

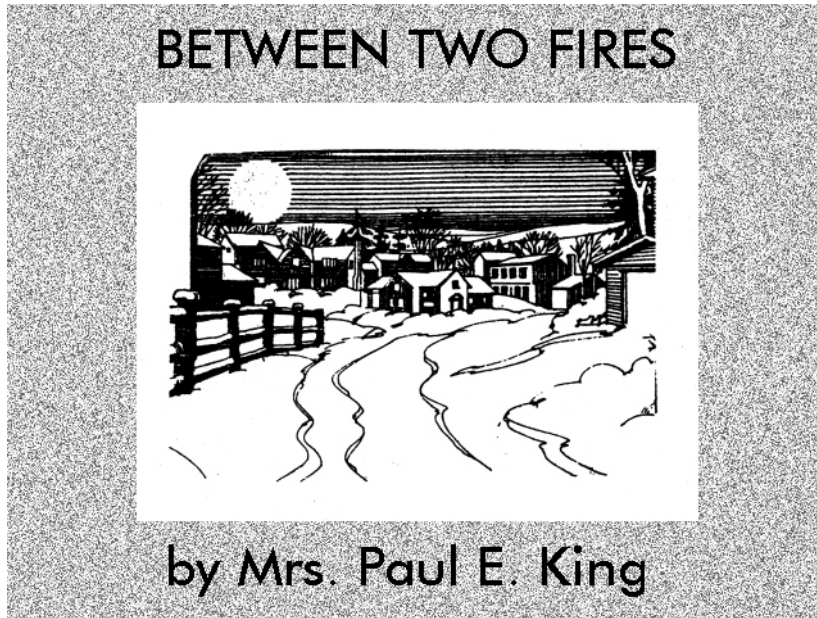
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BETWEEN TWO FIRES
By Mrs. Paul E. King

(Chapter 1)

Blake Preston stretched his long legs then slowly repositioned them. At the same time, he pressed his broad back hard against the thickly-cushioned seat in the silver-coached Eagle as it glided smoothly but rapidly across the

land. Within another five to six (or seven at the most) hours he would be at home in Devon by the Sea.

He sighed a happy contented sigh. A smile twisted the corners of his lips as he thought of Leah and their only son Jonathan. It would be good to be home again. That was the one drawback to his job: being gone from his family for any length of time.

"Well, Blake old boy," he soliloquized softly to himself, "a fellow can't have everything to his exact liking. Your lot's not nearly so hard and bad as Tom McConnelly or . . . or . . . Lawyer Githens. . . ."

At mention of the cock-sure Hartley Githens, Blake cringed inwardly. The man seemed filled with venom. With no surmising whatever, it was all too obvious that he hated Blake Preston with a passionate hatred. He hated the mere mention of his name even. But why? What had ignited, stimulated, and fed this profound hatred? Blake wondered now as he had done so many times since his coming to Devon by the Sea some better than thirty years ago.

"The fellow's a demon!" old Squire McKay had exclaimed once to Blake, after Lawyer Githens had stood on the main corner of the street and verbally scorched Blake up one side and down the other with invectives that now, at the mere thought of them, made Blake cringe back tight against his cushioned seat in refuge and embarrassed shame.

That the man was demon possessed, Blake was sure. But had not Christ cast out demons by those thus possessed?

Blake dropped his face into his hands and prayed silently. thankful to have the seat to himself.

"This kind goeth not forth but by prayer and fasting." The Scripture came to him forcibly again. "O God, Thou knowest I have fasted and prayed!" he cried aloud. "Fervently. . . ."

"Have patience, my son."

Blake looked up, startled, expecting to see someone by his side. The Voice was as distinct and clear as if spoken by someone in the seat next to him.

Then he perceived. He relaxed. Tears stole to his eyes and ran in a dizzy kind of happy way down his cheeks. "Have patience, my son!" He would. O he would! And in God's time and in God's way. . . .

The thought was too precious and too sweet to keep his eyes open and behold the motley group of frivolous, light; worldly-minded people going up and down the aisle of the coach, so he closed them to better meditate and pray.

"In the world, but not of the world," he mused, as he shut himself in with God.

When he opened his eyes some time later, he noticed snow flakes chasing each other in a playful kind of way to the ground and trying, it seemed to Blake, to race the speeding train.

He smiled, reminiscing how, in youth's long-since by-gone days, he had thrilled to the first snowfall of the season. He wondered if in the dramatic changes that had taken place in the world since he was a carefree lad, children of this mechanized, modern era knew how to fully and truly enjoy and appreciate such simple things of beauty and glory as a first snowfall.

His mind went quickly to Jonathan. Bless the young man! He was a good boy, having become a born again Christian at an early age and sanctified soon thereafter. Like Leah and himself, Jonathan grew up with an innate desire and appreciation for life's "little things." Its simple things. Those everyday things which, all too frequently, are bypassed and overlooked in man's quest for the worldly; the fanciful. Yes, Jonathan still enjoyed and marveled in the glory of a sunset, the beauty of a sunrise, and the fascination and charm of a first snow fall . . . all of this in the face of his thriving practice as a medical doctor.

Blake's heart pounded with joy and excitement at the thought of seeing Leah and Jonathan again. "How wonderful to have a home such as God had given him," he mused silently and thankfully.

The snow fell faster now. It seemed as if the train was following right in the path of the storm.

As he neared Devon by the Sea many hours later . . . and more than three hours late. . . Blake noted that, while the ground was thickly and heavily blanketed with snow, it had stopped snowing. A pale, cold looking moon peeked unceremoniously from behind fast scuttling clouds, shedding its silvery rays upon the clean, sparkly, new-fallen snow.

Blake heaved a sigh of content as he stepped off the train. Ah, but it was good indeed to be so near to one's own door!

He looked around for a cab but found none in sight. That Jonathan had been there at the scheduled time he had no doubt. He was most solicitous and kind to both his mother and him. He watched as the train pulled slowly away from the little railroad station which had long since been locked up tight for the night, then he turned toward home. He would have to walk, he knew. Perchance Jonathan or one of the country or townspeople would pass by and take him to his home which was a mile out of Devon by the Sea.

Devon by the Sea! How he loved the little place! It was pristine in a natural way, its atmosphere not brought about by wealth or the recreation of any architectural style. It was just there. You could feel it. Anyone could feel it.

The people were different, too. They still waved to all who drove the back roads. If you ever asked for directions, you were expected to spend a few moments in conversation. Yes, he loved it here. It had been an ideal place to raise their only child. If only Hartley Githens were not so belligerent and hateful.

It made it bad, Blake mused as his footsteps wended their way homeward, for neighbors to live in such a way. Why, Hartley never spoke to him; unless it was to harass and threaten him that "he would get possession of every inch of Blake Preston's acreage yet!"

It was a known fact that the lawyer had bought all the land for miles around Devon by the Sea. All, that is, except Blake's. He wouldn't sell. HIS land had come by way of inheritance . . . from generations back. It wasn't for sale. For any amount of money!

As he walked, Blake was reminded of King Ahab and Naboth's vineyard. The analogy was too similar and identical to help but think otherwise. He remembered, too . . . all too vividly . . . of the wicked Jezebel's scheming, planning and lying, which caused the "inheritor" Naboth to be slain, making it possible for the king to seize (unlawfully) the vineyard and to possess it. "Could Hartley Githens carry his threat through?" he wondered.

He looked away to a mountain that rose on the opposite shore of a small lake, and prayed. The mountain wore a shawl of dark cloud round its shoulders like an old man coddling his bronchitis.

Blake looked quickly away and hastened his footsteps. The air was extremely cold and seemed to get colder with each passing moment.

He turned his topcoat collar up and pulled his hat farther down on his head. It would be so good to step inside his house to the love and the warmth therein. He thanked God again for Leah. How like God's woman in Proverbs she was. She was a rock. A rock was not stimulating company, perhaps, but it was solid and comforting. A rock was something one built his house on: something you build your life on. That was Leah. And for all her likeness to a rock, she was the most excellent wife and stimulating company and companion a man ever had.

A soft, muffled moan or groan brought Blake quickly out of his musings. He stopped suddenly, listening. Nothing could be heard but the northeast wind as it rushed on its impetuous way, its sharp whistling sound much like that of a whiplash before the crack is heard.

He was about to move on when, not more than ten feet away, lying beneath a bare bush, was what looked like a long big bundle of clothes. To his great alarm and horror, he saw it was the body of a man lying stiff and stark, face downward, in the snow.

Involuntarily, Blake gasped. That he was in the immediate presence of death, he had no doubt. What should he do? What could he do? He was all alone, with no one around to whom he could appeal for help and assistance. How dreadful, he mused silently, to be out alone in the gloom of a winter night with no sound upon his ear but the weird, wild whistle of the melancholy wind.

He stood a few moments, irresolute. What should he do? What could he do? Again the question faced him. His heart seemed almost to stop its beating. He felt sick and faint. Then the thought struck him that perhaps the man was not dead. He had heard a groan, had he not? This thought roused him to action.

He knelt down and, with some amount of difficulty, turned the body, a dead weight, so that the white face and eyes, open but lusterless, were seen

By the intermittent shining of the moon . . . coming out occasionally from behind the racing clouds, Blake Preston recognized the hapless mortal whose head was cupped in his hands. He was stunned. Whatever was Hartley Githens doing out on a night such as this? And alone, too! Where was the man's big, fine car?

Blake gazed in awe-struck silence upon the blue-white face of the man who hated him passionately. Then, with bright tears glistening and shining on his heavy eyelashes, he quoted softly, "If he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil but overcome evil with good" Rom. 12:20-21. The wind lashed round his body mercilessly and groaned and moaned its fury out upon him. "Here's my chance to get 'even,' Hartley," he said, speaking kindly above the man's face. "May God give me strength to carry you!"

But was Hartley already dead? There was no evidence of life whatever about him. Perhaps the moan he thought he'd heard was nothing less than the incessant howling of the wind. Was he too late to show kindness to his enemy? Down he went on his knees. After a bit of difficulty, he managed to place his hand beneath Hartley Githens' outer clothing upon the region of the heart. Was there no token of life? Not any at all? But wait! Did his open palm feel and realize a faint flutter under pressure? Or was it that every pulse in his own body throbbed and beat in excitement and anxiety? Yes, surely, he did feel a heartbeat!

In a moment, Blake was a new man. There was still life in Hartley's body! Through the darkening night, he sent a fervent prayer heavenward. Not a long prayer, but earnest and fervent. Blake now came wholly possessed with an all-absorbing passion and desire and longing to bring Hartley Githens back to life . . . and another opportunity to get right with God.

He went to work to chafe the numb and stiffened limbs. He worked over the prostrate man until his own arms felt nearly nerveless and he had to pause for breath. Then he lifted the body partially up, laid Hartley's head upon his own lap, and by every means at his disposal sought to kindle vital warmth within the frozen frame. His heat sank as each limb in turn dropped as he lifted it, cold and motionless, chilling him with the verdict -- Too late! Again and again, he labored at his lonely task The lawyer must not die! He must not! He wasn't prepared to meet God in his present state.

A sudden half-sob from Hartley's lips gave Blake new hope and courage. Renewed efforts received increased reward. The lack-lustre eyes gazed dully and stiff lips murmured words, indistinct and disordered To Blake, it was like music in his ears.

What more could he do? he wondered. His resources were exhausted; but he had to get Hartley sheltered for the night. But where? His own home was too far away for him to carry the man. Town, that was it! Back to Devon by the Sea and Geoffrey Mackley, the proud owner of the one and only Inn in the town.

Blake arose and peered out into the night, hoping in vain that some belated traveler might emerge from the darkness and assist him in his awful struggle with death. But no, the only sound was the wind's monotonous and heartless moan. The only eyes that looked upon him were those of the cold and passionless stars that every now and then dared to peek out from behind the dark clouds that presaged even worse things to come.

He stood suddenly upright, his eyes hardly leaving the form of his fallen adversary. Working quickly, he stripped himself of his warm topcoat. Kneeling over Hartley Githens, he clasped the still lifeless form beside him and with a strength that only excitement and urgency and the Almighty could give him, he put the coat on the lawyer then lifted him to his own shoulder and, laying him across it, he turned and headed back the way he had come . . . back to Devon by the Sea.

He hadn't gone far when he felt the strain of the excess weight upon his own body.

"You'll have to take things a bit easier, Blake old boy!" Doctor Warnet had warned him several years ago. "That heart of yours needs rest. Slow down, my boy. Slow down! Unless you don't care if Leah becomes a widow before her time. . . ."

The good doctor's words now echoed and re-echoed in Blake's mind as, panting for breath, he felt he just couldn't go on.

"The joy of the Lord is your strength," he said aloud. "I will go in His strength! His joy and peace is my strength!"

On and on he walked . . . in the strength of the Lord. The wind jabbed at him with icy fists, knocking his breath down his throat, seeming almost to strangle him with it. His suit coat suddenly felt very thin and lightweight, and his feet felt nearly frozen. The wind was a formidable enemy, heading straight into it as he was. But he must get Hartley Githens out of the cold. He must! The man wasn't prepared to meet God.

Blake heaved a weary, tired sigh. How much longer he could carry his burden he didn't know. He raised his head toward heaven and that's when he saw a light. A dim light, it was, but light, none-the-less. His heart soared with praise. He was entering Devon by the Sea.

The withering and waspish north-easter had swept the streets of the small town as clear of life as the desolate mounds of Nineveh. Not even a dog but had found, perforce, some shelter from the cruel blast.

As Blake Preston staggered down the narrow street of Sea Breeze Place to the archway of Fisherman's Cove Inn, not a soul in the storm-swept town ventured to the door or window to look and to wonder at the strange sight coming up the two steps to the Inn's entranceway.

Opening the door, Blake stumbled in and would have fallen and collapsed had Geoffrey Mackley himself not rushed to his aid.

"Blake Preston!" he exclaimed, horrified, perplexed, and completely awestricken. "Blake Preston!" Again he repeated the exclamation. "What . . . Where?"

"Don't ask questions," Blake urged, breathing hard. "Help me . . . get . . . him . . . to bed, Geoffrey. He's well nigh dead. Almost frozen, I fear. . . ."

Geoffrey, a sensible man himself and sensing the urgency in Blake's voice and noticing the pallor of his face, lifted Hartley Githens on to his own stout shoulder and, motioning for Blake to follow, strode quickly and easily down the hallway to room 11.

He put the lawyer on the bed then turned and faced Blake. "He's not worth it, Blake Preston! The scoundrel's not worth saving. He's a cheat and a rascal and . . . and he hates you! Why'd you do it? Risk your own life, I mean? And where did you find him? Where's your car? Why'd you do it?"

Blake, leaning anxiously over Hartley's still form, began unbuttoning the lawyer's clothes. "He needs God, Geoffrey. Needs Him bad. Now, get busy. I found him lying, face down in the snow, along the road. The train I came in on was late. And with the storm, there wasn't a taxi in sight to get me home, so I began walking. God must have wanted it this way or else the man would have died and his soul would be in hell."

"But you've nearly killed yourself getting him here."

"I'll be all right, Geoffrey. Do whatever needs done for him and send me the bill. He must live. God has given him another opportunity. I'll try to call home and see if Jonathan can come and get me. Unless he's out on call he'll be here shortly. . . ."

Geoffrey's face paled. "The lines are all down. For miles around. We have no service. We had a blizzard. A real one. I'll take you home. . . ."

"Nothing doing, Geoffrey. Hartley needs reviving and nursing. You'll have a full night of it."

"From the smell of things, he has enough alcohol in him to keep two men alive in sub-zero temperatures, Blake!" Geoffrey said derisively. "What shall I tell him when he asks me who brought him to the Inn and how he got there?"

"Tell him a friend did it," Blake said softly. After a short pause he added, "And Geoffrey, please don't tell a soul about my bringing him here."

Keep it as quiet as you can. The townspeople don't need to know about him. He has a soul for which Jesus died; and he has a kind and sweet wife like you and I have . . . plus two wonderful daughters and a fine young son. No need causing heartache and embarrassment for them. You have a family; you know how it would hurt. . . ."

Geoffrey came over and stood by Blake. "You're a real man, Blake. A real man!" he said hoarsely. "Believe me when I tell you that someday soon I'm going to get converted. Just like you! You're real. God within you is real!" Taking Blake's hand in a tight handclasp, he said brokenly, "The town shall not hear a breath about this from me!"

"Thanks, Geoff, I knew I could depend upon you. Now I must be going. Hartley may soon be rallying and I prefer not to incite anger within him by my presence in the room when he comes 'round. Goodnight, and may God bless you as you help him and may He spare the man's life."

Buttoning his overcoat about him, Blake Preston stepped out into the night.

(Chapter 2)

Stepping from the warmth of the Inn to the outside, Blake was acutely aware and sensitive to the biting cold. It was bitter cold. The temperatures seemed to have dropped five degrees or more in the brief interim in which he was inside the Inn.

He turned the ample collar of his overcoat up and buttoned it tightly about his neck as he buried his nose, a bit long and slightly bulbous . . . a sure sign of humor and good temper, his mother used to say, teasingly . . . within its protecting folds. He pulled his hat down to his bushy eyebrows and a scarf about his neck was pulled up about his ears so as to defend them from the biting blast that was almost arctic in its severity.

He felt tired. Exhausted, really. And his hands, encased in warm gloves though they were, felt cold and stiff like his feet.

Every now and again he did a vigorous process of physical exercise . . . stomping his feet on the ground, swinging his arms, and beating them against his shoulders, until his blood once more was brought into healthy

circulation. He prayed as he walked. Prayed for Margaret Githens and her family. She should be notified of her husband's condition and his whereabouts, he mused silently. How could he do it without her knowledge that he had been her husband's savior? He pondered the question over in his brain again and again.

Feeling inside his suit coat pocket, he found a small note pad and a pen. He would scrawl a note and fasten it to the door knob. Margaret would find it in the morning. Not infrequently, the lawyer had stayed out all night on a drunken spree. Undoubtedly, the good wife and fine children would deduce as much again, Blake mused as he walked.

Hartley Githens' spacious house and grounds were to the east of his own place Blake knew this would necessitate his going a good deal out of his way to deliver the note. He decided to do it, however tired he was, remembering Leah and her concern and anxiety over him if he failed to get in at a given time. Margaret Githens was of the same temperament. By all means, she must know . . . at least by morning.

Blake turned due east now, toward the Githens' house. He breathed easier when he saw the place in total darkness. For a brief moment he feared that Margaret might be waiting up for her husband like Leah did for him. So he was greatly relieved as, walking on silent and careful feet, he hurried to the door and secured the hastily scrawled missive between the door and its casing, to find the house in a state of apparent rest and slumber

As he came to the road that would take him past his door, bright headlights suddenly focused on him.

"Dad!" Jonathan exclaimed jubilantly, rushing from the car to help his father inside. "I'm so glad to see you!" he exclaimed further. "You had us scared for awhile," he added, relief registering in his voice.

"The train was late, Son," Blake said simply. "Very late. A cold night tonight, isn't it?"

"Bitter cold!" Jonathan exclaimed emphatically. "And it grieves me no end that you had to walk this far from the railroad station. I was there when the train was to have arrived but the schedule on the board said it was late . .

. they didn't know how many hours even. Old Mr. Connecticut had the place locked up tight by the time I got there. We had quite a blizzard, Dad!"

"So I see, my son. A real Nor'-easter," Blake answered, trying to sound cheerful and normal in spite of an overwhelming fatigue and weariness that seemed suddenly to possess him and fasten tight fingers about the heart region.

It was so good to enter the wonderful and cozy surroundings of his own home. Leah, with her tender smile and loving affection, met him at the door with outstretched arms. "I was praying for you, my dear," she said, by way of welcome "I had the assurance that He was taking good care of you and would bring you safe back to Jonathan and me," she added, going into his arms for a moment of tender embrace

"You should be in bed, my dear," Blake said, looking long into her understanding dark brown eyes. "It's way past any little girl's bed time," he teased, trying to sound light, in spite of the increasing pain in his chest.

"Not until you are safe home, Blake Preston! I cannot rest until then. I have supper ready and waiting for you. But unless you hurry and eat, it will be 'breakfast,' "she teased, taking his heavy clothes and depositing them in the hall closet. "My, but you are dreadfully cold!" she exclaimed, touching his arms. "Hadn't you better get warm?"

Blake nodded. It was true. He was cold. Dreadfully cold, as Leah had phrased it. He ate little of the temptingly prepared food and could scarcely wait to get to bed. A quick, hot shower stimulated the flow of blood momentarily and warmed him slightly but when he pulled the bed covers tightly about him and still chilled and was shaking violently, he knew he had come to the extremity of his physical endurance.

All night he rolled and tossed and turned fitfully.

Leah and Jonathan sat by his bed, watching him anxiously. Jonathan, skilled medic that he was and shrewd observer of mankind, knew that the struggle his father was having for his life was due to sorer punishment to the already over-taxed body than the mere walk home from the railroad station.

"He can't die! O God! Don't let him die!" Blake kept crying out weakly in delirium. "O God, save him. Save him!" His voice rose and fell like the wind that rattled the windows and went screeching, moaning and whining around the corners of the house.

The two lone figures, watching and listening anxiously from their post at the man's bedside, wondered for whom he had such an intense burden that even his grave illness forbade him relinquishing it. Jonathan checked his watch, waiting anxiously for the hand on the timepiece to settle itself on the proper time so he could give his father a second injection of medication. He feared pneumonia and he knew how utterly damaging, if not fatal, this could be on his beloved father's already weakened heart.

Hour after weary hour dragged by, and when the sun on the following evening had almost disappeared behind the clean-cut skyline, and the sullen, steely sort of gleam which often attends a winter sunset seemed to intimate that it felt it was making an inglorious exit, Blake's temperature had fallen but little. Jonathan felt like he had best try to get hold of Doctor Warper. He remembered, with a sudden sick sensation, that the telephone lines were down. There was no way he could get through to the big city and the good doctor.

Walking to the west window in his bedroom, praying all the while for God's help and His healing in his father's body, he noticed the upper rim of the sun . . . its dull, red disc was poised and lingered a little, as if it had compunctions. It appeared loathe to leave the landscape it had done so little to cheer, or to forsake the benumbed, fever-ridden bed patient it had done so little to warm and befriend; as if it were remorsefully conscious that it would fare still worse with the man on the bed after it was gone entirely.

Watching its slow descent, Jonathan shuddered involuntarily. A soft hand fell lightly on his shoulder. "Let's pray again, Jon," his mother said simply. "With God All things are possible; and nothing is impossible to him that believeth."

"Yes. I . . . I know," the young doctor said, dropping to his knees in front of the window and talking easily and trustingly to his Heavenly Father.

A few minutes later they walked silently back to Blake's bedroom.

"I . . . must have slept." Blake's voice greeted them. It was weak and small-sounding. Leah's eyes brightened perceptively.

"You did, my dear husband. Thank God, you did!" she cried happily, taking his hands in hers and kissing them tenderly.

Jonathan, taking his father's temperature just then, gave his mother an "all clear" nod. Tearfully, he raised his eyes heavenward in silent praise to God. "Care for some broth, Father?" he asked, relief and thankfulness registering in every note.

"I believe I do, Son. It sounds good. Real good! A few crackers, too, Leah," he called weakly, as his wife hurried to the kitchen, her eyes shedding thankful, happy tears. Blake's recovery was slow and prolonged. The hours of leisure and rest gave him ample time to pray for his enemy, Lawyer Hartley Githens. Blake's kind, tender heart, filled by the Holy Ghost with Divine love, devised ways and means and made plans whereby, as soon as he was able to be up and out again, he could do good to the man who hated him so passionately.

Not that the lawyer had need of a single thing. Ah, no. Like Blake Preston, he had "feathered" his nest to a very cozy and comfortable degree. The one by diligence and honest and hard labor; the other mainly by fraud and illegalities.

It does not follow, mind you, that cozy nests always have cozy tenants. In all too many cases the "feathering" process is accompanied by a loss of true, human vitality, as was the case of Hartley Githens, so that as the nest grew warmer and more elaborate, the heart grew colder and could neither appreciate its own blessings nor sympathize with others who had either a poor nest or no nest at all.

Hartley's acquisition of wealth and property was his downfall. Well-to-do ought to do well. Yes, he should have done better than his poorer neighbors, because he has more to do well with. But much gold for the lawyer brought much cold to his heart . . . a selfish, grasping cold, and Blake Preston realized suddenly that there was no cure for the man's obsession except the grace of God coming into his heart in saving and sanctifying power.

The contrast between the two neighbors was drastic. Radical, even. Whereas Lawyer Githens was cold and tight-fisted, the chink of the money in Blake Preston's pockets made him think of the poor. Consequently, he was always taking from his abundance and distributed to those of poorer, meaner, circumstances.

"Poor, poor man!" he said aloud, thinking of Hartley Githens and the wealth he had amassed . . . the wealth to which he clung tightly as though he would be able to take it with him when he died.

"Did you say something, Father?" Jonathan asked, coming into the room just then.

Blake turned a smiling face to his son. "I was just thinking out loud. That's all, Jon."

"About what, or whom?" Jonathan teased, seating himself on the bed beside his father

"It was about Mr. Githens, Jonathan. I've been doing a lot of praying for the man. I love him!" Blake stroked his chin in a contemplative manner.

Jonathan brought one of his knees up and locked his arms about it. A serious look crossed his face. "Dad," he began slowly, "I've been wondering about the man. . . .

"Yes . . .?"

"Well, a few days after you took sick, Mrs. Githens sent word for me to visit her husband, which I did. He was too ill to know or care who was doctoring him, so he didn't know it was I. He was bedfast . . . in the Inn! Imagine! Mrs. Githens and Helen and Meg and Don all took turns at staying with him and caring for him. I asked Meg what had happened and she said she hadn't the faintest idea. She said her father spoke hazily and irrationally about being nearly frozen and someone got to him in time. I asked her then how it was that he was in bed in the Inn, rather than at home, and she said Geoffrey Mackley said a friend had found her father, all but frozen in the snow the night of the big blizzard, and had brought him to the Inn --" Jonathan looked long and searchingly into his father's face, a suspicion growing within his breast.

Blake closed his open Bible gently and asked quietly, "Where was his car, Jonathan? Did Mrs. Githens or the children know? Why was he not in his car?"

"Meg . . . bless her! Was much grieved. She said the car was parked in front of the Lobster Bar."

"That's too bad. Too bad!" Blake commented reflectively. "Is he home now and is he recovered, Jon?"

"He's home, Father; but far from being recovered. He came well nigh being a dead man. And he would have been, too, if some kind, sympathetic person had not taken pity on him."

"Too bad. Too bad!" Blake said simply again. There was a long pause. After awhile Jonathan said, "Father, I don't know how you will feel about this, but I must tell you. I love Meg. She loves me, too. I know how her father feels toward both of us; but Margaret -- or Meg, as I prefer calling her -- isn't responsible for the life her father has lived, and is still living."

Blake reached out and touched Jonathan's hand lightly. A smile lighted his face. "Son," he said, "You need not be concerned as to how your mother and I will react or feel about your love for Hartley's oldest daughter. We saw it coming long ago and you both have our sincerest wishes and deepest love and congratulations. Meg's a fine, upright, Christian girl. She'll make you an excellent wife. . . ."

"But that's our problem, Dad. Her father! He loathes the very name of Blake Preston and everyone connected with that name. We can't tell him."

"Perhaps you can't, my boy; but you can tell the Lord about it. We will all pray . . . Mrs. Githens and all the rest of Meg's family, plus your mother and you and I."

"He's a strange man, Father; so very temperamental," Jonathan said, getting up and leaving the room.

Blake lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes. God had answered one of his prayers... Hartley Githens was going to live! That meant he had

another opportunity to repent and get right with God. "Make it soon, Lord!" he prayed earnestly.

(Chapter 3)

Just beyond the boundary of Blake Preston's lovely grounds and well-kept grazing farm, stood the Hartley Githens' place. The house was half-mansion, half-grange, of somewhat imposing dimensions from rural Devon by the Sea's point of view.

It was surrounded by well-grown woods, had well-arranged grounds around it and was approached by a broad paved drive, at the entrance of which were a pair of iron gates, hung on strong pillars . . . each pillar being surmounted with a curious thing in bronze, called a "griffin."

What a griffin really was Blake Preston was never fully able to ascertain. According to sculptures he had seen, as well as pictures in books, they varied in size and appearance and even in the number of their claws. Of one thing he was sure, they were all indubitably ugly, not to say satanic, and unless they had some resemblance to the arch-enemy of mankind, they were like nothing in the heavens above or the earth beneath, or the waters under the earth.

It was a thing of humor to the neighborhood . . . the griffins . . . and a thing of sadness to the Preston household; for the very nature of the man within the house was like to the bronze griffins! He was cold, hard, fierce, and calculating, and seemed almost constantly to show his "claws."

The Lawyer, a tall man with short-cropped iron gray hair and a bit of a forward stoop in his shoulders, awoke tired and restless his first morning home after his bout with death and his stay at the Inn. He paced back and forth across the room, stroking his chin in a contemplative mood.

"Wife!" He bellowed loudly to Margaret Githens. "Come here. Who took me to the Inn? I've got to know! It's driving me mad. Mad, I say!"

Margaret Githens, kind-hearted Christian woman that she was, tried her best to un-griffinise her husband and, failing that, she did her best to keep his claws moderately closely cut, and failing that, she went about to supply a

healing and ameliorating ointment to those who suffered by her husband's wicked ways. Many a dollar she gave to those individuals from whom her husband had swindled and defrauded by his shrewd business dealings, and many a month's rent and food order was paid by her for those so unfortunate as to fall into her companion's wily trap and slimy, sinful clutches.

"Margaret!" he shouted again. "I said come here!" It was an order. One which was never ignored. "I told you over and over, my dear husband, I don't know who it was that took you to the Inn." Margaret's voice was soft and sweet and had a calming, relaxing effect upon her husband. It had "a-soft-answer-turneth-away-wrath" effect.

Hartley sat down in an over-stuffed chair near the blazing fire in the big stone fireplace and dropped his head in his hands. "I seem to keep remembering something," he said half-aloud. "Somebody. Kind hands they were, that massaged me and worked feverishly over me. Who? Who? It sounded much like . . . Preston. Contemptible Blake Preston! But it couldn't have been. It couldn't! He knows how passionately I hate and loathe him! It couldn't have been him!"

"And why not, Hartley dear? He's a kind man. A good man. . . ."

"Quiet!"

"Quiet!" the lawyer bellowed again, getting to his feet and giving his wife a withering look. "I hate the mere mention of the name. You know it! Now, call Geoffrey Mackley for me. Tell him he's got to tell me who brought me to the Inn. I won't take no for an answer. It's time I repaid my kind friend and the savior of my life, whoever he was."

Margaret Githens' mouth opened slightly as if in protest. Her soft blue eyes studied the domineering man before her.

They made quite a picture in contrasts, these two. The lawyer's towering stature tended only to minimize the petite frame of his attractive wife. His loud, raucous voice and uncouth mannerism magnified Margaret's soft voice, well-chosen words, and her courteous, kind, gentle, and loving ways to all mankind, while Hartley's wickedness made the uprightness of Margaret's inner nature to shine forth the brighter and to flourish like the palm tree and go deeper and still deeper with her Lord and God.

"Call Geoffrey!" the man shouted again. "Don't just stand and stare at me! What were you thinking about?"

A soft ripple of laughter came from Margaret's lips. "Sorry, dear!" she exclaimed lightly, as she walked slowly to the telephone in the husband's spacious home office at the far end of the hall on the first floor. She couldn't tell him that she had been mentally comparing him with the man he one time had been.., before the gods of drink and lust for money had ever decreed and demanded that he sacrifice his manhood, his ideals, his time and energy to them alone! That he had made a total and complete commitment to his gods, Margaret had no doubt.

She dialed the Inn's number and asked for Geoffrey, who was soon on the line.

"This is Mrs. Githens, Geoff," she said, speaking with the intimacy spoken by all Devon by the Sea residents. "Hartley's demanding to know who it was that rescued him the night of the big Nor'-easter. . . ."

"Let me talk to him!" Hartley had come up behind his wife and grabbed the phone out of her hand roughly. "Geoff," he began, trying to utilize every single bit of rough-spoken force his energies possessed, "I'm tired of hearing you say you can't tell me who rescued me. I demand an answer! Now!"

A long ripple of laughter ran across the phone. It was disconcerting to the lawyer. Frustrating even. "Who do you think you are?" Hartley shouted into the mouthpiece. "Laugh at me, will you? I'll show you who you are! I'll have you sent up for. . . ."

"For libel, Hart?" Geoffrey interrupted. "Is that what you meant to say?" he asked in a provocative manner. "As for who I think I am -- well, Hart old boy, I'm quite an unpretentious soul; no fakery about me. I'm none other than Geoffrey Mackley, husband of a good wife, father of five children and sole owner of Fisherman's Cove Inn, all of which fell into my hands through hard work and honest dealings with my fellow-man!" Geoffrey's last sentence came out meaningful and icy with an unmistakable weight of irony in it.

Hartley Githens cringed beneath the words inwardly but exploded outwardly. "Look, Geoff, I'm fed up with your evasiveness. . . ."

"Does it remind you, perhaps, of a bit of your own strategy, Hart old boy?"

Geoffrey Mackley, while making no pretense whatever of salvation . . . nor religion even, for that matter . . . was, none-the-less, a man of good repute with a good name in the entire rural community of Devon by the Sea. The now-mocking tone of voice he employed on his caller and the inference in the words, served only to enrage the already inflamed nature of the lawyer.

"Who was the man?" Hartley's voice thundered into the phone. "I demand to know! Who would have been out on a night like that?"

"Well now, let's do a bit of speculating, old friend," Geoffrey replied in a slow manner. "For one, Lawyer Githens wouldn't have been out . . . except to the Lobster Bar. . . ."

That cut straight home. Geoffrey could feel the tension across the line. He shouldn't rub it in, he knew, but he could not tolerate the lawyer's wicked dealings with innocent people nor his frequent drinking sprees and the sin and wickedness that went on at the Lobster Bar . . owned by Hartley himself.

Geoffrey, like the majority of Devon by the Sea citizens, was a strong, outspoken opponent of the bar when mention of its coming was first breathed. He fought and opposed it with all his might. He remembered how Hartley Githens had tried to bribe him into setting up a bar when he had first opened Fisherman's Cove Inn.

Geoffrey was no one's fool. The lawyer, greatly agitated and hotly angered over Geoffrey's refusal to comply with his wishes and demands, financed the bar himself in a small out-of-the-way place some three miles out of town. The small business flourished and grew until it was moved into the town, spawning wickedness and evil in its wake, all of which the owner of Fisherman's Cove Inn despised, loathed, hated and fought, and opposed with all that was in his manly character.

"Stop tormenting me!" Hartley bellowed. "I've asked you a simple question. I want an answer . . . civilly!"

"Well, as you asked a few minutes ago, who would have been out on a night such as that?"

"I can't imagine anyone. That's why I'm asking you!"

"Well, now Hartley, there's Al Castonet; he runs a trap line. He might have been out. I didn't say he brought you in here, mind you, I just said he may have been out on a night like that . . . tending his traps and following his line. It is possible, you know. Then there's Tom Brainswell; he looks after the lighthouse. He'd have to be out, bad weather or no bad weather.

"You know as well as I, Geoffrey, that Al Castonet wouldn't turn a finger to help anyone. Not even a dying man! Why, the man's so lazy he fairly reeks with the stench of it. All Devon by the Sea knows that if it weren't for his wife Sally, the three babies would have starved to death long ago."

"But Al does run a trap line, Hartley . . . since you took the comfortable little house out from under him and Sally and the children. The tar-paper shack they're living in provides little more warmth than a stable would, so I've heard from Blake Preston."

At mention of Blake Preston, the lawyer slammed the receiver down with a bang. "Contemptible man, Geoffrey Mackley!" he exclaimed with no little amount of agitation.

The weeks that followed were trying weeks for Margaret Githens and her family. Her husband's temper seemed constantly to be at the boiling and explosive points and it was with a great measure of relief that she waved good-bye to him shortly thereafter as he left for his main office downtown.

It seemed good to Hartley to be seated in the big leather chair behind his old familiar oak desk again. "My file of papers!" he barked briskly and shortly to his secretary.

With all his evil ways and sinful doings, one thing could be chalked up to the lawyer's credit and in his favor . . . he was in no way familiar or free with those of the opposite sex. Leafing through the papers Alicia Winn brought to him, Hartley's eyes fell upon one that enraged him. There it was, one of the dozen or more papers he had drawn up against Blake Preston. One dealt with what he required, namely an impassable gap, dug through on

Blake's side of the fence, since Blake Preston refused to turn his property over to him. It angered him when he remembered how he had failed to have even that granted to him by the court.

The next paper was a little more consoling and comforting. It dealt with the "transaction" of the Castonet house Geoffrey's voice and his words did a quick flashback on his brain, sending an uneasy feeling to his heart.

Slamming the papers on to his desk, he bellowed loudly, "These are old files, Miss Winn. Bring me the new!"

"Yes, Sir. So sorry, Mr. Githens," Alicia apologized, blushing scarlet over her clumsy error and blunder. Gathering the scattered papers together, she hurried away after the new file.

"Have someone bring Al Castonet to my office. Immediately!" he called after her.

"Yes, Sir. Immediately!" Alicia repeated, picking up the most recent files and laying them on Hartley Githens' desk before hurrying away to find Carl Sturk, the errand boy.

"And the boss says 'immediately,' Carl!" Alicia emphasized. "So don't delay along the way."

"But suppose the man isn't home! What do I do then?"

"Better find him!" Alicia admonished. "You know the lawyer!"

"Who doesn't!" Carl exclaimed as he drove away.

It was mid-afternoon when Al Castonet, pale, nervous, trembling and frightened, was ushered into the inner office of Hartley Githens. Why was he summoned? he wondered fearfully. Did the lawyer plan to take the tar-paper shack from him the way he had done their modest but neat little house? What had he done, to be called into the office?

"Were you out at all on the night of the fierce Nor'easter, Castonet?" Hartley asked, ignoring formal or friendly greetings whatever and coming straight to the point.

Without a moment's hesitation Al spoke up. "Indeed I was. And what a night it was! Not fit for man nor beast to be out."

"What were you doing? Out on a night such as that?" the lawyer asked quickly and anxiously, sitting on the very edge of his seat now.

Al, remembering all that his family and he had suffered at the unmerciful hands of his questioner, all but retorted that he had not been out drinking as was his interrogator, when the gentle face of Margaret Githens projected itself before him in a loving and kind way. Being a recipient of her generous and helpful gifts as well as those of the Blake Preston family, he simply replied, "I was following my trap line, Mr. Githens."

"On a night as mean as that?" the lawyer asked, deducing that the Castonet family must have been in dire circumstances indeed for the man to have ventured out in such arctic weather.

"I was," Al answered truthfully. "I started out before the blizzard swept in, Sir."

By now Hartley Githens' tone of voice was almost gentle. Barely sitting on his chair at all, he leaned far across the desk and asked Al, "And . . . ahem! . . . I mean . . . did . . . did you happen to see anyone that night? I . . . I mean did you see any other man out in that er . . . horrible blizzard and . . . and storm?"

He folded and unfolded his hands in nervous fashion. "Yes, Sir, I did."

"Who?" Hartley asked, springing suddenly up. "I . . . I mean, did you see . . . me?"

"Yes, Sir, I did."

Rushing around to the opposite side of the desk, Hartley Githens took Al's hands in his and swung the man to his feet. Was the man crazy? Al wondered. Had he gone clear berserk?

"You . . . you saved my life!" Hartley was shouting. "You saw me and took me to the Inn. Thank you. Thank you, Al! That cocky Geoffrey Mackley

refused to tell, but now I know. Come, my dear boy. I want to repay you. Miss Winn, send Carl to fetch Sally and the babies. This afternoon we celebrate and go house hunting . . . the Castonets and Lawyer Githens! I'm not so inhuman as to be totally ungrateful to one who has saved my life."

"But . . . but, Mr. Githens, I . . . I . . ." Al stuttered and stammered.

"Come Come, dear boy! Say no more. You are entirely too modest and humble about this whole thing. Be still!"

"But, Mr. Githens, I"

"I said, say no more!" the lawyer exclaimed loudly in that stern tone of voice that never failed to terrify his hearers. "Miss Winn, that four bedroom house on Driftwood Drive. Have someone go over and open the doors. The Castonets shall have the house A gift from Lawyer Hartley Githens. Bring me the proper papers. Immediately! I will sign the house over to them."

"Yes, Mr. Githens." Alicia fairly flew around, trying to decide what to do first.

"And Miss Winn," Hartley called after her again, "forget about Carl going after Sally and the children. Tell him to send a moving van over there and move them to 103 Driftwood Drive. Immediately! I'll take Al. We'll go after Sally and the children ourselves."

"Yes, Sir!" Alicia answered, exasperated. And to think people ever declared women to be changeable! she thought wearily.

"Mr. Githens," Al began again.

"I told you twice . . . or more . . . to say no more! I mean it!"

It was when they were alone and settled in the lovely house on Driftwood Drive that Sally, bright tears in her tired eyes, turned to her husband. "It's . . . it's almost like . . . like the fairy tale about Cinderella!" she exclaimed. "And . . . and, Al, I'm so proud of you! You never told me you had been so heroic and . . . and noble. Why not?"

"I had nothing to tell," he answered shortly.

"How very modest my husband is!" Sally replied with pride in her voice.

And that night, as two men lay their heads on the pillows, their emotions were as different as daylight is from darkness. One man's conscience was eased considerably in the thought that he had given the man, whose meager property he had unlawfully taken and confiscated, a house four to five times worth the value of the other.

Al Castonet's thoughts and the cogitations of his heart troubled him. He was now living in a house to which he had no right. He was acting a lie! A literal lie.

Quite suddenly, other thoughts presented themselves and began taking shape inside his head and his heart: He deserved the house! The lawyer had taken his home into his own possession . . . illegally . . . and literally thrown them out on the street. He was entitled to this house. Yes, he was! And he would go on pretending!

(Chapter 4)

The move to the house on Driftwood Drive brought little less taxation of the body to Sally Castonet than when she lived in the tar-paper shack near the bog not too far from Devon by the Sea. Besides cleaning house for the three wealthy owners of mansions on the sea, she had a house of far greater dimensions now to keep clean for her family. Nighttime found her totally exhausted and worn out.

Jonathan Blake, noting the tired lines on Sally's otherwise pretty and sweet face, secured a position for Al. "It's not hard work" he informed the man, "but it does require diligence and faithfulness. Either you go to work and provide a decent living for your wife and family, or lose Sally. She desperately needs rest. No amount of pills or medication I can give her will help her like rest. The decision is yours, Al."

Al Castonet's face paled. Sally ill! Critically so? It shocked the man. "I'll take the job," he answered unhesitatingly, not even stopping to ask the nature of the position.

"Fine, Al. Report to my father tomorrow morning by eight o'clock, the Lord willing. He'll be expecting you. . . ."

True to his word, Al Castonet was at Blake Preston's home a few minutes before eight.

Sally, much to her delight and for the first time in years, became solely a wife and mother and an excellent "keeper at home."

Al, who had steadfastly refused the Preston's repeated invitation to attend church with them, now went daily, since his employment as janitor, "upkeeper" of the thriving Holiness church kept him busy.

In accepting the offer of the position, it was stipulated also that he and his family regularly attend the church services whenever possible. Thus it was a common sight to see the entire Castonet family in each and every church service. It was on a prayer meeting night shortly after Al began his full-time job that Sally Castonet, humble soul that she was, sought and found God at the altar in the church.

The months that followed her conversion were times of extreme testing for Sally, who had by now also been wholly and entirely sanctified. Her careful, conscientious and righteous living, coupled with his close and intimate association with the Preston family, grated desperately on Al's heart and his conscience, making him thoroughly miserable and hard to live with. Time after time he threatened to quit his job and leave Devon by the Sea completely.

"But why, Al" Sally asked innocently one day, her great, honest blue eyes searching his face for the answer. "We have never had it so good and I . . . I found my blessed Savior here! You know, dear one, that the Prestons are paying your wages. You . . . you seem so unhappy since . . . we moved into this house, Al; as if something were troubling you. . . ."

"Leave me alone, Sally!" he exclaimed harshly, shaking her loving hands off his shoulders and hurrying outside. Something troubling him? If only she knew. If only she knew! It felt as if the world were pressing in on his heart, crushing him, so heavy was his load of sin and guilt and, yes, shame.

He hurried to the church. Once inside, he paced back and forth restlessly. Nervously. "Confess your sins! confess your sins . . . confess your sins!" The ticking of the cheap watch in his pocket seemed to be screaming at him. "Admit your sin . . . admit your sin . . . admit your sin!" it urged. Sweat broke out over his body. It ran down his forehead and face and made his hands wet and clammy feeling.

"Admit your sin . . . confess your sin . . ." the watch prodded.

"Stop it! Stop it" Al screamed, rushing forward and draping his body unceremoniously over the altar. "I'll do it! I will confess my sins. . . ."

Forty-five minutes later he walked out of the church into the sunlight -- the sunlight of a brand new day. His heart was made new. Washed in the blood of the Lamb.

His first stop was at his home. "Sally," he exclaimed, taking his wife into his arms and dancing around the room with her. "I'm converted. I'm a new man. My sins which were many are all washed away. Oh, I feel so free. So liberated. I'm converted! And, Sally dear, I must confess something to you; I didn't save Hartley Githens' life. I had such hatred in my heart for the man that I would have allowed him to freeze to death. And he would have, too, if Blake Preston hadn't happened along. . . ."

"Blake Preston!" Sally said the name almost reverently, more like a benediction. "Blake Preston! God bless the wonderful Preston family. Oh Al, I'm so happy for you and so thankful that you're getting things straightened out and confessed. I have felt for a long time that you were living a . . . a lie, dear."

"I was, Sally; but not anymore. Thank God! I hated the lawyer; so much so that I'd have allowed him to freeze fast to the ground. But the Lord has changed my heart. And Sally, I actually love Hartley Githens. It's too wonderful and marvelous for me to understand, but I feel it way down deep inside of my heart. I'm going to Mr. Githens and confess everything. We may lose our house. . . ."

Sally's shout of praise filled the house. "And what of it, my dearest husband! Houses are made of brick and mortar; these we can get anytime. A home is made of love and confidence and trust and kindness. God has now

given us a home! What more could we desire? Go, Al. Go to Hartley Githens and tell him everything. Withhold nothing. A tar-paper shack can be a literal heaven on earth when Christ dwells and rules and reigns within the hearts of its occupants."

With Sally's words of encouragement ringing in his ears, Al hurried to Hartley Githens' down-town office.

Alicia Winn, smiling broadly, ushered him into the lawyer's inner office." Good morning. Good morning!" the lawyer bubbled effusively as Al seated himself in the chair designated to him. "And what, may I ask, can I do for you, Al Castonet? No legal problems, certainly!" he said.

"No legal problems," Al parroted nervously.

"You're wanting a favor? A loan perhaps? Name it, my boy. I owe my very life to you. . . ."

"Mr. Githens," Al began, edging himself to the front of his chair, "I have come to make a confession and a restitution, I got converted this morning and I want you to know that I didn't rescue you. . . ."

"Come, come, my boy, don't be so modest."

"I'm not being modest, Mr. Githens; I'm telling you the truth. I was not your rescuer."

Hartley Githens sat forward on his seat. "But you said you saw me the night of the big blizzard! You said it!" he accused, shaking his index finger menacingly in front of Al's face.

"I did see you, Mr. Githens."

"Then why are you saying you didn't rescue me? Why, young man?"

"Because I didn't. I saw you, yes. But my heart was filled with such deep and intense hatred for you that I passed you by . . . leaving you on the ground to the tortures of the merciless wind and the cold. I thought it was no less than you deserved. I would not have cared should you have died. Froze. . . ."

"Then who was my rescuer?" Hartley Githens asked the question more to himself than to anyone about him.

"I got converted, Mr. Githens; down at the church, a short while ago, and while God forgave me of my sins, I humbly seek your forgiveness for pretending and acting a lie. . . ."

By now Hartley had gotten to his feet. His face was white with anger and with rage. "You thief!" he ranted. "You fraud! Out! Get out of my office this minute and never show your face again. I'll get the house back," he threatened. "See if I don't!"

Al rose to his feet to leave. "I care nothing about the house, Mr. Githens. I ask only one thing . . . that you forgive me with all your heart like Blake Preston, your rescuer and your savior, the night of the big blizzard. He keeps forgiving you and loving you. He's a man after God's own heart. That Blake Preston is."

"Blake Preston! Blake Preston? I hate the man! I hate the name. . . ."

"Yet he loves Hartley Githens as passionately as you hate him. So much so that he well-nigh gave his life for you that night . . . trying to save you from the elements."

"Out, man. Out! You lie! You lie!" the lawyer raged. Al stood his ground. Facing the enraged man he said softly, "The hands of Blake Preston were as gentle as a mother's hands as they massaged the stiff, cold limbs and body of Hartley Githens. His warm, heavy topcoat was stripped from his own back and wrapped lovingly and tenderly about Lawyer Githens' body to keep him from freezing as he was carried from his almost snowy grave over the shoulder of Blake Preston to Fisherman's Cove Inn where he was put gently to bed."

"You lie!" the lawyer shouted again. "Get out!"

"I speak the truth, Lawyer Githens. Every word of it, the truth! Blake Preston was your rescuer. He didn't know that I saw him."

"Why didn't you tell me this when I first sent for you? Why? Answer me!"

"I tried to tell you, Mr. Githens, and each time I tried, you cut me off, ordering me to say no more. Then I got to feeling as if I wasn't really doing too wrong by pretending . . . since you had so ruthlessly stolen the house from us. But I see differently now. It's just as sinful and evil to act a lie as it is to tell one. That's why I've come seeking your forgiveness."

"Out, man! Out! Never set foot in this office again!"

Al walked out into the golden sunlight, his heart an inner calm and a deep peace and rest.

Hartley Githens, in his inner office, paced back and forth across the room like a wild animal, caged and longing and looking for freedom. Blake Preston his savior! Blake Preston! It was preposterous!

(Chapter 5)

Hartley Githens, upset beyond measure by the news that Blake Preston was the man who had rescued him and the man to whom he owed his life, became almost irrational with anger and a state of confusion and shame, The "griffin" nature within the man came forcibly and noticeably and shamelessly to the forefront, setting the Githens household in a state of constant anxiety and tension.

"The Prestons are wonderful people, Hartley," Margaret Githens said softly one early evening after one of her husband's tirades. "I see no reason why this news should so upset you. Is it not proof of the man's love for you -- the rescue of your life? And at the expense of his own poor, failing health!"

"Failing health! Bah! Why, Margaret, the man's stout as an Ox. . . ."

"Not from all the reports I hear, dear Hartley. And now that I look back, I recall many things quite clearly and vividly. From the night of your rescue, Blake Preston was confined to his bed for many long weeks. He was a gravely ill man. . . ."

"How do you know about these things?" Hartley demanded coldly.

"Jonathan and our Meg are good friends, Hartley. Very good friends!"

Lawyer Githens eyed his wife suspiciously. "Are you trying to infer that . . . well, do you mean to say that Meg. . . . our daughter Meg! . . . defies her father and . . . and . . . keeps company with Jonathan Blake? Does she, Margaret?"

Margaret's eyes took on a dreamy look. "Not only does our lovely Christian daughter talk to and keep company with Jonathan, she. . . ."

"Well, she what?" the lawyer exploded.

"They make a lovely couple, dear. They are so much in love.

Hartley Githens stood adamant as a stone, only the dilating of his nostrils and the changing color of his face signifying any semblance of life.

When he recovered from the initial shock of his wife's words, he jammed his fist into the open palm of his other hand with vicious intent and force. "Over my dead body, they'll keep company!" he exploded, storming back and forth through the house like a mad man. "Wait until she comes home from work! Just wait! You'll see how much longer she'll keep company with Doctor Jonathan Blake. Why, this is. . . ."

But the lawyer's full sentence was not finished. Margaret Githens, kind woman that she was, spoke softly and gently again. "She's not coming home, Hartley. She works in a distant city. She's been gone for more than three weeks already. You've been so busy with your 'business' that you have not noticed her absence nor missed her. Meg and Jonathan are going to be married. She was hoping you'd give her away. They want you to attend the wedding, dear."

Margaret's words shocked the irate man into total silence. His face changed colors repeatedly. When he recovered his voice and his breath, he stormed. "The ideal the very idea! Me, give Meg to . . . to him! And . . . and attend their wedding! Preposterous! Absurd! Ridiculous! What a laughing stock I'd be. Hartley Githens' beautiful daughter marrying Blake Preston's son! Oh-h-h!" The latter exclamation was more like a wail than anything else.

"Jonathan's a wonderful young man, Hartley. None finer nor more spiritual anywhere. I'm happy for our daughter. Happy for both of them, really."

"Spiritual! Bah! What does Hartley Githens care for that in his son-in-law! Why couldn't she have chosen Bill Sutters or Clair Strumbull or . . .?"

But Margaret Githens didn't wait to hear more. She shuddered involuntarily as she thought of Bill Sutters and Clair Strumbull, young men who frequented the Lobster Bar like her husband and over whose lives there were shadows. Dark, sinister, evil shadows of evil doings and happenings.

Working in the kitchen, Margaret heard her husband's continual pacing, back and forth, back and forth across the living room floor, his voice thundering invectives against the Blake Preston family in a most vicious way. Then suddenly, all was silence, save for the dull thud of something dropping on to the floor.

Margaret dropped what she was doing and hurried to the living room. She found Hartley slumped in a pitiful heap on the floor. She searched frantically for his pulse, praying all the while as she did so. If only one of the children were home! She must get him to a doctor. A hasty glance at the mantel clock told her that the doctors' offices were all closed for the day. They would all be home at this hour. Reaching for the telephone, she hastily dialed the Blake Preston number.

"Hello, Leah!" She spoke urgently into the mouthpiece. "Is Jonathan home? This is Margaret Githens. Hartley's had a heart attack. At least this is what I suspect and fear. No, he's not at the office this evening. He's home, for once . . . in a heap on the living room floor. He'll be over then? Oh, thank you. Please tell him to hurry. . . ."

Margaret Githens hadn't long to wait and by the time Doctor Jonathan Blake arrived the storm, which had been brewing for some time, broke in great, fierce intensity on the outside. The dark clouds rolled and tossed and churned mercilessly in the heavens and the roar of the thunder was like cannons exploding.

Jonathan looked anxiously toward the troubled skies then back to his patient whose breathing was slow and labored. He'd hardly dare venture out

to the nearest hospital some thirty miles distant in the menacing' storm. If the looks of the clouds presaged what he feared, he'd not be able to keep the car on the road even.

"We'll have to get him to bed," he said kindly, lifting the lawyer's bulky weight on to his own strong body and carrying him gently to the bedroom where he made a thorough examination and a quick diagnosis. "You were right, Mrs. Githens; it is his heart. Something has excited the man greatly. . . ."

Jonathan's voice was drowned out by a fierce and mighty clap of thunder and the shrill howling of the wind.

"It looks like a tornado!" he shouted into Margaret Githens' ear. "It is a tornado!" he shouted again. "Drop to the floor! Flat!"

His warning was not a moment too soon. The screeching, whining, whistling, howling, melancholy wind swept across the front of the house with a force that staggered even the mind and comprehension of the noble and great doctor, taking with it the front of the porch, footing and all, and carrying it swiftly and easily away, depositing the wicked looking griffins in a near-by field . . . a crumpled looking mess of bronze.

Jonathan worked swiftly after that, barely remembering anything he did. But when darkness fell, and the storm with its mighty downpour of rain had spent itself and swept viciously out to sea, Hartley Githens was sleeping soundly in a bedroom in Blake Preston's house.

"I want him here . . . just in case!" Jonathan warned, talking to Mrs. Githens. "Then too, it will be some time before your house is fully repaired."

"And so long as we have a roof over our head, you shall have one, too," Leah and Blake Preston asserted firmly.

Thus it was that, several days later, the cocksure lawyer, Hartley Githens, rallied sufficiently to stare in wide-eyed wonder around him. "Where . . . am I?" he asked Margaret in a weak voice.

"You are with kind friends," she assured him sweetly, being careful not to mention the Preston name lest it excite and upset him and a second attack ensue.

"But . . . but . . . why am I not in . . . in my own bed?" he persisted.

"Our house suffered a bit of loss, dear. Nothing that cannot be repaired, mind you," Margaret soothed. "A tornado hit and took a portion of the front part of the house with it. . . ."

"Then . . . whose place . . . I mean, where are we?"

"With kind friends. Now you must be still and not talk. You have been a very sick man."

He made a desperate effort to rise but fell back on to the pillow, limp, perspiring and exhausted. He realized suddenly how feeble his strength was.

"Margaret!" he exclaimed in a voice strangely humble and totally unlike himself. "I . . . I am sick. What if . . . I don't get well! What if I . . . I'd die!"

Mrs. Githens, completely baffled and awe-stricken by the tenor of her husband's tone of voice and his words, said quickly, "You need not fear death, dear. Not if you get everything fixed up between God and you and your fellowman."

Beads of perspiration stood out thick and large on the lawyer's forehead. He spoke hesitatingly . . . falteringly. "Wife, I believe I am dying! Send for . . . Blake Preston. I have some unfinished business to do with him. It would be dreadful for a mortal man to meet his Maker in the condition I suddenly find my heart in.

"Make haste!" His last injunction was a modified form of "immediately." "Find Blake Preston and get him here. Quick!"

"Yes, dear husband. Yes!" Margaret said tearfully, hurrying down the hallway to the living room where she found Blake and Leah Preston going over Scripture together.

"Hartley wants you," she said, motioning for Blake. "Does he know . . . where he is . . . staying?" Leah asked anxiously.

"He asked. I told him we were staying with kind friends."

As they neared the bedroom door at the far end of the hall, Hartley's voice reached them. "Hurry, Margaret! Hurry! I fear I am dying. Bring me Blake Preston"

"Hartley, my friend!" Blake said, stepping into the room. "Did I hear you ask for me? Did you call my name?"

"Preston," the lawyer began quickly, "I fear I am a dying man. I'll not be here long and I . . . I have some unfinished business to attend to. Remember the incident of the 'impassable gap'?" Blake Preston nodded assent.

"Remember the others on 'border rights, hedges, ditches, spreading trees, rights of way, acts of trespass,' with all those interminable et ceteras that I dragged into court against you, until I filled your life with tribulation and annoyance?" Again Blake nodded.

"I beg your forgiveness, Blake Preston. I cannot meet God with such a dirty mess of sins hanging over me. Oh, if you will but forgive me this one more time . . . you, who saved me from an icy grave the night of the big blizzard! Don't look so startled, Blake; I know all about it. Al Castonet told me everything. He saw us both . . . you and me . . . and had he had his way I'd be in my grave. A Christless grave, it's sure! But God had mercy and pity on my lost soul and sent you along to rescue me. I've been as vile and mean and contemptible a man as ever walked in shoe leather. But I've not been a happy man. Blake Preston, if you can forgive the likes of such as I . . . I . . . can die a lot easier. I'm between two fires."

Walking to the side of the bed, Blake took the man's hands in his own. "You are freely and wholly forgiven, my dear man!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"Let me finish, please!" Lawyer Githens interposed. "As I stated previously, I have been between two fires, Blake Preston. I am suffering just now from the effects of a strangely-peculiar fire . . . a fire which makes it impossible for me to 'blaze away' at you any further. The fact is, I'm all ablaze myself now. I tried to 'make it hot' for you. Well, you have returned the

compliment and made it hot . . . scorching hot . . . for me. So hot that I can't stand it. . . ."

Blake raised a restraining hand to the lawyer.

"I must finish, Blake Preston. Let me go on. The 'fire' you use and the kind I used, are not mined out of the same pit. Yours came from a heavenly mine; mine is from the pits of hell itself. To you I owe my life! Thanks to you and Leah and Jonathan, I have a faint suspicion, we have a shelter over our heads at this moment. You know how badly I've treated you! And now, do you wonder that I say I am between two fires . . . your 'coals of fire' and the fires of hell? Oh, it's torture, Blake! Torture and torment! How I wish I could be like you! How I wish I could. . .!"

For one moment Lawyer Githens paused. For one ghost of an instant it looked as if the man would weep like a baby. With bright tears shining in his eyes, Blake quoted from I Cor. 7:10-11. "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of; but the sorrow of the world worketh death.

"For behold this self-same thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing in yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all these things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter."

The lawyer, whose eyes were closed momentarily, now opened them wide. "Say that again!" he pleaded, a sob rising with the plea.

Slowly and clearly, Blake quoted the beautiful Scripture passages.

"What clearing of yourselves!" Hartley Githens quoted, more to an Unseen Presence in the room than to anyone else. "O Lord," he cried aloud, "the half of my goods I will give to feed the poor. And, Lord, I'll restore all that I have taken and gotten illegally! Be merciful to me a sinner! Please! Save my lost soul. . . ."

The lawyer's prayer got straight through to heaven. He was soundly converted and born again. His voice, heretofore weak and faltering since his

illness, now rose and soared in shouts of praise and adoration to God like mighty thunder claps.

When finally he calmed down somewhat and realized that his wife and the Prestons were in the room, he reached for Margaret's small hand. "My dear," he said, using the tenderness he had employed in their courtship days. "My dear Margaret, what about the griffins at the front of the house? Did the tornado, of which you spoke so little, do any harm to them?"

Margaret, fearing lest the news of the bronze griffins incur another attack upon her husband, asked cautiously, "And why do you inquire, dear Hartley?"

"I want the beastly things destroyed! They reflect the old Hartley Githens. He is no more! I am a new man in Christ! The griffins must go! The sign of the 'claws,' Margaret . . . I am a changed man. He which hath begun this good work within me will surely finish it . . . in sanctification, like you said, Margaret my dear. The griffins, they must go!" he repeated emphatically.

"They are gone, dear. God sent the tornado to tear them down and to crumble them. Strange thing," Margaret answered, "when Donald went to the field to gather them up, he said their claws were gone. He couldn't find them anywhere."

"It is as God planned it. Perhaps . . ." the lawyer said thoughtfully, "it was a sort of omen or . . . or a premonition of these good things that are happening inside of my heart. Now, Blake Preston, take my hands again. Forever and always, there shall be between us a bond of mutual love and peace -- all because the lawyer's heart is changed and made new . . . in Christ!"

To Hartley Githens, Blake Preston's hearty "Amen" sounded like an angel choir singing.

(The End)