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## The Searcher

By Mrs. Paul E. King

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It was Christmas Sunday evening, and the restlessness I felt inside me gave impetus to my feet as they moved toward the hall closet where my heavy woolen coat hung neatly on its sturdy hanger. Donning the warm coat and wrapping a plaid muffler 'round my neck, I slipped into my fleece-lined gloves and overshoes; then, slapping the hat on my head, I stepped out into the night, locking the door behind me.



It was beautiful outside; clean, fresh snow had just fallen; the air was brittle-cold, and the sound of distant bells sliced through the stillness of the night. It was a night so highly reminiscent of other Christmases as to fill my heart with a paroxysm of pain. No ordinary pain, mine; but an aching, hurting kind which no medication on earth could allay, assuage, soothe or deaden. For years, Evalene and I had made it a practice to walk on Christmas Eve. Where? you ask. To church, of all places.

Evalene was what many would call a religious fanatic. (And, much as I hate to admit it, I dubbed her the same. In my heart, that is, I considered her this. Secretly, mine was, for I told no one my thoughts.) But now, with her absence making life little more than tolerable, I realized how very wrong I'd been. My wife was anything but a fanatic; she was an angel in disguise -- a thing I failed to recognize and admit until she was beckoned Home by the One who loved and redeemed her, and the One who was all the world to her.

I walked onward, taking deliberate steps away from the usual route to Evalene's church, not caring where I went nor choosing any particular part of town. I felt I just had to walk; the restless spirit inside my bosom compelled me. I wanted to feel again the glory of Christmas. (I had felt it and known its meaning when I was a boy of fourteen summers, a thing I never revealed to Evalene in all our thirty years of married life.) I wanted its wonder again, its beauty, its revealed mystery -- to glimpse once more the guiding star, to stand with the shepherds and sense the joy of the angels, to look beyond the holly, the tinsel and mistletoe into the realm of the spiritual -- into the heavenly-filled loveliness and happiness where God is.

Life! I thought miserably, fearfully. What is life? How well I knew what Evalene's answer would have been: "It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." Frequently, she had quoted the lines to me . . . from the Book of James, I believe she said.

Well, it was true, if I believed or didn't want to believe it. I realized the veracity of it more and more as I looked into the mirror and saw the aging process altering the once-smooth cheeks and forehead with lines and wrinkles and turning the once-yet-black hair into a thick, wiry mass of silvery-gray. The sharp, acute pain in my joints attested to the fact as well. Where had the years gone to? I wondered. And why had they seemed to be so accelerated since I passed the forty-year mark?

Deep in serious thought, I walked on. The cold air stung my cheeks and nipped my nose and, almost without thinking, I turned my coat collar up around my neck and buried my chin deep into its warm, heavy protection, pushing my gloved hands deep into the pockets. Not sure where I wanted to go, I followed the orange-yellow street lights which appeared before me like tall, erect sentinels holding torches by which to guide the footsteps of weary travelers of the night.

My inner restlessness persisted, driving me on, farther and farther from my door like the wise men, seeking something, searching for Someone.

In the biting cold of the night, I passed by a group of young people. Giggling and whispering, they were gathered 'round the gate of a small but extremely neat cottage. I paused in the shadow of a maple tree and watched. Excitement was in the air; I felt it from my point of observation. I hadn't long to wait until I saw the reason for their giggling and the excited whisperings. Two of their number crept stealthily and cautiously up to the front door. Setting a large box on the step, they rang the doorbell then ran away as speedily as their limbs would carry them. Their squeals of delight and happy laughter faded as swiftly as their retreating footsteps did and once again the night settled back to its utter calm and quiet.

"Teenagers!" a voice exclaimed in disgust and contempt. "Up to no good, I guarantee you!"

At the sound of the unexpected voice, I spun around. I had thought I was alone on the street except for the young people. Now I saw that an old man, walking his dog, had been padding along behind me.

"Teenagers!" he exclaimed again, seeming to spit the word out with contempt and derision as he gazed sourly down the street although the group had by now vanished into the dark. "Up to no good!" he repeated again.

"I wouldn't say that," I said speaking softly. "Not all young people are bad."

He looked at me with frank disbelief.

"And what makes you so sure of that?" he grunted, half in disgust and partly out of curiosity.

"Memories," I replied. "Just memories," I added more mildly and moved on, leaving him to make his own conclusions.

Glancing back over my shoulder before leaving the block, I saw the door of the little cottage open. An aged man, his hair as white as the newly-fallen snow, was peering into the darkness as though searching for someone. By his side stood an equally aged woman. They looked at the beautifully gift-wrapped, enormous box, then looked at each other and finally they lifted the box off the step and disappeared behind the door.

I thought of Evalene then, my beautiful, beautiful Evalene. It was the week we had become engaged. The night was glorious with stars, a cloudless, deep purple-blue sky and a cold but silver-white winter moon. The Hansons were poor. Poor! Nine children, they had. It was Evalene's idea. (Even before she was saved and sanctified wholly she had a heart as soft as butter on a hot August day.)

We had worked for weeks prior to Christmas to fill a "Hanson Barrel" . . . "something for every one and many things for all. It's all the Christmas they'll get, Dick!" she told me sadly when her idea became a fixed thing in her mind.

We skimped and scraped on ourselves then bought (or made) and wrapped and tied, and soon the enormous barrel was filled -- clear to the very top! The lid wouldn't close due to the gifts that tumbled over the barrel's rim, and Evalene, perfect homemaker and clever seamstress that she was, decked the barrel and lid out in a perfectly fitted "dress" of stunning poinsettia-red velvet, tying the lid on at a slanted angle with an enormous bow of bright green velvet ribbon!

"Don't make noise, Dick," she warned in a whispered tone in my ear as we parked her father's old pick-up truck a short distance away from the Hanson's house and her younger brother and I started for the door with the Christmas barrel.

"I'll go now," Joe whispered in my ear once the barrel was outside the door. "I promised Bonnie I'd come by as soon as I helped you and Evie." (Bonnie was his girlfriend; his wife now).

Joe had hurried away in his car, which he parked farther down the street. Evalene and I looked at each other. Our eyes met; our fingers touched. She looked fairer than the moon, I thought and her eyes shone brighter than the scintillating, diamond-glistening stars.

"Knock on the door, Dick," she whispered, excitement showing all over her lovely face.

"You do it, Evalene; after all, it was your idea . . ."

"But you were so wonderful to help me, Dick. I couldn't have done nearly so much if you hadn't been so unselfish and helpful."

"Let's knock together then," I added, drawing her hand, with mine, toward the door.

We ran then, just like the young people whom I had seen such a brief time ago, ran and hid, watching from behind bushes until the Hansons opened the door and discovered the beautifully wrapped and done-up barrel -- the only Christmas gifts they received that year.

From then on, we began doing everything together. (We were married less than a month after our engagement.) That's why I missed her so dreadfully now. The "togetherness" was gone; the loss and the loneliness of having half of you gone is all but devastating.

I walked until I came to the main thoroughfare of town. Christmas lights glittered and sparkled from lamp posts, and myriad trees, bedecked in tiny, sparkly-white miniature lights, glistened and shone like some enormous fairy-land. Department stores, their gigantic glass plated windows displaying miniature replicas of ice skaters, wood cutters, toy-makers, animals and such like, were transformed into a child's world of make-believe. I walked on, looking and becoming increasingly aware that all this glitter and sparkle was not what I wanted -- not that for which I was searching. It was all so very transitory, seasonal, even in this instance. There was nothing lasting and enduring to it.

Involuntarily I turned around and started back, taking the way toward the church where Evalene used to worship, the church in which she had had her radical heart-change. Perhaps there I would sense her presence, and my loneliness and restlessness would be allayed.

My steps matched the wind now . . . brittle and brisk . . . and soon I was walking down the street where the neat but unpretentious looking church was located. As I approached it, an illuminated cross caught my attention. I stood as one transfixed, recalling all the horribly-evil and ugly things the cross symbolized and realizing for the first time in years what Isaiah 53 meant. Then I walked up the three steps and let myself into the vestibule where the singing reached my ears.

The interior of the church was neat and clean, I noticed, but nothing at all like some of the "uptown" churches, where each tried to outdo the other in ridiculous looking architectural design and oddity.

I walked to a pew near the center of the church, caught up in the fervency of the congregational singing, the shining glow on faces. Although I had lived with words continually., looking them up, pursuing their meaning, rolling them on my tongue for rhythm, sound and meter... I could find none to explain this feeling of awe -- this awareness of greatness, this consciousness of how near to us are the angels, how close to us is God. In humbleness of heart and contrition of soul, I bowed my head and threw open the door to my heart. "Come in, Lord Jesus," I cried out of the depths of my heart. "Come in, and wash me in Thy Blood. Make me whiter than snow..."

On the way out, people wished me a blessed Christmas, taking my hand in a firm, tight grip of genuine Christian fellowship and brotherly love. The minister, detaining me for a brief while, said, "You're Richard Baker, I believe."

His eyes searched my face for an answer.

"That's right," I told him, wondering how he knew.

As if reading my mind, he said, "Your wife was a member here -- before my arrival, of course. You see, I'm just starting into my third month as pastor of the flock. You did us a great kindness many years ago."

I gasped. Incredulous! It was incredulous. I had never seen the man before tonight. "You must have me mixed up with someone else," I told him, with a half apologetic smile creasing the corners of my mouth.

He smiled then, a smile so genuine and real that it went clear through me. No hypocrisy here, I mused happily. "I am Joshua Hanson."

The declaration, made so simply and without further explanation, was the key to his former statement.

"But . . . but how did you know?" I questioned quickly. "I mean, well, how did you know that . . . that..."

"A barrel as big as the one you and Evalene brought to our door couldn't be carried there quickly nor set down as easily and quietly as a smaller, less bulky box," the minister said with a twinkle in his deep blue eyes. "I was looking out the window, feeling quite glum and down in the dumps over knowing there would be no clothing nor anything for us that year, due to Dad's illness, and when I saw Evalene and you sneak up to the door and knock, well, you'll never know what happened inside my little heart.

"It was that Christmas barrel, with its carefully selected and well-chosen gifts of clothing, toys and foodstuffs, that made me realize that God does answer prayer . . . mine specifically. I was saved shortly thereafter and sanctified wholly that same winter and, young, though I was, I felt God's call to preach upon me . . . a call which I have fulfilled and am now fulfilling. Do me a favor, Richard, will you?" he asked suddenly.

"I'll be glad to," I replied hoarsely, feeling all choked up on the inside.

"Take dinner with Mrs. Hanson and me tomorrow, the Lord sparing us all."

I nodded in hearty agreement. "Thanks, Brother Hanson," I said. "I'd be delighted to do so. And before I go, I want to tell you something: I'm saved. Saved!"

I walked home, feeling lighter than I could ever remember having felt. The quiet house was "waiting up" for me, its single burning living room light beckoning me inside to its warmth and comfort. Turning the key in the lock and stepping into the hallway, I realized with holy joy and pure delight that I had come Home. At last, I was back in God's great sheepfold.

Before removing my heavy coat even, I fell to my knees and, weeping for joy, I had a holy praise meeting. The searcher, like those other wise men of long, long ago, had sought and he had found; not a small child with His mother in a house, but a Saviour, the Prince of Peace.

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THE END