

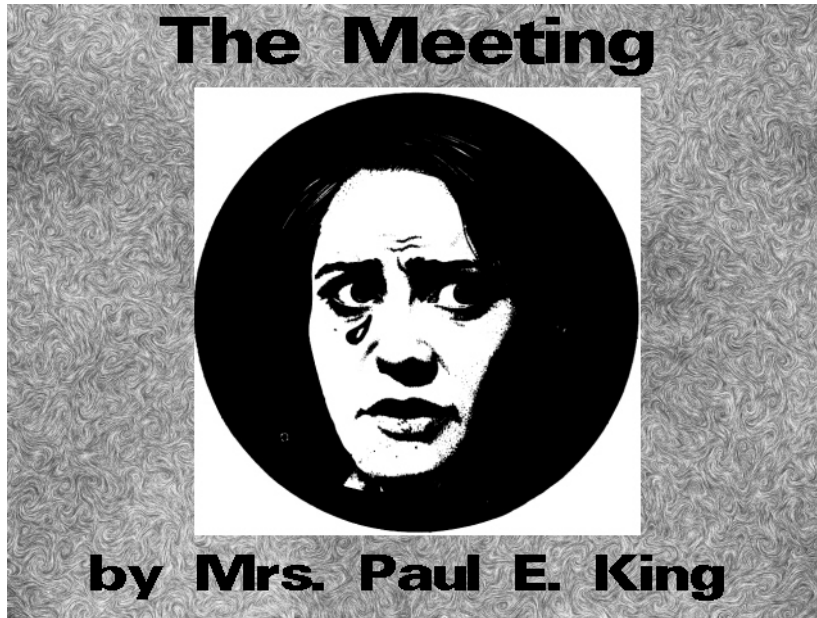
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Digital Edition 11/09/05
By Holiness Data Ministry

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The Sunday School Beacon
September 22, 1985



THE MEETING
By Mrs. Paul E. King

It seemed unreal, but there she stood, silhouetted gracefully against an evening sky of rose-orange and pink. Her long, jet-black hair fell in two shiny, thick braids more than halfway down her back; her dress, of vivid reds and yellow and blue, reached to her ankles. She stood facing the receding, fading sun, straight as an arrow, her arms up-raised, reaching, reaching. For what, I didn't know; but I had an idea that maybe I did know. Was that a teardrop

shining and shimmering on her face, caught like a gem by the sun's final rays? Dare I approach her? Was this some sort of religious rite she was performing? I wondered, taking a light step toward her then halting and stopping dead-still in my muffled footstep as my mind did a hasty rerun of a childhood scene. I trembled lightly with remembering. Shivered slightly, too.

We had gone mushrooming, my mother and I. We went after supper because, mother said, the mushrooms were up then, and besides, we didn't want everybody knowing our business. "Everybody" was the gypsies. They had come to our small community the day before. A whole colony of them, it seemed. Their fascinating and sinister-looking, green and red covered wagons stood by the curb near our house at the very edge of town, and I gazed fearfully at the swarthy, gaudy aliens who, I was told by a little friend, kidnapped little children and made them forever their own by staining them with an infusion of walnut husks.

Filled with an overpowering sense that something clandestine but extraordinary was going to happen, I trudged after my mother across the causeway and marshes to a rolling pasture.

Dusk had fallen. A warm, muggy kind of dampness lingered in the air. The frogs in the marches and the katydids in the trees were intoning like so many fervent evangelists. I loved the feel of the meadow grass still warm under my bare feet, the out-croppings of rock edged with moss, and the aromatic smell of bayberry.

We trudged together side by side, saying little, thinking deep, silent thoughts (mine about the gypsies), looking to the left and right for our "specialties."

Mother found some mushrooms then, almost luminous against the dark-green grass, but they were scarce. "Doesn't look like we'll get enough for a meal, even," she told me sad-like. "Someone got here before we did, I do believe."

Poor Mother, I thought, knowing how happy she was when she could treat Father and all of us to a heaping dish of mushrooms simmered in butter.

"The gypsies got them," I said quickly.

Mother straightened her shoulders and picked up her basket. "Don't ever accuse unless you know the facts, Judeen," she said sternly. "And even then, it's better not to tell it."

The promise of the evening began to fade. I climbed to the top of a rock, child-like and adventuresome, and there, in a space hidden behind rocks and bayberry bushes, I spotted a mass of strange, white balls. Some were as big as baseballs, others as puffy-big as my head. I called Mother. Puffballs, she said, the biggest she had ever seen! The firm, white forms with the pungent mushroom smell heaped wealth as we filled Mother's basket. Then we took a shortcut down the service road of a farmer and on toward the causeway.

It was dark now, and my eyelids drooped as I plodded along. The moon came up over the harbor, where two white yachts like a pair of swans rode at anchor, and the poplars on the outside of the road were outlined in theatrical brilliance. On the inside, the footpath and the parallel bridle path were deep in shadows thrown by three rows of maples except where the moonlight cut bright, jagged patterns and splashed them across our pathway.

Suddenly, we heard the creaking of wagons and the steady, rhythmic crop, crop, cropping of horses' hoofs. Mother and I moved off the dust-thick road into the darkness of the maples, blending into the shadows of the trees and of the night itself, just as the caravan rolled past us.

"They . . . they're leaving!" I exclaimed in a whispered tremor. "The gypsies are leaving already. But why are they coming down this road, Mother? This doesn't lead anywhere except to Mr. Kearney's fields and . . . and to his barn."

"I can't answer that," my mother replied. "But I do think they're stopping. Hush, Judeen. Don't say anything. And don't cry. You hear?"

I had begun to say something to Mother but stopped immediately at her command. I knew I had heard the wagons come to a halt. But why? And how would we get to the causeway?

"Judeen," my mother's mouth was close to my ear. "We'll have to go back. Back to where we found the mushrooms and through the marsh again."

Here, take my hand. And don't cry. Be careful how you walk. We don't want anyone hearing us. Now, let's go . . ."

Slowly, oh so slowly, we walked in the heavy-dark maple shadows. Several times, we heard voices, but we kept going until we reached the rolling pasture. Once there, we had full moonlight to travel by. I was shaking like a leaf. "May I talk now?" I whispered to Mother.

"Yes, softly, Judeen."

It felt good, hearing my voice. And Mother's -- especially Mother's. "What are they doing?" I asked, thankful that the Kearneys had no little children which could be kidnapped and spirited away forever. Unless it would be their grandchildren. Horrors!

"I don't know what they're doing, Judeen, but as soon as we get home, I'll have your father call over to the Kearneys and let them know that we saw the caravan on their back service road. Now don't worry, honey. The Lord is taking care of us and I'm sure He'll take care of Mr. and Mrs. Kearney."

The grass beneath my feet was damply-cool by now and my eyelids felt heavy with sleep. I wanted to forget those gypsies, but I couldn't. Why were they on that road? That private-owned farm-road? I was sure they were up to no good at all. Then, little though I was, my mind reminded me that someone may wonder the same about Mother and me, did they see us. We were on that road. But we did have proof that we were mushroom picking; we had a whole basket full as evidence.

The moon rode lazily above us, giving us light on the home stretch, and when I stepped inside the kitchen door, I sighed with glad relief. In no time at all, I was bathed and ready for bed, our frightening ordeal soon blotted out of my mind by sleep and pleasant dreams. And we never again saw the gypsies.

And now, here was one. I was beholding her with my very own eyes. Was she, perhaps, one who had at some time or other traveled with the caravan? And could she possibly have camped with the caravan at the edge of town so very near to my parents' home years ago? If so, had they seen my mother and me as we melted into the darkness that night?

Her lips were moving. And those were tears.

"Please," I cried softly, stepping close to her, "May I help you?"

She opened her eyes. Great, round, dark, searching eyes they were. And they were filled with tears! "I . . . wish I could . . . find peace." The statement, a stutter at first, came out in frank emphasis. "I have been seeking so long, searching for something . . . But what?" she cried, looking totally exasperated and frustrated.

"It's not something, my dear friend," I said, speaking softly-close to her ear; "it's Someone!" And my dark eyes met the even-darker ones of this attractive girl.

She studied me for a brief moment, openly and candidly so, as if she had nothing to hide. "Bu . . . but," she stammered then, "it is not a man-friend I need. Already I have one, a fine, good, handsome man. One of our own! " she exclaimed, with emphasis on the last phrase. "Still I have no peace. Why? Why?" she asked with fierce intensity. "I have tried many and diverse religions; none has brought me peace. None! I am distraught!" she cried, hammering her fists on her chest.

"I am Judeen Marstel," I said, introducing myself as tears ran down my cheeks.

"And I am Lyneesa Givechil," came the simple reply.

"What a pretty namer" I remarked. "God led me here this evening," I added. "I planned on getting into my room early this evening, but the strange urge to climb to the top of the hill persisted and so, here I am. God wanted me to meet you, Lyneesa. With the college so large and the campus so spread out, God knew this would be the best and most opportune time for a meeting. I'm so glad I obeyed His gentle proddings, His urgings. "

"This . . . God, Judeen; Who is He?"

We sat on a boulder overlooking the harbor and, there, amid the setting, sinking sun, the world a peaceful silence around us, I told Lyneesa about my wonderful Lord and Saviour: His humble birth; His years of

unselfish ministry; His agony in the Garden; His betrayal and ultimate crucifixion death and His glorious resurrection and, finally, His ascension.

Grabbing my hand in a vise-like grip while tears poured down her cheeks, she asked brokenly, "Why did He do it, Judeen? Why?"

"Love, Lyneesa. Love for lost sinners like you and like me. Because of this unselfish, undying love, I am a Christian. I have peace in my soul through Christ. He has made me a new Creature in Him; old things have passed away and all things have become new. This is what He can do for you, too. This, Lyneesa, is Whom your soul is crying out for . . . the Lord Jesus Christ."

"What must I do to . . . to find Him?"

My heart felt light and blest with joy. This was the moment I had been waiting for. I quoted Scripture after Scripture to her, giving her book, chapter and verse relating to salvation. Then we knelt to pray. It was one of the greatest moments of my young life, praying with Lyneesa until she prayed clear through and was born again . . . of God. Words fail me in describing the glory that fell and the radical change in my dark-skinned new friend. Her face actually shone with the glory of God on it and all she could exclaim was, "He has come! He has come! Peace! Peace! Wonderful peace! Oh, I love Thee, Lord! I love Thee!"

Lights blinked and winked along the harbor and the moon came up big and silver-gray and round. In the trees, katydids and cicadas began their nocturnal intonations and down in the marshes, the frogs added their deep bass to the rendition. Again, memory did a hasty rerun back in time. This time I was not afraid. Smiling joyously, I reached over and squeezed Lyneesa's hand.