IF I COULD
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Long after my time . . . yes, long, long after my time, someone wrote,

"Backward; turn backward, O time in thy flight
Make me a boy again -- just for tonight."
I do not ask to be a boy -- a carefree, laughing, lighthearted boy: Would to God I could be a man again! A living, mortal man! You see, I am haunted by memories and scenes and places and words and faces. One face in particular. My mind, how it tortures me!

I was once a boy -- "A lovely child." This much repeated phrase of my mother only mocks me now. And to think that once I, too, lived and laughed as you do now.

I was just a boy -- in those long, long years ago -- but I see them yet. Hear them, too. Every June, the reapers came. There was the head of the family, a bearded old man, his wife and daughters, several sons and grandsons, a goat and two buffaloes. And I knew with pleasant resignation that for the next week or so they would all camp in the shade of the wall near our garden gate.

I knew, too, that if I listened closely, I would hear the bearded old one read from the law of Moses and the Prophets, nightly.

Very, very silently I crept along the wall and stationed myself advantageously.

In a clear voice and distinct, but shaking and trembling with inner emotion and delightful anticipation, the bearded one would begin; "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be" (Gen. 49:10). I tell you, even to a boy, it was electrifying. I listened attentively as the reading continued.

"Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

"Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this" (Isaiah 9:6-7).
"And think you that He has come, Father?" asked one of the sons when the reading was ended.

The old man's voice was soft and low. "Hast thou so soon forgotten the joyous tidings of the shepherds on that night some years ago, my son? Shame! Shame!" It was a gentle but meaningful rebuke.

"Think you then, for sure, that it is He? That He is here -- our long-looked -- for Messiah? Our King?" another questioned eagerly.

"I have no doubts, my children. He is here! He has come!" The exclamations were positive.

Trembling, I stole stealthily away from my place inside the wall. We lived just off the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem then, and my father and mother hadn't minded the family camping there, so very, very near us. I watched the women pound the rice with pestle and mortar, milk the goat, and pat their unleavened dough into flat loaves, just like Mother, before baking them on a metal plate over a crackling fire.

A terrible cloud of dust rose during the threshing and winnowing -- powdery dust that seeped through every crack and settled on the furniture, food and lungs. This however, was as nothing compared to my present state.

I disliked the closed windows and doors in the Palestinian heat during the threshing time but this, too, was as nothing -- comparatively speaking.

Nor can the sand flies that came out of the corn and bit us mercilessly during the threshing season compare with the stinging, biting, gnawing conscience with which I am now tormented.

I remember it now as vividly as then, when this same family went into action, slashing through the barley and piling the sheaves into enormous mounds just beyond our gate. After all had been cut, the buffaloes were harnessed to two heavy planks. Long nails were driven through to project underneath -- the "threshing instrument" mentioned in II Samuel 24:22 and Isaiah 41:15.
The animals were then blindfolded (to keep them from getting dizzy) and went in endless circles, trampling the corn down and dragging the ears from the fodder with the nail-studded planks. Constantly, I heard the praises of the old man as he saw the golden grain before his eyes. He was a great one to praise Jehovah God. Oh, how I wish I could banish forever from my tormented conscience his voice! His face!

As evening drew near and the cypress trees cast their long slender shadows across the garden, after many days of long hard work, the family packed up their belongings and began the homeward trek to their village.

My place inside the garden wall now seemed empty, quiet and lonely without them. Nothing was left but the short stubble in tile fields and the haunting, emphatic words of the bearded old one: "He is here, my children! I have no doubts!"

I grew into young manhood. So did others about me. Among them was a Personality Who was to change my destiny.

"In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea,

"And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

"For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his path straight."

This dynamic and fearless preacher of repentance "had his raiment of camel's hair and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey."

What a following he had! All Jerusalem and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan! The countryside was shaken, I tell you, it was! John proclaimed with no uncertain sound, "This is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias."

John was indeed a prophet. We all recognized it. Many people were baptized; others were called a "generation of vipers" and were told to "bring forth fruit meet for repentance."
Lest any should think him the Christ, he proclaimed in the hearing of all,

"I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire:

"Whose fan is in his hand, and he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" Matt. 3:11-12.

In my mind, I was certain John was not the One of whom the bearded one read. But could the Man of whom John spoke be the true Messiah! My heart beat wildly with excitement. What was this new doctrine of repentance? I was soon to learn a lot.

"Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of John.

"But John forbade him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?

"And Jesus answered and said, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Then he suffered him."

I guess none of us who were there that day will ever forget what we saw. I know I can't. (Would to God I could!)

That face! Those eyes! Ah, those kind, merciful looking eyes!

He came "up out of the water and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him:

"And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

No, I shall never forget my first encounter with Christ. I knew this must be He of whom the old bearded one had read and in Whom he had trusted. Something about Christ told me this was He.
He immediately went about doing good. Multitudes followed Him until the day He laid down the terms of true discipleship. Many, then, departed from Him and walked no more with Him.

He possessed unlimited power and was kind to every lost son of Adam's race. He was hard with the leaders of the synagogues, who hated Him and tried repeatedly to get rid of Him. (Oh, could I blot forever these memories from my mind! Oh! Oh! No one knows the remorse of my soul!)

The day He chose me to be one of His disciples will never be forgotten. What a high and noble calling was ours -- that of being "One of the twelve!" But alas, how utterly dangerous for me!

We were intimate with the: Savior -- we knew the homes He visited, the hillsides where He "resorted hither to pray," and I -- I knew where the garden was -His garden of prayer!

Would to God I could come back! Would to God I had one more chance -- one more opportunity. The "right eye," of which He preached in His Olivet discourse, would be plucked out and cast forever from me. Yea, both eyes! That "right hand" which so offended me, would be cut off. (Did He know about me then -even when He was preaching? Oh He must have! The God of all miracles and all might saw my heart!)

Ah, these hands, these grasping, covetous hands wherein lay the thirty pieces of silver, how they burn and blister me! The price of Blood! Oh, have mercy, my God, I beg, and take away this burning! Oh, my torment! My torment! Thirty pieces of silver. Imagine!

Would to God I were back behind the garden wall again listening to the trembly voice of the bearded one and could feel, not the burning, blistering torment of these endless flames, but the Palestinian heat which, in comparison, is nothing. Nothing!

Would to God that I could exchange the strangling, suffocatious smoke of eternal torment for the dust of the threshing season or even the flail in this place of torment! and I am falling, falling, endlessly falling into this bottomless pit and lake of fire where "the fire is not quenched and their worm dieth not." The screaming, screeching, cavernous echoes of Hell are maddening. Maddening, I say!
Oh, dear world -- dear reader -- if I could come back, how different my life would be! Gladly would I make every restitution and confess my every sin in deepest contrition of heart. I would not be here if I had done this while I yet lived. Hell is real! Hell is terrible! Don't come here! Please, please, I warn you!

Oh, if I could! If only I could! But my day of grace has long since been past. I am now a long-time creature of eternal suffering, punishment, pain and woe. The night I betrayed Him . . . (oh, how black was the night in my soul!) that fateful night -- I forfeited forever my hope of eternal Salvation. Little wonder then that I went out and hanged myself. There are no limits for wrongdoing and evil when one turns himself over to Satan.

I extinguished the flame of life by mine own hand. In so doing I flung my immortal soul into this place of eternal torment. As you know, I am Judas Iscariot. And I beg to come back -- for only one moment. Oh, if only I could. . .!

"Is there no hope?" I hear him cry
As he screams and writhes in pain.
"Must my soul be tormented to never die?
Can't I have just one chance again?
The flames, how hot they are!
This blackness . . . how dark it is!
Must I be tormented forever and aye
In the regions of Hell like this?

"Depart from me, conscience! Depart, I pray!
Don't torture my soul anymore!
O, haunting memories, leave me, I say;
Take wings, and away from me soar!"
But the voice of conscience lives on in Hell
And memories will never fade;
And the soul who's unsaved must ever dwell
In the land of "No Hope" and "Too Late!"

"O must I burn to never die . . . but live!"
He screams, as he writhes in pain.
And down in the regions of Too Late and Lost
He's tormented by the awful flame,
No singing there! . . . Opportunities gone
And the pleasures of sin all past.
They're crying now . . . no mocking or fun!
They're reaping the wages of sin at last!

"And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever" Rev. 14:11.