

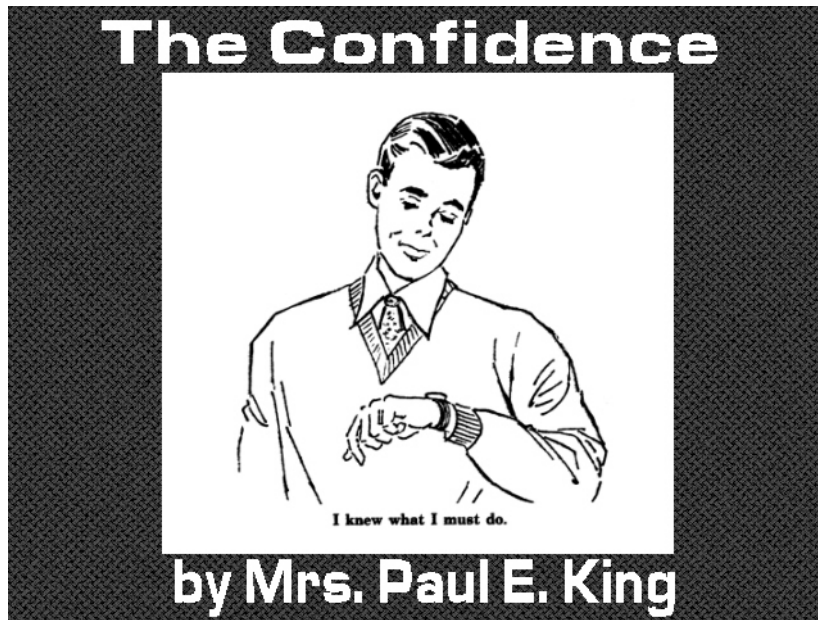
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**THE CONFIDENCE**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

I felt like a traitor. But it was too late to do anything much about it: Rodney had told me something in strictest confidence and when Don came up to me in the school cafeteria and asked had I heard anything about Rodney's brother, I spilled the beans.

Don and Rodney and I were real buddies. Always, we were a threesome at school and at church. What one of us knew, the other two soon knew also. We weren't tattlers; nor gossipers, either; it was just the fact that we felt that as sure-enough, real buddies, we should be open and candid and candidly frank with each other. This candidly-frank bit had its own reward in that we truly understood each other and respected the other's feelings, et cetera.

I tried now to concentrate on my algebra lesson for the school test in the morning but my heart condemned me until concentration was absolutely impossible. I had betrayed a confidence; I felt so guilty and wretched until I felt weak and crumbly. Whatever made me do it? I asked my heart. Rodney was my friend. But, then, Don was my friend, too. And, I reasoned, I hadn't promised Rodney that I wouldn't tell. Still, it was told in strictest confidence. Furthermore, I knew that Rodney must have trusted me or he would never have told me.

I drew my knees up and locked my arms around them in a tight grip, feeling guilt and shame over allowing my tongue . . . that "little member" inside my mouth.., to betray Rodney's confidence in me by telling what I was asked not to tell. I tried to put my feelings where Rodney's would be when he discovered that I had told Don everything and, believe me, it hurt my heart. It cut! Deeply! Would I ever trust Rodney, had he done what I had done? Would I have confidence in him, and in his profession of faith in Jesus Christ, had he unloaded a strict confidence of mine on Don? I knew the answer to my questioning heart. How well I knew it!

A load lay heavily upon my heart now. What a load! I recalled another who had betrayed a strict confidence in our school. The result was devastating; Merle was a pretty girl. She had dark eyes, jet-black hair, a dark complexion, and was soft-spoken and on the shy and timid side. She kept more or less to herself, allowing for only two friends, Bridget and Haley. Of the two, Bridget was by far the closer to Merle. Merle never invited anybody to her home, and she never went to any of her friends' homes, either. I had overheard Bridget tell Haley one day that she had wanted Merle to go with her to something or other but she had declined with a soft, polite, "I really must get home."

Tears sprang to my eyes now at thought of Merle. Not that she was all that special to me nor anything like that; Bonnie was my "special." But,

truthfully, Merle was sweet. And gentle. She reminded me much of a lamb. Gentle, I mean. And, like I said, she was pretty. Tom Kelly had fallen for her, but hard and deep. But Merle would never date. Not anybody, mind you. Always, it was the same story, the same answer that she gave to Bridget: "I must get home. I really must!"

It was on a beautiful early fall day at school that I heard the sad news. Bridget herself related it all to me. "Dave," she said, calling me aside in the hallway as I was going to my math class, "I must talk to you! Oh, I feel like I'm going to die! I really do, Dave. Oh, I feel awful! I . . . I don't see how I can get through this day!" And she had gone to pieces, figuratively speaking, right there in the school hallway "When may I see you, Dave?"

I gulped. What would Bonnie Lou think; Bridget and I huddled alone in some far-off corner in the school cafeteria? Bonnie and I didn't do that, and we were dating once a week!

"Please Dave!" Bridget pleaded. "I must talk to someone. I must. You're the only one who'll understand. And I . . . I can trust you . . . ."

Trust you! The words cut through me now like a sharp dagger. The tears rolled down my cheeks. For Merle. For Bridget. For me. Myself! Again I felt smitten. Really smitten. Now, back to Bridget.

"Okay, Bridget," I replied, "we'll meet at noon inside the school cafeteria, Lord willing."

"Oh Dave, I'm so thankful!" she cried, rushing away without another single word.

Needless to say, my mind was definitely not on math that morning. Truth of the matter was, I scarcely remembered anything Mr. Keckenbush said. I felt torn, knowing Bridget was desperate because of something bothering her and wondering what Bonnie Lou would think of me, huddled in that farthest corner of the cafeteria, sitting across from Bridget at that tiny little wobbly-legged table, the one we all had dubbed Mr. Wobbles.

The noon hour arrived and, as previously arranged, Bridget was waiting for me inside the cafeteria doors. "I told Bonnie I had to talk to you about something," she said, as we started down the line together.

"Hey, that's great of you!" I exclaimed. "I was wondering what she'd think when she saw us together at Mr. Wobbles. But Bonnie's sanctified wholly, and I decided she'd not be jealous. That's a trait of carnality, Bridget. Jealousy, I mean. And when one is entirely and completely sanctified and filled with God's Holy Spirit, carnal jealousy is removed in its entirety and its totality. But that was great of you. Thanks much."

We walked in silence the rest of the way down the line, pushing our trays before us. I knew Bridget was carrying a heavy load upon her heart; I could feel it. Ordinarily, Bridget was bubbly and light-hearted and fun to be around. Today, however, her face wore worried lines and her eyes looked troubled and sad. It hurt me to see her like this. Whatever was troubling her was of a serious nature, I knew. Yes, very serious.

Our trays were scarcely settled upon old Mr. Wobbles' shiny-clean top when Bridget broke down and sobbed. "Oh Dave!" she moaned. "Dave! Why'd I ever do it? Why? Oh-h-h . . . !" Her moan faded into a pitiful groan of anguished remorse.

Ordinarily I could hold back my tears until I was alone, but not that time. Between scanty bites of my hot barbecue sandwich, tears rolled down my cheeks and fell onto my plate. Never had I seen Bridget in such a state of anguish. "It has something to do with Merle," I ventured.

"It has everything to do with Merle!" came Bridget's broken reply. "Oh Dave, I feel so wicked. Merle's gone! Gone!"

I sat bolt upright on the chair like an electric shock had gone through me. "Gone? Merle? Where? Why?"

Bridget sobbed convulsively. I was honestly glad for the far corner and for Mr. Wobbles. A quick glance around the cafeteria let me know that few of the students even noticed us. Good! I thought. At least there wouldn't be any questions asked.

"Where'd she go?" I questioned anxiously. "I . . . I don't know! Nobody knows. Nobody, Dave! But she's gone. And . . . and all because of me!" Again she groaned and moaned.

"You? Now don't jump to conclusions, Bridget. I've never known you to harm anybody intentionally."

"Oh, I didn't mean to harm her, Dave! It's just that I shouldn't have told Kristen. But she plied me with question after question until, by bits and pieces, she extracted the whole story from me. Oh, I'm so sorry! So sorry! But it's too late. She's gone! Merle's gone! For good! She hadn't made me promise not to tell, Dave. . . ."

"Hey, wait a minute, Bridget; aren't you overreacting? How do you know Merle's gone? And, too, if you didn't promise, well. . . ."

Drawing a neatly penned paper from her jacket, Bridget slid it across the table to my tray. "Read it," she said with a torn sob.

Forgetting about my lunch, I unfolded the paper to its full length and began to read.

"Dear Bridget," it said,

"You have been the best friend I have ever had and, until a week ago, when Kristen told me that she knew all about my alcoholic parents, because you had told her what I had told you in what was meant to be a confidence, well, I thought life was finally going to be good to me and for me. Now, however, I feel more devastated and forsaken and forlorn than ever. I have no one, Bridget! Absolutely, no one, to whom I can turn for consolation and a tiny bit of comfort, even. You were like a ray of sunshine in my lonely and sadly-distorted home life. You and Haley. But mostly, you.

"I've been scared . . . yes, scared . . . of any close friendships because I knew I could never bring my friends into the horrible mess and atmosphere that was ever-prevalent in our home. Oh Bridget, you have no idea what it's like to live with alcoholic parents, who hardly know the world exists and who have no respect for each other nor their home. This is why I never allowed Tom to come to see me. I tried so hard to keep my painful secret. Kristen, however, has done everything but keep it a secret. I cannot bear the probing stares of my fellow-classmates another day. I'm leaving. For good, Bridget. I'm sure you meant no harm, but the damage is done. In my heart! Goodbye. I'm sorry Merle."

It was my turn now to want to groan. I pushed my tray away. "I understand now," I told Bridget.

"But what can I do, Dave? I love Merle. I tried to help her. Honestly, I did. Oh, why did I permit Kristen to draw that out of me!"

"Kristen's skillful at that," I admitted sadly. "Have you any idea where Merle may have gone, Bridget?"

"I wish I did! Oh how I wish I knew! If she had other friends. . . . But there were none besides Haley and me."

"She has relatives," I injected with hope.

"But she's not close to any of them -- because of her parents' condition, she said. If only I were rich, and could afford to have a detective track her down. My folks would give her a good home and plenty of love and support, Dave. What if she goes down the broad road and . . . and. . . ."

I knew what Bridget was thinking. The same thoughts entered my mind. The suicide rate was a high among teens; also, the streets were full of lustful and wicked men and women. Innocent girls like Merle could easily fall prey to their devilish wiles. "Let's pray for Merle," I said with a great burden gripping my heart. "God can protect her and take care of her."

We prayed then. How we prayed! And God met with us there in that far-off corner. But no one ever heard from Merle Bridget's remorse was indescribable and painful.

A knot popped into my throat now. I was worse by far than Bridget in that I knew for sure that what Rodney had told me was confidential. True, I hadn't promised not to tell; but, then, a confidence was a confidence by all standards and should be kept just that . . . a confidence. And even though Don and Rodney and I were buddies and best friends, I had no right to tell even my close and good friend, Don. If Rodney had wanted Don to know, he would have told him, I knew. But he hadn't, and he didn't, and now, here I was, in a sort of dilemma, feeling guilty and traitorous.

Getting quickly to my feet, I hurried to the phone and dialed Rodney's number, feeling a great load lift off my heart as I did so. "Hello, Rodney? Got

a couple minutes to spare for your buddy?" I asked into the mouthpiece. "It's important. Something I've got to straighten up with you. Make right. Okay. See you in a little while then, God willing."

I hung up the phone, told Mom I'd be back within forty minutes with God's protection and help, and hurried down the sidewalk to Rodney's house. Never again would I reveal a confidence. Never! By God's grace! It was a solemn vow which I meant to keep. Always!