

Diamond Character

by Libby Lindblom

Sixteen-year-old Stephen Kostya jammed his cold hands deeper into his ragged coat pockets. He quickened his steps along the snowy road. The sky was changing from the winter-gray of daylight to shades of purple, and the sun was slipping away fast. *I'll have to hurry to get home before nightfall*, Stephen thought.

His mind went over the happenings of the day. *Working for Uncle Anton and Aunt Nadia is exhausting, but I'm so grateful for the chance. Mother was really upset at herself that I had to, but it's not her fault Father got sick and died. And she doesn't need to be out working with the little ones to care for.*

Had it only been one month since he had first started working on his uncle's farm a mile away? Stephen shook his head; it seemed like years! But it was true. Only a month since Father died of that deadly epidemic that had swept over their homeland of northeastern Russia. Somehow the rest of the family had avoided the disease, but poor Father had caught it and only lived five more days. Tears filled Stephen's eyes. His dear, godly father—how he missed him!

And this winter of 1925 has been an unusually harsh one, he reflected. *In years past, somehow it didn't seem so hard to be outdoors and work for money. But then, perhaps everything seemed easy and comfortable when Father was with us.*

Stephen could see the lights of his family's humble little cottage now. He could almost feel the warmth of the fire and see his little siblings' bright faces. Once more he quickened his pace.

His mother met him at the door, wrapped in her only shawl. Lines of care were etched on her face, which was framed by wisps of thin, graying hair. She pulled him into the cottage and bolted the door latch. "It's cold out tonight, son."

"Oh, a little nippy." Stephen smiled as he handed her the coins he had earned that day. He felt the need to be especially cheerful around Mother. Though she had always been a strong Christian in the past, since Father's death Stephen had been concerned about her. She seemed to have completely lost her joy.

"Supper is ready," Mother said as she tucked the coins into her dress pocket. "Come, children. You've been making such a mess playing with those pebbles. Put them away now."

The three younger ones—eight-year-old Inna, six-year-old Oleg, and five-year-old Roza—scrambled to gather up the pebbles they had been playing with on

the dirt floor of the cottage. They smiled a welcome to their oldest brother, and he returned the smile.

The family sat down to a supper of hot barley mush. While they ate, Mother commented with worry, "Are you enjoying the work at Uncle Anton's, Stephen? I'm afraid he's making you work too hard."

"Why, Mother, what makes you think that?" Stephen asked in surprise.

"Your hands are red, and you look so tired every night when you come home." Mother sighed.

"I think my hands are red because of the cold wind. As for being tired, I'm no more tired than you," Stephen assured her. "I'm not quitting."

"But you're so young to carry the burden of providing for our family," his mother objected. "Maybe I should just get a job myself in a factory..."

"Oh, Mother, please, no!" all four children chorused together. Inna added fearfully, "You'll get sick and die like Father!"

Mother laughed a feeble laugh. "How ridiculous, daughter!"

"No, it's not ridiculous," Stephen said. "You're frail, Mother, and this winter weather hasn't been easy on you. You need to stay indoors, stay warm, and take it easy. I think you do too much around the house as it is. Besides, you know the little ones need you. Really, I don't mind the work."

"What did you do today?" his little sister Roza piped up.

"Lots," Stephen smiled. "Uncle Anton doesn't like me to waste any time. I swept out the barn and piled fresh hay into the horse pens. Then I scrubbed down the north wall, which was splattered with mud. Tomorrow he wants me to go up on his roof and fix a leak. Aunt Nadia has been getting snow in her kitchen!"

"Ugh!" Roza squealed. Inna and Oleg laughed.

"Well, I so appreciate your diligence in providing for us, son." Mother sighed again. Her face wore an expression of utter weariness.

As he went to bed that night, Stephen knelt to pray. *Lord, I never told Mother about what Uncle Anton told me today. I couldn't bring myself to; she just worries so much. I haven't told her either about his unreasonableness and horrible temper. I'm afraid she'll want me to stop working there, and for her sake, I've got to keep on.*

His uncle's rough shouting from earlier that day came back to haunt him. *"What are you, boy, an empty skull? Two hours washing one wall and it looks worse than when you started! Tomorrow if I find one task done to my*

dissatisfaction, I'll thrash you like you deserve, as a father in your life ought to be doing!"

Stephen shuddered as he crawled under his threadbare quilt. He *had* done his very best on that wall, and there wasn't much more he could do to please his uncle. This certainly wasn't the first time he had received angry threats, but they were usually in the form of not getting paid rather than physical punishment. Something told Stephen that his uncle's hatred for religion was what prejudiced him against his dead Christian brother's family.

I need You, Lord, Stephen prayed. Protect me, please. Help me relate to my uncle and aunt in a godly manner. And show me what would be wise to share with Mother. I don't want to hide things from her that she should be knowing... but she really shouldn't ... He fell asleep before finishing his prayer.

In the morning, Stephen awoke before dawn and hurried to his uncle's farm in the cold, windy darkness. Aunt Nadia would be sure to give him a bite for breakfast; she was sympathetic and kind. And perhaps if he arrived early, Uncle Anton would be pleased with him.

He arrived at the farm just as the eastern sun was scaling the horizon. The crow of the rooster, followed by the cackling of sixteen hungry hens, met his ears. Uncle Anton's large frame was already emerging from the kitchen door. "Well, there you are, boy! Go feed those chickens, or they won't lay well today. Now move it!"

As Stephen bolted for the chicken coop, he couldn't suppress the feeling of disappointment. *Uncle wasn't even pleased that I got here half an hour early!* He struggled to get his numb hands to work at sprinkling the chicken feed around the coop in the freezing morning air.

When he was done, his uncle already had the next job ready. "Now take this pail of tar and go patch that leak in the roof. I have no earthly clue where it is. But you'd better find it, or don't you dare go asking your aunt for breakfast. I won't let her give you a crumb!"

"Yes, sir!" Stephen's teeth chattered with the cold. He took the pail and then went running for a ladder. Maybe moving fast would help him get warm. After dragging the ladder over to the house, he clambered up it and then walked carefully around on the snow-dusted tiled roof, searching for the leak. He could see none.

Suddenly, from the porch below, his uncle bellowed, "Quit that! I'm trying to enjoy some peace with my morning tea without hearing an army stomping over my head!" The kitchen door slammed.

Stephen sighed. He got on his hands and knees and, crawling around, scraped away the snow from the tiles with his bare hands. His fingers were raw and tingling with pain before he finally discovered a six-inch crack in one of the tiles, right above the kitchen. He opened the pail of tar and began spreading it over the leak.

A sudden scream made him jump with fear. “You terrible thing!” his uncle roared. “A glob of tar just landed in my cup of tea!”

“I’m so sorry,” Stephen pleaded through the crack as he worked quickly to spread the tar. “I didn’t mean to.”

“Well, you’d better mean to do something right, because I meant what I said yesterday!” his uncle screamed. Then Stephen could hear him grumble loudly, “He just does everything wrong!”

“That’s your imagination, dear. Eat your breakfast,” soothed his wife.

Stephen struggled to fill the leak with tar, but the crack was too wide, and he was afraid he would drop more if he spread too much. Finally he climbed down the ladder and, gathering his bravery, knocked on the kitchen door.

Aunt Nadia opened the door. She smiled at him. “Do you need something?” she asked gently.

“Yes, ma’am. I need to tell Uncle Anton that ...”

Aunt Nadia stepped aside as her husband pushed past her and glared down at his nephew. “You need to tell Uncle Anton what?”

“The tar won’t work to fill that crack. It’s too big. If you give me a board and a hammer and nails, I’m sure I could nail the roof from the inside.”

“Well, you know where the wood and tools are. Whatcha waiting for?” he snapped.

“Just your permission, sir. I mean, I want to make sure I’m doing what you like.”

“You have my permission. Get at it!” Stephen’s uncle slammed the door in his face.

While he dug around in the toolshed for a board, hammer, and nails, Stephen’s mind drifted back to his family at home. *What would Mother say if she knew how miserable I am here? Of course, she’d want me to quit working. But having no income certainly wouldn’t improve her struggle to trust the Lord.* He thought of his little sisters and brother. Because of his hard work here on the farm, they would have warm soup and bread and potatoes on the table at lunch, and

schoolbooks to study at home during the day, and cloth from the big store in the city for Mother to sew them clothes. For them, it was worth it. Stephen smiled.

Now, back to that leak. First he dragged the ladder up to the kitchen door. Then he knocked on the kitchen door again, dragged the ladder inside, leaned it against the kitchen wall, and scrambled up it. He felt around the ceiling until his hands touched the crack. Then he carefully lifted the board and nailed it into place.

Just as he was ready to climb down, a glitter of light caught his side vision. Stephen glanced in surprise. In a crevice in one of the large boards running across the ceiling, a large white jewel was tightly wedged. *Funny*, he thought. *In all the times I've repaired this ceiling, I never noticed that. Must be a secret storage space of some kind.*

"Whatcha doing up there so long? Come on down!" his uncle bellowed from his seat at the table below.

Stephen hurried down the ladder and then dragged it back outside. When he reentered the house, Uncle Anton was glaring at him. "Now go feed and water the hogs!" He turned his back. Quickly, before her husband could see, Aunt Nadia slipped a fresh muffin into her nephew's hands. Stephen nodded his thanks before hurrying back outside.

The day was long, and the unreasonable farm owner threatened his young worker more than once with various punishments, although none were carried out. As he walked home in the evening, rubbing his hands together to keep warm, Stephen once more occupied his mind with praying. This time he heard a comforting whisper to his heart in response. *Don't be afraid. I won't let your uncle touch you to harm you.*

Stephen breathed a long sigh of relief. *Thank You, Lord. I'm sure I can face the future days with much more peace now.*

At home that night, the little ones were delighted to see him as usual, and even Mother appeared somewhat cheerful. She smiled as he handed her the day's coins. "Thank you, son. You take such a burden off my heart."

Weeks and months passed, and the snow of winter melted away to let the fresh green buds of spring appear. On the first day of March, the skies were so blue and the sunshine so warm that Stephen left his coat at home. He whistled cheerily as he walked down the road to a new day's work. *Life has been more bearable these past few weeks*, he reflected. *Aunt Nadia's kindness gets me through the days there, and Uncle Anton hasn't been as rough lately. And despite his threats, he's never laid a hand on me. Thank You, Lord, for Your protection!*

In his rejoicing, Stephen was unprepared to face what awaited him at the farm. The moment he reached the first fencepost, he could see the large form of his uncle standing on the porch, his arms crossed and an angry scowl on his face. Instinctively Stephen slowed his steps, just as his uncle's shout pierced the stillness of the morning air. "Get up here! Come on, let's go! You aren't going to get away with this one!"

What could I have done? Stephen used the few remaining yards he had to cross to think fast. *Nothing. All the work was done perfectly yesterday. I'm sure of it. Lord, help me.*

The moment he stepped onto the porch, his uncle reached out a burly, muscular arm and grabbed him by the shoulder. "Thief! Robber! You'd better come clean on this quick, or you'll wish you had!"

Stephen stared speechlessly. Finally he squeaked out, "What?"

"You know what you did!" Uncle Anton screeched. He shook his nephew three times and then dropped his arms to his side, seething with rage. "So. You can just come right out and tell me. It was back in January. But time doesn't take away a crime nor its penalty. So, young man, let's hear it."

"I'm totally confused, Uncle Anton. I don't know what you're talking about," Stephen protested, shaking his head.

"So you're going to play innocent? You don't know *anything* at all about my grandfather's diamond which I've been hiding in a crack in my ceiling for twenty-seven years, and just this morning when I checked for it was gone?" Uncle Anton was shouting in full volume. "I know what you did! You were up there in January supposedly repairing that roof crack. Ha! Now I know why you wanted to come inside! So let's hear the story. Where'd you hide it? Or did you sell it?"

Stephen's mouth dropped open in shock and dismay. Uncle Anton truly believed he had stolen that jewel? How could he prove his innocence? Finally he faltered, "Uncle, I didn't touch your diamond—honest. I saw it that day, but I didn't lay a hand on it. I'd forgotten all about it until now."

"Honest!" His uncle mocked. "You don't have an honest bone in your body, boy. I don't believe you for an instant! Where else could the jewel be? Nobody else goes in my kitchen, much less up on a ladder to inspect my ceiling boards!"

Again Stephen thought fast. "Maybe it fell or slipped deeper into the board. Couldn't I go up there and check?"

"I suppose you may have a little extra time to fabricate your lie," Uncle Anton sneered. "The ladder's in the shed."

Stephen dragged his feet to the shed, taking his time to process this strange new accusation. The diamond was missing. How? Did Uncle Anton really distrust him that much? Hadn't Stephen always tried to be as honest and dependable a worker as possible? Hadn't he always strived so diligently to show his unsaved uncle and aunt a Christian life? With a groan of despair, he pulled the ladder off its hook and dragged it back to the house. *And Lord*, he prayed, *You said You wouldn't let him touch me, but he shook me three times!*

Keep trusting Me, he sensed the Holy Spirit's gentle reply. *I promised I would not let him touch you to harm you.*

Feeling chagrined at his lack of faith, on top of his utter confusion at where the diamond could have vanished to, Stephen set up the ladder in the kitchen without a word. Aunt Nadia was drying the plates from breakfast. As he climbed the ladder, she glanced at him and gave a somewhat sympathetic half-smile. As soon as her husband stomped out of the room, she began kindly, "Stephen, tell me what you did."

"I've done nothing, Aunt Nadia!"

She shook her head sadly. "Look, lad. I know your family is poor, but you needn't have thought to steal from us. You know you could have come to me for help at anytime. I'd have been more than glad to lend a little help, behind your stingy uncle's back. But now you know it's best to come to the surface about it, pacify your uncle, and walk off with a clean slate."

Stephen looked back at her in silent misery. The pain of having his uncle not believe him was bad enough, and now his aunt? Without another word he felt around the ceiling boards for the missing jewel. Sure enough, the crack in the board was empty. There was no mistaking it. The diamond was gone.

As he climbed down, Aunt Nadia offered, "Would you like me to go with you to tell him the truth?"

Stephen jammed his hands into his pockets and looked her square in the eye. "Aunt Nadia, I'm being entirely open and honest with you. I never laid a hand on Uncle Anton's diamond. I'm awfully sorry it's missing, and I sure hope it turns up, but I have nothing to do with it."

"Stephen, I'd like to believe you, but there's no other possibility but that you took it," his aunt chided. "No one but you has entered this home in months."

Helpless, Stephen shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't take it, Aunt Nadia. What else can I say?"

His aunt sighed deeply. “For your poor mother’s sake, Stephen, I wish you wouldn’t do this to us.” After a pause, she suggested, “Won’t you just tell him you stole it, even if you don’t think you did? He’d be angry, but it would blow over in time, and at least you’d get to keep your job here. But if you don’t confess, he’ll throw you out for good. Believe my words, Stephen! I know that man. And I’d sure hate to see you go.”

Stephen only shook his head and said with firm resolution, “I couldn’t say that, Aunt Nadia. I couldn’t tell him a lie.”

A heavy boot kicked open the door as Uncle Anton stormed back in. “Well, find it?” he barked.

“No, sir.”

“Then get that ladder out of my kitchen and yourself with it! You’re fired! I don’t want you back until the day you return my diamond!” his uncle roared. “And your mother and little sisters and brother will all starve for your cruelty and villainess to your family in performing this act of utter disgrace! You ought to be ashamed to show your face, much less to look at me so blankly and pretend to be so faultless! Did you hear me? Out!” He jabbed a finger toward the door.

Daring not to speak another word, Stephen hurried out the door, returned the ladder to the shed, and started rapidly down the road for home. The birds were singing their merry songs of spring, but his heart was too heavy to listen. *Mother needs that money! She needs me!* The ache of disappointment in his spirit was deep. *And more than that, whatever will she say? She’ll be so worried and upset! She’ll never go back to the old, cheerful self she used to be before Father died. And she will probably start the fuss about her getting a job again. Oh, I can’t bring myself to tell her. I can’t make her more miserable; she’ll make herself sick!* He brushed away the hot tears that burned in his eyes.

When his vision cleared, he squinted up at the sky. *Yet, You say You care, God. You say You know. It’s so hard to believe, but I believe it. I love You and I will trust You.* He took a long, deep breath. God knew that the truth was on his side. Somehow, someday, the truth would manifest itself in a clear manner and prevail against all this anguish and confusion.

Mother gasped and fell against the doorframe when Stephen arrived home at noon. “Are you all right, son? Why back so early?”

“Mother, Uncle Anton believes I stole a jewel from him, and he won’t believe me that I didn’t. So he told me to leave and not come back.” Stephen spoke calmly, but he quickly reached out an arm to steady his mother as her feet wavered.

“Oh, no!” His mother burst into tears. “Oh, why did you do this to us? We can’t afford to lose that income! We will die now!”

Stephen quickly led her to a chair as her sobs became more hysterical. Inna, Oleg, and Roza gathered around and watched in concern as she cried. When she finally quieted down, Stephen leaned close to her ear and whispered in a plea for mercy, “Mother, I didn’t do anything. This is all a false accusation. But we don’t need to worry, because I believe if God wants the truth to be made known, He’ll make it clear in His time. He can also provide for our needs just fine without me. Please, Mother, won’t you pray with us instead of cry? Won’t you lead us in trusting Him?” He reached for her hands.

But his mother tore away. “I can’t, Stephen! I am nothing to lead this family. I relied on you, and now you have let us down.” She began weeping again. “Why did you even get close to that diamond? Why did you even go in his house, and let yourself fall in the line of suspicion? Weren’t you supposed to be doing farm work? Why didn’t you ever think that our only, precious income was at stake?”

Stephen could see that it was useless to reason with her. Instead he knelt on the floor and gathered his siblings in his arms. “Will you pray with me? This family needs to trust the Lord. We won’t die. Jesus is watching over us.”

They nodded sheepishly. “Very good. Oleg,” Stephen instructed his brother, “I want you to pray. Tell God we need Him to help us be joyful and trust Him to care for us.”

Oleg launched right in, the peaceful love of a six-year-old evident in his tone. “God, please help Mother and all of us to be happy. Please take good care of us. Please give us all the money and food we need. We love you, God. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.”

“Oh, children, I am such a failure,” Mother moaned. “I’ll never be as good a parent as your father was to you.”

Stephen eyed her with concern. “Please, Mother, go to bed and take a nap. You’re so tired. The little ones and I will find something to eat while you rest.”

“I’ll rest, but I can’t make our life happy again,” Mother sniffled as she left the room.

That night as he lay in bed, despite his exhaustion, Stephen found himself fighting a vicious inner battle between simple trust in God and insurmountable discouragement. Life looked hopeless on the one hand. But on the other, it looked full of miracles just waiting to happen. At long last, his faith in God won out, and he fell asleep to a sweet night’s rest.

In the morning, a fresh idea came to his mind, renewing his enthusiasm. He shared it with his family at breakfast. "I'll gather birch branches in the woods all morning, and then in the afternoon, take them to market in the city and sell bundles of kindling."

Mother's face was doubtful. "That will hardly bring in anything." She sighed. "But you may as well do something useful. If it isn't working after a month or two, I'll need to find a job."

So for the next several weeks, Stephen gathered birch branches in the mornings and spent the afternoons in the city market. To his joy, the bundles of sticks sold excellently. Even Mother couldn't resist the sparkle of satisfaction in her son's eyes and had to smile as he dropped the Russian *kopeks* into her hand. But he could see that she was only putting up with his innovativeness, rather than truly being contented with his earnings.

One evening when he got home, little Roza ran up to him. "A stranger came here to see you today!"

Stephen raised his eyebrows and looked at Mother. "Someone to see me? Who was he?"

"I don't know." She shrugged uninterestedly. "Some man who wanted to talk to you about something with your wood business, I think. I told him to go find you at the market tomorrow."

The next afternoon in the market, Stephen was down to his last bundle of branches and almost ready to head home when a tall man in a black coat approached him. "Are you Stephen Kostya?"

"Yes, sir."

Stephen extended his hand for a handshake, and the man gripped it firmly. "Pleased to meet you, Stephen. My name is Matthew Petrov. I understand you used to work for your uncle Anton Kostya over on his farm."

As Stephen nodded, he felt his face flush slightly. How far around the countryside had Uncle Anton spread the news about his thieving, dishonest nephew?

But this man didn't seem scornful. Instead, he nodded and smiled as he studied Stephen's face. "That's what I thought."

"Did you want sticks?" Stephen inquired, trying to discover the man's intent. "You can have the last bundle for free."

But Matthew Petrov chuckled and shook his head. "No, thanks, my boy. I've been wanting to meet you since yesterday. You see, I run the steel factory about a

mile from here. I was over at your uncle's farm yesterday morning repairing the steel gate on their barn. While on my way out, I stopped in the house to talk to your aunt and she mentioned you to me."

"What did she say?"

"Well, we were talking about honest workers. I was telling her what a struggle I'm having to find good, reliable men for my factory. Our world is a criminal pen these days, and I've had to fire half a dozen workers just this past week for stealing parts," Mr. Petrov explained. He paused and then said, "Your aunt told me that you had worked for them last winter. She spoke highly of you."

"Highly?" Stephen repeated in surprise.

"Yes, very highly. She couldn't stop telling me about how honest and faithful you were to them. She said you would rather lose your job than tell a lie about something you didn't do. And when I hear a description of that kind of character, young man, I'm impressed."

"I don't understand, sir. Didn't she tell you about the diamond?"

"Yes, she told me. She even showed it to me."

"You mean they found it?!"

"Oh, yes, they found it. Nadia told me that during the wintertime, they get out their candles to light their kitchen table. Evidently what happened is they had a severe hailstorm last January that shook the roof. The jewel must have dislodged and fallen down into one of the candle trays. She packed away the candles without noticing it, and just this past week got them back out for company. The diamond was sitting right there in one of the trays.

"When she discovered it, she showed her husband, but he didn't care. He said he would never tell you and forbade her to, either. He said you must never know. Nadia was very upset. She said she has shed tears about it, and pleaded with her husband to change his mind. I guess you know your uncle, though. According to his wife, he doesn't change his mind."

Stephen listened in shock and amazement. "I can't believe it! When did this happen?"

"Apparently just last week. Your aunt asked me to find you and tell you, and ask for your pardon on her behalf," Mr. Petrov said.

Stephen smiled. "I told Mother if God wanted to bring out the truth, He'd make it clear in His time," he remarked quietly, half to himself.

Mr. Petrov looked even more pleased. "That's exactly right, young man. But it takes meekness and faithfulness on our part, too. Many a boy would have simply

made up the lie that he took the jewel, born the temporary punishment, and kept the job. I'm positive that's what many of my own workers would have been tempted to do in your situation."

"Yes, Aunt Nadia wanted me to do that," Stephen recalled.

"Well, son, it's the logical thing. No man wants to bear the disgrace of being fired from a job, and many would readily pay any cost to avoid that. But it isn't the *right thing*. Integrity will cause a person to do the right thing, no matter how much it hurts." Mr. Petrov reached out and laid a hand on Stephen's shoulder. "I hardly know you, Stephen, but I'd like to make you an offer. How would you like a job in my steel factory?"

Stephen's mouth dropped open. "Oh, sir, I would love to! But..." he hesitated. "I've done nothing but farming and selling sticks. I really don't have any experience ... I'm not sure that I could." His voice trailed off.

"I realize that, son, and I don't care. I don't care either that you're only sixteen years old. In today's world, there is something far more valuable than age, experience, or even riches: and that is pure, reliable character. I know without a doubt that you're the man I need." Matthew Petrov smiled warmly. "Are you able to start tomorrow?"

"Granted my mother's consent, sir, I'd be honored." Stephen hesitated a moment and then added, "But... but don't I have to do something to sign up for a big job like that? I mean, don't you need letters of recommendation or something?"

"Not at all, son. I told your aunt I needed someone trustworthy, and she recommended you immediately. That's all I need to know." Mr. Petrov reached out for another handshake. "I'll meet you at the factory gate tomorrow, then. Eight o'clock sharp."

Stephen almost ran the whole way home, his heart shouting praises to his heavenly Father. *The diamond has been found! I've got a new job!* Arriving at home, he burst into the cottage, and before even realizing it, he had voiced his elated thoughts.

His family gasped in unison. When Stephen calmed down and related the whole story, one by one they shook their heads in joyful amazement. Stephen looked at his mother. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Mother, don't cry. This is happy news." He laid a strong arm across her thin shoulders.

Mother hugged him tightly as she wept. "Oh, my son, you were right all along. God is so much nearer, so much closer, than I have given Him credit for

during these past few months. I wish that I had had more faith! Ah, why couldn't I just believe Him, as you told me to?"

The next night when Stephen arrived home, Mother's hands flew to her face in astonishment when he handed her the *kopeks*. "Am I dreaming? Is this one day's wages?"

"Yes, ma'am! It's a full three times what Uncle Anton ever gave me in one day! And this is the best job I've ever landed, by far," Stephen rushed on. "Working with the steel is so fascinating, and Mr. Petrov has given me one of the highest responsibility positions in the factory. I'm to keep careful inventory of the parts, and give him a full report every evening on what's missing and what's needed. And all the other workers are supposed to report to me. It's kind of overwhelming at first, but it's really exciting!"

For a moment as he watched his mother's face, Stephen thought she was going to cry again. But instead, she reached out her arms and gathered little Inna, Oleg, and Roza in a close hug. Lastly she beckoned him closer and included him, too. Her voice was almost a whisper as she said, "Our God is incredible to us, children. I want you to know that I have repented of my despair and rededicated my life to Him. I have finally learned that when you trust Him and keep your life clean and straight, He'll work everything out for good—in His time. And that's worth more than any diamond in the world."

In his heart, Stephen echoed a sincere *amen*.