

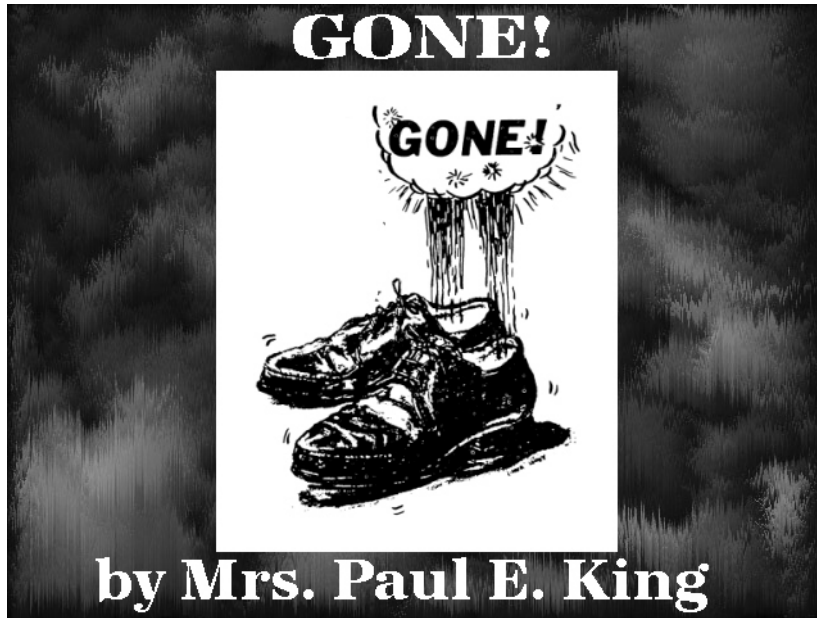
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**GONE!**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

(Character #1)

Gene walked cautiously and silently up the trail. As silently, that is, as was possible with the thick leaf carpet beneath his feet. But he was a man of the fields, the mountains and the streams; and, too, he stepped as

noiselessly and carefully as any Indian who had ever roamed the mountains before him.

He inhaled long, deep draughts of the brittle-crisp mountain air then exhaled it quickly in one great, enormous breath. He repeated it over again and again, a thing as natural for him as eating or sleeping was. He had made it a practice to breathe deeply. Always. He did it without thinking. It was a habit with him.

He ducked low to avoid an overhanging rhododendron branch, then he paused to marvel at the mid-October leaves kaleidoscoping in the gentle breeze. A fresh sparkle had taken over the familiar trees, promising new adventure with every step he took. The mountain was ablaze with flamboyant color. Everywhere he looked, he saw the blending of colors, reminding him of early morning sunrises and evening sunsets and of Miriam's myriad roses and their varied hues and subtle shades. Color. Color. He was immersed in it and he loved it.

"Ever see anything prettier?" his companion asked, looking at the trees, and breaking the silence with the question. "Isn't God wonderful!" It was more of an exclamation than a question. "He's extravagant with His beauty."

"Nature," Gene said coolly. "It's nature, Roy. Happens every fall."

"It's God, Gene. He created the heavens and the earth. The sea, too. And all things in the earth, the sea and the sky. If God had not created and made these things of beauty, there would be no nature. Everything reverts back to the Genesis account of the Creation and to God. 'In the beginning was the Word,' "Roy quoted, "And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made."

Gene shifted the gun he was carrying, then he said, "Could we just enjoy the day together without any Bible quotations? I know you enjoy your salvation, as you phrase your joy and heart-peace. But you know how I feel about spiritual things, Roy. We grew up together. Slept in the same bed all our single life. And I'm happy for you. But I'm not ready to go to the limits you've gone to to get this salvation. Maybe someday; but not now. I appreciate you as my brother, and I know something has happened to you: You're not the same; you're different. And it's definitely for the better. But to

make all those restitutions and straighten up your backtracks! Whew! Nothing doing for me. Like I said, maybe someday. But not now."

Roy leaned against a tree. Propping one foot on a rotting stump, he said, "Gene, listen to me just this one more time. I've told you on numerous occasions how the Bible tells us that Jesus is coming back to take away His Church; the Bride of Christ. I want you to be ready to go. And the only way to be ready is for one to repent of his sins and in deep contrition of heart and soul to come to Christ for mercy and pardon. The purchased price of our salvation was Jesus' precious blood. His very life! Think of it! The Savior's blood! I love you, Gene. You're my flesh and blood brother. I want you to go to Heaven with me."

"Lay off of me, Roy, or you'll lose your hunting partner for today. I'm a man; I know what I want and I know what I don't want. Our parents weren't religious people and I'm not either. As you know only too well."

"One word of warning, Gene; don't put off coming to Jesus for pardon until it's too late." With those words, Roy fell silent. He felt defeated; but he knew his brother. How well he knew him! Then, too, God would never force Himself, nor impose His dear person upon any who did not want Him nor desire Him. Roy knew this too.

A quick sideways glance at his brother revealed the set jaw and the anger blazing in his eyes. This grieved Roy. Deeply. He hadn't meant to make Gene angry. Not at all. His motive was pure, prompted by love and an urgency deep inside his soul. Time was short. He felt it deep within his being.

Everywhere he looked anymore, it seemed, he saw and felt the unmistakable signs of Jesus' soon coming. The breezes seemed to whisper it and the heavens to declare it. It possessed his entire person. He rejoiced in the anticipation and glad expectancy of the glorious event. Jesus was coming! And soon! He had the wedding garment on. It was the robe of righteousness and true Holiness. And he had wanted Gene to get clothed with the same beautiful and spotlessly-white garments too. Oh, how he had wanted for Gene to get ready!

Gene turned suddenly and said briskly, "Let's get to hunting. That's why we came, isn't it?"

"Partly," Roy answered honestly. "I wanted to do a bit of hunting, yes; but I have prayed much about this other matter, too."

"Forget about the 'other matter,' Roy. Let's hunt." They started forward in total silence, so far as speaking was concerned. Gene, great and notable hunter that he was, had eyes and ears for nothing other than the game after which he had come.

The air was brittle-crisp and freshly-clean smelling in the aftermath of numerous hard frosts and repeated snowfalls. It was refreshing and exhilarating and Roy, his mind more on spiritual things than on hunting, offered up praises of heart-felt thanksgiving and deepest gratitude to God.

"Unto them that look for him, shall he appear . . . ." He quoted the scripture verse aloud in a soft voice and a reverential manner, his heart and mind thinking of and feasting upon the thought of that "blessed hope."

Gene gave him a quick sideways look of disgust then turned away as quickly as he had cast the glance.

Roy sighed. A hot tear slid down his cold cheek. Would none of his loved ones come to know and to love his Savior he wondered? His mother and father, while never once making light of anything he ever told them about Jesus and His saving and sanctifying power, never made a move toward God either." It's fine for you, Roy," his father had said numerous times. "but I've managed well enough without God all my life and I'll die that way, I suppose."

A cold shiver of fear traced Roy's spine as he recalled those words. No amount of reasoning or pleading and giving scriptural verses was able to alter his father's thinking nor change his set ways. His mother was equally as set and calloused. And now Gene.

"Oh, God!" he exclaimed pleadingly in little more than an anguished, whispered prayer-cry of longing. "Have they no concern for their soul? None whatever?" Again the moan escaped his lips. "Oh God! Dear God, move upon their heart. Please!" His plea was muffled.

"Look, Roy," Gene exploded angrily. "I'm fed up with you. Enjoy the day. I'll hunt by myself." With those words, he hurried away and was soon swallowed up in the dense rhododendron and trees.

Roy stood for a moment in shocked silence, his tears forming little ice crystals on his cheeks. Rebellion was such an evil thing, he realized suddenly. Rebellion against God, especially.

His thoughts wandered to Jenny then. Dear, sweet Jenny! His beautiful young wife of less than two years. It was through Jenny that he had first heard about Jesus. She had told him so many wonderful things as he lay, helpless, on the bed in the hospital; things about Jesus and His power to forgive sins and to make one free from sin.

With nothing but seeming endless time on his hands, she had placed a New Testament beside him on the bed one day as she came into the room in one of her off-duty hours. "Read this," she had said softly and kindly to him. "And I'll be praying for you, Roy. Read it with an open heart and an open mind. Will you, please?"

And he had promised her that he would. In fact, he read far into the morning hours that night.

"Did you read from the Book?" she asked him the next morning when she came into his room looking neat, modest and prim in her nurse's uniform and cap.

"I could scarcely put it down," Roy remembered having told her. Then, with a quiver in his voice he raised the New Testament and asked. "Is it because of this that you are so different?"

"It's because of Jesus, Roy. I learned about Him and His great love through the New Testament. A girl friend gave it to me. After I was converted, I promised the Lord that I would begin a ministry of passing out His Word to all whom I felt would receive it."

"And how did you know that I'd receive it?" Roy had queried.

Jenny smiled then; a radiant smile. "I've prayed much for you, Roy," she had replied. "I asked God to open your heart to receive His Word and He did it. I knew this before I gave it to you."

Roy remembered how much that had baffled him. But she had spoken the truth and he knew it. Without preamble or further talk, he asked, "And now, what must I do? I feel all funny-strange inside. I never knew that I, too, helped to crucify Jesus; not until I read about it." Then, in an agony of spirit, he had burst out with, "Oh Jenny, you have peace: Show me the way to get it. Will you please?"

And that morning . . . that wonderful, wonderful morning . . . he passed from death unto life: he was born again, of God.

As the days passed, Jenny brought him books on Holiness of heart and, shortly thereafter, he was sanctified wholly. A few weeks later he was taken out of traction and, within several days, he was sent home to finish recuperating.

His dates with Jenny were times of spiritual feasts, and when she became his wife his joy knew no bounds. His family liked Jenny but considered her quite out of touch with the young women her own age and, also, extremely quaint and old-fashioned.

Roy had a sudden longing now to just be with Jenny. They had the mutual bond of married love as well as Jesus Christ as their Savior between them. They rejoiced in the same spiritual things and had no hankering for the world and its trinkets. Gene, on the other hand, had interest in everything but the spiritual. Yes, suddenly, Roy wished he had remained at home by his own hearth-fire, where he could be near Jenny and watch her as she kept their house and baked their bread. Oh, Jenny was a sure-enough thirty-first-chapter-of-Proverbs wife and woman. And he loved her devotedly.

Having no desire whatever for hunting since Gene's pain-filled words, Roy settled himself on a fallen log. He had driven his brother to the edge of the mountain and, instead of hunting now, he would enjoy the beauties of God's creations until Gene was ready to go home. Then he would drive Gene home.

Gene checked his watch again, a thing he had done for the past two hours. Then he paced around the locked car, his hands clasping and unclasping nervously inside his hunting trouser pockets. Where was Roy? They had set a time when each was to be back at the car, if they got

separated. Two hours late! This was not like Roy. He was the punctual one; the one to abide by a contract and fulfill a promise.

Cupping his hands to his mouth, he called loudly, "Roy, Roy!" The mountains caught the sound and echoed the call back to his listening ears as if in sheer mimicry or mockery.

He waited with bated breath. Then he repeated the call. Again, the mountains tossed the name back at him. He was becoming agitated. "That religious fanatic!" he exclaimed, kicking at his filled game bag on the ground.

A look at the sky told him the all too obvious: night was coming on. And he had no way to get into the car, nor its trunk. That meant he'd have to go looking for his brother. And, too, he'd have to pack his game bag and his gun along with him so no one would steal them.

Grabbing the heavy bag off the earth floor and shouldering his gun, Gene started back into the woods. Anger boiled and churned inside him. Never again would he go hunting with Roy! His jaw was set; his mind was made up. After this, he would go hunting by himself, or with several of his non-religious friends.

Dusk was settling into the mountains. The sun was almost totally gone from sight and the crows had settled into the tallest trees for the night. A chill wind raced past his cheeks, flushing them scarlet. The intense silence of the woodland was oppressive to him. Noisily, he pushed ahead, breaking twigs and kicking logs and, every now and again, calling, "Roy. Roy. Where are you? It's almost dark! Roy!"

He parted the rhododendron and walked ahead. He was now where he had been when he told Roy he was going to hunt by himself. Or near to the spot. He remembered one of the "landmarks." Always, when in the mountains, he established "landmarks" inside his head as a prevention of getting lost.

He took a few steps forward, and then he saw it. Gasping, he fell to the ground.

When he recovered, he sat up. Then, crawling forward, he touched the pile of clothes. "Empty! Empty!" he cried. "Gone! Gone! Roy's gone!"

His hand fell over the cold stock of the gun. Again he screamed, "Gone! Just like he said." He fell down again in another faint.

"Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of Man cometh" (St. Matt. 24:44).

(Character #2)

The nursery was quiet and peaceful. Katie tip-toed across the room to the crib and the sleeping beauty within. With motherly pride, she touched Kara's dimpled cheek, a tender caress flowing from her heart to the much-desired and long waited-for little girl.

"O Kara, I love you so!" she exclaimed in a tearfully joyous whisper. "Your daddy and I waited so long for you!"

Tears of overwhelming love and overflowing joy spilled down Katie's beautiful face. She felt fulfilled. Completely so. Her role as mother-housewife was now no mere wished-for thing. She was blest. This was reality. Again, she caressed the sleeping child.

A song sparrow on a bush beneath the nursery window raised his head and drilled out a soft evening song as beautiful and melodic as the young mother had ever heard, and in the meadow beyond the house a lark rose on the wing, casting to the breeze a song of such beauty and loveliness as to make Katie cry for joy.

"Sleep, my child," she whispered above the pillowed head. "Sleep. The birds are singing for you. All's well in the world. When you awaken, I will be nearby. Have no fear, little one. Mother loves you."

A faint smile tugged playfully, though only momentarily, at the lips of the golden haired girl then it vanished and faded as rapidly as it had come. Katie stooped over the crib and once more kissed the dimpled cheek. Nothing in the world.., absolutely nothing.., could have given her the joy and the fulfillment that Kara had given her. Not any amount of money even.

She caressed the tiny little hand then she tiptoed out of the room. How wonderful when the infant lips would form, then utter, the word every mother

longed to hear, Katie thought, trying to imagine how Kara's first attempt at calling her "mother" would sound and be phrased. Oh, there was so much to look forward to, she realized with joy. Yes, so very much.

The young mother went about her household duties with a joy previously unknown, her mind wandering down memory's lane to the carefree days of pretend. How lovingly and tenderly she had cared for her dolls; inanimate but lovable objects of her childhood affection. She had talked for them and with them and, always, it was on a parent-child basis, with her being the parent. Then, quite suddenly it seemed, she had grown into an area of her life where she was neither child nor woman and, for the most part, her beloved dolls sat on the bed and chairs as mere figures of lovely adornment and precious cherished memories of a blissful but forever-gone past. But now!

Tears of joy splashed from her cheeks on to her busy hands. Kara was the living doll of her married dreams. She and Chuck had hoped and dreamed and waited and, yes, planned a nursery for the little one they had wanted so badly. They had almost even prayed for a child. Only, neither had felt in a proper spiritual state to do so. Oh, they had known what it as to pray. But that was before Chuck had become prosperous in the business. Then they had become too busy to go to church; too busy to "Take Time to Be Holy," as one of the hymns they used to sing had admonished them to do.

Katie hummed softly to herself as she worked. She had everything for which to be happy and content, she mused silently. Chuck's business venture had prospered and sky-rocketed beyond and above their wildest imaginations. The loan which he had gotten from the bank "to get the business on its feet" (Chuck's words) had long since been paid off, and now the money seemed to be rolling in. Chuck had told her to buy whatever her heart desired. His one ambition in life, he had said, was to be able to provide his young wife with anything and everything she wanted or desired. And having fulfilled that ambition, Chuck was ecstatically happy.

Katie looked beyond the kitchen window to the beautifully landscaped lawn with its perfectly kept and well manicured grounds. Flowers of every description, color, hue and fragrance adorned the sprawling lawn.

She had her very own Garden of Eden, she thought, recalling the days of yesteryear when the Bible, with its account of the afore-mentioned garden,

had special meaning for her. Those had been good years, she had to admit secretly to her heart. Yes, wonderful years. She had been close to God then. Oh, so very close to Him! He had been the source of her joy, of her peace, her contentment and her complete rest. Soul rest, that is. Nothing had been so important to her as pleasing Christ and obeying and following Him. But that was before Chuck had become prosperous; when he had been just another very ordinary but wonderful husband.

The young mother thrust the troubling thoughts from her mind, a thing she had been doing habitually since the time when both Chuck and she had decided they were too busy for church-going. Too busy for Bible reading and praying, too. But then, for many weeks prior to the discontinuing of the Bible reading and the praying, their family devotions were nothing more nor less than a mere ritual and a form to the two, she had to admit. With God's presence and person gone from one's heart, the delight and the joy and eager anticipation of private, as well as family, devotions, became a chore instead of pure delight and Heavenly bliss and rapture.

She must not dwell on the past, she told herself. She was living a newer, different way as the wife of a prosperous and well-known business tycoon. The way she was once taught and brought up, and her once old-fashioned way of living, and radical inner heart change and subsequent sanctification, just didn't fit in with Chuck's business and their new lifestyle.

Katie cringed inwardly at the thought. She had known so much and had had such a great amount of light on what was right and what was wrong that she sometimes became fearful. Scripture verse after scripture verse crept back into her memory, stealing her happiness from her, until she managed to busy herself to the extent where other thoughts possessed her mind and swept the Holy thoughts away. And now that Kara had arrived Katie's thoughts fingered much on her child. Kara helped to keep her mind off the past with its hauntingly-sweet memories.

She slipped cake batter filled pans into the oven for Chuck's evening dessert. She was thankful that she was taught early in life how to cook and bake and keep house. The credit for her efficiency and expertise in culinary art had to go to her mother, she realized.

At thought of her mother, she winced. She had caused great grief and pain and myriad tears for the God-like woman who gave birth to her, loved

her and taught her, Katie thought silently. Yes, Chuck and she had brought great grief into the life and the heart of her devoted mother and father by their backslidden conditions. But, here too, their new lifestyle and that of her parents just was not compatible. She loved her mother and father. Indeed she did. But she felt uncomfortable around them. Out of place, really. And extremely guilty too. She knew they were right. Yes, she did. But prosperity and material possessions blinded one's eyes to the better; loftier, higher and more noble things in all too many instances, she had to admit. Hers included.

She walked out through the glass patio doors to the flower-laden lawn. Humming birds darted like lightning from flower to flower and butterflies flitted leisurely from One flower bed to another, seeming to enjoy the wealth of blooms as much as Katie did.

She cut various and numerous flowers, handling them gently, tenderly and carefully. She tried always to have an attractive table for their evening meal and tonight, along with the softly-glowing candles, she would have a lovely arrangement of the exquisite blooms in the center of the table. Being a wife and a mother and, yes, a home-maker too, was most wonderful and rewarding, she mused silently as a soft melody formed in her heart and gave rise to words on her lips.

She arranged the bouquet in her lovely solid silver vase then set it on the lace covered dining room table between the sterling silver candle holders, whose creamy-white hand crafted candles reminded Katie of the satin-petaled gardenias growing in the flower garden.

She stood some distance away and surveyed the table with pride. A pleased and satisfied smile gave testimony to her accomplishment. Chuck would reward her with one of his many loving embraces and a kiss. He was such a good, devoted husband. She trusted him completely. Their marriage was a blissful thing. "It would be perfect," her parents had told them a time or two, "if each of you were in a right relationship with the Lord. O come back to Jesus!" they had pleaded.

Again Katie thrust the nagging thought from her mind. Someday Chuck and she would change and take the way of Holiness again. Maybe when they were older. But for now, they were enjoying the luxuries and the pleasures of their new lifestyle too much to change. It was fun; heady even. So different from the way she had lived before. Oh, they weren't partying nor carousing in

sin's dives and its hell holes, to be sure; just enjoying this newer, different way of living in luxury. But then, she guessed sin was sin no matter what form it took.

She heard Chuck drive into the two-car garage. She ran to the door to meet him.

"How's my beautiful wife?" he asked, embracing Katie then picking her up and carrying her into the kitchen. "Um-m! Something smells delicious!" he exclaimed.

"Your favorite cake," Katie answered, freeing herself and hurrying to the oven to remove the finished product. "I'll frost it as soon as it's cool," she said.

"No need to hurry, my dear," Chuck answered. "How's our little doll? Oh, I tell you, Katie, a more perfect baby was never born than our Kara. Was she good for you today? Do you think she missed her father?" he teased.

"She's a perfect child, Chuck. So good and pleasant. she's fast asleep in her lovely crib. Come, let's go in to see her. She should soon be waking. Oh, don't you just love to see her beautiful, big, shiny-bright eyes and that heart-stealing smile when she gets awake! No woman on earth can be more happy than I am, my dear. I have you, and now we have Kara. We're a complete family." Katie's eyes were shining.

"I love you so!" Chuck exclaimed, pulling her close to his heart. "And I love our child too. Oh, how I love her! But come, let's go into the nursery and together we'll watch her awaken. The supper can wait. There's nothing pressing us for time. We have the entire beautiful evening to relax and enjoy each other's company."

Laughing and walking arm in arm, they went to the nursery. The crib was empty, only the nightgown and the bedding was there.

"She . . . she's gone!" Katie cried. The color drained from her face. She collapsed in a tiny heap onto the thick carpet on the floor.

Chuck stood, statue-like, seeing but not believing what he saw. It was all a horrible nightmare. Then, coming out of the state of acute shock, he

rushed to the phone to report Kara's disappearance. The lines were flooded; he couldn't get through: Nothing but a busy signal.

The insistent ringing of the front door chimes sent him rushing to the door.

"My two little children!" their near neighbor screamed. "They disappeared before my very eyes!" She was hysterical. "Please tell me I'm not losing my mind! Please!" She was frantic now. "Oh, I tell you, it's frightening! I was reading to them, and quicker than I can blink my eyes, they disappeared. Have you seen them? Please help me to find them. Please!"

Chuck trembled. "In such an hour as ye think not," he quoted, "the Son of man cometh." Then, ignoring the screaming neighbor, he walked, zombie-like, back to the nursery, exclaiming, "Gone! Kara's gone! We . . . we missed the rapture. And now will come the plagues of Revelation! O my God! My God! Have mercy on a fool!"

Seeing Katie lying on the floor and hearing the wailing of the neighbor woman, Chuck's knees buckled under him and he fainted away.

"Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh." St. Matthew 24:44.

(Character #3)

She sat alone, rocking in the much-used, well-worn rocking chair, her thoughts meandering back over memory's pleasant roads and lanes of yesteryear. A smile tugged at her lips, bringing laugh-lines to her closed eyes while an errant sunbeam, stealing in through the tangled vines on the trellised porch, planted a warm kiss on her thinning white hair. It was much like a caress, she thought, relishing the warmth.

She folded her wrinkled, work-worn hands that lay in the folds of her gingham print apron and twiddled her thumbs as memory played back its record of long since by-gone days when the family was all together and the old house rang with merriment, laughter and noise; when Joshua's heavy footfall on the porch signaled his arrival home from work and the children . . . all seven of them . . . stopped whatever they were doing and ran with open arms and eager anticipation and shining eyes to welcome their father home.

What pleasant times, she thought, when the children were small, pliable and tender and easily molded. Yes, those were good days; days when each child looked upon Joshua and her with respect and love. Days when each child had had his and her personal heart-change and served the Lord with all of their heart. And with gladness, too.

As happened since the beginning of time, with the passing of years came changes. Joshua II, their firstborn and eldest, fell in love and married and moved to distant parts to serve God on foreign soil, returning home only during furlough time, at which brief interlude she and her husband . . . Joshua II's father . . . got acquainted with the lovely grandchildren whom they had previously not met or seen. She felt good about Joshua II and his lovely family.

She sighed contentedly. Joshua and Marilyn were ready to meet God. Ready for the rapture, should it take place now, she mused. So were their offspring, who were now grown and serving God on the same field as their parents. This was reward enough for her, she decided, smiling; an entire household ready, and watching and waiting for His return.

Two of their girls were next to leave the family nest and begin lives of their own. They were faithful to come by and see her every few days, calling her frequently by phone to make sure she was all right and not in need of anything. They seemed happy in their homes, with their husbands and children and, like Joshua II and Marilyn, they held fast to "the faith once delivered to the saints." Yes, they too testified to their eager looking forward to of the Lord's return.

"Thank You, Lord," she said softly, smiling again. The soft breezes played in the tangled vines on the trellis, rattling and shaking the leaves in a merry manner and wafting the delicate fragrance of the blooming flowers to where she sat. She rocked gently, recalling the days when the family hulled beans and peas together on the porch, singing song after song as they worked. Those were happy days. Delightful memories.

Children number four and five left the nest shortly after their father crossed triumphantly over to the Celestial City. She scarcely saw the boys now; their employment in distant cities kept them too busy to make the long trips home often. How she did miss them! But her greater concern was their

spiritual welfare. Upon her questioning, when each son called home, they had admitted they were working hours which seldom gave them time for church. "I go as often as I can, Mom," Mark had told her, "but it's not like when you and Dad took us. I feel all lean in my soul," her son had confessed honestly. "I want you to pray for Phil and me. We don't like this crazy work schedule."

"Then quit your job and find something else," she had admonished tearfully. "Is it worth losing your soul over?" she had asked.

"No. But the pay is too good to quit," Mark replied on the phone. "And it's not easy to find another job right now."

She remembered her answer: Straight and forthright it was: "Ye cannot serve God and mammon, Mark. Tell Phil this for me, please. I'm afraid the oil has leaked out of your vessels. And you know the awful consequences of this."

There had been a long silence on the phone after her statement. Then Mark had said, "Just pray for us, Mother. We need it. We do want to get back to God. We'll never be happy till we do."

Pray for them! How she prayed! Interceded really. And for child number six too.

Elizabeth Ann, their seventh and youngest, lived nearby and, like her parents, was a God-fearing, God-loving beautiful Christian. She, along with her righteous husband and their three children, was ready to meet God and to go up when the Lord came for His Bride. But David. . . .

A tear slid from beneath her closed eyelids. Then another and another, until her gingham apron was wet with the fastly-falling tears. "O God!" she cried. "Bring David and Phil and Mark back. Please! At any cost, bring them back."

A pain shot through her heart. What a pain! Of agony.

Joshua and she had brought each child up in the fear of God. They had followed the Biblical patterns and guidelines to the very best of their ability and their knowledge, she knew.

"O God!" she cried aloud again in a soft, heartrending moan. "My dear Heavenly Father, bring our three boys back. Please!"

She rocked more slowly now, her heart a broken thing. Since David had married, his ideals and religious principles were changed. Taunya had never been deeply spiritual, the mother remembered; and though she had warned her son, he felt he could influence the dark-haired girl his way.

The reverse proved true, however; and now the things that once he held sacred and dear were merely "old-fashioned ideas of Mother's and Father's." (His words to her.) Times had changed, he added, and he meant to keep abreast with the changing trend. No need to live the way he used to: He saw things in a new and a different light. He and Taunya were having the time of their life, so he declared.

She folded and unfolded her hands, feeling as though her heart were crushed and broken to tiny pieces. How could he have drifted so far? And at such a rapid pace? she wondered. Church? He had said that was not necessary. The coming of the Lord? He had heard that ever since he could remember and the Lord still hadn't returned.

Her mind went quickly to the Biblical account of the ten virgins. Like the five foolish virgins, Phil and Mark's supply of oil had leaked out. Through busyness and the lack of prayer and Bible reading, they were now devoid of grace and salvation. But they had not become hard and callused, neither did they make light of spiritual things, like David did. Their desires and intentions were to get back to God; to get right with Him.

At the thought of David again, the worn body trembled. The Bible declared that scoffers would arise upon the scene in the last days, saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation" (II Peter 3:4). Could David, her son, have fallen to such depths that he was now among that wicked class called scoffers?

She shuddered at the thought. He knew the consequences of backsliding; knew, too, that sin has its payday. The Bible was once his favorite book; so he was not in the dark regarding the ultimate end of those who missed the rapture and were left behind to go through the great

tribulation. How could one who was once spiritually enlightened and alive unto Christ turn away so completely from Christ, the aged mother wondered?

Tears showered from her eyes. It was a crushing thing for one's son to stray so far. David and Taunya had even made light of her old-fashioned ways and beliefs, all of which were founded completely upon the Word of God and had their foundation and basis rooted securely to and in the Bible.

"Times have changed," Taunya had told her one day. "What you believed and received back in your day isn't relevant for today. It's out-dated. Like those first, early computers; out-dated! Why these new, modern computers are so far advanced in every way that we don't have a single old one in the building where I work. It's the same way with your religious beliefs; they're out-dated. This is a modern age," Taunya had declared. Insisted, even, the mother remembered.

She had tried to reason with David and Taunya, quoting scripture verses to them in a soft, gentle way. But both seemed to have had a closed and tightly-locked mind regarding the things of God.

"Come quickly, Lord Jesus!" she exclaimed in a single sentence prayer of longing and eager yearning. "Oh, come quickly, lest others drop out by the wayside and miss Heaven."

Today was the day when David and Taunya would be coming by to see her, she recalled and remembered. How she longed to reach through to them. But some things were best left in God's hands, and she had turned the pair over to her Heavenly Father a long time ago. They were in His hands. Both David and Taunya had within them the power of choice. Each was an adult. They would be held accountable to God as such. She was no longer responsible for her son and for what he did or didn't do.

A songbird on a limb in a nearby tree trilled out a song of such beauty and clarity that the mother ceased her slow-motion rocking for a while to listen to the joyous singer more clearly. If a bird could thrill her soul to such extent, what would Heaven's immortal singers do for her! she thought, emitting a loud Hallelujah of praise to God.

She brushed a work-worn hand across her faded blue eyes. The pull Heavenward was becoming increasingly stronger with each passing day. Conversely, earth's ties were lastly losing their grip and their hold upon her.

Something within her spiritual being proclaimed joyously that her own God was about to do something great and wonderful: Jesus was coming. Soon! She felt it deep within herself. Her last breath before retiring at night and her first upon awakening in the morning was a joyous, "Even so come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly."

The shiny, new sports car drove into the familiar parking space beneath the ancient oak tree and, laughing like two school children, David and Taunya got out and started down the cobblestone walk to the porch.

"We're here, Mother." David gave his usual, customary greeting, expecting to see the gentle-faced mother appear inside the screen door, her dainty, petite form framed in the doorway.

There was no responding answer. All was silent, save for the jubilantly singing bird in the nearby tree. "Mother. Mother." No answer.

"David!" Taunya cried, her face ash-white. "Look!" She pointed a trembling finger to the rocking chair behind the trellised vines. "Her clothes! Even to her apron and her shoes! She's gone! Perhaps she was right."

Stumbling over to the rocking chair and the empty shoes, David's eyes fastened on the open Bible lying on the little table beside the chair.

"Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh." (St. Matthew 24:44).

He read the passage with a sinking sensation. The words seared themselves in his heart and upon his brain. "O God!" he cried. "O God! She was right after all."

Grabbing hold of the porch railing to keep from falling, he doubled over in a paroxysm of uncontrollable sobbing, screaming loudly, "I played the fool! I played the fool! She's gone! Gone!"

(Character #4)

He sat in a pulpit chair on the platform of the beautiful church which he pastored, a pleased smile enhancing his handsomely-dark and manly face. Before him, in the second pew from the front, sat his lovely wife and their

three beautiful children, ages two, four and six. Making eye to eye contact with his wife, he smiled broadly. She was as pleased with the progress of the church as he was. She answered his smile.

His gaze swept across the congregation. What a crowd of people! Every pew was filled. Even in the balcony. Oh, this was what he was striving for. Pushing for, really. Now they would have to expand. They couldn't grow anymore unless they did so.

He dropped his head and shifted his eyes to the notes in his sermon outline book. His thoughts raced to the thirty acres of land on the north side of their city. That would be the perfect site for their lastly-growing church, he was sure. It was a choice site; in a prestigious area. This was what he found so completely appealing about the land; the "high" type of people living in the locality, as well as their above-average homes. Yes, he had to admit, it was because of the exclusiveness of the area that he found the thirty-acre tract of land so utterly desirable.

The choir members marched in to the strains of a softly played hymn by the organist and took their places in the choir loft, sitting down at a given hand signal command by their director.

Again, the pastor smiled. What a fine choir he had! Every one of the members had had voice training. He was fortunate indeed to have secured the talented and capable young choir director.

His eyes took in the audience once more. The ushers were setting chairs in every available space that would not block off escape routes in the event of a fire. A surge of pride washed over him. This was the fulfillment of dream number one. But it was only the beginning: He had greater dreams still. And with much work, coupled with his dynamic personality and love of people, he would see dream number two brought to fulfillment also; that of having a congregation that exceeded any other in his denomination. Oh, he would have to change even more than he had already done to achieve his dream, he knew; but, little matter there: he had a fixed goal in his head. He meant to reach that goal, no matter what.

The organist continued playing. Something a bit more modern than some of his older church members cared for. But it appealed to the younger set, he admitted silently to himself, and also to the myriad young couples

whom he had persuaded to attend his church. Yes, these newer, more modern young people found the music and the songs definitely to their taste and to their liking. It was "more with the times," some had told him after an evening service.

He looked to the first pew on his right and saw two white-haired heads bowed in prayer. The Wrights were a thorn in his flesh. Oh, they weren't cantankerous nor carnal. Oh no! Never! Never! He knew where they "stood" with their God. Yes, he did. He had not one bit of doubt as to their readiness to meet God. They were ready! This he knew. They gave every evidence to being saved and sanctified wholly. At one time they, along with the Patches, the Grouses, the Witmores and the Erlicks and Holbrooks, had been the very core and backbone of the church. They were all charter members and gave complete evidence of having given up all to follow Jesus.

His eyes wandered to the third pew behind the Wrights. The Patches too were praying. So was John Witmore, and the elderly Erlicks. Mrs. Witmore? Was she ill? he wondered.

He should give a bit more attention to the elderly, he told himself. But the fulfillment of his dream was dependent upon the young couples and the young people, was it not? And he meant to see dream number two become reality! Yes, he did. So that meant that he would have to zero his ministry in upon what counted. Furthermore, the Wrights, Holbrooks, Grouses, Patches, the Witmores and Erlicks didn't agree with the changes he had made nor with many of the things he was doing.

"You've let the bars down," Bro. Patch had once told him with tears in his eyes. "God won't bless us if we compromise," the elderly man had added kindly.

Nor was Bro. Patch the only one who had approached him..., in kindness and tenderness, to be sure. Ah, no! Each of those former old stalwarts had come to him, pleading with him to turn around and head in the same direction in which he had had such a glorious and wonderful beginning; the way of old-fashioned, true Holiness.

He had trodden the way for years; loved it even. and he had been fully and completely satisfied walking the Highway of Holiness, narrow though it

was. Then he had heard how one of another denomination was succeeding in church growth and he decided to try the "formula."

Before he realized it, almost, his library became filled with books and literature other than the old-fashioned, radical, rugged Holiness books upon which he had "cut his teeth" and which had kept him stirred, searched, broken, fed and humbled.

Little by little, he had let down here, opened the gate there, and lowered the bar elsewhere, until there was neither black nor white but everything was in sort of a gray area. Too, there were few absolutes with him anymore. To gain the approval of the multitudes and to fill the church pews, he had made concessions and allowances. But it had worked, he admitted. Just look at the crowd! And they had come to hear him preach!

The choir director stepped to the pulpit. The organist increased the volume of music and the congregation, according to instructions given in the bulletin, turned to one of the newer, more modern songs found inside The New Hymnal.

The old saints sat with bowed heads and wet eyes, their heart a broken thing because of the compromise and the sacrilege of the music. How long would a Just and a Holy God tolerate it? each Holy heart wondered. How long would it go on? And under the name and the banner of Holiness too!

The choir was next on the program. They sang with perfect harmony; their voices blending beautifully and as one. But there was no glory. No shout of victory. It as true professionalism. Professionalism, devoid of God and the grace of God.

The old saints continued to weep and to pray. Oh, for the former days, when the entire congregation sang in the Spirit until the fire and the glory fell and there was shouting and running the aisles and sinners ran screaming unto the altar, begging God for forgiveness. The former days, when the ice was out of the pulpit and the frost out of the pews: when the fire of Pentecost burned hot and bright in the heart of the believer and the glory was everywhere. The former days, when form and programs were a thing unheard of and the Holy Spirit had complete right of way, moving mightily and forcefully upon the hearts of men and women, boys and girls.

The minister felt uncomfortable with the many bowed heads and the flowing tears. If only he could get those narrow-minded ones out of his congregation, he thought. They bothered him. Their very presence was a condemnation to him. Sure, he had once believed as they did. But the way was too strait and too narrow to get many people to follow, or to take it. And he wanted crowds. Big crowds. In spite of the fact that Jesus had declared, ". . . strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it."

A soloist was rendering her part now in the choir arrangement. Clear as a bell, it sounded, but that was all. Minds raced back to the times when old Brother Wolf, long since gone to Heaven, began singing one of the Holiness songs of the church and how the fire fell. Times when Sister Hallmer, under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, broke out singing How Firm a Foundation, bringing the glory of God down upon the scene. Nothing was programmed, planned or rehearsed: Holy people moved as the Spirit of God directed, led and motivated them and, always, it was for the glory of God.

To appease his troubled spirit and to remove the uncomfortable feeling he had over the bowed heads and the falling tears, the pastor's gaze once more swept across his filled-to-capacity church.

He checked over his sermon notes to make sure that nothing in them would be offensive to his hearers. He dare not become specific and name individual sins. That would be far too offensive and obnoxious to his congregation of new, modern people. Furthermore, they would leave him and go elsewhere where sin was not mentioned nor named. No, he must not cry out against their Sabbath desecration, their lying, cheating, cursing and swearing, their adulterous living, nor their nudity, immodesty and worldliness. They would not tolerate it. Even now, some were asking him why the older saints, and some not so old, dressed so plainly and modestly and never wore either jewelry nor makeup, and why the women never cut their hair.

He looked down to where the Grouses were sitting. A slight twinge of conviction pricked him when he recalled what he had told several of his newest couples regarding the hair and dress question: "Some people just like to be different," he had said, laughing at his own life.

God, he knew, hadn't laughed nor found it one bit humorous. Someday he would be asked for an answer, he realized. But the fulfillment of dream

number one was too heady to become obsessed with such morbid thoughts, he had decided, so he thrust the thought from his mind.

He followed the schedule on the program, taking up the offering then turning the service back to the choir director for another special choir arrangement before it was time for him to preach.

Precisely on time, he got to his feet and walked to the pulpit, standing rigidly erect and never once moving from his original position. Then he began his sermon, which was more like an essay or a lecture than anything else. But it sounded good to him. Good, it was full of intelligent and pleasant sounding words, sentences, and phrases.

And all the while, the Holy people prayed and wept, their heart-cry one agonizing, "How long, Lord Jesus? How long?"

The minister glanced up from his notes to see how the Holy ones were responding to his carefully-chosen words when the wondrous event took place. They were sitting before him one moment, and the next, they were gone. Children likewise. Pandemonium erupted. The quiet sanctuary became a mad house as parents screamed for their children and their infants who, though sleeping in their arms, disappeared in the twinkling of an eye.

Fingers pointed at the minister. "You knew! You knew He would return for His Bride. But you failed to keep us stirred, and to warn us of our drifting condition, and now we are left behind. Like you, we must face the horrible plagues of Revelation. Oh, we hate you! We despise you! You have been a faithless minister."

Hatred filled the sanctuary. Hatred, for the minister. His wife pointed an accusing finger at him, screaming shrilly, "They're gone! They're gone! Our three children are gone!"

Like one in a trance, he stepped from behind the pulpit. His heart felt as cold and as hard as stone.

"Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come." (St. Matt. 24:42.)

(Character #5)

The sunshine made dappled shade patterns beneath the sugar maple as John Kerpen arose from his knees and started across the back lawn toward the vacant lot near the school. The fellows would be waiting for him, he was sure. He hadn't meant to keep them waiting; but after his errand for the aged Wittingtons, and what they had confided to him regarding their son, he felt he had to pray and tell the Lord all about it. His prayer time had gone longer than he expected. But for this he was not sorry nor did he have any regrets. When one became lost in prayer and was interceding, time was of no consequence.

He cut through the Daffer's yard, across that of the Polstons, then took the alleyway to the vacant lot, his heart a symphony of joy and peace. Nothing in the world could take the place of making contact with God and Heaven. When he was spiritually thirsty or dry, the time spent alone with God refreshed him; if he became spiritually hungry, the alone-with-God time fed and nourished him. If he felt weak and unable to face a certain battle or situation, the time spent alone with God sent him back to the place of battle and of conflict feeling like David, who declared in Psalms 18:29, "For by thee I have run through a troop; and by my God I have leaped over a wall."

Yes, prayer and Bible reading was his lifeline to Heaven and to God. He was thankful that, early in his Christian life, he had established the Heavenly lifeline securely and without fail. Because of it, by it, and through it . . . the daily times of prayer and Bible reading . . . he had grown and matured spiritually, young though he was.

"Here comes the preacher," one of the fellows shouted as John emerged from the alley out into the open area.

A volume of laughter ensued, all in good nature and spirit.

"Sorry I'm a little late," John said, stepping in among the anxious players. "I had an errand of mercy and kindness to do and then felt the need of prayer. I'm ready to play. Have you chosen sides?" he asked with a grin.

"You're on my side," Ted Cassady declared.

"That's only because Ted got first choice at choosing," Bill Link put in.

"I'll do my best, no matter whose side I'm on," John remarked kindly. "After all, you're all my friends. I love and appreciate each of you for what you are and for what my Savior can and will make out of you after you get converted and give your heart to Him."

"Hey, we're not ready for that just yet, John," Todd Nevins ejaculated. "I'm too young to get all serious minded and bogged down with religion. Seventeen and eighteen are still meant-for-fun years in my book."

It's OK for you. But it's not for me right now."

"Like John told us before," Parker Batts remarked, "he doesn't have religion. . . ."

"I know; it's what he calls salvation," Todd added quickly. "And for John, this fits; if that's the proper thing to say. But I mean that . . . well, almost all our life, John's been like he is today: Different. He's one of the neighborhood boys, and all of us kinda' like him as such," and Todd slapped John soundly on the shoulder and gripped his hand in a tight clasp that seemed to say, "I like you like you are. Keep praying for me."

John took his place with the fellows on his team. He whispered a prayer Heavenward for his friends. He knew their good points and their noble characteristics just as they knew his. And he knew their downfall and their weaknesses, too. Todd's big hang-up was the "smoking chimney" between his fingers. He had told John this one day when he was amiable and in a talkative mood. He had even said he'd like to break the habit, and would he, John, pray for him. Ever since, John had had a heavy burden for Todd.

He looked toward the batter's mound where Todd stood with his bat raised, ready for the first ball. His heart went out to Todd. He was from a fine family and, as his peers would have said, Todd had everything going for him. Everything except the main thing, John thought: Jesus was all that his friend needed. He would free him from the chains of the cigarette habit, and any other habits Todd might have.

It seemed a thing incredulous to John, that those of his close friends and associates who had binding, strangling habits of sin and wickedness, would resist so strongly and stoutly and not yield body, soul, mind, spirit, and strength to the One and Only Liberator, Jesus Christ.

Todd hit the ball soundly and sent it flying beyond the outfielders. John cheered for his friend; a thing he did for each of them, no matter which or whose side they were on. The fellows liked him for it, it seemed. They frequently declared that they needed no outside cheers since John afforded each of them with what they needed to play a good friendly game before having to go home to finish their school homework, or whatever chores their parents had planned for them to do.

A church bell rang out loud and clear. Its melodic notes sent shivers of excitement and joy up and down John's body. He was always moved upon whenever he heard the bell. It reminded him of his spiritual as well as his religious freedom and of the One who had paid love's Supreme price and its sacrifice that he might have full salvation and life eternal. It gave him a worshipful feeling each time he heard it. The bell had been rung every day of his natural life, so far as he could remember, at twelve noon, sharp, and at six, sharp. The townspeople frequently set their timepieces by the church's ringing bell, knowing that the old sexton rang the bell to the minute of the hour.

What would happen when the church sexton died? John wondered now. Or was taken up in the air as a part of the Bride of Christ? From conversations which he had had with the sexton, John was sure the old gentleman had the wedding garment on and was just waiting for his Lord's return.

"Sometimes I get so homesick for Heaven, and have such an intense yearning to leave this wicked world that I can scarcely wait," the man had told John on one of his stops by the church. "I had a God-like, good, old-fashioned mother, son," he had confided. "She led me to God. . . ."

"Hey, you were day-dreaming, John," Ted said. "I asked you a question three times and you didn't even hear me. Where were you? I mean, what were you thinking about?"

"The old church sexton, and what the ringing bell reminds me of. I'm sorry, pal. I can't help it though. That bell does something for me. One of these days it won't ring anymore," John declared, with a far-away look in his dark brown eyes.

"How's that?" Ted asked, searching John's face. "For as long as I can remember, old Bill's been pulling that rope and ringing the bell. To the minute! At twelve and six o'clock without fail, rain or shine, storm or calm. He hasn't missed a day, my dad told me. Is he sick, or something?"

"Not that I know of," John replied. "It's just that when the Lord returns to take the Bride of Christ Home, old Bill won't be here to ring the bell anymore. He told me he's longing, and just waiting, for the Lord to come and take him Home. There'll be a lot of changes made, when Jesus returns for His Holy saints."

Ted became extremely serious now. "I read something about this coming event," he confessed honestly. "And it scared me. Is it true, John? My mother said her folks talked about the Lord's return back in their days. Well, when He didn't come, Mother said she just didn't pay much attention to it anymore."

"That's the sad thing about it, Ted: Just because the Lord hasn't returned to claim His Bride, or to take those whose soul has been washed and cleansed from all sin, doesn't mean that He won't return. The Bible says He'll come at a time when people aren't looking for Him, nor expecting Him. We aren't told when He'll come, but we're admonished to be ready at all times, and to be looking for Him."

Ted swallowed and kept his eyes upon John. "You don't know the exact time that your father will return," John explained, "when he's gone on one of the business trips for Van Company. But you know that, barring no trouble, he will return. And even though you don't know the time of his return, you look for him and you wait for him. Too, just because he hasn't returned when your mother and you expected him to doesn't cause you to lose heart and say he never will return. Right, Ted?"

"That's so right. I get the point, John. I'll have to tell Mother what you just told me. I'm convinced that you are on the right road. Someday I'm going to become a fellow companion-traveler with you and get myself ready for Heaven."

"Do it today, Ted. This very moment. Jesus could return today. Get things fixed up between you and God and then go with me to Heaven."

"Some other time, John. Not now."

"Hey, you two, we're playing ball, remember?" Bill yelled. "Talk when the game's over."

Ted turned to say something to John but he had disappeared. Gone! In the twinkling of an eye.

"He's gone! He's gone!" Ted shouted, frantic with fear. "Just like that, gone! And he was just telling me about it. The Lord's return, I mean." And he threw down his catcher's mitt and raced away, crying, "He's gone! John's gone! We've missed it. Missed it!"

The fellows picked up their bats, balls, and mitts. White with terror and fear, they raced toward their homes.

"Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. . . .

"Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh" (St. Matthew 24:42, 44).

Are you ready, my dear readers? If not, please prepare now. Jesus is coming. Soon!

(The End)