

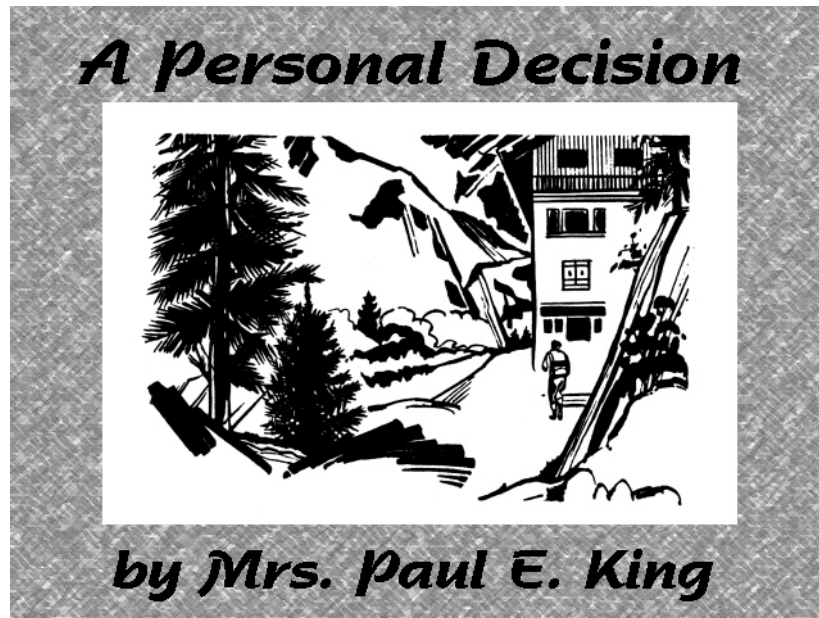
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A PERSONAL DECISION
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Cory glanced over at his father, carefully. He didn't want him to see that he was looking. Then he stared ahead at the endless looking ribbon of road, barely discernible now in the growing dusk of twilight. His father flicked the headlights on and their bright beams picked out the black road. Cory studied the white lines along the edge of the road, saw the center line dividing the

dual lanes, then pushed his back deeper into the comfortable, cushioned seat, his mind racing. Laws. Everywhere he went, everything he did, laws.

"Something bothering you, Cory?"

He hadn't meant to sigh out loud. But he did.

"Something wrong?" Again, the question.

"Just thinking."

"Something good and wholesome, I hope."

Cory squirmed in his seat. "Well . . ."

His father gave him a quick sideways glance and Cory felt like his dad had read his thoughts. He felt uncomfortable, a thing he never used to feel around his parent.

"I hope you'll enjoy these next few days, Son -- just the two of us alone in your Uncle Roy's cabin in the woods . . ." Mr. Neeley's voice trailed with the hint of a sob.

Cory felt tears dart to his eyes; stinging, salty tears. He had brought so much hurt, so many heartaches, into his father's and mother's life lately, doing things he never dreamed he'd do and saying things he never intended to say. And each time he did them he hated himself.

"Cory, last night . . ."

Cory sat on the edge of the seat. "I know, Dad. I was home an hour after curfew again."

"Why are you so disobedient anymore? And rebellious? Have you forgotten what God's Word has to say about disobedience and rebellion?"

Laws again, Cory thought, feeling rebellion surge and rise inside his chest.

His father said no more. But Cory could feel the pain and the hurt which he had again inflicted. If only he could forget Mona and her crowd. Everything had gone in reverse since he became interested in her. The standards and principles of his life's training and up-bringing he had reversed to please Mona; the once strict adherence to his father's curfew had been ignored to meet and pacify her demands and wishes. Everything pivoted and centered around Mona and her lifestyle. He was happy, but unhappy. Dumb, he thought. No, weird. How could one be happy and unhappy simultaneously? It didn't add up to a balanced or proper equation, he rationalized, trying to pinpoint where the imbalance came in.

He glanced surreptitiously out of the corner of his eye to his father. Tears shimmered silvery bright on the sunken cheeks. Sunken, no doubt, over fasting, weeping and praying for me, Cory thought with a dagger of conviction plunging his heart. If only he would never have become so infatuated over Mona, he thought. Love could do strange things for a person and to a person.

Love? Did Mona actually love him? How many times had he asked himself that question? Oh, she said she did. But did she, really and truly? Mona could say so very many things that sounded convincing, but actually weren't so.

Cory ran nervous fingers through his dark hair, the nagging fear of Mona's faithfulness pounding his brain. He knew as well as he knew his name that if and when she chose to do so, she would drop him as smoothly and as easily as she had dropped Dick Scanlan and Norm Derrick. It was a sort of game with Mona. Only he had hoped that when he began going out with her that her game-playing was finished. But in his heart he knew this wasn't so. He had only been pretending, latching onto a star of hope and bowing to her wishes and demands in the hope of keeping her.

Suddenly, it seemed that a bright light came on inside his brain and he could think more clearly. Maybe being away from Mona and riding with his father had drawn the lines more clearly and properly, he reasoned. Or maybe it was simply that he was willing for once to face facts and analyze Mona in the light of what he had known always, but which he had shoved far back in a corner of the attic of his mind.

Sometimes facts were painful to face, he knew. Yes, exceeding painful. They could hurt. Cut, too. But maybe this was what he needed, he told himself honestly -- the knife of hurt and pain to cut asunder his selfish, self-willed, rebellious heart until the festering, deeply-hidden sin was laid bare for all to see, including himself.

Sweat broke out on Cory's forehead. He was no novice where religious things were concerned. He was an enlightened man, brought up in a spiritual home with Spirit-filled parents and holy, godly living sisters and a younger brother. He had heard of salvation and holiness of heart and life for so long as ever he could remember. And until he flipped over Mona and got to hanging around with her and her crowd, he had had no problems.

Step by step, Cory traced his downfall. Proverbs had quite a bit to say, -- warn really -- about the wicked woman . . . "Flee from her;" "Come not near her house . . ." These were only a couple of the Scriptural warnings. Yet he, like the foolish fly, had zeroed right into her "web" of charms and beauty. And he knew as surely as he knew he was riding with his father that Mona would one day ease him out of the picture.

"Dad," he said, turning in the seat to face his father, "I know why you've taken time off work to take me to Uncle Ray's cabin . . ."

Mr. Neeley gave Cory a quick glance.

"You . . . want to talk to me -- alone . . ."

"That's part of the reason ."

"Why wait till we get to the cabin?"

"It's your move, Cory . . ."

Cory cleared his throat, brushed the sweat off his forehead with an equally moist hand then said, "I'm past eighteen . . ."

"Right, Son. You'll be nineteen within a couple of months if God spares you."

"I could leave home and, according to the laws of our land, there's nothing you and mother could do to prevent it or even to bring me back. Compel me, that is."

"Correct."

" I thought of doing this, Dad -- gave it much thought, in fact. Always, I felt a restrainer around me, something or Someone holding me back from carrying my plans through. Herm Gallagher said I could stay with him when I decided to make the break with the home ties -- said he has no restrictions; he can come and go as he pleases. But I'd never be able to fit into Herm's lifestyle. He's too wild for me."

Mr. Neeley turned off the main highway onto a little-traveled, black-top road, his ears wide open to what his son was saying, his heart sending up a silent but fervent prayer for this, his only stray.

"I see what a fool I've been, Dad -- a blind, deceived fool . . ." And Cory's shoulders shook with sobs. "I've nearly killed you and Mother with my disobedience and rebellion and I . . . I'm truly sorry, Dad. Can you forgive me, please? I'm not happy. Oh, there were times when I thought I was, when I was with Mona. But inside, where truth and facts are faced, I'm miserably unhappy. Tonight, I see that if anything is to be done for my soul's eternal welfare, I must do it. No one can do this for me."

"Thank God, Cory! Thank God!"

"And if there's any parting with Mona and her crowd, I must do it. This is a personal decision, one neither Mother nor you can make. I must do it. And right here and now I make this personal decision and pronouncement: forever I separate myself from Mona and her crowd of godless friends. I've known a better way; nothing less can fulfill my needs or satisfy my desires. Could we pray, Dad? I feel all broken and crushed inside, like praying will be easy and Heaven is bending low."

"Oh, Cory, thanks be unto God!" was all Mr. Neeley could exclaim as he pulled the car to a halt beneath an umbrella overhang of stately pines. The weekend would be one of praise and shouting, he knew. Praying and fasting and holding on to God had its reward: "And when he came to himself, the prodigal said, I will return to Father's house . . ."

Feeling younger than he had felt for months, Mr. Neeley got out of the car and knelt by his sobbing, already loudly-praying son on a thick forest moss carpet. Heaven was bending low -- he felt the holy current.