MAKING THE GRADE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

I shivered and shook. Then I sat up in bed, now wide awake and fully alert, as I am only when I haven't slept well the night before. Ominous dread hung over me and shrouded the brilliant sunlight that was streaming through the windows in sunny warmth. I hugged my knees and legs to my chest and rested my chin on their bony structure, wanting to cry or run away, or both.
But that was not the solution to the dilemma, I reminded my throbbing heart. I must face the inevitable, and the sooner the better.

I jumped out of bed with the force of a Jack-in-the-box, poked my head around the bedroom door to see if anyone was stirring in the house, then made my bed up quickly and neatly. I would get out of the house for a brisk walk in the brittle-crisp fall air, I decided, as I made a hasty job of dressing and getting ready for school.

I rummaged in the pantry for Post Toasties, my favorite cereal, spooned sugar over them and drenched them in creamy milk, but I couldn't swallow my breakfast. My fingers were cold as ice, but my body was damp with perspiration. I knew my apprehension would last for hours, until the fateful time when my worst fears would be confirmed, appeased, or denied.

I took the bowl of Post Toasties out to Shamgar and poured them into his dog dish. He lapped them up with unconcealed relish and delight, wagged his tail furiously and licked my hand thankfully, his eyes, all the while, looking up into mine as if to say, "Another dish, please."

I stroked his furry head and wrapped my arms around his neck. Shamgar was my friend. He loved me and believed in me in spite of my failures and my shortcomings. He was ever loyal and faithful to me if I made "top-shelf" grades or "middle-shelf" or lower grades. He never judged me by the status quo, the "know-know-know," or anything else. Shamgar's loyalty to me sprang out of his great dog-heart of love and undying devotion. He never tired hearing of my mistakes nor did he ever castigate me or give me a look of reproach for airing them in his ears. No indeed. He was loyal to me. I suppose I should have named him Loyalty instead of Shamgar. But, somehow, Shamgar seemed to fit him well. He had no ox goad, it was true; but with his great, enormous body and his strong jaws, he looked like he could have routed a thousand Philistines.

"No more Post Toasties, Shamgar," I said, "even though you like them every bit as much as I do. I'm going for a walk before school time; Want to come along?"

Shamgar's tail and head gave me his direct and unmistakable answer. In a moment's time I had him untied and, together, we started down the long
tree bordered lane, with fall wrapping us in her fragrantly: colorful cloak and anesthetizing me with the magic of her charms and beauty.

I loved autumn; it had a subtle way of making me pause and count my many blessings. The sheaves of grain, which had stood, earlier, in the field like golden treasures, were now all garnered and gleaned and lay in golden-brown heaps inside the bins in Father's granary, a bountiful harvest indeed. The shocks of corn, which had looked like Indian wigwams, were husked and stored in airy corncribs, filled to the top and running over. Another bumper crop. Pumpkins, as deep orange as any I had ever seen, were piled beside winter squash in a special place in the cellar, waiting and ready to be cooked, baked, canned or frozen. The potato bins were heaped high in the cellar, and cabbages, rutabagas, turnips and sweet peppers, red, yellow and green, gave splashes of color to the under-the-kitchen "storehouse."

I sighed, thinking of the bountiful blessings which were ours. Shamgar wagged his tail, licked my hand, and looked up into my face, wearing what I thought for sure was a happy smile.

The land meandered pleasantly between the meadows now and I remembered all the Penny Royal tea which my mother and sisters had gathered from the two fields. Come snow and winter and ice and sleet, the sweet fragrance would fill the kitchen as Mother steeped it for our evening beverage. With a bit of honey and a squeeze of lemon juice in each cup, we were sure there was no finer winter beverage anywhere. For now, however, the short stalks of tea were drying, upside-down in the attic, tied with string and hung from the rafters. Popcorn, too, was drying there in much the same way.

I felt happy, remembering. So many blessings had I. I tried hard to concentrate on the blessings and, out loud, I said a loud "Praise the Lord."

Shamgar stopped dead still in his tracks and wagged his tail furiously, as if to let me know that he, too, was thankful.

In the midst of my thankfulness and my happiness, the old dread and fear crept subtly and slowly but surely back into my thoughts, canceling out every bright and beautiful and happy thing which I had experienced only moments ago. How I wished I had made better use of my time and would
have studied more diligently and applied myself better. But the past was gone; it could not be recalled. Not ever.

Tears stung my eyes. My face felt flushed. How could I ever face my parents if I had a D in some of my subjects? How? They had been so patient with me; so long-suffering, so loving and kind. But could I help it that I was a daydreamer? Was I normal, I wondered, or was daydreaming abnormal? The easiest thing in the world for me to do was to allow my thoughts to wander to the woods, the streams and the meadows; to the little creatures in the fields and the woodland; the butterflies, birds, fish, and such things. I loved being a part of them all; watching them as they fed, swam, burrowed, hopped, jumped, flew or whatever.

I walked beneath one of the long rows of trees and sat on a stump, my mind a whirligig of confused thoughts and a mad maze of dread and fear. Oh, if only I could recall the last six to eight weeks of school! If only. . . !

"Lord, I'm ashamed of myself!" I cried aloud in open and honest confession. "You know I haven't sinned against Thee . . . unless my lackadaisical attitude and my dilatoriness is sin. . . ."

I stopped short. Tears flowed in total abandon down my cheeks. I became silent before God. In a whispered voice, I asked Him to search my heart to its inmost depths. Was my daydreaming habit a sin? And what about being lackadaisical and dilatory where my study practice came into focus?

In the stillness and the silence of that hour before God, I saw where these weaknesses of mine could lead to sin unless I corrected them and did something about them.

As though a light was suddenly turned on somewhere inside my head, I understood the meaning of the Apostle Paul's statement from I Corinthians 9:26-27: "I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air:

"But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: . . ."

I began to recount some of the keeps in the Bible . . . "Keep thyself pure . . ." (I Tim. 5:22); "Keep yourselves in the love of God . . ." (Jude verse
"Fear God, and keep his commandments . . ." (Eccl. 12:13); "If ye love me, keep my commandments . . ." (St. John 14:15).

In it all, I realized that I had some keeps to live up to and to fulfill. New light had come to me and was now being shed on my pathway to Heaven; I must walk in that light if the Blood of Jesus was to continue cleansing me from all sin. If I failed, and rejected the light, it would become darkness to me. And how great would that darkness be! Thus stated the Word. I must now walk in this new light of discipline; of keeping my daydreaming under. Yes, I must. And I would!

I opened my eyes and saw the sun was still shining. Perhaps it was I, or maybe it was because of some new light that was shining on my pathway, but I thought the sun looked brighter and the world around me seemed all new.

I began to sing and to whistle. I had to; something inside me felt like it would burst unless I gave vent to the beautiful peace and the blessed presence of God witnessing to my heart that all was well with my soul.

"I'll race you to the end of the lane and back to the house," I said to Shamgar, jumping to my feet and starting out on a brisk run, with Shamgar already well in the lead.

I felt revived and renewed as I walked the mile and a half to school. Sure, I dreaded the ordeal of getting my report card and of having to take it home for Mother's and Father's approval and disapproval. I could have done better, I know. Much better. But the past was past; it was gone forever. It could never be recalled nor undone. But my heart felt light and peaceful and good, knowing that the weeks and months and years ahead would all be different, by God's grace, and would show marked improvement. I had made a vow unto the Lord that I would study and cease my daydreaming. Like the Apostle Paul, I would keep my body under; in my case, my daydreaming.

What good would I ever be to God and His great cause unless I learned the lesson of discipline in my youth? I thought. I knew the answer. I had first hand observation by merely looking at some of my classmates and their dissipated lives. They seemed to live only for the immediate present; the now; with little or no thought to what they are doing to their body nor how badly they may be hurting anyone else.
I shuddered as I recalled the horrible end of one of my classmates. His was a totally undisciplined life. He seemed to have no moorings whatever; neither at home nor at school. Numerous times, I had tried to talk to Cal about his soul. His comments were the same. Always. "It's not for me, Dave. I'm not interested. Save your breath. You're an OK guy. But I'm not interested. Save your prayers for someone else. Maybe when I'm old and feeble and grayheaded and don't care about having fun. . . ."

But Cal had not lived long enough to see his eighteenth birthday even, I recalled. His dissipation and his undisciplined style of living had brought him, via alcoholic beverages, to an untimely death and a sinner's grave.

I slid into my seat in a serious mood and immediately began to study. Especially would I improve my English and Literature grades, I purposed. Those two subjects were not my "cup of tea," as the saying goes. But I would discipline myself and I would excel in each! Yes, by God's grace, I would. One couldn't expect only what he most liked in life, could he? Indeed not. Life was filled with things one did not like nor care for. And, in many cases, the unliked, disliked things were necessary things, and beneficial, too.

My entire day was filled with hard, disciplined and diligent work, and I marveled when the dismissal buzzer sounded; the day had passed by rapidly for me. Surprisingly, I enjoyed it thoroughly. My heart rejoiced. I had not dawdled my valuable time away with idle daydreaming. I felt like I had accomplished something.

Mrs. Ferguson gave me my report card. Patting me on the shoulder, she remarked quietly, "You can do better than you're doing, David. I'm expecting better grades next time, God willing."

"Yes, Ma'am!" I exclaimed, thanking her and hurrying out of the classroom.

I was almost afraid to look at my grades; but I knew I must. So, taking a deep breath, I held the card up and gave it a careful scrutinizing. I deserved the three D's I had gotten. I couldn't deny this. But they would never appear again. Never!
Knowing that I must face my parents, I hurried homeward. They would be disappointed in me, I knew, and this was painful to me. We were a closely-knit family. But they would see the difference in me, by God's help. Yes, they would. I had learned the shame and the pain by not doing my best. The time for improvement had come!

Feeling like I had won a wonderful victory, I tossed my jacket in the air, caught it as it sailed down, then ran towards home.