to toward the leafy exit to the bicycle path. A few more steps and they were out of sight. They ran down the path to the first picnic table.

"You never did answer me, Mark," acused Tracy. "I said I think we can win that contest since you suddenly got so good."

Mark didn't say anything.

"Don't you think so, Mark?"

"Yeah, maybe."

The buzzer sounded. The echo of it bounced off the mountain peak and vibrated through the trees. It sounded even louder down here than at the campground.

The three campers remained motionless and looked at each other until the sound stopped. There would be time, if they ran, to make it. Mark knew if he said, "Let's go. Hurry and we can make it," they would go with him. He even thought that maybe they wished he would say it.....but he didn't. He just couldn't. He had always been happy to be a Christian, to be in church services, and to talk about God until he found out that God doesn't always do what He promised.

Why should he worry about disobeying church rules when God didn't matter, anyway?

Tracy tried again to talk about the contest. "I think we can do it. Don't you Mark?"

She was very persistent. "As good as you were today and with a little more practice from both of us, don't you think we can win?"

Mark was silent.

Darla wondered out loud, "How did you get so good all of a sudden today, Mark?"

"I know how," Tracy offered. "I heard Mrs. Sharp tell him some special rules. They are the same rules that my.....daddy.....told me. He said you have to aim

over your target and then ease down. Let go of the string the instant you pass the target. He said that helps keep your hand from getting wobbly."

Mark turned to look at Tracy. "Do you really like your new daddy all that much?"

"All what much?"

"Well, you talk about him all the time. How he taught you to shoot."

"I don't either talk about him all the time. But I have to talk about him sometimes because he's married to my mother. I think."

"What do you mean, 'you think'?" Darla demanded.

"I only know that they told me. That's where they said they were going when they dropped me off here. I wanted to go on with my Mama to wherever she was going, but I couldn't. They wouldn't let me."

Mark and Darla looked at the ground in silence. Tracy's voice quivered as she went on.

"My mama says it will be nice to have him to take care of us. I thought we were taking care of ourselves just fine."

"Do you like him?"

"I don't know," and she began to cry. "I don't know if I do or not! Sometimes I think I hate him and then he's nice to me and I'm miserable. When he buys something for me I think he just wants me to like him so my mama will be happy with him."

Tracy sat down on the picnic bench and buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders began to shake. Darla sat beside her and put her arm around her.

Mark watched. He only wanted to cut devotion and look what happened? Tracy was crying her heart out. It seemed as though Darla was going to be crying in just a minute.

Finally, the sobbing stopped. Tracy rubbed her sleeve across her tear-wet eyes. Her face and eyes were red and her chin quivered. Darla's arm was still around her shoulder.

"I'll bet he will be okay." she tried to comfort Tracy. "He sounds like a nice person, and you are a nice person, so why would he not like you?"

Tracy nodded.

Mark didn't want to ask but he just had to. "Where is your other daddy, I mean.....your real one?"

"He moved away a long time ago. Way before last year. He told me a lot of things about how it wasn't the same between him and mama as it used to be and he couldn't be happy if he stayed. He didn't think I knew why, but I do. I know why things weren't the same."

"You do?" Mark was amazed that she would have this knowledge. It was all still a big puzzle to him.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did things change? You said you knew."

"Did I? Than I don't want to tell you. Oh, I might as well. It's me. Before I was born they must have liked each other, at least, they looked that way in photos. Then I was born and they weren't happy. That's the only thing that's different, and I didn't have to be very smart to figure that out."

"Oh, no, Tracy. They couldn't not be happy just because you were born. You mustn't think that!" Darla comforted.

Tracy looked up. "Do you really know anything about how it is?" she asked. "How many fathers do you have?"

"Just one," Darla answered softly.

"See? You don't know how it is. Your parents both wanted you but mine really didn't want me to be born but my mother pretends she did. If they loved each other at one time and then, after I was born, they didn't love each other any more, who's else fault would it be but mine?"

"Did you tell your father all these things?"

"Yes, and he said I was wrong. He said he loves me and it was not my fault he had to leave, but I know that's not true."

Mark looked from one girl to the other. Tracy's tears had dried but her eyes were still red.

There came the noise of a lot of voices from the campground. Devotion must be over. They'd better hurry back before someone missed them. Well, he had cut devotion, but he wasn't any happier. What he had heard from Tracy only made him sadder. He'd never have guessed she had all these bad feelings. It just went to show you that you couldn't tell what people were thinking just by looking at them.

"Beat you back to the campground," Mark challenged, and began to run up the path with the girls close behind. Huffing and puffing, they blended into the campers streaming out of the Chapel. Perfect timing.

Back in the dorm, Cory apologized, "I tried to keep a seat for you up front but I couldn't see you and had to let someone else have it."

"That's all right," Mark told him.

"Good story he told," Cory continued. "Didn't you think so?"

"Yeah," answered Mark without enthusiasm. Next he's going to ask me what I thought of it. He pulled the sheet over his head and turned over, facing away from Cory.

Cory said no more.

Mark's mind, under the sheet, was whirling. Who would have thought Tracy felt the way she did? And Cory? And himself? There must be a lot of grownup people who don't feel the same about each other as they did one time.

And Tracy thought it was all her fault. That was silly. Wasn't it? But then his dad and mom had loved each other a long time ago. And now his dad was living somewhere else. It could be Mark's fault. It probably was, now that he thought of it. His thoughts stopped right there. His eyes became wet. He rubbed his knuckles into the corner of his eyes, quietly so Cory wouldn't know he was still awake. He might start talking again. Mark felt sobs inside his chest, trying to escape, but he wouldn't yet them. Even if everything was his fault, as it likely was, he wouldn't cry now. He'd wait till later. Fellows didn't cry unless they were alone.

The lights went out and finally Mark got to sleep.

When he opened his eyes it was Saturday. This was the day that dinner would be a hot dog cookout! There was to be a watermelon feast! They would get to roast the weiners for the hotdogs by themselves, using the long forks and then there would marshmallows to brown on over the coals. A fun day! And then after the hotdogs, watermelons and marshmallows, there would be a devotional

service around the campfire. Just what he needed....another church service. Oh, well, he'd just have to take what came.

Also, today, there would be a nature hike around the bike trail. Each dorm counselor would take a group of campers and they would walk all the way down to the little bridge and up to the tower, then they would come back by way of the footlong. That sounded great! And they were going early enough so there would be time afterward for some bow and arrow practice. No regular session, just practice.

After breakfast and prayers, the campers started down the trail. Mr. Stanley explained the rules. It was the "buddy system" again. That was the safest way to have fun and make sure everyone was accounted for. Cory was walking much better now, and insisted he could make it, even though they would be gone for two hours, and a lot of walking would be uphill.

"We're going to note several things," Mr. Stanley told the boys. "First, we will see how many kinds of wild flowers we can see, just from the bike trail. We will see if we can recognize any trees, if we see any birds whose names we know, and especially, we will look for something that makes us ask ourselves this question, 'Why did God do this the way He did?'"

He continued, "I'm giving each of you pencil and paper. Write down anything you would like to talk about later."

They stood in a bunch around him, waiting. "See, there goes group three and we must wait ten minutes before we follow. We are group four. There are 32 of us and we will stay with our buddy and not leave the trail. Got it?"

"Got it."

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU!"

"GOT IT!"

"Good. Are you ready?"

A yell arose from the boys and they were off. The morning air was cool and the woods smelled strongly of rich soil and decaying leaves. A damp, healthy smell, like the way a greenhouse smelled, hung on the summer air.

"There's a flower," yelled someone.

"Where?"

"See there? What kind is it?" The blossom was bright red and had two petals that pointed up and the other pointed down. The leaves were a little sticky to the touch.

"Most people call that one a red-bird tail. Those two little petals pointing up reminded them of the tail of a red bird, or cardinal. That's very good for the first flower."

"Here's one."

"All right, what's its name?"

"Beats me."

"Look closely. What does it look like? What you might have for breakfast?"

"Hmmm," The little flower on the tall, leggy plant had a raised, yellow center and tiny white petals all around. It looked like a fried egg. "Is it an eggplant?"

"No, silly," someone chided. "An eggplant has a big, purple ball, doesn't it, Mr. Stanley?"

"Yes, but he's close. That's a fried egg flower, but it's also called a fleabane daisy. A lot of flowers have several names, depending on who's talking. That particular one is said to keep a dog from having fleas if the plants are used as a dog bed. Of course, the dog would have to agree to sleep on the bed for it to work."

"There's one. I know what it is. It's a violet." The small purple flower popped up through the dry, dead leaves and looked just like a picture with its velvet petals and green, heart shaped leaves.

"There's another one. It's a lot lighter in color. Does it count for two if they are different colors?"

"Why not?" smiled Mr. Stanley. "We're making the rules."

Some of the delicate primroses beside the path were white, while a cluster of pink ones grew near by. Their little cup-shaped blossoms looked like salad bowls for a doll. Two colors counted for two kinds of flower!

"Why are they called 'roses'. They don't look a bit like real roses."

"Perhaps the first ones were rose colored, or maybe they looked like roses without many petals. It's impossible to say what it looked like to the first person to name it. Of course, we remember that it and all the other plants have botanical names, but we won't try to remember them."

"Look!" Someone held up a nut. It had a hole in the side and was hollow. "And here's another one."

"What kind of a nut is it?"

"Oh, that's a pecan. Anyone knows that."

"Look again."

"Hey, look at this little point on the end. It's too fat for a pecan, and the shell is too thick."

"What you have there is a hickory nut, and that is the tree, right there"

"Can we eat them?"

Mr. Stanley smiled, "You're too late. The squirrel beat you to them."

"Squirrel? Is it up there now?"

"Probably, but you could be looking at it and not see it. They hide extremely well in the leaves. He'll be hidden good and proper after all the noise we've been making."

"Did you put the hickory tree on the tree list?" someone asked.

By now they had come to the bridge. The flower list and the tree list were growing slowly. At the stream, they added willow, with its long slim leaves, and sycamoare, with the strange smelling leaves with powdery undersides.

"Hey, I know about the sycamore. This is the tree Zachaeus climbed to see Jesus. Boy, it's a long way up to the limbs."

"That's right. But it's possible this was not the tree. That name could have been changed in the translation. We think this because Israel was dry and arid and the sycamore trees we know usually grows near water. Also, the Bible talks of another tree called a 'sycamine', which bore fruit, and it might have been like our peach or apple, with low limbs which would be just right for a short man to be a little taller so he could see above the crowd. Then again, the other tree may have been just as difficult to climb. We know that Zachaeus really wanted to be up where he could see. He put forth a great effort just to see Jesus. And now, strangely, some people who have a chance to see Him will turn away."

"Ooops," thought Mark. "Here comes a sermon."

But that was all Mr. Stanley said.

At the sunshiny tower, there were flowers that liked lots of sunshine. There were huge patches of daisies and browneyed Susans.

"Why do they call a yellow flower with a brown center, a browneyed Susan? Why not call it a Jane or a Mary?"

"We don't know. Perhaps the person who named it had a little daughter named Susan, who also had brown eyes, and he wanted the flower named after her."

"Did he have another daughter named Daisy?"

"Possibly."

The boys took a turn at climbing the tower, all except Cory.

"How's the foot, son?" asked Mr. Stanley.

"It's okay," Cory told him, smiling, but he didn't look "okay".

"You tell me if you need to rest, will you, son?" insisted Mr. Stanley.

"I will," Cory promised, but he didn't.

Mark walked beside Cory and Mark could see that his friend really wasn't enjoying anything. They kept getting farther and farther behind. And then, as they were coming down the steep part, just before the log foot bridge, it

happened. Mark was walking just ahead of Cory just when Cory stepped on a roundish rock that started to roll. He slid down and over the bank of the bike trail, piling into the accumulaton of dead, dry leaves.

"Hey, wait up," Mark yelled to Mr. Stanley, who was at the front of the group. "Cory slid down. Wait a minute."

Mr. Stanley came hurrying back up the hill. He knelt down beside Cory and felt his leg and ankle. He saw the twinge of pain on Cory's face as he massaged the foot.

"Well, Cory, old man," Mr. Stanley told him, smiling, "we've done it again. We injured the sprain."

Cory didn't say anything.

"I'm going to leave you here with your buddy," and he patted Mark's shoulder, "and we'll go on, but I'll send help for you. I don't want you trying to walk on that ankle."

He pulled a radio from his pocket and extended the aerial. "Group four to headquarters."

"Headquarters, here," the radio answered, with a crackle of static.

"We have a man down."

"Man," he had said. Cory looked more like a very disappointed boy, half buried in the leaves.

The leader continued, "Send us a cart. He is down at position marker 27."

"Right-O."

"Group four out," and Mr. Stanley put away the radio.

"You boys wait right here for the cart. You'll get to ride in," He grinned and patted them on the arm to ease their disappointment. It was almost embarrassing not to be able to walk on, as the others did. What was even worse, they would have to sit here while group five, and maybe even group six came by, and no telling how many others.

Mark tried not to look disappointed as he sat down in the leaves beside Cory.

"I'm really sorry, Mark. You got stuck with a real dud to buddy with. I always fall down, or bump into something. My mom says she can't decide if I'm really accident prone or if I just don't pay attention."

"What do you think?"

"I can't decide, either. Anyway, I want to apologize to you."

"That's all right. I was getting tired anyway. I'll bet the cart ride will be fun. The other guys didn't get to have a cart ride on the bike trail," and he grinned at Cory.

Group five went by and so did group six, which was all girls. They gathered around Cory.

"Oh, you poor thing!"

"Does it hurt a whole bunch?"

"Oh, Cory, I'm so sorry you got hurt again."

Cory tried to laugh and talk with them, but Mark knew that he just wished they would go on and leave him alone. Mark had half a mind to tell them that, but he didn't.

Then the cart came, and who was the driver but Mr. Sharp, the archery instructor. "Well, if it isn't old hard-luck Cory," he laughed as he jumped out of the cart to help Cory out of the leaves and into the cart.

The little electric cart jump-rattled on down the bike trail, jiggling and jolting and swaying dangerously around the turns. Say, this really was fun! They passed the girls, and caught up with group five, and everyone stood aside for the cart to pass, just like they were celebrities, or something!

Then they caught up with group four.

"Hey, look at Cory and Mark! They're going to beat us back."

"Gimme a ride!"

"If I sprain my ankle, can I get on the cart?"

"Aw, they just faked it out because they were tired of walking."

Cory waved to them and grinned, but just as soon as they were out of sight, the smile faded. It was easy to see that Cory did not like all the teasing.

Even at the Medical Station, they teased him.

"Cory, I'd better order another case of elastic bandages, if you're going to keep this up."

Cory chuckled at the nurse's joke, but didn't say anything. After his ankle was bandaged, he hobbled along with Mark to a bench under a big tree.

"Cory, do you always get hurt a lot?"

Cory nodded.

"I'll bet it makes you really mad to miss out on the fun, sometimes."

Cory nodded again. "It used to make me really mad, but I'm kind of used to it. At least, it's no surprise. I know, now, that something bad will probably happen!"

"But it keeps you from learning to do things, like shoot the bow and arrow."

"Right, but that fall was my fault. I should have known not to climb that tree like that. If I hadn't done that, I could have learned archery. But I'll be well again, and then I'll learn."

"But you can't do it this year."

"Yeah." He changed the subject, "You know, I think you and Tracy stand a really good chance of winning the contest. You've both hit excellent at least one time, and no other team has done that. You're probably lucky to get her instead of me." Cory grinned, "With my luck, I'd have probably shot you in the foot."

Mark grinned back, "And I'd have kicked you with the arrow still in my foot, too, and that would hurt you worse than me!"

"But really, you might win it. Wouldn't that be fun? A ribbon for being better than anyone else! Boy!"

"Cory, did you know Tracy's new daddy, the one who showed her how to shoot, was her mother's friend. They dropped her off here, and they went somewhere to get married."

"Really? How do you know?"

"She told me," Mark decided not to tell Cory just when it was that Tracy had told him.

"HMMMMM, well, I guess she likes him OK."

"She says she doesn't know if she likes him or not. He's nice to her and buys her things but she thinks it is just so her mother will like him. He might not even do that after they're married."

Cory sat on the picnic bench and stared up at the limbs of the tree. "Look, Mark, there's a red bird up there. His tail really does look little like that red flower. Do you think if we saw a girl named Susan, she would have yellow skin and brown eyes, like the other flower?"

Mark looked up and saw the bird, but he knew Cory was just trying to talk about something else instead of moms and dads who were divorced. Mark knew this, but he just had to talk about it.

"You know something else. Tracy thinks it's her fault that her daddy didn't stay with her mom."

"Really? How come?"

"Well, she says they were happy one time, and that was before she was born. Then later, she was born and they were not happy anymore. She said it looked pretty plain to her that it was her fault. It made her cry a lot and Darla tried to make her feel better."

"Tracy was crying? When?"

Ooops, now he did it. He just as well tell everything, now. Cory was too smart to be faked out. "It was last night. I got tired of hearing about God so much so I went out to the woods alone. At least, I thought I would be alone."

"You cut devotion? That's why I couldn't find you."

"Well, anyway, she said all of this and then she started crying. And then I got to thinking. That's just what happened at my house. My folks must have liked each other or they wouldn't have gotten married, but later on they weren't happy anymore. So maybe it's my fault, too."

"No, you're wrong. You're both wrong. Your mom and dad wanted you and hers wanted her. You don't get mad at someone you love, just because you got something you wanted."

"But that's what happened."

"But it don't figure. It's like if you get something for Christmas that you really wanted, like maybe a new bicycle. You can be happy about the bicycle but you might get mad at other things. So getting the bicycle didn't cause it. I'm not sure what I'm trying to say but I know people don't get divorces because of their kids."

"Oh." Mark liked the sound of Cory's words and hoped they were true. He didn't want to think he might be the reason, but that still didn't explain why God didn't want to answer his prayer.

"Mark, you know what I think I'll do? I think I'll go to the library and find me a good book and read for a while."

"How come? Your foot hurting or something?"

"Just a little. But I like to rad." He grinned at Mark, "I always read books when I sprain my ankle."

"Well, okay, if that's what you want, but I don't think I'd like to read library books while I was at camp." Mark was sure Cory was doing this so Mark would feel better about leaving him and doing other things. "But I could come to the library with you."

"Oh, no. You should go and do other stuff, but when you get to do your target practice, come and get me so I can watch." Cory limped away.

Mark looked around. He felt kind of alone, now, with Cory gone. Cory was a good friend, and it seemed as if they had known each other for years instead of days.

He went to the swimming pool and watched for a little while. There was a lot of laughing, splashing and dunking going on, but it didn't interest him. He watched the softball game for a minute and then wandered on.

The pavilion with the piano was empty. He went in and sat down on the piano bench and began to pick at the keys. Funny how the little white bars made tunes. What were tunes, anyway? Some kinds of horns had little holes that you cover with your fingers to make tunes while other kinds of horns made tunes by the way you held your mouth. Then guitars had to have their strings jiggled, while fiddles had their strings rubbed! And then xylophones had little bars to be tapped with little hammers so they would make music. Funny!

So many different ways of doing it, and they all made music. Just a lot of different kinds of music, and then if you put them all together, you get an orchestra.

He was plunk-plunking the keys of the piano and listening to their different sounds when one of the boys yelled at him.

"Hey, Mark, Mr. Sharp says we can practice now. Says to be sure to get you because your buddy can't practice right now and you will get extra time. Hurry!" And he was gone.

Mark ran to the library for Cory, who hobbled as fast as he could and the arrows were just being passed out when they reached the target.

"Glad to see you, Cory. I need you to watch Mark, since Tracy can't be here. I don't think we would have any accidents, but we have to remember that arrows are weapons and one can never be too careful when practicing with any kind of weapons. Our native American Indians lived by what they killed with the bow and arrow, so we know they can be dangerous."

By now most everyone could hit the hay bales. After each round, the hay looked like a giant square pincushion with arrows sticking out all over it. Also, by now, a lot of the boys were hitting the target. There were still a lot of "Cruddys."

"Getting better, boys. Most of you have made "Cruddy" at least once. But we are not following the rules. I see some of you trying to shoot straight ahead, even though we have said again and again that you must turn sideways. You get

stronger muscle control that way, and you can brace your arrow arm against you side. That makes you steadier."

He continued, "Your aim is good, most of you, but you let your arm jerk before you release the string. That makes you shoot off target. There is a time for all things and the time to release your arrow is the instant you see the target. Now keep trying."

Mark drew back his string, aimed at a cloud and lowered the bow. Twang! Only a "Pretty Good," Again. This time he got an "Excellent." Again. Another "Excellent."

"Boy, Mark, you're doing good!" Cory seemed so pleased with him.

Mr. Sharp blew the whistle. "Now we will shoot one at a time. Six arrows each, and we will release them as quickly as we can, one right after another for a timed trial. Your partner will hand them to you."

Six arrows were given to the first boy. Twang, twang, twang! Some hit the target and some hit the hay. The next boy did about the same. There were so many boys who had six shots each, that Mark was afraid there would be no time for him to practice speed, but finally he got his six arrows. By now he was very nervous.

Cory handed him an arrow. His arms were a little trembly. Everyone was watching him and expecting him to be good. He set the arrow on the arrow rest, caught the bowstring with two fingers and drew it back. It felt good! Aim high....lower.....there's the bullseye.....twang!

Mark closed his eyes. It looked too good to be true, so there would be a mistake, of course. He couldn't have hit the bullseye. No one had done that, yet. But he could hear a lot of cheers.

"Open your eyes and look, Mark! You did it!" Cory was beating him on the shoulder. "Open your eyes, you dummy, and see what you did!"

Mark felt breathless, like his chest was not big enough for his heart and lungs. There was his arrow, right in the twinkle of the bullseye!

Mr. Sharp told him, "Hold your fire, Mark, till I pull your arrow."

Mark let his arms hang limply at his side, as he had been instructed, while Mr. Sharp walked to the target and pulled the arrow.

"You can do it again, Mark," Cory told him. But he knew he couldn't. Never, if he lived to be ten million, would he hit right in the middle of the eye.

"Fire at will," Mr. Sharp told him, and he set the arrow, drew the string and raised the bow. It jiggled and trembled so badly, he lowered it again. That would count against his time. The loss of time made him more nervous.

"Steady, now," instructed Mr. Sharp. "Nothing to be nervous about. This is only practice."

Yeah, right! thought Mark. Nothing to be nervous about? Sure!

He took a deep breath and drew the string. Aim.....lower.....twang, and he shut his eyes. Be lucky to even hit the hay.

"Open your eyes, Mark," Cory yelled at him. "Do I have to keep telling you that?"

Mark opened his eyes. "Excellent." Not a bullseye, but it was an "Excellent." Everyone was quiet and Cory handed him another arrow.

"Draw the string.....aim.....lower.....twang. This time he got a "Pretty Good." Watch it, Mark, he chided himself. Then he got another "Pretty Good" and two more "Excellents."

"Good job, Mark," Mr. Sharp congratulated him. "All of you boys did well and we will learn to do even better. We must blend the right muscles with good timing and we have it made. But right now, they want all of you able bodied boys over at the cookout area. I'm going to show you how to place the wood for a very large camp fire. I'll need a lot of strong arms. This should be good exercise for your archery contest. Off with you, now!"

Cory hobbled long and Mark walked with him.

"I just know you and Tracy are going to win. When you don't get nervous, and when you remember the rules, you're really good."

Mark looked down and kicked stones with the toe of his track shoes. He was happy and really wanted to say something, but what could he say? It seemed that Cory was missing out on everything, but he was so good about it, and he

seemed happy for Mark. He should have been Mark's buddy. Cory was a real pal.

The boys carried wood. A lot of wood! In the center was a small pile of soft, dry chips and splinters and the short sticks of wood were stacked all over it and were leaning inward in a circle. Just outside this circle, was another circle of bigger sticks all leaning onto the first row. Then there was another row.

"Now we are going to light the center pile and let it be burning while we carry more sticks. It has to burn a while before it's really good for roasting wieners and marshmallows. Piles of red hot coals are best. Now stand back."

Mr. Sharp struck a match and slipped it into the pile of splinters and shavings and the little blaze caught and quickly build up, licking its tongues of flame around the bigger sticks. "See how quickly it starts to burn when it's piled right? Takes a little time to follow the rules, but a lot of time is saved later on. All right, men, back to the woodpile."

There were groans. "How come we have to carry it all?"

"What's the matter with the other boys carrying some?"

"I'm tired and my arm hurts."

"How much do we got to carry?"

Mr. Sharp's voice cut into the complaints. "Look at it this way, boys. You're special! You were chosen for this very important job. Without you, there would be no campfire tonight."

"Thanks a lot!"

"Who chose us?"

"I did, so get busy."

More groans, but the woodpile continued to grow.

They had just finished the huge circle of wood and were returning to the play area when Tracy's nature trail group came in. She saw Mark and Cory and ran breathlessly to them.

"How did we do? I mean, how did you do?"

Cory answered for him. "He got three 'Excellents' and a 'Bullseye'!"

"Really? A bullseye? Oh, boy, oh, boy, oh, boy! Hey, Darla.....wait up..." and she was gone.

Finally it was campfire time. The food was spread out on the tables and covered with netting to keep out flies and other winged creatures. The campfire had been burning for along time, and now it was a heaping pile of red, hot coals. The heat from the fire warmed their faces and the glow of it made their cheeks rosy. Everyone was starving.

With such a large fire, there was room for a lot of campers to roast their wieners at once. The mouthwatering smell enveloped the campground, and the spit and sputter of juices onto the coals was wonderful. A few of the wieners were dropped into the coals accidentally and they began to smoke. Even the smoke smelled good. Everyone ate all they could stuff down, and then they started in on the marshmallows.

The little white puff balls of marshmallow caught fire when held close to the coals and they blazed up like a ball of flames. That's when you had to blow hard to get the flame off before it burned up. Then you popped it in your mouth quick, while it was still soft, and most of the time it burned your lips and tongue, but you didn't care. Very much. The mouthful of squishy sweetness was worth a little pain. And then they ate watermelon, spitting the seeds as far as they could. Fun! Fun!

Then the food tables were carried away and seating mats were passed around.

"Don't sit on the ground without a mat. This fire gets insects excited and we don't want any of them chewing on you. Sit on your mats." And they did.

The speaker walked to the center of the circle beside the campfire. A string of light bulbs had been attached to tree limbs and these were turned on. The speaker turned around in a circle and looked at everyone.

"We're sitting in a circle tonight, and that is what I want to talk about."

He took a small metal ring out of his pocket. It was a band of metal about a half an inch wide and big enough for him to easily slip over his thumb.

"This little ring doesn't look very big, but it did a strange thing." Then he slipped the ring in his pocket while he continued.

"Once upon a time, when I was a boy about your age, we lived in the country. All around the house there were trees, and there was one special tree which was planted close to the front door. Now, my father really liked that little tree. He said it was in exactly the right place to be shade from the morning summer sun.

"Well, that little tree grew. With all the care and water my father lavished on it, the tree couldn't help but grow fast. It got about as high as my head, (I was about the size of you boys) and we thought it would just shoot right on up.

"But the next year it didn't grow at all. It put out leaves and it was green but there were no new growth shoots anywhere.

"My father examined the tree, carefully. It had no parasitic insects, no diseases that he could see, and it had plenty of sun and moisture. So he decided it was just taking a year off to work on its roots, or something. He had never heard of such a thing, but it was the only explanation he could think of. We watched it all year, and in the fall, it was no bigger.

"Spring came again, and we eagerly watched the tree. Growth was slow. Green leaves came, but still the tree did not do well. Finally it reached some size, though it was not nearly so large as it should have been. By then, we had quit counting on that tree and ignored it. It struggled along, painfully slow.

"Then the next spring, it seemed to take on new life, sprouting new growth and gaining height, though it was still below what should have been its potential.

"Then there came a storm. It wasn't even the worst storm of the season, but the wind came whipping around the house in a certain direction, and slammed against the little tree. With a crack, it popped off its roots, cleanly as a twig broken between the fingers. It was a puzzle, because the wind should not have broken a tree of that size.

"Then my father, examining the broken stump, saw what happened. Can you guess what the problem was?

Hands shot up all over the campground.

The speaker smiled. "I know what you're going to say, and you're right. It was this little metal ring that was at fault. That little tree had the misfortune to pop out of the ground right under this ring. As a sapling it grew well until the size of the tree reached the size of the ring. Then, for a year, growth was slow and disappointing. Finally, with the care it had been given, the tree extended its bark over and around the ring, enclosing it inside. A circle of new wood outside the ring furnished nutrients to the new growth.

"Growth became much better, then, as new wood built on the outside of the ring, and there was hardly a visible mark to show what the tree had done, but the damage was still there. It was just hidden inside, known only to the tree. When the gusts of wind pushed against the trunk of the tree, instead of flexing as it should have done, the scar tissue built around the ring had no give, or

flexibility, so the force of the wind popped the top of the tree off the roots, exposing the metal ring within the wood.

"My father dug the ring from the wood and handed it to me, and the useless top was taken away to the brush pile to be burned. So, what happened to the stump? Well, in a few days, a green sprout appeared. By the end of the summer, the new tree was as tall as my head. The following summer, the tree grew to the top of the house, and produced a few hickory nuts. The year after that, it was loaded with nuts which rained down on our heads, slammed against the roof and attracted squirrels from everywhere!"

The speaker took the ring from his pocket again. Mark sighed. Here comes the sermon, he thought.....and he was right.

"This little ring reminds me of sin. Sometimes we have the misfortune to be part of a problem that is not our fault. It was not the fault of the tree that it came up within this constricting ring. Sometimes it is not anyone's fault. There is sin in this world, and sin causes trouble wherever it is.

"But the fact that sin is in the world doesn't mean we can't do something about it. Perhaps some of us, like that little nut tree, just happen to be there when sinful things happened around us. We have a choice of three things that can be done.

"If we try to take care of the problem by ourselves, as the tree was trying to do, we can grow around the problem and hide it inside our hearts and lives. That way it will always be a part of us. Poison from this foreign object will spread

throughout our spiritual systems, weakening us. Our whole, entire lives will be affected by what we continue to hide within ourselves.

"Another choice would be to pretend this problem does not exist. We can live our lives beside our problem, and hope the part that hurts us die so we won't feel the pain anymore. We pretend the hurt is not there, but it still is, and we are weakened, because so much of our effort is focused on the problem.

"Now, these two things are what we can do by ourselves. But there is another choice. We can ask our heavenly Father, who loves us and wants us to grow strong right here where we are, for help. If we ask Him, He will take away the part of the problem that is poisoning our lives. The problem may still exist because sin will still be in the world around us, but our Father will have removed the part of it that would keep us from growing into a spiritually strong person and bearing fruit for Him, as He has said a good Christian will do.

"Also, this does not mean we will never have pain. Remember, the tree had to fall to the ground in order for the trouble to be discovered and removed, and to allow it could grow naturally. There has always been pain in the world, often brought upon us by people who are very close to us, and whom we love very much. Remember this, that Jesus bore a lot of pain, which was caused by our sins, and He was glad to bear it so we might have freedom from sin if we only ask Him. Then He helps us to keep the sin outside of ourselves, even though it is still all around us. He helps us keep from absorbing this sin into our lives and allow it to become a part of us and cause internal spiritual poisoning.

"Now, I need someone to tell me the name of a little ring (or sin) that might cause us a problem."

He chose a girl. "You mean like being crippled?"

"Well, that could be probably more of what we would call a handicap. God helps us there, too, and He expects to overcome in these situations. That is physical problem, and they are important to consider. Just now I would like to talk about a spiritual problem."

Hands went up, and he chose another girl. "What about envy, like when your best friend has a lot more stuff than you do?"

"That is a very good one. The Bible tells us that we should not covet, which means 'be envious.' This envy in the heart would effect our Christian testimony or witnessing power, causing weakness.

"Suppose we were friends, you and me, and I was envious of something you had. I would begin to treat you hatefully, and keep saying things about it and try make you feel bad. And then when I tried to witness to you and tell you about God's love, would you believe me? No, that's right. As my friend, you might think that if God can help people to be good, then why has He not helped me? You would likely want no part of God. Who has another?"

This time he chose a boy. "Maybe this is not the question you want, but I want to know the answer. What happens when people get mad at God?"

"Now, that is a very good question. That could be a very important 'ring' that can keep us from growing spiritually, even though it is hidden and no one else

knows it's there. Tell me, why would this person be mad at God? What would be the reason?"

The boy answered, "Oh, maybe a person asked God for something he wanted really bad and there wasn't any reason that he couldn't have it. Then maybe God didn't let him have it. Didn't God say He likes to give good things to people, and that if we asked Him, He would give things to us? Well, then, if we asked God for things and He didn't give them, we might have a reason to be mad at Him. Don't you think?"

"Yes, we might. First, we must remember, though, that when we pray, we close our prayers with the request that God have his way, even if it is different from our way, because God can see the end of things, and not just the middle, the way humans see.

"But there is another thing to consider. This might be difficult for boys and girls of your age to understand, but let's try it. God made humans different from things and animals. He created this world out of His own words when He spoke. We know that.....but when He made humans, He used His hands to shape them, not His words, and He breathed His breath on them so humans would be special. With the breath of God within us, we are very different from any other of God's creations.

"Animals obey God's will when they act like their created nature tells them to, and they have very little choice in the matter. The elements, like the sun, wind, and rain, obey their cycles in the manner designed by God.

"But humans are not that way. God created humans so they would be able to decide what to do, not blindly obey. It is more pleasing to God for us to decide to please Him, than it would be for them to please Him because they had no choice. But then, when people are given a choice, sometimes they make the wrong choice, and a lot of people are hurt. Often they hurt many others besides themselves.

"Remember when Joshua marched around the city of Jericho? God said when the walls fell, that the city was to be burned as a sacrifice to Him, and nothing was to be taken away by the soldiers. However, one soldier, his name was Achan, took some things he wanted. That sin caused Joshua to lose his next battle, and several of his soldiers were killed. Then, when his sin was discovered, his whole family was punished. Sin has an effect on a lot of people, not necessarily those who commit it.

"Then there is Jonah who didn't want to go preach in the town of Ninevah where God wanted him to. But God was kind enough to try to change Jonah's mind. It took a storm at sea, which frightened all the others on the boat, to get Jonah to decide to do what he should do. Then we notice that when he didn't decide to go God's way, the whole city of Ninevah listened and were saved.

"As boys and girls, you are greatly affected by what your parents, teachers and other adults do, and there is very little you can do about it except one very important thing. You can keep it from becoming enclosed into your life and poisoning your attitude toward God. Things like jealousy, hatred, and even discouragement can keep the Christian life from growing, just as the ring stopped my father's tree.

"We remember that, since God made us, He can certainly take out the things that stunt our growth. Also, remember, He gives us free choice, just as he does our parents, so we can decide to live for Him or turn Him away.

"This does not mean that we must not ask God to change things that make us unhappy, as long as we remember to ask God that His will be done. We must tell Him we will accept His will and love Him, no matter how things turn out.

"I think perhaps most of you boys and girls have problems which bother you that are caused by situations where you have no control. We are going to bow our heads now, and I would like for you to pray with me that God will help you keep these things from ruining your life by stunting your Christian growth.

"Our Dear Heavenly Father, look into the heart of each of these campers and we ask that whatever be the problem in each life, You will help them not become bitter because we know this is just a poison that Satan would like to use to stunt their growth. Help each of them to replace jealousy and hatred with love and kindness toward all your children, and most of all, to trust that You will help, no matter what our circumstances are. We ask this in Your name, so that Your will be done. Amen."

Mark had bowed his head with the others. It would have looked strange if he hadn't. During the prayer, he felt his throat get all choked up, and his eyes got swimming full. A tear splashed onto his arm and he wiped it off quickly. There was no use crying about anything, he'd already tried that and it didn't help. Nothing helped.

While the speaker had been talking, there had been only a few lights on so the campfire had glowed red against the black of the evening. Now the overhead lights and all the dorm entrance lamps came on.

The boys and girls began to work their way, in groups and singles, back to the dorm. Mr. Stanley, who had been sitting with Mark and the others from his dorm floor, told them, "You boys go hit the showers and get ready for bed. I'll be along in a little while for prayers. Mark, I want you to stay and give me a hand here."

The boys walked away, Cory hobbling along with them.

"When they had gone, Mr. Stanley told him, "Mark, we are going to kill the fire out of these coals, so you go turn on the water over there by the building and I'll get the rake."

Mark ran to the building and turned the faucet. Water immediatly spurted from the hose, which was already stretched toward the dying campfire. This was going to be fun! He ran to the end of the hose and picked it up, training the stream of water toward the red coals. The stream of water hissed and spewed, sending clouds of steam and small black cinders flying into the air.

"Hey, Mr. Stanley, I know why this hose was stretched out here like this. I'll bet it was so that if the fire got too big, the water would be handy to put it out."

"You're exactly right, Mark. We just can't be too careful when it comes to fire. The tiniest spark can burn down a house, or could have seriously injured some of you boys while we were building it."

He continued, "Mark, Mr. Sharp tells me you're going to be a real sharpshooter with that bow and arrow."

"He did? Boy, I sure hope he's right. I get so nervous it makes my arm shake, and then I have to think about something else for a minute. That way my time was not as fast as some of the other boys. Did you see me shoot?"

"No, Mark, but I plan to. I thought I'd catch your next practice. I always like to see my boys do well at whatever they're trying. I'm really proud of your friend, Cory, too."

Mark couldn't help asking, "Why?" It couldn't be because he was always getting hurt. That was nothing to be proud of.

"Cory seems to be what some people refer to as 'accident prone'," Mr. Stanley answered, "and if something bad can happen, it seems to happen to them. What I am really proud of is the way Cory lives with it. When he first got hurt, he could have been mad and hateful because he had to give up his place to Tracy, but he didn't. He comes right out there, anyway, and stays with you. It wasn't really his fault he got hurt. You were doing the same thing and you didn't. It just happened, like a lot of other things just happen. The really important thing is how we act when those things happen to us. That's where Cory does an excellent job. He even tries not to get mad when he gets teased about it. Everyone here loves Cory, and I'm sure God is very proud of him, and the way he lives his Christian life."

Mark put his thumb over the end of the hose, causing the water to spray out over the whole size of the fire. There was a lot more hissing and steaming and billowing of fly ash clouds. The black cinders floated up and then came settling down on the two of them.

"Oh, look at you," Mark laughed. Mr. Stanley was speckled with flakes of black from the ashes. He had rubbed his hands over his eyes and left wide, black smears that made him look like a raccoon.

"Well, you're no better," the counselor teased him. "Just look at you! That ash you stirred up fell down on both of us, and it wasn't even my fault at all. Really, it shouldn't have fallen on me, since it's not my fault."

"Don't be silly," Mark laughed. "It was all up there and had to come down. You just happened to be under it. It would fall on anybody who was under it, whether they did anything or not."

"Yes, Mark, and about the best thing I can say for these black ashes is they they will wash off and we are going straight to the showers. Now, Mark, if you will turn that hose away for a minute, I'll rake the coals over so we can spray them again to be sure to kill every bit of fire."

When Mr. Stanley had turned the coals over, there were more red-glowing coals under the wet, black one. Mark hosed them down causing small hissing spots. The stream of water soon blackened the last of them.

"Mr. Stanley?"

"Yes, Mark?"

"Why did God say He would do things for us and then not do them?"

"Why do you ask that, Mark?"

"I asked God to keep my parents from getting a divorce, and He didn't do it."

"Mark, there are things like that which we find very hard to understand. We know it is better if parents do not get a divorce, but parents are people and people are still permitted by God to make their own choices. In the case of marriage, there are times when one parent makes a choice that the other parent must accept.

"God speaks to parents just as He speaks to everyone, and they either listen or they don't listen. Many times people wish they had listened after it is too late, but God did give us our own mind and He lets us make our own mistakes, if we refuse to listen to Him. And the worst part is that those mistakes often hurt other people, particularly those we love and who love us."

"But," Mark wondered, "what about me? Doesn't God think I count?"

"Of course He does, and He is concerned when you feel anger or bitterness. He wants to help you, in a special way, to be strong enough to stand for Him, even though you might not understand why He permits things to happen to you. When we pray to Him that His 'will be done', it is our way of asking Him for an answer when we can't find one. Or, we might say, it is our way of turning our problem over to Him."

Mark suggested, "Maybe there isn't an answer."

"No, Mark, there is always an answer. Many times God is the only one who knows what it is, and we may not see any reason for things being they way they are until we finally get to heaven. You must rememer, though, that there is always an answer."

"I'll try," Mark agreed. "I'm really tired of feeling mad at God."

"Tell you what, Mark, I believe that fire is out, now, so we can kneel right here and talk with God about that."

They knelt on the ground and Mr. Stanley put his arm around Mark's shoulder.

"Dear Lord, Mark has a problem and he has decided to let You work it out for him. He can't find the answer, but he knows You can. We ask You to help him feel better and to trust You to take care of him. We thank You and want You to have your way in his life. In Jesus's name, amen."

They stood. "Mark, all you have to do now is let God have your problem. What your parents did is not your fault, and you don't have to worry about it anymore. That will be a lot easier, won't it?"

Mark grinned, "I think it must be."

"Good, now let's go to the shower. The other boys will be waiting for us."

They showered and did nighttime prayers, and the exhausted campers were soon asleep.

Then came Sunday. There were church services in the morning, in the afternoon and again in the evening. Mark was glad he was no longer mad at God, or it would have been a long, miserable day!

The evening speaker had a large garbage bag full of stuff which he took with him to the front of the Chapel.

When he began to speak, he told them, "What if you came down the road in your car and saw me carrying this heavy load. You might feel sorry for me and offer to let me ride with you. Then, when you stopped your car for me, I would get in but I would still carry my heavy load on my back.

"Perhaps you would say, 'Why don't you put down your load so you can rest?'

"Then suppose I said, 'Oh, no! I would not do that. You were nice enough to pick me up, so I can't do that to you. I'll just keep holding my load.'

"You would think me very stupid, wouldn't you? And you would be right! If your car was carrying me, then it was carrying my load, also, and there would be no reason for me to continue to carry it, too. There are a lot of people who do just as stupid a thing, probably without realizing it.

"Jesus tells us to cast our burden on Him because He cares for us. So if we do that, there is no reason for us to keep carrying it, is there? When we have something that worries us and that we don't understand, that is a burden, and it

should be handed over to Jesus. Just say, 'Here, Jesus, take this problem away because I don't know what to do with it.....'"

The speaker said a lot more things, but Mark was too busy thinking about what had just been said. "I think that must be what I'm doing," he told himself, "and its making me worry a lot and be mad all the time."

When the speaker continued his devotion, Mark said within his heart, "Here, God, you take my problem. I'm too tired to carry it, and I don't know what to do with it, anyway." He was amazed at how much better he felt..

The rest of the time flew by. Camp was a lot of fun if you didn't have to be trying to avoid God.

The arrows were more fun to shoot, the singing and swimming was fun. Every evening there was a really neat devotion, and he and Cory hurried to get a front seat at the Chapel.

Then, all of a sudden, it was the last Friday of camp, the day of the performance contests.

Mr. Stanley was one of the archery judges. Mark and Tracy were last to shoot. Mark's lip was sore from nervously biting it. Tracy was bouncing up and down on her toes with excitement and nervous jitters. Mark's hands shook so badly he had trouble finding his pockets! He knew he would not be able to hit a thing.

The other archers did not seem to be having trouble. Everyone was hitting the target. There were a lot of "Excellents" and a lot more "Pretty Goods."

The judges were measuring each shot. Points were based on how far the arrow hit from the bullseye. It took a lot of time, measuring each shot.

Tracy kept jumping up and down and saying, "I'm so nervous. I'm so nervous," but Mark was much too nervous to say anything!

"Help me do my best, please, God," he prayed silently. Then he didn't think about it again.

The team that shot before them was doing well. Mark felt his mouth get dry and his breathing shallow. Then he remembered he had already asked for help, and there was nothing more to do, so he relaxed. A little.

It was his turn next. He breathed deeply and flexed his shoulders as he had been taught to do. He set the arrow. Twang! He got an "Excellent."

Five shots to go.

Twang! Another "Excellent." This time he hit closer to the bullseye, so it counted for more. He took another deep breath and shot again. Another "Excellent."

His next shot was a "Pretty Good." Then another "Excellent." They had a chance, now, if Tracy did well.

He took his last arrow. Remember the rules. Aim high.....lower.....twang! Oh, look! He did it again! Right in the eye of the bull! Tracy squealed delightedly.

Then Tracy took the bow. She drew the string and fired quickly. Twang, right in the corner of the bullseye.

"Oh, boy!" Mark rejoiced to himself. "If she hits the target at all with the rest of her shots, we'll be home free!"

Next, Tracy shot three "Pretty Goods" and two "Excellent." The judges measured each shot, even though they already knew who the winners were.

Later, during the award presentation, Mr. Sharp called them to the platform, and while Mark and Tracy stood beside him, he said. "I'm really happy to give these ribbons to these two winners. This has been a special time for each of them. They both came here with a difficult kind of burden, and I understand from their counselors that they have learned to deal with their problem by depending upon God, and accepting His help.

"They have learned to be excellent archers, but more important, they have earned the "Mark of Excellence" for their Christian growth.

"So, for Tracy and Mark, we give a blue ribbon as a souvenir of their marksmanship, but the real "Mark of Excellence" will be taken home in their hearts."

There was a lot of noisy clapping, and Mark's eyes were blurry with tears of happiness. It was hard to see the steps to go down off the platform.

Mark Of Excellence -- Joann Klusmeyer

"Thank you, God. It's so much easier when I let You help. I'm probably going to need You again, so I don't plan to get far away from You!"

And tomorrow, Dad would meet the bus that brought him home!