

A Tale of Three Sisters: A Short Story

By Irv Sternberg

The Merrywells were delighted that the Lord had given them two lovely girls whom they had named Faith and Hope. Since their birth, the children had lived up to their names. Faith loved going to church and memorizing sections of the Scriptures. And Hope possessed the brightest and cheeriest demeanor of any of her fond friends. The Merrywells were pleased and proud.

And so it was that they felt blessed when Mrs. Merrywell gave birth to a third girl whom they unhesitatingly named Charity, completing the circle of virtue names brought to America by their Puritan ancestors. The arrival of little Charity seemed to assure the family of a lifetime of happiness. But a dark cloud appeared when Charity was about five, and grew larger and darker as she grew older.

The Merrywells had learned from their pastor that little Charity had taken two dollars from the donation plate at a Sunday service. They were mortified. Astonished by this behavior, they questioned her action. She had no explanation. They lectured her on the evil of perpetrating such a foul deed, convinced it was only a childish aberration when she promised never to do such a thing again.

The next year the family was out for a drive with Faith sitting in the front with her parents while Hope and Charity sat in the back of the large Buick sedan with the family brown lab, Happy. Suddenly, Hope cried out. "Ouch, stop that! It hurt!"

Mrs. Merrywell turned to see what had happened.

Hope was rubbing her arm. "Charity bit me!"

"No, I didn't," Charity said quickly. "It was Happy."

Mrs. Merrywell looked at Hope's arm. The skin was not broken, but the flesh was bruised. She would be all right. She looked at both girls. One of them had lied, a realization that pained her heart.

That pain continued to linger over the years, and it always seemed to grow out of something involving Charity. When she was in high school, her principal asked for a meeting with Mr. and Mrs. Merrywell to discuss an incident that had occurred in the cafeteria the previous day. A teacher had overheard Charity using vulgar language in conversation with other students. The Merrywells were shocked. Where had she learned such words? What possessed her to mouth them?

After graduation, Charity went off to college. The Merrywells had wanted her to go to the nearby state college like her sisters, but she insisted she wanted to go out of state. In her freshman year, she hesitatingly confessed that she had to quit school because she was pregnant. Mrs. Merrywell almost fainted. Her father looked like he would have a stroke. Charity eloped with her boyfriend and gave birth to a boy. Then they had a girl, nice children both of

them. But the Merrywells' hearts were broken beyond repair. What had they done wrong? Why had their youngest child behaved the way she did all her life, and why had she caused them so much pain?

As the years passed, Faith married a clergyman and moved to New Hampshire after husband's calling. They had a son, who lived a tormented life until he came out of the closet and announced he was gay. Faith and her husband were devastated. Hope moved to Hollywood in pursuit of a movie career. She acted in small roles in several inconsequential films, married a cameraman she met on the set, and accepted a life of California regularity.

Mr. Merrywell died of a heart attack when he was 76 and Mrs. Merrywell lived alone in their Denver home. She required attention, and it was Charity, who lived nearby, who provided it. In her mother's last years, Charity and her family looked after her mother, spending much time with her, making sure she got the medical attention she needed, never letting her get lonely.

Her death approaching, Mrs. Merrywell pondered the mysteries of life. "My daughter, Charity, is the bright star in my life," she told a friend. "She has lived up to her name."