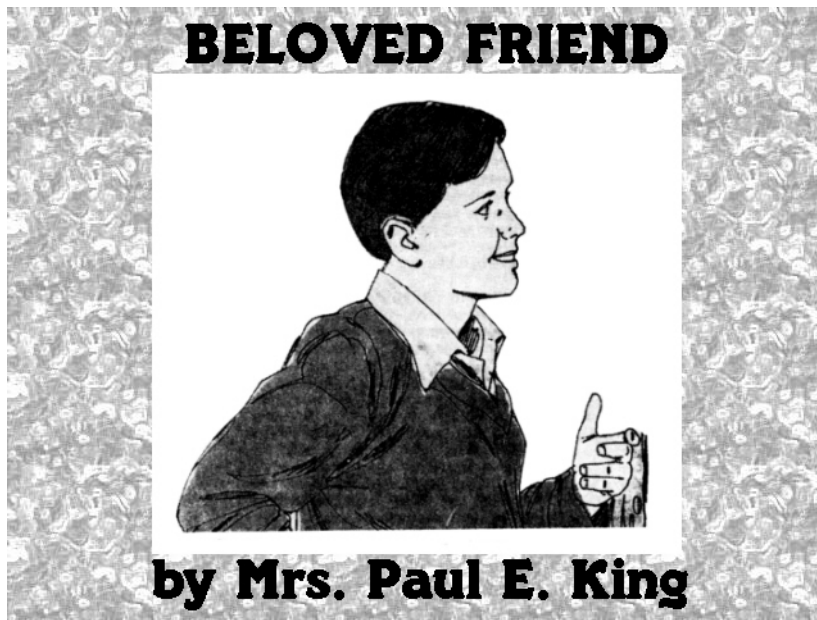


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Digital Edition 10/22/2001
By Holiness Data Ministry

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BELOVED FRIEND

By Mrs. Paul E. King

From the June 5, 1983 Sunday School Beacon

Would you believe it; I did it again! Yes, indeed, I sure did. Lexie (she's my almost-nineteen-year-old sister) says I don't have a "refined, dignified" brain in my head (whatever that means). But can I help it if I don't? I just have to be me; I don't know how to be anyone else. Truth of the matter is, it's really quite sickening and disgusting when someone tries to be someone else beside himself. Or herself.

Well, like I said, I'm me. And, much to Lexie's chagrin, disdain, disfavor, dissatisfaction and disapproval (and all the other verbs and/or nouns you care to add), I made friends with ("of all people!" Lexie's words) a garbage collector. Yes, that's what I said--a garbage collector.

Perhaps my pretty, auburn-haired sister wouldn't have that "high and mighty" feeling if our dad were like a lot of my friend's dads..., auto mechanics, insurance salesmen, GM or Ford plant workers and farmers. But our dad's none of these; he's a doctor. (And a good one, I'm sure).

Lexie feels I'm doing quite an "injustice to the profession by hobnobbing with such low class boys" (her words again). She's even accused me of being "grossly disloyal to Dad's high calling." But then, I've just got to be me. And since, by my sister's logical inference from a general rule or principle. I am positively and absolutely devoid of that "high and mighty" professional something or other, well, I went ahead and happily made friends with the lowliest of all (thus far), the garbage collector.

We moved into the big house in Fairhaven Woods only two months ago when Dad took a job in General Hospital after having practiced elsewhere for 13 years. Always his sights were on General; so, when an opening came and he was asked to come, he accepted gladly. Now the garbage collectors had always picked our garbage up at the back of our lawn. The extreme end of the back, to be sure. Consequently, we never saw the men. Oh, we may have had a fleeting glimpse of a denim blue cap and a jacket as the men hung precariously from the side of the rattling, noisy monster of a truck on their way to the next house, but to actually see them, no, we didn't. That is, a good face to face sort of seeing, I mean. But things were different here in the Woods.

It was this way: I was on the front lawn doodling with a ball when I heard the clanging, banging, rattling noise of the gray monster emerge from Dogwood Lane onto our street, Laurel Lane. (Here in the Woods, our garbage is picked up from the front of the lawn. Kinda' strange, isn't it? But that's the way it is.) Well, like I said, I was doodling with the ball when the garbage truck rattled down our street. I saw a goodlooking, smiling young man come racing down the street toward our lawn and me. Whew! Could he ever run! "Toss me a few," he called, still on the run. I did. He caught every ball like a pro, pitching it back to me with equal skill.

The truck wheezed to a stop, its noisy motor still running, when the young man, tossing me the ball with one hand, easily swung the garbage into the open-mouthed cavern at the truck's rear end with the other.

I stood, open-mouthed, watching him. He was a genius. A giant. What's more, he was young--not much older than me, I was sure.

"Hi," he said, with a twinkle in his blue-blue eyes, as he bounded easily across the lawn to where I stood, astonished and awe-stricken, wondering what vitamins he took to have energy and vitality like that.

"Oh . . . hi," I answered, recovering from the pleasant shock long enough to respond and to smile.

He dropped on the thick carpet of lawn and drew his knees up to his chin. Locking his fingers around his ankles, he said, "I'm Stephen Kingsberry, son of David and Deborah Kingsberry. But you may just call me Steve; that's what all my friends call me."

I gulped. All his friends! I was considered his friend . . . "that's what all my friends call me," he'd said. Again, I gulped. "I'm sure glad to know you, Steve," I answered, dropping on the lawn beside him. "I'm Trenton Peterson. Trent for short."

Steve smiled. "I'm sure happy to meet you, Trent. Been wanting to do this for a long time. Do you ever go to church?" he asked, rocking back and forth and looking as casual and relaxed as I do around Dad and Mom. And Lexie, too, when she's not trying to make me over nor trying to make me be what I'm not nor who I'm not.

"Sometimes, Steve. Like at Christmas and on Easter Sunday."

If this shocked Steve, he never let on. "I was wondering if you'd go with me tomorrow night. Our church is having a special youth meeting, Trent. I just know you'd enjoy the preaching and the singing. I'd sure be happy having you as my guest. Think you can make it?" he asked quickly.

"I'm sure I can," I answered. "But I'd better ask my folks to make certain."

Jumping to his feet like he had springs in his body instead of sinew and bones, Steve thrust a small card into my hand saying, "Call me tonight before seven if you can go tomorrow night. OK?"

"Will do," I promised.

"Hope to see you then," Steve said, looking down the street where the monster was almost ready to pull over to the curb. "Great meeting you, Trent," he called over his shoulder. "I'll be waiting for your call."

He ran like a deer, and just as the truck pulled over, he swung the heavy bags of garbage easily into the gaping cavity. Then, turning and taking the blue denim hat off his head, he waved goodbye.

I watched until the truck disappeared around one of the many circular drives in the Woods. Then I hurried inside where I scrutinized the card in my hand more closely and carefully. It gave the guest speaker's name as well as the names of the special singers, the time of the services, the address of the church and the pastor's name and phone number. Beneath this in neat, clear printing, Steve had his phone number listed.

"Mom," I said going into the big, airy-fight and cheerful family room where I knew she'd been when I went outside, "how about me going to church tomorrow night with Steve Kingsberry?"

Mom looked up from her reading and pushed the glasses farther up on the bridge of her nose. (I knew her contact lens must have been bothering her again or she'd have been wearing them instead of the glasses. She didn't like glasses; said they were a "necessary nuisance," the way they slipped down off her narrow nose-bridge.)

"Steve Kingsberry; who's he?" she asked, smiling. "One of the garbage collectors. He's a super . . ."

But that's as far as I got. Lexie uncurled herself from sofa number two and jumped to her feet. Placing her hands on her slender hips, she came to fife. "Trent, how can you!?" It was both an exclamation and a question. At least, it sounded like it was.

"What do you mean, Lex, 'how can you?' "

Her blue-green eyes flashed. "You know what I mean!" she exclaimed, sounding for the world like thunder with a shaft of lightning following, the lightning being the exclamation point to her loud rumble. "A garbage collector--of all things!" Turning, she said, "Mother, you and Father are going to have to do something. This boy, my brother, is bringing disgrace to the family."

The way she said "this boy," you'd have thought I was the garbage instead of the bags which Steve tossed so lightly and easily into the truck. I smiled, feeling real sorry for Lexie who had developed that "high and mighty" attitude ever since Dad became known as a great doctor and surgeon three or four years ago when his name and what he had done was published and printed in some journal.

Mom looked rather amused at my sister, telling her she wished she would have pursued her once-winning way of making friends, like I was doing.

That's when Lexie accused me {again} of being "grossly disloyal to Dad's high calling." Giving her nose a tiny tweak, I laughed saying, "I'm having a good time, Lex; you're miserable. My friends are down-to-earth fellows. There's not a snob in the whole bunch. ' "

"And why should there be?" she countered angrily. "Farmers, barbers, shop workers. Ugh!" She shuddered.

"Just think, Lex," I said teasingly, "no farmers, no milk. You know how well you like milk. No barbers, no haircuts."

"I sure wish you'd wise up to the new trends!" she shot back hotly. "Those haircuts of yours. Ugh! You'd think you'd have more respect for your father's profession."

"Perhaps I do, Lexie; that's why I have mine cut conservatively. I want to look like a man, not a she-he man."

"Honestly, Mother, you're going to have to do something. He's impossible. He's a disgrace to our family."

"Just why do you think Trent's a disgrace?" Mother countered quickly.

"His friends! And now this one, a... a garbage collector! What will Sheila and Carmen and Britt and Kris say when they hear about it? And hear about it they will."

"What's wrong with being a garbage collector?" Mom asked. "Your father worked in a grocery store, drove a taxi, cleaned buildings, did painting and roofing and anything he could get to put himself through school. Do you think he's scum, Lexie?"

"But nobody knows that, Mother," Lexie answered. "And I'll appreciate it if you'll never tell my friends about it."

"May I go with Steve?" I interrupted, asking my question the second time. "He's a great guy. He really is, Mom."

"How old is he?" Mom asked.

"He doesn't look much older than Lexie. Maybe 19 or 20," I said, guessing.

"Please, Mother, no. No! And especially not to church!" Lexie begged, looking daggers at me.

Very calmly and sweetly Mom said, "You may go, Son. You've chosen your friends carefully and wisely thus far and I'm sure this Steve Kingsberry will prove his worth, just as the others have done." Lexie stormed out of the room.

"Thanks, Mom," I said, hurrying outside.

Steve seemed excited that I was allowed to go with him when I called him before seven that evening, and it was I who was the excited one when he picked me up the following day.

Talk about new and different--that was Steve's church! I'd never been in a service like it. Sing? I thought the roof would cave in any minute. No anthem type songs nor singing here. What's more, the people sang like they knew what they were singing about! It gave me a funny, tingly, goose-bumpy

feeling. And when they prayed..., and I mean, literally, they, not just a person, but everybody..., well, it kinda' shook me.

But if the praying scared me, well, I was just being initiated. The preacher was something else. He scared me, startled me, shook me, and made me feel that for sure I was the meanest, dirtiest, foulest, vilest sinner on God's good earth. I never heard a message like it, not in all of my barely-over-seventeen years of natural life. Needless to say, when he asked those who wanted to be born again..., saved... I was the first to step out. Fearful of dropping into hell's gaping jaws before I hit the altar even, I ran down the aisle.

Don't ask me what happened after that, nor how many others followed -- I don't know. But one thing I do know: I passed from death unto life. In Christ, I was made new. Transformed. Never have I experienced anything like it. My load of sin and guilt and . condemnation dropped off at that altar where I met my wonderful Saviour. I felt as light as a feather.

All the way home, Steve and I talked about God and praised the Lord. I could hardly wait to share this blessed experience with Mom and Dad and Lexie.

They were all in the family room when I opened the door, even Dad. This was quite unusual, but I was sure the Lord had it planned this way.

"Well, how did you and Steve make out?" Mom asked before I had time to come in where they sat even.

"I can't say how Steve made out, but I sure can tell you how I did!" I exclaimed joyfully. "Tonight, I got converted. I'm saved and I'm going to Heaven."

"You... what?" Dad asked slowly, softly.

"I got ready for Heaven. I asked God to forgive my sins and to come into my heart and He did. I'm so happy. I have perfect peace in my soul."

Mom got all misty-eyed. "Th . . . that's wonderful, Trent," she remarked in little more than a whisper. "But how do you know it?" she asked quickly.

"Something inside tells me so. I don't feel guilty nor condemned anymore and..."

Lexie, who had been deeply engrossed in a program, seemed suddenly to have come back to our family room and into what was being said. Jumping to her feet, she demanded, "Are you trying to say that now you've gone religious?" It was almost a commanding question, one that she felt I had to answer.

"I found the Lord Jesus Christ, Lex, if that's what you want to know," I answered happily. "I wish you'd ask Him into your heart. Mom and Dad, too."

"How dare you, Trenton! How dare you! It's not enough that you hobnob with low-down trash; you must go and get their brand of religion, too! Well, I'll tell you one . . ."

"Lexie!" It was Dad. "I'll have no more of that!"

"But, Dad, he's disgracing us all!"

"Is it a disgrace to get ready for Heaven, to be born again, Lex?" I asked gently. "If it is, then so be it; I'll bear the disgrace, or whatever you may call it. Tonight, for the first time in my life, I know the real meaning of soul-rest and soul-peace and pure inner joy. I wish all of you knew what it is. It's wonderful..."

"Cut it out! " Lexie all but screamed, running up the circular stairway to her bedroom.

"You . . . look different," Dad said hoarsely.

"I am different, Dad. Why don't you and Mom come to church with Steve and me? He's coming for me tomorrow night again. He said the Lord had a clean and pure heart for me, but I'd have to want it and ask Him to do it for me. Why not go with us and get ready for Heaven, too?"

Dad looked at me for a long while. Then he said, "We may do that, Son. Yes, we just may. This must be what one of my patients was telling me about before she died. Said she often prayed for me and my family, that we'd get saved. It made me feel strange, for I knew where I the one dying instead of

her, I'd have been terrified. But she said she had no fear of death; said she knew she would soon be at Home with Jesus. Yes, Son, we'll go with you. Tomorrow's my day off. We need to learn about spiritual things..."

I could hardly sleep that night, so full of joy and happiness was I. Not only was I a new creature in Christ, but I felt sure that Mom and Dad were close to being one, also. As for Lexie, well, I calmly and trustingly gave her over to God. He knew better than I how to bring down her "high and mighty" feelings and make her willing to yield and to humble herself. Then I rolled over and, before drifting off to sleep, I thanked God for sending me my new friend, Steve... working to put himself through Bible school. Steve the giant! Steve, the lowly garbage collector, called-preacher and successful soul-winner.