

The Foot of the Mountain

by Roland Foster

After his wife died Harmon settled gently into a rut, lonely but comfortable. Afternoons he would sit on his favorite bench in the park until supper time, feeding popcorn to the pigeons or just watching the people. He enjoyed seeing the young mothers and occasional fathers and peacock-proud grandparents taking the little ones out for a stroll and a breath of air before nightfall. He savored his memories of his wife JoAnna and their loving marriage, and thought of his dead son Tim and what might have been, and he was perversely pleased that his losses remained sharply painful, like an arthritic shoulder on a rainy day.

One couple in particular amused and delighted him with the freshness of their joy in each other and their little girl, perhaps four months old. They came daily to the park, dressed in matching new-looking blue warm-up suits, and took turns running a few laps around the lake, first the wife, usually, and then the husband. They were quiet, expressing their love with small touches and knowing smiles that filled Harmon with vicarious warmth. After a few days they recognized Harmon, and they would nod or say "Evenin'" in a country-southern drawl, and smile as though it pleased them to see him there. He offered to share his bench, and the young mother, Tricia, began sitting with him on the bench after she ran, talking quietly and politely about the baby and not much else. Eventually, he wasn't sure exactly how, it came about that he watched the child while the young couple ran together.

He tried to become their friend, so that he might encourage them and help them in their relationship by sharing what he had learned about love and commitment, but to little avail. The young man, Michael, was painfully shy, making careful one-syllable answers to his questions; standing by quietly each day until Tricia said "Thank you" and they left the park. But Harmon was patient, and eventually Michael, too, began to sit and visit a while, and to share brief glimpses of his dreams of finishing night school and of a little home of their own with a lawn and a swing set.

Harmon missed them when they didn't appear for almost a week. Then Tricia came, with the baby but without Michael. She explained that he had been laid off, and she was working a part-time job in addition to her regular job, and they were trying to decide what to do. "He wants to go back south, but things are no better back there," she said, summarizing their dilemma. A week later Tricia reported that he had gone back anyway to South Carolina, to stay at his mother's place, and she and the baby would join him when he had found work and a place to live. "But I don't expect it will be any time soon," she added with a sigh. "Meanwhile I'll try to put a little money aside."

Harmon was glad that Tricia, on days when she wasn't working late, still came to the park dressed for running, though often she just sat and visited with Harmon and rocked the baby gently in the stroller. He realized to his amusement that they had indeed become friends, not by his design but simply because she needed a friend. And when her part-time hours were cut and her income waned and they feared she would be evicted, it was easy for him to offer to help out, "just for a while."

Two months went by, and it became obvious that his fixed income could not stand the strain; but by then she was as a daughter to him, and he was able to persuade her to move into his apartment, into the bedroom that seemed too large for him by himself but just right for her and the child. He could sleep on the sofa and help take care of the child, and she could put most of her pay into savings, so as to have a nice nest egg when Michael finally was able to send for her.

They quickly established a daily routine. Tricia was working the day shift, so she could leave the baby at day care on her way to work. After lunch Harmon would pick up the child, and at the park he would stroll her and rock her and dandle her on his knee as proudly as any grandfather. He was reminded sometimes of Tim, who had crashed his Navy jet on a training flight. JoAnna and he had lost not only their son, but also their only hope of grandchildren. But that was long years ago; no need to dwell on it now.

Each day after work Tricia joined him at the park. She would exercise if she felt like it, and they would sit a while and talk. She told him of her own and Michael's humble origins, of their modest dreams for the future, of what was happening at her work. Harmon shared things he had seen and done and thought about during a long life. One cool and windy afternoon he told her this:

I dreamed once, or I may have read it somewhere, that life is a Mountain, and we who live are all climbers on the sides of the Mountain, struggling upward toward a lofty peak. At times we slip or slide, or we climb downward instead of upward, often without even knowing it. We pause when we can to rest for a while in a sunny alpine meadow or on a cold, windswept ledge — but not for long; we have to keep climbing. We meet other climbers as we go — some seen in stark silhouette against a clear sky; some half-perceived in misty dimness; some only briefly felt as we grope in blinding snowstorms. If we are especially blessed, we find ourselves traveling part of the way with a loving partner, sharing our burdens and giving each other a boost over the roughest places. In the end we climb or slide or fall the last part of the way, and come to rest with the other worn-out climbers at the foot of the Mountain.

Tricia wanted to know what happened after that, but his dream had not given him the answer. She turned her attention to the child, who was fretting. "We should go home now," she said.

He wanted her not to tell Michael about their arrangement, to wait and surprise him with the money she was saving, but she said Michael needed to know that something positive was happening, and she wrote and told him. Four days later, while they were eating supper, Michael came, ignoring Harmon's greeting and outstretched hand, looking only at Tricia, saying, "Get your things, we're leaving."

Harmon's hand on Michael's elbow was lifted off and flung aside. "Michael!" cried Tricia in reproach, and Harmon, stunned, queried, "What's the matter?" But with a sudden awful clarity he saw himself and Tricia and the child through Michael's eyes, and he knew.

All Michael said was, "My wife and baby belong with me."

"Yes, you're absolutely right," whispered Harmon. "Forgive me."

As they were leaving Tricia hugged him and said, "Don't worry about us, Harmon. We'll be okay."

He spent a few days in a purgatory of self-examination. He thought of the Mountain, and how poorly his dream had pictured it; how much of the richness of life had been left out. Marriage was in the dream, but where were children and friends? Where were the joyful family picnics in the alpine meadows? Where was the fellowship and the laughter with people met along the way? Why had the dream not shown him a human chain forming spontaneously to rescue a fellow climber in distress?

Had he himself chosen to have a relationship only with JoAnna, only with Tricia, only with one dependent individual at a time? And again, what good was the dream, what was its point, without the answer to Tricia's question: What happens at the foot of the Mountain?

Later, finding to his amazement that there was light and life within him still, he simply laid aside his deficient dream and every mistake of the past. He was awake, and the present was all he had to work with. He became a volunteer at the children's hospital near the park, and every fine afternoon he would take three or four of the wheelchair patients out for some air and sunshine. He would talk with them and listen to them and love all of them, and not think of adopting even one. And every night he would spend a while on his knees, asking for blessings on Michael and Tricia and the baby, healing for the young patients, and wisdom for himself, before he went to sleep in his too-large bedroom.