

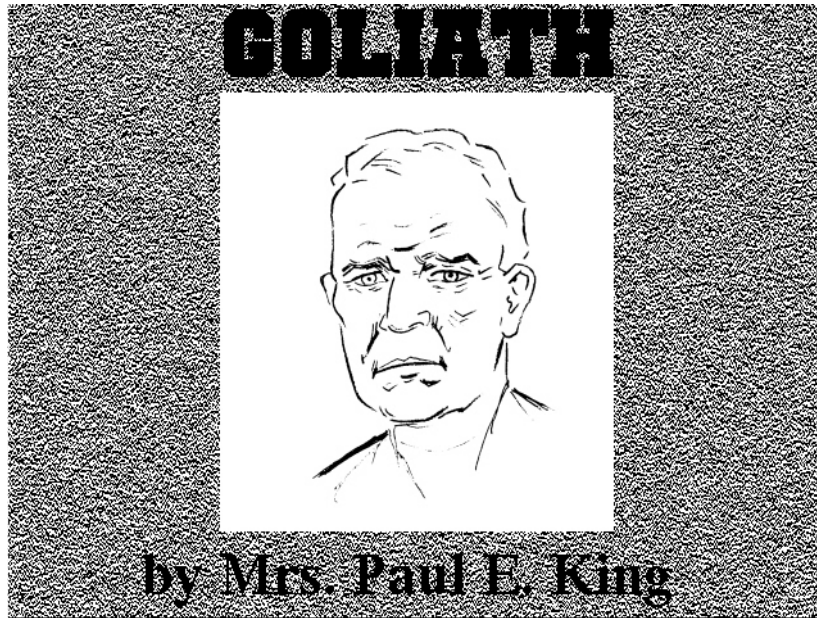
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GOLIATH
By Mrs. Paul E. King

I finished cleaning the top of the stove in the fast food restaurant where I worked and was just taking my greasy apron off when the phone rang.

"Good evening. This is Koffey's Chicken House," I said into the mouthpiece, expecting to hear someone ask for a takeout order or a bucket of chicken.

"Todd." It was Mom's voice. It sounded urgent; like she was breathless.

"Mom," I cried, "what's wrong? You all right? I'll be home in a little while, the Lord willing. I'm just taking my apron off and. . . ."

"Todd, listen to me," Mom said, collecting her wits and beginning to breathe more normally. "It's Mrs. Varner. They don't think she'll make it."

"Mrs. Varner? Our neighbor, Mrs. Varner? Susan?"

"Yes, Todd; it's Susan. She's in the hospital and they think she's dying. They're trying to find Buck, but nobody knows where he is. Now listen carefully; you'll have to find him, and I have a hunch where he is. Susan has often confided in me so I can't say anything other than that you'll have to go down to that place called a den or a dive or . . . or. . . ."

"Oh, Mom, you can't be meaning Zeb's Den!"

"That's what I believe Susan called the vile place where he hangs out. Only you must tell no one that she said this to me. Absolutely no one. Go, my dear son, and when you have found Buck, tell him his wife is in the hospital and she's not expected to live. Don't linger; leave as soon as you have delivered the message to Mr. Varner. I wouldn't be asking this of you if your father were here, but he isn't, and he won't be home for some time yet due to that out of town business meeting with his associates."

"Oh Mom! I've never gone into one of those kind of places."

"I know, Todd, I know; and I thank God you haven't. I don't want you to go there, not ever. But this evening you'll have to; we can't let Susan die without her husband being there. I know he thinks she's crazy for serving the Lord, and I know how hard he's made it for her; but she's calling for him and he needs to know. Now go, son, and please remember that I'll be praying for you from now until I hear from you or until you're home here with me. God bless you. The angel of the Lord will go before you. . . ."

I tossed the apron into the covered laundry type hamper, told my boss I'd see him the following afternoon, God willing, then I hurried out to my faithful old car and pulled slowly away, my mind spinning like tires on ice.

Zeb's Den! The mere name conjured up every kind of conceivable wickedness possible. It was a place where the roughnecks and the "toughs" hung out, I had heard; not a place where anyone with high morals, noble ambitions and a holy-pure-clean heart would visit. Not ever!

"Oh, kind Father," I cried as I headed the car toward the section of town where the Den was located in. "Please help me," I pleaded. "You know my mission, Lord, and You also know that I've never been inside a place like Zeb's Den. Please, dear Heavenly Father, take my hand as I go in there; walk with me and make me a blessing. I'll thank You and praise You. In Jesus' name, I ask this, Amen."

I saw the place from a distance, and even though the sun hadn't fully set in the western sky I noticed the garish looking neon sign gaudily advertising the wicked place. I felt sick at heart and halfway sick in the pit of my stomach too.

I parked some distance away, dreading even the thought of having to take "Old Faithful" (as I nicknamed the old Plymouth) so near to one of the devil's dives and dens. Then I hurried down the street to Zeb's Den, praying earnestly and fervently for grace and help.

I stepped inside and was almost overcome with tobacco smoke. It swirled around me in a sea of blue-gray, almost as dense as fog. I coughed, feeling all choked up. I knew what was going to happen with my asthma-allergy problem. I searched for the ventilator inside my pants pocket just in case I'd need the medication before I could complete my mission, thankful that it was finger-tip handy.

I hurried along the outer perimeter of the bar, staying as close to the wall as possible, all the while searching for Mr. Varner's face and all but counting the minutes until I could make a speedy exit. Ribald language filled the air, accompanied by raucous laughter and one curse word after another. I felt the intense darkness and wickedness of the Den and marveled how anyone could tolerate, endure and enjoy such a place.

I moved steadily onward, deeper and deeper into the den of iniquity. Several times my route was blocked by drunken, bleary-eyed men who paused briefly to stare at me and mutter something indistinguishable then

stagger away, looking for all the world like I had always thought a lost soul looked.

Tears swam in my eyes, and it wasn't from the heavy, thick, dense, blue-gray smoke either. These men were lost; they had a never-dying soul to save; they needed Jesus. It gripped my soul to the core.

I moved slowly to the back of the smoke-filled Den. A pool hall! I thought, pushing my way in among the men, searching for Buck Varner's face. And then I did it; I bumped a man's arm, making him miss a pool shot. (At least I decided that's what happened.) He turned on me like a raging bull. And when he turned and I saw his stature, under my breath I uttered one word, "Goliath!" Talk about big! This fellow was humongous -- tall, broad shouldered, and, what I could see through the cloud of smoke, he looked like he was pretty much all muscles.

Like one demented, he looked at me and, with his voice exploding in one invective after another, he held the blunt end of the stick in his right hand and leveled it at me. I felt like David standing before Goliath. The man's intent was clear. And suddenly I felt a surge of holy courage rise within me. Almost, I felt like shouting David's words to him: "You come at me with a spear and a sword; I come to you in the name of the Lord." I didn't, of course. He glared at me.

"Sir," I said, "I'm sorry I bumped you. Forgive me. I belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm His child, and I wish you were too. He loves you; so do I. I'm looking for Mr. Varner. Buck Varner. Susan, his wife, was rushed to the hospital. She's been calling for him. She isn't expected to live. Nobody seems to know where to find this wonderful woman's husband. My mother sent me here to look for him. Buck Varner, are you here?" I called loudly. Silence wrapped the place in a quiet shroud.

From a corner of the crowded, smoke-filled room, I saw our neighbor get to his feet. He was crying as he came to me, saying, "Todd, what happened? What happened? Where is Susan?"

I heard a rattle and a bang behind me and when I turned away from my neighbor, there stood "Goliath" before me, shaking like a leaf in the late fall wind. The cue stick had fallen from his hand with a clatter and a bang to the floor. He grabbed hold of my shoulders and sobbed, saying over and over,

"Not Susan! Not Susan! Dying! Dying! My sister! My sister! No! No! It can't be."

Like two frightened boys, Mr. Varner and the humongous man sobbed on each other's shoulder. Then, like one awaking out of sleep, Buck -- my neighbor -- said, "Let's go, Carl. Every moment counts. Why are we standing here wasting time?"

Grabbing my arm, Buck Varner pushed, shoved and elbowed his way through the dazed, bleary-eyed crowd of men, begging my forgiveness for "having had to come into such a vile place" (his words) to find him, and steering me constantly away from the worst looking bunch of drunks. His brother-in-law, Carl, hovered over me like a hen guarding her chicks from the hawks of the air. With both men going at post-haste, the Lord saw that I got out of Zeb's Den at record speed.

"Praise the Lord!" I exclaimed, the moment I was outside where I could breathe God's good, fresh evening air. Then I inhaled and exhaled until my lungs felt at least partly clear from the suffocating, sickening stale smoke inside the Den.

"You'll come with us, please?" It was Buck. His eyes were pleading, imploring me to comply.

"I'll follow you, Mr. Varner," I said. "Or would you rather I drive you men there in my car? I'll be glad to do so."

"I'll drive, Todd. But please, come with me to the hospital. You and your folks know how to pray. I . . . I'm scared, Todd. I don't know what I'll do if . . . if anything happens to . . . to. . . ."

"It can't!" Carl exclaimed. "No. No. Susan cannot die! Oh, she mustn't die. You say he knows how to pray?" he said, turning to Buck.

"Yes. Yes, he does. His father and mother too. It's because of them that Susan became a Christian and is ready to die."

Grabbing both my shoulders with his huge hands, the big man -- Carl -- said tenderly, almost gently like a mother speaking to her child, "Pray, my

boy. Please pray. My sister cannot die. We need her. She's become an angel. Pray!"

"You can be sure I will," I said as I slid behind the steering wheel of Old Faithful and followed the men to the hospital.

Buck went immediately to Susan's side in the intensive care unit and Carl, who was to have waited in the waiting room, followed his brother-in-law in also, much to the nurses' displeasure and consternation. I called Mother from a pay phone near the elevators on the floor.

"Oh Todd," she cried when she heard my voice, "are you all right? I've prayed constantly for you since you left."

"And God heard your prayers, Mother. Buck's in with Susan now. So is her brother. God is working, Morn. I wish you were here. Buck wants me to stay with his brother-in-law and him. He's scared, Mom. What shall I do?"

"Stay with him, Todd. I'll go to prayer again. Somehow, I have the feeling that Susan's illness is going to work out for the glory of God. We've been praying a long time for this man's salvation."

"Put Buck's brother-in-law on your prayer list tonight, Mother. He's as broken up as Buck is. And every bit as scared, too. . . ."

Sometime between two and three in the morning, Buck and Carl came out of the ICU with beaming faces. Every hour on the hour, Buck made his way into that unit of fear to spend the precious five minutes allotted him with Susan, and every hour on the hour Carl trotted in beside him. Each previous entry back into the intensive care waiting room where I sat and prayed, had been one of fear and despair and gloom and, always, one or the other of the two men had looked at me with troubled eyes and sad faces and asked, "Are you still praying, Todd?" This time, however, I knew something had happened and taken place in the ICU. I could scarcely contain myself as they came through the doorway in to where I was sitting.

"You can stop praying, Todd," Buck said, as he sat down beside me and placed his hand on my knee. "Susan just got me through to God." Buck's shoulders shook with holy laughter and weeping.

"Me too!" Carl exclaimed, pacing the floor and swinging his great, humongous arms this way and that, stopping every now and then to say, "Oh, it's wonderful. Wonderful! Thank You, Lord!"

Talk about camp meeting; we had one right there in that intensive care waiting room. It was glorious.

Susan fell into a peaceful, sweet, deep sleep after she had the assurance that her husband and brother were born again, from above, and were in God's fold. Too, her recovery was speedy and remarkable from that moment on. And, oh yes, the pew she always sat in in church is pretty well filled now, with her husband and her brother and his wife and their three children all born into the family of God.