

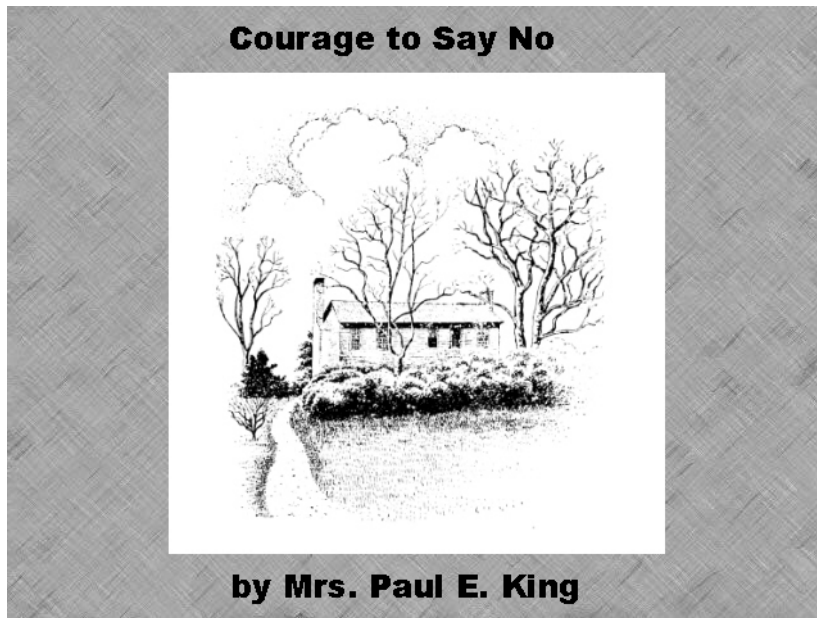
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COURAGE TO SAY NO
Mrs. Paul E. King

Robert Scyler brought his years-old, faded blue car to a stop in front of the big house on Ashlawn Street. 1286, that's what the slip of paper had written on it, and this was 1286. He turned the motor off and sat for some time, looking at the houses in the neighborhood. He had no idea Bud lived in such a swanky neighborhood. The houses had class; they were distinctly and

very definitely built by people, or for people who had wealth. Again he checked the number on the slip of paper. He was right; it was 1286.

He felt like starting the car and easing it as quietly as possible away from the big house. Why he told Bud he'd come still amazed him. Perhaps it was prompted by the fact that he knew he'd be alone this New Year's Eve, and he didn't like being alone. Or perhaps it was simply that Bud seemed to be a rather sensible fellow. At least he appeared that way when they worked together at Biffy's Burger House. And he, Robert, liked sensible fellows.

Was Bud home? he wondered. If so, the house looked dark on the inside. Why wasn't a light burning on the huge porch? Surely, if his friend was at home he'd have at least one light turned on somewhere along the enormous front porch.

Robert studied the house again. It was a work of modern architecture, this he saw quickly. The landscaping softened the severe lines of the newer ultra-modern concept of the building. To each his own taste, he thought silently. For him, the softer and more relaxed look of the older homes was perfect. But each one had his preference, he knew. Diversity made life more interesting, he had to admit. The same with individuality: out of all God's trillions in the human race, no two were exactly alike; God made each different and diverse from another. It was almost as though each had his very own distinctive patent.

With the thought came a sense of awe and amazement. God seemed to take such special delight in each of His individuals.

This was the awe-inspiring thing. He cared for one as well as another, and, with all the billions of living people, He was an "ever-present help in time of trouble" and need. He was never too preoccupied to help any of His children when they were in need. Never! Truth of the matter was that he was touched with the feelings of their infirmities.

"Hey, why don't you come in?" Bud's voice sliced through Robert's deeply spiritual thoughts and brought him rudely back to the immediate present and to his surroundings.

He rolled the window down slightly and countered with, "I wasn't sure that anybody was home. The dark porch, and equally dark looking house, convey a no-one-at-home sort of message."

"Well, I'm home, so come inside. I was downstairs with some friends. Dad had the architect incorporate a game room into the plans of this house and that's where I was. And here's the light to chase away the gloom from your mind," Bud teased as he turned a switch and the entire front of the house and lawn was flooded with light.

Robert followed Bud into the house and down the thickly carpeted stair steps to the game room. Something within him seemed to say that he should not have come. He couldn't understand it, but he decided that he would be obedient to his inner feelings and leave if the feelings persisted.

Raucous laughter greeted his entry and, while no one in the game room seemed to notice Robert's presence, the young people there fell silent instantly when Bud shouted above their noise-making that he wanted to introduce someone new into their world.

Robert felt a shiver trace his spine. The "into their world" phrase prompted it. Just what kind of world were these young people living in? he wondered, feeling even more ill at ease. But, surely, Bud wouldn't have invited him to something that wasn't all right. Or would he? he wondered.

He saw one of the taller more muscular fellows eye him up then turn away with a look of scorn upon his face. The same young man got Bud's attention, and with a motion of his index finger, soon had him alone in a corner of the game room where he spoke earnestly but silently to him.

Robert stood near the bottom of the stairs, wondering more than ever why he had accepted Bud's invitation. He certainly was not in his element. He felt this strongly now. Yes indeed, he did. Something was not all right. The night was still young; the hour early. If the noise and the merry-making was at a high pitch already, what would it be like when the midnight hour approached?

His thoughts raced quickly to the usual, and peacefully wonderful, New Year's Eve nights of his past. Always, he had gone to a Watch Night service with his parents at the church where they had attended. And even now, he

would have been down at the church had there been a New Year's Eve service. But the pastor's wife's mother was critically ill and they were in a distant city with her. His own parents had to rush to the bedside of his grandfather (on his father's side of the family), while several other families were faced with similar circumstances. So, the pastor had canceled the service. That was the only reason Robert was not at the church. His part-time job had hindered him from accompanying his parents to his grandparents' home. Bud's invitation to spend the evening at his home had come as a welcome thing; at least he would not be alone, he had thought, when the proffered invitation had been extended to him.

He saw Bud moving from the corner among the friends who were there. Finally, he made his way over to where Robert was standing.

"We'll soon be getting in high gear, Bob," he said. "I'm not sure if you've ever participated in some of the things we'll be doing tonight, but there's always a first time. Each of us had to have his first time, too. We can initiate you into the group, if you'd like. We have high times. And I mean high!" He cast a meaningful look at Robert.

"Explain yourself," Robert said, wanting to hear from Bud's lips what he was now suspicioning. He felt extremely uncomfortable and out of place. Bud shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to another. Robert caught the look of nervousness on his face. He saw the tall muscular fellow watching closely from where he stood near a group of young people who had gathered around him. "Just what do you do, Bud?" he asked.

Bud looked toward the brawny fellow, then, in a brazen voice, he said, "I don't think I need to tell you. You're not dumb, even though you are different. Stop playing the game, Bob. Why not enjoy yourself for a change? You've been wrapped up in your religious cocoon so long that I figured it was time to release you from it and introduce you to a world of euphoric pleasure and bliss. That's why I invited you here. We're into everything. Of course, we try to be sensible about it all and not go to the dives for our highs. Too many cops out there."

"Am I hearing you rightly, Bud? Are you trying to tell me that you are doing drugs?"

Bud looked toward the brawny, well-muscled man again. "See that fellow over there?" he asked Robert. "He's our leader. He got a lot of us into this thing. We're into more than drugs," he added; "we're now into mysticism and yes, even into witchcraft."

Robert gasped. "And I thought you were a sensible fellow," he said.

"I am sensible, Bob; sensible enough to have these gatherings here in my parent's home. They're gone most evenings to parties of their own, and to social functions. Now, do you care to join? It'll be a whole new world for you, I promise."

Looking Bud full in the eyes, Robert said, "No, thanks! I've found a better way of living: Jesus Christ living within me fulfills my every desire. He meets my deepest soul-longings, and fills me constantly with His love and His Divine presence. I have peace, Bud; you have pain. I have rest; you have un-rest. I am satisfied; you are dis-satisfied."

"Who says?"

"You said this to me one time, remember? That's when I told you about the radical heart change the Lord Jesus had worked and wrought in me. Deep within my heart, I have a never-failing well-spring of perpetual peace, joy, and soul rest. It can be yours, too, Bud. The decision is yours to make. It's a personal thing. Like I told you once before, I wish you'd come to Jesus."

"I've never been one who enjoyed being preached at or to, Bob, so cut it out. I might have known you wouldn't come our way. But, too, maybe I wanted to test you; to see if you had courage to stand the test. You passed."

"Hey, you," the big fellow bellowed, coming over and placing a huge hand on Robert's shoulder. "Why are you here? Why? Answer me," he demanded angrily and impatiently.

"I came at the invitation of one whom I thought was a friend," Robert answered quickly. "But I see I'm in the wrong place."

"Then leave! We have things we want to do and you're holding up the party," the brawny one ordered. "You're not welcome here."

"Thank you. I will leave. But not until I tell you there's a better way than this one which you have chosen to travel on. In Jesus Christ, you will find everything you have been searching for."

Shaking Robert roughly, the big one yelled, "Get out before I have to take you out by myself! And I mean this literally." Turning to Bud, he said, "Be careful that you don't bring anymore like this one in here! Do you hear me?"

Bud countered quickly with, "This is my parent's home; I'll invite anyone I want to invite."

"Who says!" came the bold exclamation. "I'm the boss, remember? Now move," he ordered Robert.

Once outside and in his car, Robert breathed a sigh of relief. What a predicament one could get into! he thought, feeling keenly disappointed in Bud and in his own judgment of human character.

Driving homeward, he thought along the line of friends and friendships. He had always chosen his friends carefully and prayerfully. His parents had taught him (and his married brothers) that it was important to do so, stating that true and upright friends were treasures of great worth and price. A real friend, his father had stated, would do nothing to cause pain or grief, nor would he bring harm to his friend. This being the case, then, Bud could not be classed as a real friend. Since drugs destroyed one's mind and ruined and wrecked one's body, as well, what kind of friends were those whom he had just left in the game room? Would Jesus not have classified them as false friends!

He prayed as he drove. The streets were almost totally free of traffic. People were, no doubt, where they had planned to be; some with relatives and friends, others in church services, and, still others, in bars and various places of evil and wickedness. What a way to celebrate the passing of the old year and the beginning of a new! he mused silently. Sadly he thought of Bud and his friends and the numerous people who were patrons at the bars and in houses of ill-fame and sin.

Bud's words registered suddenly upon Robert's mind now as he drove into the night along the quiet streets: "You passed the test." Those were his words. The test to have the courage to say no. Tears formed in the young

man's eyes as he recalled the words. Perhaps sometime in the near future, Bud may come to him for help; for spiritual help. Yes, it could be so. To some extent, he was afraid of their leader, Robert was sure. His nervousness gave him away.

He pulled into his parents' driveway. Even though the church service had been canceled, he could have his own Watch Night service. And he would, he decided as he unlocked the house door and walked inside. He would pray the old year out and the new year in. The Lord would be there; what more could he desire or ask! Turning the light on, he began to sing. He wasn't alone, after all, this New Year's Eve; his Ever-Present Friend was there with him!