

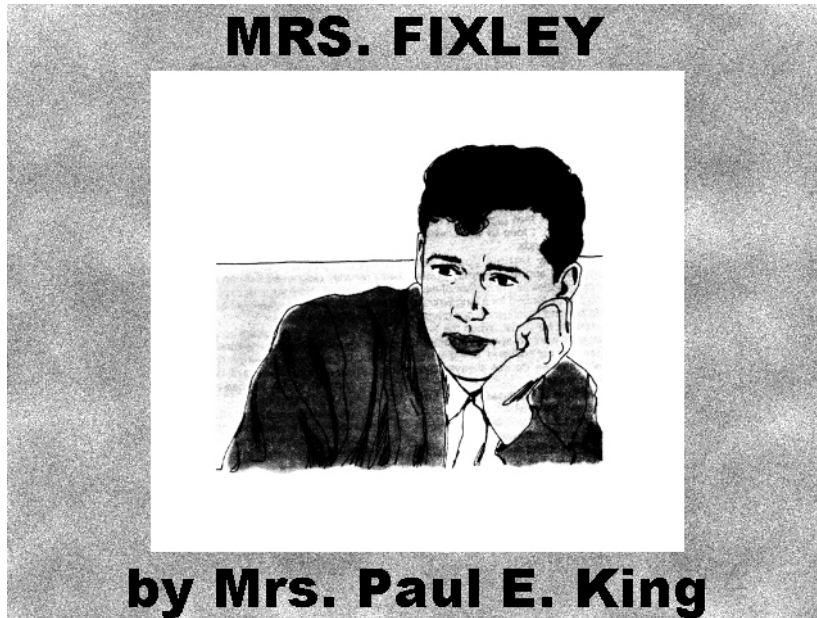
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**MRS. FIXLEY**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

I have a problem. Mrs. Fixley has a problem. Maybe each of us has a problem. At any rate, it is a problem; a very real problem. OK?

Mrs. Fixley is our nearest neighbor; not a bad neighbor at all. No, not at all. So, what is the problem, huh? OK. OK. I'll get to that. But, like I said, Mrs. Mathilda Suzannah Amanda Fixley is our close-by, nearest neighbor. Our

lawns run side by side in grand and glorious color, made so by the diligent care and labor of Mrs. Fixley and her perennial ever-bloomers which bloom from early spring to late, late fall. The woman is a gardener of all gardeners -- at least, of all the gardeners I know. She has the proverbial "green thumb." Added on to that, Mrs. Fixley is almost always smiling. Coming to think of it, I can't remember of ever having seen her frown. And, too, the woman's as neat and clean and tidy as anyone you'll ever meet, see or find. She comes near -- if not altogether -- to being what some people call a perfectionist in everything she does.

Sounds like Mrs. Fixley's quite a wonderful person. But like I said, Mrs. Fixley has a problem. And I have a problem over Mrs. Fixley's problem. And I can almost hear someone begging me to get to the point and stop beating around yet another proverbial bush before I give you a problem over Mrs. Fixley's and my problem and we end up having three problems -- yours, Mrs. Fixley's and mine.

"Get to the point!" you plead. "Stop talking -- er, writing -- in riddles. Be specific. Out with it! You're driving me up the proverbial wall. What is Mrs. Fixley's problem? What is your problem, Thad?"

OK. OK. I'm getting to this: Mrs. Fixley is a questioner.

"A questioner?" you squeal. "What is a questioner? And what is so dreadfully odious and obnoxious about aforementioned questioner?"

What a stupid question! A questioner is someone who asks questions. Many questions. Lots of questions. And, in Mrs. Fixley's case, especially and particularly, it is one who asks questions that come too close to things you're doing that you should not be doing and things you're saying or have already said which you should not be saying and should not already have said. See what I mean? She makes me feel uncomfortable and . . . and nervous. It's like she hits an exposed nerve with every question she asks. Like this morning -- But I'll get back to this later.

I'm alone at our house right now; Dad and Mom are away on a two and a-half week trip to Brazil, visiting and helping out at a mission compound over there. It's an anniversary trip -- 35 years of married bliss. It was a surprise to Mother from Dad. All her life, Mom wanted to be a missionary. She prepared for this. One thing alone prevented her from going -- a health problem.

"You can take care of things till we get back, Thaddeus," Dad said, when he let me in on his little secret before presenting the two airline tickets to my mother. "You're almost nineteen, and even though you'll be working during the week days you can keep up the lawn and all the other things we always do each week. I don't want anyone staying overnight except Monty. I know Monty's OK. And I don't want you staying out later than your usual 11:30 time. This is late enough, Thad. I'm counting on you obeying my orders and carrying on just like when your mother and I are here."

It wasn't too bad for a day or two after my parents' departure -- the big house, cooking my own meals, doing the dishes, running the vacuum cleaner around in the center of each room, getting to bed on or before the prescribed time and doing just as I pleased, alone and not having anyone to answer to. But on the third night the loneliness and quietness of the big house became oppressive. Night number four was worse; the empty house was more than oppressive: I couldn't stand it.

I took off in my old but good-running Plymouth car. I didn't have any particular destination nor any thing special I wanted to do. I just knew I had to get away from the quietness and the emptiness of the house.

I drove to the nearest big town and stopped at a roadside drive-in for a double cheeseburger and some french fries when whom should I see but Sharlene Dellhart, an old flame of mine from my junior year in high school. Sharlene seemed delighted to see me; not to say that I wasn't delighted to see her; I was. I thought she was prettier than ever.

"Hey," I said as she waited on me at the drive-in window, "how long have you been working here?"

"Just since school let out, Thad. Or had you forgotten that I'm in college?"

I had forgotten, and I told her so, apologetically. "What time do you get off work?" I asked quickly.

"Within another hour," she replied with her dreamy smile.

"How about me taking you home?"

"Thanks, but I have my own car," she answered as she pointed to a faded looking rusty-red Volkswagen parked in a corner parking space of the fast-food lot.

"How about a drive along the lake?" I asked.

"I'd love it, Thad."

"See you right after you're finished," I said as I drove away from the pick-up window and found a parking space, where I ate the sandwich and french fries and sipped the Sprite I had ordered, then waited for Sharlene.

Being with Sharlene was fun. We talked about our high school days and our best-liked, least-liked teachers, and our many times dreaded exams (because of our own unpreparedness and lack of proper and diligent study).

I came home an hour later than I was allowed and/or was supposed to. My Plymouth may be old but it has a smooth-running motor; a motor that is quiet and purrs like a kitten. I was sure Mrs. Fixley could not have heard when I pulled into the garage and slipped quietly and noiselessly into the house. But I was mistaken. I should have known. Yes, I should have known.

It was scarcely 8:30 a.m. when I heard a gentle tap, tap, tapping on the kitchen door and I spied Mrs. Fixley's serene face outside the glass of the kitchen door.

"Good Morning. Good Morning," I called cheerily as I threw open the door and motioned her into Mother's big roomy kitchen.

"Good Morning to you, Thaddeus my boy," she replied, stepping inside and noting the orderliness and the cleanliness of the kitchen with an approving smile. "I'm much pleased to see your mother's kitchen in such fine shape." She complimented me, still smiling.

It was like the calm before the storm, I thought, knowing without any doubt that more than an orderly kitchen was on Mrs. Fixley's mind.

"You were late coming home last night," she stated as calmly as if she had been my mother. "Do you think you will get away with this, Thaddeus?"

Do you think you can violate your parents' orders and get away with it? Do you, dear boy? Just because your father and mother aren't here to see how late you came home doesn't take you out of the scope or the focus of God's All-seeing eyes, you know. Did you think, perhaps, that even He doesn't see or know?"

See what I mean? Mrs. Fixley's a pro at asking questions. She "pinned" me down until she extracted a satisfactory answer from me, and learned that I had done nothing more than drive Sharlene Dellhart around the lake for an hour or hour and a-half and that we had then driven back to where her Volkswagen was parked and sat in my car for another hour, under lights, talking and laughing over school happenings. And then I had driven home, totally oblivious to the fact that I had overstayed my allotted time by one full hour.

Another day, later on, she met me as I emerged from the garage and was ready to go into the kitchen.

"Thaddeus," she asked in her gentle and quiet way, "why weren't you at the prayer meeting service last night? Don't you realize how much you need the midweek prayer meeting? Doesn't it bother you that you weren't there? What answer do you suppose you will be able to give the Savior when He asks the reason why you weren't there? Do you think you'll fool Him with one of your flimsy excuses? Remember, dear boy, God is All-wise and All-knowing. No, you will not be able to fool Him. He knows you could have been there, but because your parents aren't home and may never learn about your absence, you decided to miss that very important and much-needed midweek service.

"And Thaddeus," she continued, looking me full in the face and in my eyes, "why did you leave the church house on Sunday morning and go joy riding?"

It was like Mrs. Fixley had exploded a bomb with her question. I hadn't known anyone knew that I had slipped out of the church (as quietly as the proverbial mouse) during prayer time and drove over to Lookout Rock, a distance of forty-three miles from our small town. How did Mrs. Fixley know I had gone "joy-riding?" How? I still don't have an answer to this question. It's almost like God tells her all about me and my goings and comings.

Take what happened four days ago -- I was in Wickham's Grocery Store parking lot. I had just deposited my few groceries on the floor behind the driver's seat and was ready to slide behind the wheel of my trusty old Plymouth when Mrs. Fixley's voice reached my ears.

"Thaddeus. Thaddeus," she called as she rushed to my side, crying. "Oh, Thaddeus," she exclaimed, "why did you say it? Why? You don't mean it, do you? Tell me you don't. . . ."

A light flashed on inside my head. I knew what she meant. Instantly, I knew. But where was she that she could have heard?

"You don't mean it, Thaddeus, do you?" she asked as tears flowed freely.

I stood before her feeling condemned. I had told Sam and Sally Creighton -- twins in our area -- that if I could get away with it I'd have my Sundays free, like they did, to go riding around or surfing and beachcombing -- anything and everything I wanted to do, going to church only when and if I wanted to go.

Well, when I didn't answer Mrs. Fixley, she turned and, with the saddest look I had ever seen on her face, she walked to her car and drove out of the lot, crying harder than ever.

I felt like I kind of believe a criminal must feel when he knows he's guilty, and all the way home from the grocery store I felt whipped and low-down, knowing I had hurt one of the nicest and best neighbors the world ever had.

For four days, I saw nothing of Mrs. Fixley. In one way, it was a relief; in another, it was frightening. Mrs. Fixley lived close to God! Then this morning, bright and early, I heard the familiar, soft tap, tap, tapping on the back door.

"Good Morning. Good Morning," I called as I opened the door and let her inside.

She stood just inside the door, refusing my offer of a chair. She looked tired and wan, I noticed, and the ever-present smile was gone. Her pale-blue eyes never left my face. I felt my own gaze falter and wilt beneath her stare.

She said nothing, but continued only to look at me. Never before have I seen such pain and hurt in anyone's eyes or on their face as that which now registered on my neighbor's face and in her eyes. At length, she spoke.

"Thaddeus," she said with trembling voice, "where do you stand with God?"

Silence. Fearful silence. Intense silence. I shifted my gaze to the floor and to my feet and my heart seemed to slink away into a dark corner inside my chest and hide in shame and guilt.

"Are you born again, Thaddeus?"

Again, silence. Brooding silence. Searching silence.

Mrs. Fixley's gaze dropped. She broke out into a sob; a sad, pathetic, long sob. It tore me wide open somewhere inside my chest. I had never, and I mean never, heard anything so heart-rending in all my life. Then she dried her tears and straightened her thin, bony shoulders and stood straight as an arrow. She reminded me of a soldier ready for combat.

"Look here, Thaddeus," she said sternly, "if you think I'm going to allow Satan to entangle you in his slimy, sinful web and damn your soul, you better change your thinking: so long as there is a breath remaining in this little, old, fastly-shriveling body of mine I will hold on to God for your salvation and entire sanctification. For unless you are born again and have a pure and a holy heart, you will not -- cannot -- enter God's pure and clean and sinless and Holy City.

"I helped to pray you into being, and by God's grace I will continue to pray and fast and intercede for you until you are God's child. I have been jealous over you with a godly jealousy ever since the doctor announced to your mother and father that, 'due to many fervent prayers' -- the doctor's words -- your mother would be able to carry you to full term. You are a miracle son, Thaddeus, and I have no intentions whatever to allow Satan to destroy or thwart or mar what God has planned for you. None whatever! I will battle Satan on my knees for your complete deliverance from sin until my eyes are closed in death and my tongue lies silent in the grave.

"What are you going to do with Jesus, Thaddeus? Someday you will have to answer this question to the One whose love you have spurned and rejected. What answer will you give? You will be speechless as His eyes burn into your soul, lost through neglect and unconcern. Lost -- for all eternity. What are you waiting for, Thaddeus?"

Suddenly, I felt every defense fall and crumble. With clear vision, I saw that the longer I procrastinated and put off my salvation the deeper I would become entangled in the devil's web and the harder it would be for me to break with sin and worldliness.

"Mrs. Fixley," I said with trembling and quivering voice as the fountain of my heart broke wide open and tears gushed from my eyes, "I need God. O how I need Him! I never realized until now how exceeding wicked and sinful my heart is. Oh, I need help! I need God! I want God! I want His forgiveness. . . ."

This little old lady -- our nearest neighbor, the "questioner," as I called her; the perfectionist -- lives so close to God that it didn't take her long to make a connection with Heaven. She prayed and cried and praised -- I was doing the same, praying and crying, I mean -- until I made contact with Heaven and knew I was born again. Positively and absolutely, born again. Of God.

Talk about wonderful! It's glorious. Glorious! And all because of a little old lady named Mrs. Fixley who knows how to pray -- clear through. And, oh yes, one thing more my problem: where did it go? Into a blessing. A God-sent blessing!