

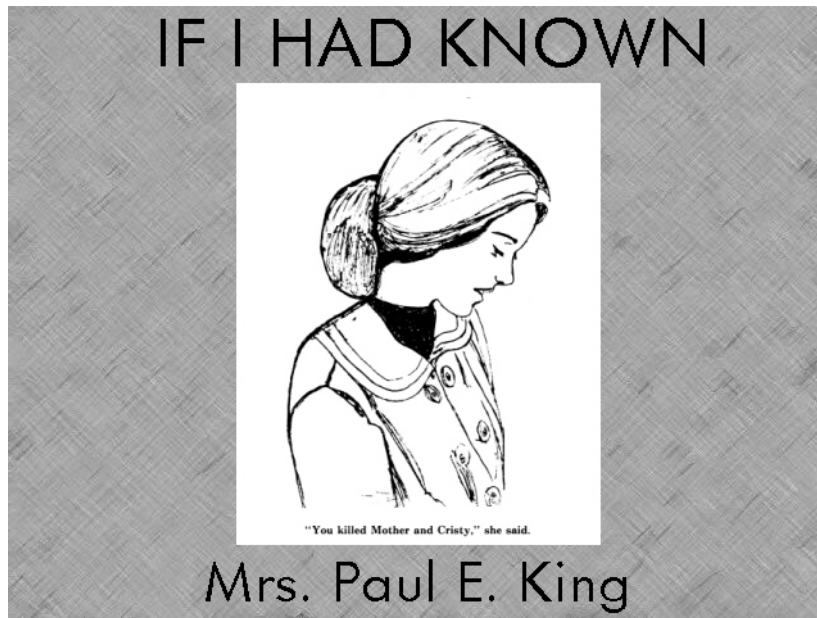
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## **IF I HAD KNOWN** **Mrs. Paul E. King**

I tapped lightly on Cherie's bedroom door and called her name softly. She was in there, I knew: I could hear her stifled, smothered sobs.

Cherie was my twin, and we had done so many of the same things together that it seemed totally and completely preposterous that she should try to shut me out of her world now.

I felt like screaming, and I wanted to run, run -- away; just anywhere -- and never return. Never!

"Cherie!" I called her name again, this time more loudly. Her light was out. At least, I couldn't see any semblance of light coming from the crack beneath the door. I tried again. "I must see you!" I exclaimed, opening the door slightly and poking my head inside.

"Go away, Ken!" she replied. "Go away and leave me alone. Please! I never want to speak to you again. Never! You killed Mother and Cristy and . . ."

"I did not! I didn't! You helped as much as I!" I cried aloud, hysterical with emotion and a feeling that was closely akin to guilt.

"But you're the 'smart' fellow who planned everything and . . ."

"I didn't! I shouted back. "Sig made all the arrangements for the evening and . . . and . . ."

"And you thought it was smart and clever and super-super to lie to Mother and sneak out of the house when we were supposed to be in our respective rooms studying!"

"You went too, don't forget!" I retorted hotly, trembling from head to foot.

Cherie raised herself from the bed and, turning the boudoir lamp on, she faced me. Her new dress was wrinkled and her eyes were red and swollen from crying and in their dark pools of brown I saw a haunted, frightened look registered unmistakably there.

Instead of shouting at her again I suddenly broke down and sobbed. She was motherless, Cherie was; and I was too. The thought shot through my being like a hot arrow when it pierces the heart.

I sobbed until my chest felt sore and my body felt old and worn and when I looked at my twin again I saw pity in her eyes.

"How was I to know Mother'd suspect I wasn't in bed in my room and you weren't in yours?" I said, more humble than I'd ever sounded or felt in all my life.

"But you had another motive, didn't you, Ken? I mean, well, you . . . you thought you'd try to . . . follow in Daddy's foot prints, didn't you?"

I shook my head in acknowledgment of her statement. "I think highly of Father, Cherie and, aside from his night life, he is a good father to us."

Cherie sat down on the edge of a chair. "But he's always resented Mother's new life in Christ, Ken. And in a way I guess you have too. But Mother had something real. You'll have to admit this. And why I never went with her and Cristy to church is something for which I'll never be able to forgive myself. Mother's had peace since her 'conversion' and 'sanctification,' as she called her experiences of what happened in her heart. Cristy, too. Young though she was, she had the same thing within her heart as Mother had. And . . . and now they're both gone! The light's gone out of our home, Ken and . . . and out of my life!"

I had no reply for Cherie. None whatever. She had merely spoken and expressed the sentiments of my heart: that which I felt deep inside me. Oh, if only we had not consented to go with Sig to that late party! If only. . . . And to think, that as my dear mother and Cristy were out trying to find Cherie and me, it was Sig himself who had had the head-on collision with them, killing not only himself but my mother and twelve-year-old sister, as well.

"Tell Ken and Cherie they're forgiven," his mother had told the doctor before her life expired, "And tell them to get right with God and meet me in Heaven."

Those were her last words. They stung his soul to its depths. If only he could awake and find he was having a nightmare or that it was all just a bad dream and not reality at all.

"What will we do, Ken?" Cherie asked in distress, groaning within herself. "I feel terrible; knowing I acted a lie. O, why was I so cross and curt with Mother? And why did I scold Cristy for using some of my stationary? I wounded Mother; I know I did; and I made Cristy cry. I want to tell them how sorry I am but they . . . they'll never hear it. Oh-h, Ken . . . And you yelled so

fiercely at Mother when she urged you to, 'please, choose different companions to pal around with,' in her very own words. I can still see that look on her face and the tears in her eyes as she told you this. Almost begged you! 'For your soul's sake,' she said. Oh, we grieved her so dreadfully, you and I, by more or less following Daddy's life-style and his way of wayward living!"

"Dad's OK, Sis. He just has different tastes from what Mother had."

"But suppose it would have been Daddy who was killed and not Cristy and Mother, where do you think his soul would be? Do you feel, in all honesty and frankness that he'd have said, 'Tell Ken and Cherie to meet me in Heaven?' "

I shook my head "no." My eyes were downcast. "All right then, where would Daddy's soul have gone? Since Mother's and Cristy's went to Heaven, and to God, there's only one other place to which the soul can go and that's to Hell and its fire, Ken. And I don't want to go there! Oh, we were fools, you and I, not to emulate our mother's life and go to church and get converted."

I sat as one dumb, both from the shock of the tragic accident and from Cherie's plain-spoken but true words.

Where would Father's soul have gone, had it been him (and not Mother and Cristy) who was lying even now in Spencer's Mortuary? I wondered. And where was Sig's soul? He'd drunk heavily of alcoholic beverages at the party, I knew. Undoubtedly, he'd been drunk when he hit my mother's car. His soul, where was it?

I shuddered, remembering; and seeing, suddenly and unmistakably, that I was on the wrong road. Worse still, I hadn't been content to travel the way alone: I involved my twin in it too, I was leading Cherie downward, and it was the road to Hell!

Without further conversation, I backed out into the hallway and hurried to my bedroom. Closing the door behind me I walked (like a giant mechanized toy) to the window and stood there, staring out into the inky-black night. The rain from the roof made a steady drip, drip, dripping sound that I felt would drive me mad.

Where was my father now? And how much longer before the police would be able to locate him and tell him of the tragedy? Suppose it was I who was lying in Spencer's mortuary! Where . . . where . . . my soul! Where?

We were fools, Just like Cherie said. I, especially so. Cherie "looked up" to me like a big brother, even though we were twins. She never fully shared my enthusiasm over Sig, however. "He gives me the creeps, Ken," she said outspokenly once when I'd nearly begged her to accept and "take advantage" (my own words) of one of his many invitations to take her with him on a date.

Sig was popular. Very popular, (as worldly popularity goes) and I'm sure that was my main reason for wanting my sister to go with him. I wanted Cherie to be somebody -- with the "in" crowd. But she turned Sig down flat. Yes, she did. She seemed endowed with a sort of sixth sense (or whatever it is that sent alarm bells ringing somewhere inside her pretty head).

A surge of pride swept through my soul over Cherie's courage. I guess a fellow really admires and looks up to someone who has the courage and inner strength and fortitude to say no to what is wrong and evil. Especially when that someone is a girl and that girl is his twin!

Cherie had backbone. Something I didn't have but needed badly, I saw now. Perhaps, if I had not influenced her by my unwillingness to go to church, Cherie would have been a real Christian like Mother and Cristy. In fact, I was sure that I was the stumbling-block in her path. Father was seldom home to love and instruct us; consequently, Cherie had looked to me for a certain amount of that father image, of which all of us were deprived.

I was tall and broad-shouldered, like Dad. My hairline was a direct copy of his; the jaw line and contour of my face were exact reproductions of his. Even to the sandy-colored hair, I was my father made over.

Cherie, on the other hand, was dainty looking and very petite. Her hair, like Mother's, was a jet black. So black, in fact, that it shone like pictures I'd seen of panthers. Her complexion was fair -- fair and almost looked like porcelain dolls I'd seen in Great-aunt Mary's house. Like Mother, Cherie was extremely beautiful. She could have dated any boy in school she had so desired: but except for one boy, Rodney Wellington, she had no concern

whatever for the others. Rod was a sensible young man and my mother thought highly of him. But for me, he was much too sensible.

I cringed now as I thought of my aversion to Rodney, knowing full well that it was my ugly pride that wanted me to be in the very center of the wicked and diabolical "in" crowd. Like my sister, Rodney went conversely to Sig and his crowd. I shuddered again, thinking of Sig's soul and where it was, unless he'd had time to repent and get saved.

Exhausted, I walked to the bed and threw myself across it, clothes and shoes still on my body, and in spite of the many questions racing back and forth through my mind, I slept.

The first faint shafts of sunlight were stealing silently through my windows when I awoke the following morning. In a daze, the night's tragedy rolled over me like giant waves. I sat up suddenly and looked toward the door; then I hurried across the room and raced down the stairs to the kitchen. There was no familiar greeting. Nothing. Just an emptiness and a hollowness that was so oppressive and haunting that I thought I'd go crazy.

I almost ran from the kitchen to the living room where I slumped into an overstuffed chair and buried my face in my hands.

A muffled sob told me that Cherie was somewhere in the room.

I raised my eyes and saw her huddled in a little heap against the pillows on the sofa.

"Hi," I said, feeling numb inside.

"Hi, Ken," she answered without any feeling whatever.

It was as if she was dead, I thought. Hers was a voice with no life; no feeling. Mother and Cristy were the light of her life. Mine, too, I realized suddenly with an inner pain I'd never felt before.

"Daddy didn't make it," she said, still in that without-feeling tone of voice." Make what?" I asked.

"He didn't come home again last night. . ." a sob rent her body. "Mr. Spencer called. It looks like you'll have to make the arrangements, Ken."

I sat bolt upright. "It's not my place: it's father's!" I exclaimed indignantly. Getting to my feet, I hurried to the phone and dialed a long list of numbers with no success whatever. Dad, I was finally informed by his answering service, had gone out of town on business and was not due in till late afternoon.

"But. . . but I've got to reach him!" I stuttered into the mouthpiece. "My mother's dead and. . ."

"I'm sorry," the impersonal sounding voice answered on the other end of the line." He left no number where he could be reached by phone. He'll be back in late afternoon," she repeated, hanging up on me.

I was stunned and shocked and angry, and for the first time ever I felt resentment toward my father's behavior and his shoddy treatment of my mother.

I slumped into a nearby chair and sobbed. "It isn't fair!" I exclaimed suddenly. "It isn't right!"

"I said that all along, Ken; but since it's too late to do anything about it we'd better concentrate on what Mr. Spencer wants to know."

"Dad will be back at the office late this afternoon so I'm not doing anything," I stated flatly and firmly.

Cherie looked stunned and made no comment as she started for the kitchen.

That was one of the most agonizing and longest days of my life, and when Father finally had all the arrangements made and I tried to sleep that night, sleep eluded me. For one thing, my conscience wouldn't allow it. I felt very much like I was responsible for my mother's death, and Cristy's added to this guilt feeling was the condemnation of sin in my heart.

All night long I weighed two persons on the scales of my mind -- Father and Mother. And the longer I evaluated and compared the life of each, the

more convinced I became that it was Mother's life after which I should be patterning mine.

I became restless and miserable and the day of the funeral I did a strange and totally out-of-order thing: I ran to the altar and there, between my mother's and sister's caskets, I got saved.

Not until I got up from my knees was I aware that Cherie had followed me. But she had. And when I looked at her I knew that she, too, had found the joy and the peace Mother and Cristy had. Father looked humiliated and angry but I was too happy to allow his flushed face and the glint of hatred in his eyes to bother me.

I had an obligation to fulfill. An obligation of my own -- to God! Someday, (as Mother frequently told Cherie and me) we would have to give account to God for the deeds done in our body; whether they were good or evil. When that day came, I wanted my record clear. Clear and white and spotless.

Cherie touched my hand ever so lightly. I looked down at her radiant face. It was shining. Just like Mother's and Cristy's, I thought.

"Thanks, Ken," she whispered through her happy tears. "Thanks! I've been wanting to get saved for so-o long . . ."

You can't imagine the joy I felt in knowing that, finally, I was heading in the right direction and that my sister was following.

I raised my head in praise to God and in that instant of happy exaltation I seemed to see Mother and Cristy. They were smiling and beckoning me to continue on in the path of righteousness.

In that little church I made my first vow to God . . . "I would take up the cross (like Mother and Cristy had) and I would follow Him each and every step of the way Home!"

By His grace, I mean to do just that. I couldn't alter or change my past, but the future now unfolded like a beautiful scene before my wondering eyes and, with God's help, I would dedicate all my being's ransomed powers to the One who had redeemed and saved my soul.