

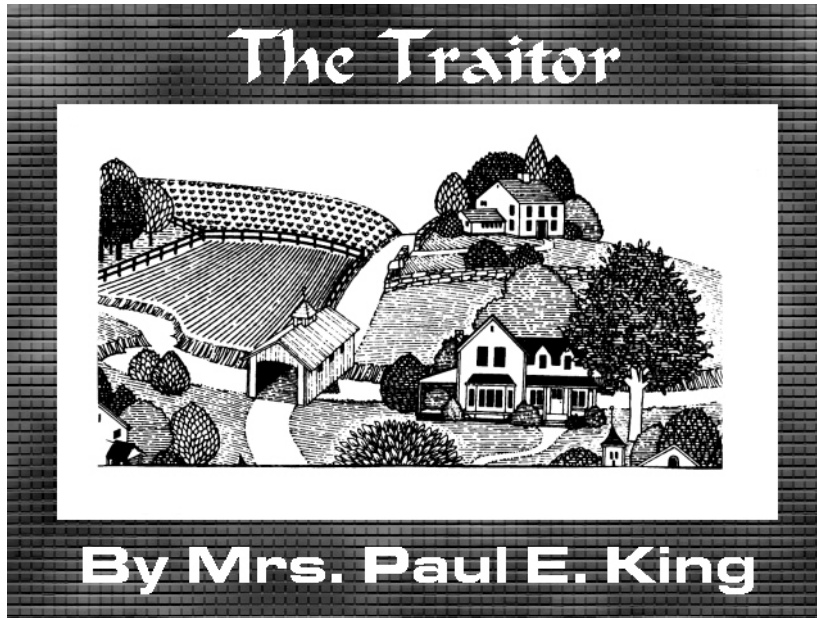
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THE TRAITOR
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Karl turned at the corner of Ash Street and Oaklane Road in time to see Lee jump into the car of Alton Phoff. He could scarcely believe what his eyes had just seen: Lee going around with Alton and his crowd! It couldn't be! he thought. Still he had seen it.

He stood for a long while, staring after the rapidly disappearing shiny-blue sports car, then he turned and headed back the way he had come. His heart felt heavy, like it had an enormously weighty stone pressing in upon it, crushing him. Lee, his longtime friend, a traitor to Jesus Christ and to everything that was once holy and sacred and spiritual! It shook Karl visibly. It seemed unreal. And frightening too.

The day was brilliant with sunshine; the sky as clear and as blue as a robin's egg. Karl, in no mood or frame of mind to talk to anybody, turned toward the cemetery road which was not far from his home. Always, since he was twelve or thirteen, he resorted to the silence and the stillness of the old cemetery when he needed time to think and to meditate and to talk to the Lord. There was something about the silence of the place and the solitude of the surroundings that seemed to encourage him in his walk with the Lord and give him the courage and the strength to forge ahead, no matter what the circumstances were which he was facing.

He walked through the open iron gate (he could never remember it being shut; not ever) and felt the serenity and the sacredness of the place wrap him in its cloak of quietness and peace and hope. It was a good feeling; a warm feeling. From the top of a tree a mocking bird trilled a medley of songs to him so sweet and wonderful until he felt he had entered into a part of something akin to Heaven.

He stood still for a long while, his head bowed, a prayer on his lips and in his heart. Then he walked farther into the cool, tree-shaded "silent city."

He sauntered to his very favorite spot in the entire cemetery, reading again the epitaphs on the three tombstones in the corner plot. Time and years and the elements had left their mark on the aged stones, which were getting harder and harder to read the eroded, fading messages that were chiseled there more than a hundred years previously. One stone, that of the father, left no doubt in the mind of the reader that the man was a saint indeed: "God-fearing and godly," the chiseled message stated, "he achieved that for which he aspired -- bringing his children to God. Dad, we'll meet you in Heaven."

The other two stones, one of them belonging to the wife and mother and the smaller one with a lamb chiseled on it, to a two-year old girl, were almost impossible to read. Karl was able to discern parts, however, and

always he came up with the wonderful message that the mother must have been a deeply-pious and spiritual woman who loved her God and family greatly and who was now singing with Heaven's joyful choir.

It was quiet as he sat down on the grass beneath the pines that whispered and sighed above him. He wondered if the deceased ones, whose graves reposed beneath the beautiful trees, had ever felt the sting and the pain of one who defected from God's army. If so, how did they handle the situation? he wondered, realizing that life a hundred and more years ago had no shiny-bright, fast-moving sports cars and no drugs either. People lived simpler and less complex lives. They worked hard to make a living and, in most cases, the home was one's castle, no matter how meager and poor its furnishings. He had often heard his grandparents tell how life was in their day. He loved reading about it.

Karl groaned aloud. He felt torn apart, almost like a part of him would die unless he could reach through and get to his friend. But Lee avoided him anymore. Positively and absolutely, he avoided him. Worse still, the last time he Karl -- talked to him, Lee told him not to come by anymore, saying, "I'm having an exciting time, Karl. Fun, man. Fun! Please don't bother me anymore."

"Bu. . . . but Lee . . . your . . . your. . . ."

"Soul," Lee exclaimed, as he broke into Karl's stammered words. "It's my soul, Karl, not yours."

"It's dangerous to trifle with God and with spiritual things," Karl remembered having told Lee.

"Like I said, I'm having fun. Real fun. Don't bother me anymore."

Karl could scarcely believe what he'd heard from his once faithful friend and, even yet, it seemed unreal. Not even their pastor could change Lee's mind and persuade him to at least continue to come to church. He had told the minister much the same that he had told him -- Karl.

Looking back over the months now, Karl felt strongly that Monica Joyce had much to do with Lee's drastic changeover. Monica felt that the rules of

the church's Christian school were just too binding and restrictive, so she dropped out and began going to public school.

Lee was like a lost puppy after she left; he'd been dating her. He finished the remainder of that first semester out then he, too, went over to the public school. But even before he left Laurel Christian School, he had been spasmodic in his church attendance. As the young people's leader, this had disturbed Karl greatly. So he "put feet" to his prayers and made repeated visits to Lee's house, until he was asked to not bother him again. How this hurt!

Was Lee afraid that Alton, or one of his "in" crowd, would steal Monica from him? Karl wondered, knowing Monica's bent toward popularity.

Karl had heard that Lee and Alton were now bosom friends, but he had passed it off as surmise or idle gossip. But today he had seen.

He groaned within himself. Where would Lee stop? he wondered, and when? Alton was noted for his vulgarity, his smut, his drinking and for living life on the fast strip. And Lee had called this fun?

Karl recalled the tent meeting at the west end of their town two years ago. He had invited Alton, and all his crowd of rowdy makers, to attend. They came; but only to cause a disturbance.

He had talked to Alton a few days later and told him that he loved him and that he was praying for him. But Alton had laughed in his face and let him know that he was getting along very well, thank you, without God, and that he intended to keep right on doing like he was doing -- having fun and enjoying life while he was young and able to enjoy it.

Karl felt a heavy burden grip him for Alton and Lee, and for those known as "Alton's Crowd" -- the elite young people of the more affluent parents. They had had anything and everything they wanted. This, to a large degree, was their downfall; their undoing.

Karl began to pray, and as he prayed the burden intensified. Then a sudden, horrifying fear gripped him. He interceded for the group, Lee especially.

It was the wailing of the siren that brought his thoughts quickly and frighteningly back to the present and to his surroundings. Instinctively, he knew there was an accident and that Alton's car was involved. It was as if someone had told him. It was too real to doubt.

He got to his feet and, walking rapidly, he was soon out on the road leading back into the small town. The flashing lights of the ambulance sent chills along his spine. They were heading west.

He walked faster. The ambulance stopped; he could tell by the stationary sound. Why, it sounded like it was out near the big, empty lot on which the tent meeting had been held two years ago. There was a curve there. . . .

He felt chilled by the thought. He broke into a brisk and fast run. A few minutes later he saw it; saw what remained of the shiny-blue, almost new sports car.

"O God!" he cried, as he rushed forward, hoping to find Lee and tell him one more time that there was mercy with the Savior; mercy and pardon and forgiveness. Yes, even for a traitor -- a backslider.

"Get back, young man," a cop said urgently, blocking his way to the twisted, crushed sports car.

"My friend's in there. Somewhere," Karl cried. "And he's not a Christian. He isn't ready to die and to meet God."

"I'm sorry, young man. Sorry. It's too late for your friend. Or for any of them. Another case of drinking and driving. They don't go together!" The policeman's voice had a razor-sharp edge to it.

Karl felt like he was frozen to the spot. He watched for a while as the dismembered body parts were collected then he turned away. It was too much for him to bear.

He was sick at heart and sick in the pit of his stomach, too, when he realized that Alton's accident happened directly in line with where the tent was located a short distance off the road!

Stumbling and blinded by tears, he started for home. What would a traitor-defector -- a backslider -- say when he came face to face with God and was asked for an answer? What could he say? He would be speechless, Karl knew. He would spend eternity in... in. . . .

"Oh, no! No!" Karl cried out loud, as he hurried away. "The lake of fire! Lee! Lee! Why did you go back into sin? Why? You'll burn forever . . . and ever. . . ."

Blindly, he stumbled homeward.

"The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways . . ." Proverbs 14:14.

"Turn ye unto me, saith the Lord of hosts, and I will turn unto you, saith the Lord of hosts" Zechariah 1:3.