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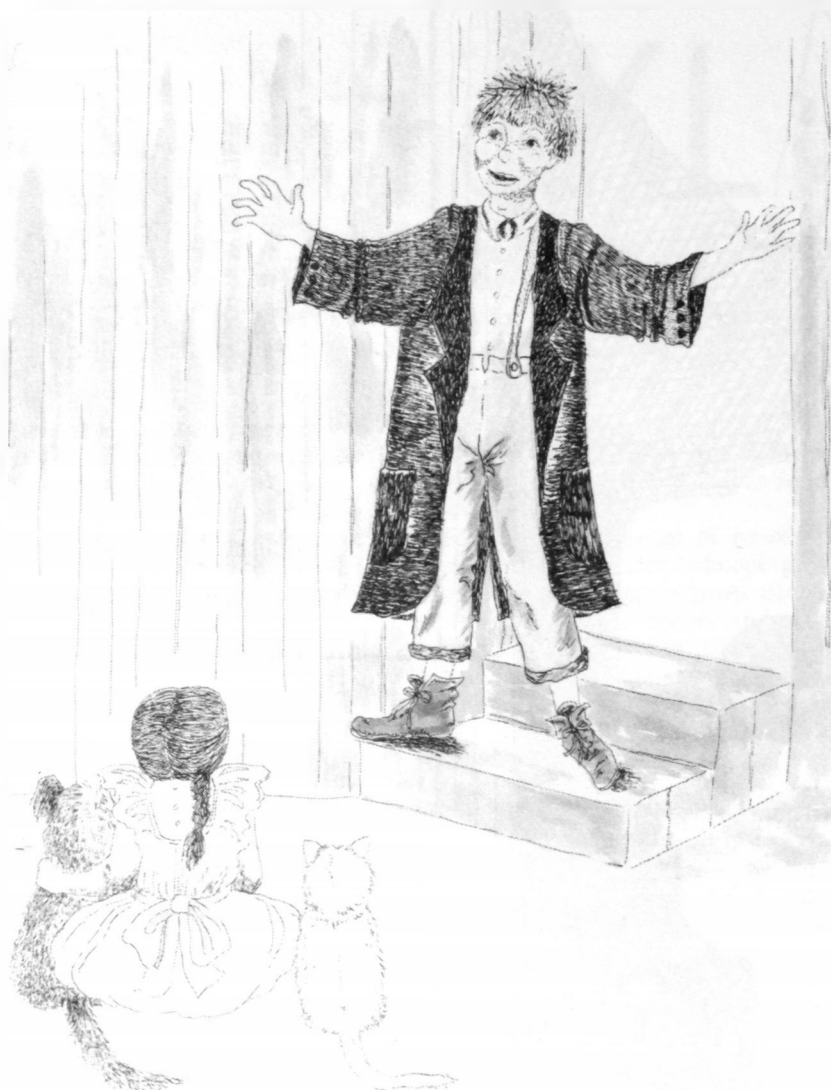
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ILLUSTRATION BY J. VAN ORSDOL



LITTLEST PAUL

by Opal Hartsell Brown Garrity

His name was Johnny, but they called him "Littlest Paul." He had preached since Sarah could remember. Today at the back of the log house, he lined up her; Old Smut, the big black dog; Old Puss, the mean gray cat, and Blossom, the blond China doll; and opened his Bible.

With only his bushy head and bare feet sticking out from opposite ends of Daddy's long black coat, Littlest Paul began his sermon.

"Repent and be baptized, everyone of you," he read from memory, "in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

Littlest Paul was seven, three years older than Sarah. He had preached to the trees, cows, birds, insects, warning them

of hell-fire and damnation if they didn't obey the Lord.

Today was his first full service, and he expected some of his listeners to come to Christ. This was practice for next Sunday. He would preach for the children after dinner on the ground at church.

Old Puss rose to her feet and started to walk away. Sarah grabbed the fur on her neck and set her down. Old Smut curled around to nibble fleas on his back. Sarah spat him with her hand.

"Gentlemen don't do that in church," she scolded.

Clutching the dog's collar with one hand and the cat's neck with the other, she looked at the China doll, pretty and unmoved. Littlest Paul continued his sermon, raising one foot to scratch the

other with his cracked heel.

Soon the animals became too restless for Sarah to handle. Littlest Paul gave the invitation' "'Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden,'" he quoted, "'and I will give you rest.' Won't you come while we sing?"

Keeping time with his flapping coat sleeve, he led, "Walking in Sunlight." Sarah joined in the singing. At the end of the first verse, Littlest Paul stopped and pointed a finger at the pets.

"Now you two know," he said, "that you haven't been living right. Just this morning you got in a fight over a piece of bread. Smut, you took it away from Puss and she scratched you. You growled and she clawed. And the Lord said, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.' Now what are you going to do about it?"

Sarah remembered her own sins. Often she teased Littlest Paul until he struck her; then the fight was on. Because he was the older and larger, he got the blame. Today, her ears burned; she didn't want her brother pointing to her next.

Hoping he would keep talking to the animals, Sarah rose up and pulled them forward. Littlest Paul pushed up his long sleeves and bent to take the dog's paw.

"Smut," he asked, "do you believe with all your heart that Jesus Christ is the son of God?"

Sarah moved the dog's head up and down in a nod.

Littlest Paul took the cat's paw. "And Puss, do you believe with all your heart that Jesus Christ is the son of God?"

Sarah moved the cat's head up and down.

Littlest Paul took off his coat and laid it on a box. "We will now have the baptizing," he said and went to the well.

While he drew water and filled the big black pot, Sarah held the wiggling animals. Littlest Paul took Smut first. The dog pulled back from the water and tried to get away.

Using her free hand, Sarah picked up a stick and hit him across the tail. With one big leap, he cleared the wash pot, then dashed into the pasture.

"Ah," Littlest Paul said, reaching for the cat, "let the old sinner go."

When he put Old Puss in the water, she bounced up on hind legs, kicking and meowing, but Littlest Paul put her under. She came up dripping, her ears laid back and her green eyes angry. Littlest Paul held her at arms' length, while Sarah picked up Blossom. The four hurried to the house.

Sarah knocked on the door. Mother opened it.

"Sister Hart," Littlest Paul said, "meet Sister Puss."

Sister Hart tossed back her head and

laughed until the pile of brown hair on her head shook. Sister Puss tossed back her wet gray head and ripped Littlest Paul's chin. Two long streaks oozed blood.

"Y, you old devil!" Littlest Paul shouted, throwing the cat to the ground.

Mother slammed the door. Her footsteps raced into the front room where Daddy was. Now Littlest Paul was in trouble. He walked to the cellar door and sat down. Sarah followed. Big tears rolled down her brother's sunburned cheeks.

Sarah wished he would cry aloud and make an ugly face. She couldn't stand to see him crying without a wrinkle or sound. She had to do something. Quick!

Choking back tears, she raced to the front porch and up the steps, stopping at the door as if the knob had a stinger. It was so quiet inside. Maybe Mother and Daddy had gone out the back door after Littlest Paul.

"Jesus God," she begged, "please help me."

The sound of a giggle reached her ears. Why, Mother and Daddy were laughing and whispering. Sarah leaned against the door. Her parents giggled louder.

She hadn't heard them have so much fun since the time Daddy grabbed the runaway pig by the tail, and it popped off in his hand. He sat down in a puddle of mud.

Their talk became louder. "We'll have to do something," Daddy said, "maybe stop him from preaching a while."

Oh, my! That would be worse than the razor strop! Littlest Paul couldn't preach to the children Sunday after dinner on the ground, and Cousin Claud needed to be baptized. He was always teasing the girls and fighting the boys. "Teasing" jogged her memory, shooting her through the door.

"Mother! Daddy!" she shouted. "Brother is a good man. He lets me tease him a long time before he gets mad and fights; then he takes the blame. He didn't mean to call the cat a bad name. Whip us, then I won't tease him any more, and he won't cuss the cat any more."

Daddy in the armless rocker and Mother squatted beside him were as still as a painting. Then Littlest Paul appeared in the front door, his eyes and cheeks red.

"I told God I'm sorry," he said, "and I really am."

Daddy got up and put his arm around Littlest Paul, while Mother drew Sarah to her full warm bosom.

"Mother," Sarah asked, "will Littlest Paul have to quit preaching?"

"Ask your father," she said.

Father tilted his head sideways. "That depends on his future speech," he answered.

"Oh, good," Sarah said. "He'll get to preach to us Sunday after dinner on the ground at church."

Mother and Daddy looked surprised and then smiled.

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