

Story 1

'A Hatful of Miracles' by John Gleason

I had just graduated from Northwestern University and wanted to see something of the world before settling into a career. With some money saved from a summer job, I was heading for Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, places that seemed romantic to me. It was October.

In New York I boarded a rusty old coal-burning freighter. At first there seemed to be just three passengers besides myself: a bright young civil engineer from Michigan; a worried-looking old man in a white linen suit; and a stately, charming woman who turned out to be Mrs. Charles Colmore, wife of the Episcopal bishop of Puerto Rico, who was returning there after a visit to relatives in the United States.

We made friends quickly, the way you do on a sea voyage. Then, two days out of New York, a young woman with dull blond hair appeared on deck for the first time. She was in her early twenties, much too thin. She looked so pale and wan that we instantly pitied her. She seemed a bit wary of the male passengers, but she accepted Mrs. Colmore's invitation for tea in her cabin.

"It's a strange story," the bishop's wife told us later. "She comes from a little town in Pennsylvania and she's on her way to the West Indies to look for her husband. He evidently left home several months ago after a violent quarrel with her mother over his drinking and his inability to find a job and support his wife properly. She finally heard a rumor that her husband had gone to the West Indies. She still loves him, so she left her 'old dragon' of a mother, and now she's on her way to find Billy – that's her husband's name: Billy Simpson."

"You mean," I said incredulously, "she's going to leave the ship when we get to San Juan and start looking? Why, that's crazy! There are hundreds of islands in the Caribbean."

"I told her that," the bishop's wife said, "but it didn't seem to make any impression. She just says she'll find him. How, I don't know. But she seems absolutely sure of it."

"It would take a miracle," the old man said, thin and intense in his white tropic suit and brown wool cap.

"It would take a whole hatful of miracles," I muttered.

"Does she have any friends where she's going?" asked the young engineer. "Does she have any money?"

"No friends," said the bishop's wife. "And almost no money. Not enough to get her back to New York."

When we heard this, the rest of us dug into our pockets and raised some money to give to this strange waif of a woman.

"This will help you find a place to stay when we get to San Juan," the bishop's wife said when she presented the money in front of all of us. "And I'm sure our church there will help you find enough for your return passage home."

The woman murmured her thanks. Then she said, "But I'm not going home. I'm going to find my husband."

"Where? How?" asked the old man. He had been fired from his bookkeeping job after thirty years with the same company. Now he was moving to Puerto Rico, where he hoped his experience would outweigh his age when it came to finding another job. I couldn't help thinking that he was seeking an answer to his own *where* and *how* as much as to the waiflike woman's.

The young woman shrugged, and smiled a little. She had the oddest smile – sad, fateful, dreamlike. "Prayers," she said. "My prayers. A few years ago I asked God to send me someone to love, and He did, and I married him. Now I'm asking God to help me find my husband again. That's all. Just asking. And I'm sure He will."

Time passed, trancelike, the way it does on shipboard, the young woman leaning against the rail watching the flying fish skitter across the cobalt sea, the engineer and I on the fantail, the old man asking the bishop's wife for ideas about getting a job in Puerto Rico.

We docked in San Juan early one morning. I was scheduled to catch another boat that afternoon for St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, and so had a few hours to kill. The others were going to look for an inexpensive hotel where the young woman could stay while she figured out her next move, whatever that might be. The engineer and the old man needed a place to stay too. The bishop's wife had delayed her own trip to Ponce, where the bishop was, in order to give some reassurance to the young wife. "I've got to see her settled somewhere," she said to me privately. "And then I'll ask some people at the church to keep an eye on her."

In the smothering heat of midday we walked all over the old city of San Juan, finding the cheap hotels – all run-down establishments infested with fleas and bedbugs. Finally, the bishop's wife suggested that we get on a bus for the neighboring town of San Terce. She thought accommodations might be more attractive and more available there.

So we clambered onto a bus for San Terce, but all the hotels we found in this pleasanter suburb were too expensive. Eventually, exhausted under the hot sun, the bishop's wife, the old man and the young woman sat down on a sidewalk bench. The engineer and I continued the search, and, amazingly, we found a pleasant, clean and inexpensive hotel within a block.

We tried to register for the group, but the clerk insisted that each person register individually. So the others lined up before the registration book. When it was the woman's turn to sign, she picked up the pen, glanced at the page, dropped the pen – and fainted.

The clerk dashed for some water. The engineer and I put her on a couch, and the bishop's wife bathed her forehead while the old man patted her head. She came to slowly.

"Heat too much for you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No . . . Billy."

“Billy?”

“He’s in the book,” she whispered.

We jumped up to take a look. There scrawled after a date two days before, we read: “Billy Simpson.”

“What room is he in?” I asked the clerk. I couldn’t believe it.

“Simpson?” the clerk said, “Oh, he got a job. He came back after work. Not here now.”

“This can’t be,” the old man said almost angrily. “She must have had some idea that he was here!”

The bishop’s wife looked at us. “No, I’m sure she didn’t,” she said. “Otherwise she would have come directly to this hotel on her own, wouldn’t she?”

Nobody could answer that. Now, I know that in a good story the narrator does not remove himself from the scene just when the climactic episode is coming up. But this is the way it all happened. Real life doesn’t always write the script the way a good playwright would.

Anyway, I had to be on the boat that sailed to the Virgin Islands. The engineer shook my hand and wished me well. The bishop’s wife gave me a letter of introduction to the Episcopal minister on St. Thomas, a Reverend Edwards. The old man said he would come to see me off.

The boat was belching smoke, more of a ferry than a ship. As we neared the gangway, the old man spoke.

“The real reason I wanted to come along was to ask you something. Do you think that prayer really led that woman to her husband?”

“I don’t know,” I replied uneasily. “There’s always coincidence. But this is certainly a big coincidence.”

“I wonder if prayer could help me?” he said. “I don’t know much about it.”

“Neither do I,” I said. “Why don’t you ask the bishop’s wife?”

“Do you think I should? I’ve been a bit afraid to.”

“Sure,” I said. “Ask her. And if I hear of any jobs in the Virgin Islands, I’ll write you at the hotel.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Have a good trip.”

When I arrived, Reverend Edwards invited me to stay with him, charging a small amount per week for room and board. Settled in, I spent my time sightseeing, chatting with natives at the docks, writing,

relaxing, learning all I could about the islands. I often visited with Revered Edwards after dinner. One night I told him about the young woman on the boat and missing husband and the prayers. I'm sure my tone indicated my doubts.

The old clergyman said, "Don't ever be afraid to believe, John. You're too young to have a closed mind."

With time, the woman and Billy Simpson almost slipped from memory. But one day I mentioned the incident to two new friends of mine, deaconesses who lived next door to the church.

"Why," said one of them, "that sounds like a Mr. Simpson we had here at the clinic. He came from Antigua with a bad case of the D.T.'s. We practically had to chain him to a bed."

"And then," said the other, "one day he suddenly became alert and insisted on getting up. Our Danish doctor said he'd better stay with us for a time, but Mr. Simpson was adamant. He said he had to get to San Juan to see someone. When we asked who, he said he didn't know. He just had to get to San Juan. That night he caught a small powerboat going to Puerto Rico. We gave him some money to get him there and maybe enough for a room. That's the last we heard of him."

We compared dates, and this Mr. Simpson would have landed in Puerto Rico three days before my group arrived. He could have reached that hotel before we had, as the register showed.

I had to find out. I wrote to the bishop's wife, gave her my news and asked for hers. In two weeks, her answer came: "Yes, it was the right Billy Simpson. His reunion with his wife was one of the most touching things I've ever seen. Now, there are several events to consider, miracles possibly. One, Mr. Simpson's sudden cure from alcoholism in St. Thomas, which he confirms; two, his strange compulsion to get San Juan, which he couldn't understand at the time; three, the guidance that led him to that hotel; four, his finding a good job within twenty-four hours, after not being able to get a job for months; and five, the guidance that took our group to that hotel. For me, these events add up to a hatful of miracles that can be explained in only one word: Prayer. The Simpsons are living happily in San Juan now. Not long ago they gave me some money to use for a charity, and so I am enclosing funds for your friends who helped Mr. Simpson while he was ill."

A week later, I received a letter from the old man. He had gone to Ponce with the bishop's wife, found a good job, joined the church and become very happy in it. He wrote: "When we were at the hotel that day, Mrs. Colmore said that maybe there was a lesson in the experience we had shared. I believe there was. For me, the lesson was that some people instinctively know the power of prayer, but others have to learn it."

I couldn't argue with that.

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Story 2

'Abundant Answers' by M. L. Carney

Our daughter Amy Jo's moved back in with us. She enrolled in a full-time master's program at a nearby university, but was feeling restless and unsure about the future. "You know," she said one night as she was setting the table, "I used to talk about going to law school. Remember?"

I did remember. She had only been about ten when she first brought it up. And while she'd mentioned it a few times during the years, it somehow had fallen by the wayside as she got a degree in communications, took a job and got married. Now it was surfacing again. "I remember," I said, "but I'm not sure if that's what you should do now or not." Silently, I wondered where she would get the money. "Just pray about it..." I said.... The words sounded frail. Wasn't there something else she should be doing?

A few minutes later, Amy Jo came back..., beaming. She spread out the Chicago Tribune on the table and pointed to a classified ad: "Wondering if law school is right for you? Work for us and decide!" It was a large law firm in Chicago, an easy train ride from where we lived. So Amy Jo took the job, working for a year as a court runner. She loved it! Then she took her admissions test and enrolled in Valparaiso University, where she went on to law.

I've always believed in answered prayer. But these days I'm looking for those answers in lots of places. My Bible, of course. But also in the "thought for the day" that appears on my e-mail. Or in the overheard wisdom of an older woman in line at the grocery talking – on a cell phone – to her daughter. And, yes, maybe even in the newspaper. As for the financial problem of law school – Amy Jo is on full scholarship, which is something we both prayed about!

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