

## A True and Faithful Friend

As I walked along Main Street that morning, I asked myself how Christmas Eve could possibly have come so quickly. It was our first Christmas together as a married couple and I wanted to give Maggie the perfect gift. It couldn't be like that Valentine's Day fiasco when I bought her the vacuum sweeper. That almost called off the whole wedding. A vacuum seemed like a good idea at the time, but that's another story. Now was the time to buy Maggie a Christmas gift that would not only delight her, but win the approval of her whole family who would be descending on our sparsely furnished newlywed cottage on Christmas day.

On the corner under a garland clad lamppost stood an elderly man clinging to a little black puppy next to a sign that read "free to good home". When my eyes met the old man's, he said, "There's no better gift than a faithful and true friend."

It seemed like the perfect gift. Maggie loves dogs and it was the cutest puppy I believe I had ever seen. As I contemplated while stroking the puppy's soft fur, I was startled by woman's gruff voice from behind me.

"Oh, no you don't!"

It was Maggie's Aunt Shirley spreading her usual brand of Christmas cheer. "I know you're not even considering giving that little beast to Maggie for Christmas. Puppies are a nuisance. You have to take them for walks and clean up after them. They get their hair on the carpet and furniture." Then she cleared her throat and raised her eyebrows as she smugly said, "I suppose the hair wouldn't be much of a problem, since she has that vacuum cleaner you gave her for Valentines Day."

The vacuum. The dreaded vacuum. Somehow this 125-pound gray haired woman made me feel like I was speaking to a brigadier general. "No ma'am," I stammered, "I was just looking at the puppy."

"Good," she snapped, "There's a jewelry store right down the street. Now get a decent gift for my niece for a change."

The old man's eyes met mine, and he kindly nodded with an understanding smile.

The Jones Jewelry Store was crowded with other men who had also waited until the last minute to buy that perfect gift. After patiently waiting in line, I purchased the pearl earrings the saleslady so highly recommended. She assured me it was the perfect gift no woman could do without.

I was just a few steps out of the store when I heard a voice ring out “Merry Christmas, Howie!” It was Maggie’s cousin Lisa and just for the record, I hate it when she calls me “Howie”. My name is Howard.

“Why you’re not still Christmas shopping, are you?” her voice chimed.

“Oh no,” I smiled. “I’ve been done for some time.” (I know what you are thinking, but technically speaking, two minutes is “some time.”)

“Good,” she said nodding toward the jewelry store window. They’re a bunch of losers who all waited until the last minute. They will probably all end up with a pair of pearl earrings. When a man gives a woman pearl earrings, she knows it’s because he waited until the last minute to buy her gift and that’s what the saleslady suggested.”

Shoving the earrings in my pocket and clearing my throat, I said “Yeah, the poor saps should have shopped earlier.”

In a sing-song tone Lisa said “I hear Madame Stephanie’s Ladies Apparel has some of the cutest sweaters a girl could want. Chow, Howie” When Lisa went on her way, I went back into the jewelry store and stood in line and returned the earrings.

In front of Madame Stephanie’s stood a little girl with the same puppy I had seen earlier and the same “free to good home” sign. She looked up at me with her big blue eyes. With an angelic smile she sweetly said, “There’s no better gift than a faithful and true friend.”

I gave the girl a smile and the dog a pat, and with time ticking away I stepped into Madame Stephanie’s Ladies Apparel. There was a display table full of cashmere sweaters. I held several up one by one, trying to determine if it might be an appropriate gift. As quickly as I laid each one back a matronly, middle-aged saleslady neatly folded it and put it in its proper place. Looking over her glasses, in voice that seemed more like a command than a question, she inquired “A gift for your wife?”

I nodded sheepishly.

“And what size does she wear?” she demanded.

“I don’t really know.” I drew a figure in the air with my hands and said, “She’s about this big.”

The saleslady rolled her eyes, did an about face, and walked away. I picked out a pink sweater that I thought might fit her and waited in what seemed to be an endless line and left the store feeling like a conquering hero.

My victory celebration ended abruptly when I saw my mother-in-law walking toward me. “What’s in the bag?” she questioned.

I tried to avoid telling her it was Maggie's gift, but she persisted. "Is that Maggie's gift?"

I shrugged a nod.

"What is it?" she inquired.

I said, "I want it to be a surprise," as I clenched the bag to my chest.

"Oh, let me take a look," she insisted as she poked at the bag. "Whatever can be in there? It's too small for a vacuum cleaner," she said with a crooked smile.

"The vacuum. Again, with the vacuum. You would think that I had kidnapped the Lindbergh baby," I thought to myself as I guarded the bag.

"Well," she said, trying to use her X-ray vision on the bag, "Whatever it is, I hope it's not pink. Pink just isn't Maggie's color. And I hope it fits her. There's nothing worse than getting something that doesn't fit, and you have to return it. It's like having to go out and buy your own Christmas gift. Well, see you tomorrow, dear."

When my mother-in-law disappeared down the street, I went back into the store, stood in line and returned the sweater.

I was running out of ideas and time. I spied the same puppy and the same sign I had already seen twice today. This time they were being held by a young man with thick black curly hair. They stood in front of a sporting goods store. It seemed strange that all these people would keep showing up with that same puppy, but I didn't have time to ponder that. All I could think about was Maggie's gift. Since they were outside the sporting goods store I took it as a sign that's where I would find the perfect gift. Let's face it, I was grasping at straws. As I walked toward the door the young man smiled and extended the puppy towards me and said "There's no better gift than a faithful and true friend."

I smiled politely and hurried in the store. A light bulb flashed over my head when the stocky salesman pointed toward the treadmill. That's it. Maggie had told me she wished that she had a treadmill so she could jog in the winter. "Wrap it up!"

I shoved the big box out the door gloating in the brilliance of my excellent choice when I saw another familiar face. It was my best friend Chad, who had been the best man at my wedding. Good, finally someone who would be on my side. "Just got Maggie's present," I announced as if I had just won a gold medal.

"A treadmill? Dude! You just don't get it, do you? You can't buy your wife a treadmill for Christmas. That's like calling her fat. Remember the vacuum sweeper, man."

I shoved the big box back into the store and stood in line and returned the treadmill.

I passed the puppy and the sign, held by a red haired, rose cheeked lady who said as I passed, (you guessed it) "There's no better gift than a faithful and true friend." I flashed what I hoped was a courteous smile at her as I rushed back to Madame Stephanie's.

I was desperate. I had to find something...anything. When I arrived, much to my chagrin, the lights were out and the door was locked. Of course, they closed early. It was Christmas Eve. All the normal people were done with their shopping.

I ran to the jewelry store it was locked tighter than a drum. The street was dark, but I ran frantically from store to store like a crazy man rattling doors in desperation. I even tried the hardware store. If my in-laws hated the vacuum sweeper, what would they think about bathroom fixtures? But I didn't care because anything was better than nothing.

This was it. Every store was closed and I was without a present. I hung my head down. Then I thought of the puppy. The puppy. The beautiful, wonderful puppy. There's no better gift than a faithful and true friend. I'll give her the puppy.

My eyes darted from one end of the street to the other, but alas, no puppy. No old man. No little girl. No curly haired man. No rosy cheeked lady. No present for Maggie.

My car was the only one left parked on the street. On the way home I was so discouraged. What would I tell Maggie?

As I was driving home, a church caught my eye. I had never noticed it before. It seemed to glow, and I could hear music coming from inside. The church sign outside read "Today's Sermon: There's no better gift than a faithful and true friend."

I don't know if I stopped because I was intrigued that I had heard those same words so many times today, or if I was just stalling going home because I was ashamed. Whatever the reason, I made my way in, and don't ask me why, I sat in the front row. The choir was singing Christmas carols in perfect harmony. They were being directed by the curly dark-haired man I had seen earlier with the puppy. I smiled thinking that was odd. Then I noticed the organ player. It was the rosy cheeked lady. And the little girl was in the choir.

I couldn't believe it. When the preacher got up to preach, it was the elderly man I had first seen with the puppy. He spoke eloquently about the real meaning of Christmas. He said it's not about the presents we give each other, but it's about

the gift God gave us. He quoted St. John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

He told how Jesus came to earth as a baby and grew up to be a perfect man. Even though He did nothing wrong, He was nailed to a tree, where He bled and died to take the punishment for our sins. He explained that if we ask Jesus to forgive us, with His help turn from our sin, when this life is over, we can have a home in heaven.

The preacher went on to explain that Jesus will never leave us or forsake us. He loves us and cares about everything in our lives. The big things and the little things. He is our best friend. He said "Won't you ask Him into your life today? There's no better gift than a faithful and true friend."

At that very moment I bowed my head and asked Jesus to forgive me, and He did. It was the greatest gift I ever received.

I left the church feeling better than I had ever felt in my life, knowing that Jesus is my best friend.

I was, however, still on my way home without a gift for Maggie. What would I do. When I got home Maggie greeted me at the front door. Worry and anger shared the expression on her face. "Where have you been?" she questioned.

I just had to fess up. "It's a long story, "but I don't have a Christmas gift for you," I said sheepishly.

"How could you, Howard," she exclaimed. She looked at me so sadly and just kept shaking her head, "Howard, Howard."

Her voice got louder, "Howard!"

She started shaking me. Then I realized. It was all a dream. I was in my own bed, and she was waking me up.

"You've slept all day sleepy head. Get up. It's almost time to go caroling."

I looked at the clock. She was right, I had slept all day. The fact was I still hadn't bought her a gift yet. I sprang up and put on some clothes. "I've got to run to the store" I said.

"The store, Howard? It's Christmas Eve. They are all closed."

I knew she was right as I headed toward the door, but I had to try.

When I rushed out the door, I nearly knocked over a delivery man making his way up our walk. The old man smiled...It couldn't be...It was the same man from my dream. He handed me a basket. When I raised the lid and looked in, I

saw the little black puppy with a Santa hat strapped to his head and a jingling bell around his neck.

When I looked up the old man was gone. There was no sign of him or a delivery truck.

My wife came out behind me and threw her arms around me. "Thank You," she said with tears in her eyes "It's the best present I ever got."

When she gathered the puppy up in her arms, I saw a note in the basket. It simply read "There's no better gift than a faithful and true friend."

Now you may not believe this really happened the way I said it did. But we still have that little black puppy. He's a big dog now. His name is Bucky. And I still have that faithful and true friend. His name is Jesus.

During the holidays it is easy to get overwhelmed with all the festivities and cares of the season. I pray that at this Christmas time we will focus on the true meaning of the celebration. Although we can enjoy the many traditions, let's remember it's all about the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes that was laid in the manger on that first Christmas. He came to us because He loves us. He loves us so much He died for us. No matter where we have been or what we have done, Jesus cares about us. He is only a prayer away. If we ask Him into our lives, Jesus will never leave us or forsake us. He is faithful and true. Jesus is our best friend.

Merry Christmas!