

The Story of *Grace*

Back in the war year of 1918, a bearded, saintly old man with footscrapers to sell called on Eric Enstrom at his photography studio in the tiny mining town of Bovey, Minnesota.

Out of this chance encounter came a world-famous photographic study. Today Enstrom's picture, "Grace," showing the elderly peddler with head bowed in a mealtime prayer of thanksgiving, is known and loved throughout the world.

There was something about the old gentleman's face that immediately impressed Enstrom on that 1918 day when Charles Wilden visited his studio. "I saw that he had a kind face . . . there weren't any harsh lines in it."

It happened, at the time, that Enstrom was preparing a portfolio of pictures to take with him to a convention of the Minnesota Photographers Association.

"I wanted to take a picture that would show people that even though they had to do without many things because of the war they still had much to be thankful for."

On a small table Enstrom placed his large family Bible, and on it laid a pair of spectacles. Beside the Bible he placed a bowl of gruel, a loaf of bread, and a knife. Then he asked Wilden to place his folded hands to his brow in prayer before partaking of a meager meal.

Enstrom immediately noticed that Wilden struck the pose very easily and naturally. To bow his head in prayer seemed to be characteristic of the elderly visitor.

As soon as the negative was developed, Enstrom was sure he had something special . . . a picture that seemed to say, "This man doesn't have much of earthly goods, but he has more than most people because he has a thankful heart."

The picture caused little stir at the 1918 photography convention. A few years later, however, Enstrom took it to convention again. This time it was hung in exhibit and received warm critical acclaim.

Most sales in the early 1920s were to traveling people who came through Bovey and saw the picture in the window of Enstrom's photo studio. As soon as one print was sold, he'd make another to take its place.

The early "Grace" pictures were printed in black and white or in brown tint. Later Enstrom's daughter, Mrs. Rhoda Nyberg, also of Bovey, began hand-painting them in oils, and interest in the picture soared.

A moving testimonial came from a businessman in nearby Grand Rapids, Minn., who wrote about the picture in a newspaper column. He concluded the column with a simple, eloquent prayer to accompany the picture:

Lord, there may be many homes that are larger than mine. There may be tables groaning with food and drink in abundance. There may be riches in supplies and appointments. There may be conveniences on every hand and there may be physical assurance that tomorrow will bring still more. But, Lord, you have been with me unto this day and supplied my necessary requirements. On that assurance I rest by belief that you will bless my efforts, if I apply them to the best of my ability to carry on. I am content. Amen.

Other words of appreciation for the picture — for its deep expression of reverence, humility and gratitude — have come from near and far.

When demand for the picture outran Enstrom's ability to supply photographic prints, he sold the publishing rights to Augsburg Publishing House (now known as Augsburg Fortress). Printed in full, natural color, "Grace" is a cherished favorite in countless homes, churches, and restaurants everywhere.