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CHRISTMAS EVE NIGHT
By Mrs. Paul E. King

It was late Christmas Eve. He sat alone in the spacious living room. A lone figure, deep in the soft cushions of his favorite chair near the fireplace. The fire had burned to smoldering-red embers. The house was silent-still. Too silent. Oppressingly silent. Hauntingly silent. What had he done? What?

He leaned forward in his chair, untied his shoes and slipped into the house slippers beside the chair. They were located on the right side; the side he had demanded her to put them for him at his readiness to slip into them when he returned home from work.

When! The word hit him with thunderous force. His face flushed scarlet. When! Such a small word. But the strength of their marriage had hinged upon that simple little word.

"But I'm a man!" he argued with his conscience and his ever-nagging brain. "Why should I have to give account where I was until when . . . ?"

He swallowed. The lump wouldn't go away. Guilt complex jumped before him, standing like a pugilist ready for countdown, between him and the slowly-dying embers in the ornate fireplace. "Why, indeed!" Complex shouted back with such force as to make his knees tremble and his body shake.

So he did come in at 3 and 4 some mornings; so what! he reasoned. Wasn't he entitled to an occasional "night out with the boys?" he asked Complex, shaking fiercely.

Guilt stood his ground, rooted to the spot on the thick carpet. Unmovable. Eyes burning into the man's heart. "So you think that, huh? Who are you trying to kid and to deceive?"

"But we don't do anything bad . . . Not really bad. I . . . I mean . . . not all the time. Sometimes we . . ."

Guilt raised a red-hot, iron fist. The man felt its burning-hot blow being driven into the very inner recesses of his heart. He had never dealt with Guilt before. Never. Always, he had driven Guilt's little niggings away. Not now; he was there in full force!

Guilt staggered him. So much so that he was forced back, back, back, into and against the soft cushions of the plush chair. His chair! Never hers; not even when she wanted to snuggle in beside him and sit beside him -- be near to him -- so they could watch the fire leap and dance in the fireplace and make shadows on the wall, tiring, finally, and settling down warmly to red-hot embers. "I like for us to do things together," she had often said. "To watch things together; and your chair should really be our chair: we are married.

He gasped for breath. For air. Like a drowning man. "And doesn't a man have the right to something all his very own!" he demanded silently, pale with horror at the towering figure of Guilt's pointed, red-hot. finger -- probing, probing. Convicting. Condemning.

"And they two shall become one . . ." Guilt's thunderous voice staggered the man.

"Please!" he begged aloud. "Leave me alone. Torment me no more."

Guilt stood, unmoved. His very presence plummeted the depths of the man's soul. "This time I will stay," he said. "This time you must do something about your life. Your heart. No, you are not entitled to a night out with the boys. You belong at home with your wife after work. And she has every right in the world to know where you have been till when . . ."

"Please! Leave me alone. You torture me!"

"I am not sent to make you comfortable," Guilt replied emphatically. "My duty is just the opposite; you must be made uncomfortable. You must be shaken. Shaken! Do you hear? You are taking the wrong road. The broad road that leadeth to destruction. The wife whom you promised to love and cherish and protect, you have driven away. Instead of the security of your love, she has lived with the constant fear of your violent, unpredictable temper and the ultimate threat upon her life. What do you have left?"

"Stop it! Stop it!" the man cried, trying to rise from his chair but not succeeding. Again, he gasped for breath. Never had he had such an encounter with Guilt. Never. And he had known that somewhere down the road they would meet. Yes, he had known. But always he tried to convince himself that Guilt was for sissies only. Real men, never!

His hands trembles. They were clammy-wet and icy-cold. He coughed nervously and gasped again. The house seemed to be closing in on him, much like a man with claustrophobia.

For a long while, Guilt seemed silent. In word only! His presence had the man locked in a state of horrible fear. So much so that he couldn't move.

And scarcely breathe. His heart pounded in his chest like a giant hammer. His temples throbbed.

"You have been selfish," Guilt's accusing voice declared, making the man gasp again. "Selfish and tight with your money, where she is concerned. You have deprived her of her very needs, and spent what was rightfully hers with the boys. Will God hold you guiltless? No! No! You are to forsake all others and cleave unto her, till death do you part. You have forsaken her, and have been cleaving unto others! And this in open rebellion toward God!"

"No! No!" he cried aloud.

"But it's true!" Guilt thundered back, causing the man's heart to feel faint. "I am not an enemy, as you may think; I am your friend," he continued in a pleading but loud manner. "If you will follow the leadings of your heart and do what God the Holy Ghost is telling you to do, this night . . . this Christmas Eve night . . . my troublesome presence can be gone from you. My uncomfortable feeling can be turned into an inner assurance of peace and joy. I come only to disturb you to action. You are guilty! What are you going to do about it?"

The man's face dropped into the palms of his hands. Tears began to flow. Then great heaving sobs shook his broad shoulders. "I am guilty!" he admitted candidly. "Oh, my God, have mercy on my wicked and sinful heart! I'm sorry. Forgive me! It's true. It's all true, what Guilt said; what Guilt thundered to my heart . . ."

One by one, each known sin was confessed, and with each confession of and repentance for sin. Guilt departed. Love and joy and peace came into the man's heart and took up residence there.

He sat in the darkness, no longer afraid and trembling with fear. He was overjoyed with joy, this heavenly music-maker of the soul, truly new-born in Christ. The embers in the fireplace were tiny, red sparks dotted among the mostly-gray dead ash by now.

He got to his feet and put kindling and a log into the fireplace. Then he hurried to the telephone. Dialing the number, he spoke quickly: "I won't be with you fellows tonight," he said. "Nor ever again." A pause. "No. No, I'm not sick. I just got saved. Converted. No, it's not that I got religion; I got salvation

through Jesus Christ. I'm born again. The Lord forgave me of all my sins. What was that? When will I be joining you again? Never. I told you once. But maybe you didn't get the message clearly. I'm through with sin. You better do something about your soul, too . . ."

He dialed another number. His hand trembled. His eyes filled with tears. "Hello. Is Beth there? Please, may I speak to her? She doesn't want to talk, you say? Tell her I must talk to her. It's important. I'm changed . . ."

"Please, Lord, help her to believe me this time . . . Please! "

"Hello. Beth! Beth! I'm sorry for all the tears and the heartache and sorrow I've caused you. Please forgive me! Can you? Will you? I just got converted. You have a new husband and . . . What? You want to come home? Oh, thank God! Thank God! When may I come and get you? Now, Right now, Oh, honey, I'll be there! Thank God!"

The city streets were silent as he drove down them. Lights shone through sparkling-clean windows from candles and trees. It was Christmas Eve night. Tonight, for the first time ever in his life, he would rejoice like the shepherds of long ago that the Saviour was born, not only in a lowly manger, but that He was born in his heart. Beth would notice the difference. Yes, she would notice it. And the difference was not for tonight only, but for so long as he lived. What a wonderful gift to give one's spouse, he thought happily . . . a changed life and a new heart!