

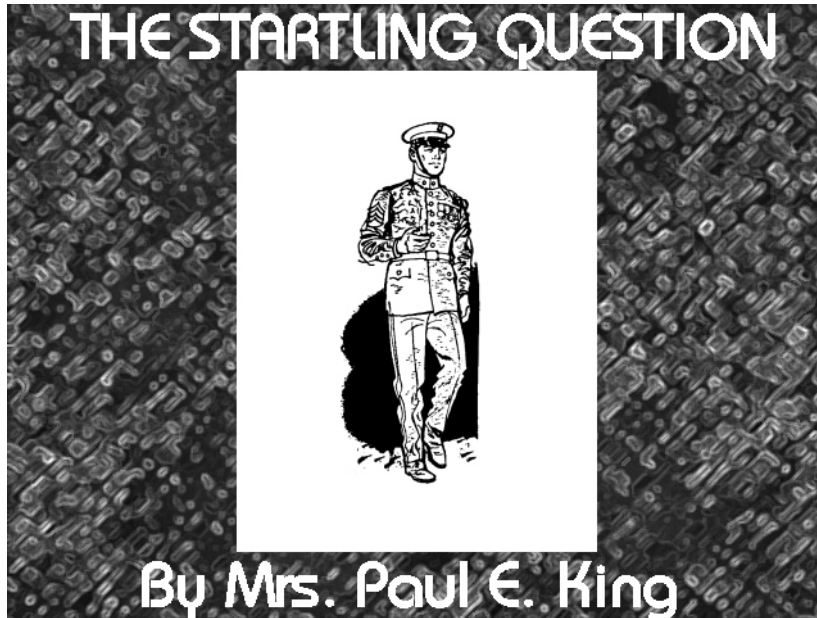
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THE STARTLING QUESTION
By Mrs. Paul E. King

I thought I had things pretty much in hand and pretty much made when I left home and enlisted in the Army and in short order went from a private to a corporal then a sergeant and a staff sergeant and, finally, up to a lieutenant. Yes indeed, being addressed as Lieutenant Conley sounded sweet to my ears. Especially so since I was still very young.

It broke my parents' heart when I told them I had joined the Army and that I would be leaving home now. But since I was almost nineteen and jobs were scarce and few in our area, I felt I would at least be working and earning some money. I never could stand to be idle for any long period of time, and I knew that in the Army I would stay pretty busy. Especially during boot camp, as I soon found out. Whew! what rigors, boot camp! More than once I wished I was back home. But it was the best thing ever for me: I learned the real meaning of discipline and hard work and as soon as I settled down to a quiet resignation and submissive acquiescence that this was now my lot by my own choosing, I discovered that it wasn't so bad after all, and I rather enjoyed it. I accepted it as a challenge. A real challenge.

I missed the softness of my mattress at home and the comfort and warmth of the carpeted bedroom floor -- on a cold, wintery morning in the barracks, especially. But, weighed against many of the new experiences I was having and enjoying, I decided my life was really pretty special and wonderful. I was glad I had enlisted. For one thing, I enjoyed traveling, and because I was a soldier in Uncle Sam's Army I got to see things and be in areas and countries which I never would have seen and lived in had I remained at home. And, like I stated previously, I had a job.

I liked my work. To me, this was all-important. Especially when a letter from home told me that most of the fellows whom I knew and grew up with had had to go to the cities to try to find work. I never did have a great love affair with or for the city: I much preferred the small towns and villages and the rural areas. So I felt good in knowing that so long as the Army needed me, I'd have a job; a job that was doing something for my Country. This in itself gave me a feeling of pride. I was patriotic, and I mean patriotic! From the soles of my feet to the top of my head, I was patriotic. I felt I had an obligation to my Country -- to live up to what it believed in, was founded upon and what it stood for. I tried to be the best soldier possible and I did all within my power to make those under my command the same.

It was on one of my trips home to my parents, after a year-and-a-half stint abroad, that I decided to go through my civilian clothes and sort out what I felt I would no longer want or need. Some I had "outgrown" (girth-wise). Not that I was fat; I wasn't. Nor was I what one could call "rotund." I had been on the skinny side when I left home, and the added pounds I had gained in the Army put my weight a bit more where it should have been.

"Johnny," Mom said, as I took the last suit of clothes my parents had bought me off the hanger and folded it carefully on the bed, "what are you planning on doing with that suit?"

"Give it away, I guess. How about the Salvation Army? They help a lot of needy people."

Mom fingered the lapels lovingly. Then she lifted the coat and held it before her, eyeing it carefully. "I believe it will fit Mim Heathrow's Charles. Yes, I'm sure it will. They've fallen on hard times. Charles has been wanting to look for work but he doesn't have decent clothes to wear. He's a smart boy, Johnny. I'm afraid he'll . . . well. . . . Sometimes discouragement drives one to do some pretty bad things. . . ."

Mom's statement trailed like the tail of a kite. I looked at her. "Anything you want," I said. "Where do the Heathrows live? I'm going to take this pair of shoes over to Somerville to have the heels taken care of. It's the most comfortable pair of shoes I've ever worn, or owned. I suppose there's still a repair shop over there."

"I can't say for sure, Johnny. I don't get over that way often. I know there isn't any here in our small town anymore. My, how times have changed!"

"You and Dad would really notice these things, I'm sure," I said, thinking that fifty years was really very old. (Dad was fifty; Mom was forty-nine.)

A sad look came into my mother's pretty blue eyes. She looked thoughtful. Then she said, "When your father and I moved into this town after we were married, we had everything we needed right here. There was Harney's Meat Market, Svensens' Bake Shop, Ciotti's Grocery, Foster's General Store, Markel's Shoe Repair, two five and ten-cent stores, a candy store and a drug store. We found everything we needed right here. Are you giving those shirts and sweaters away too?" she asked quickly as I placed them on the bed beside the suit.

"I may as well," I answered. "I'm in Uncle Sam's uniforms now and someone else may be able to make good use of these things."

"Charles, Johnny. I just know they'll fit him. Mrs. Heathrow told me she's really been praying for clothing for Charles."

I looked at Mom. I had never heard her talk like this before. "Praying?" I questioned, frowning my brow.

"Yes, Johnny, praying. And I may as well tell you, now that we're together again, that you have a new mother and father."

"New ? How's that? You look the same to me. I . . . I guess I don't understand. I'm sorry, Mother."

With tears streaming down her cheeks, Mom came over and threw her arms around my neck, exclaiming joyously, "We found the Lord, Johnny. Imagine it! After living like pagans all these years, your father and I are converted. We're Christians. And we owe it all to Mrs. Heathrow. She saw me in the grocery store one day and she talked to me about Jesus and my soul. Oh Johnny, I didn't realize I had to be born again -- of God -- to get into Heaven. I always thought I'd get there because I lived a clean moral life and treated people nicely. But I was wrong. Mrs. Heathrow showed it to me from the Bible, and I got scared. She told me to pray, and ask Jesus to come into my heart and to forgive me of my sins. And I did. He came in, Johnny. Just like that! I knew it! Oh, it's wonderful to be converted and know you're ready for Heaven. . . ."

I was speechless. Absolutely speechless. Hugging Mother closely to my chest, I finally managed to say, "I'm glad you're happy, Mom. Now tell me where I must go to drop these clothes off. I'm ready to go."

"I'll go with you, Johnny. You can drop me off at Mrs. Heathrow's house, then pick me up on your way home, if you don't mind, please. She has a Bible for me, she said. And I want to see her face when she gets all these clothes for Charles. We'll put them in a box and close the lid."

Mom's eyes were shining. She looked very young and pretty, I thought.

I smelled the roast baking in the oven as I walked past the kitchen to the living room door and out to the car, carrying the box full of clothing. I knew we would be having a real feast for supper as soon as Dad got home from work. It gave me a good feeling and I was glad to be home for a while.

Morn slid in the seat gracefully and as easily as a young woman. I closed the door, then got in beside her and started the car. "Where to?" I asked.

"I'll show you. It's on your way to Somerville." Fifteen miles down the road, Mom told me where to turn, and as I did so, she said, "Right up on that little knoll, Johnny. See the neat little house in among the pines? That's where she lives."

Mrs. Heathrow was on the front porch shelling peas when I drove up. When she saw Mother she ran down the steps like an excited child and hugged Mom soundly, saying how glad she was to see her.

I carried the box to the porch, where I was introduced lovingly and proudly to the woman by my mother and after acknowledging the introduction and telling Morn I'd be back as soon as possible, I drove away toward Somerville, wondering about the strange things she had told me.

I was delighted to find the little shoe repair shop was still in the same place and that it hadn't gone out of business nor moved elsewhere. I parked directly across the street from it, crossed over, then took the shoes into the shop.

It smelled of leather, polish and glue as I entered. I liked the smell; it reminded me of days when I was a boy and took the shoes to a shop nearer home. I heard the whir of a machine and knew someone's finished shoes were being buffed to a shine. "May I help you?"

I turned to see a tall, thin man emerge from a side room. He wore a typical cobbler's apron. It was smudged with various and sundry shades of shoe polish, but it was sturdy and durable.

"I need new heels," I said, placing the shoes upside down on the thick, heavy wooden counter.

He handled the shoes carefully and expertly. "How about your sole?" he asked as he began making out a ticket.

The question caught me off guard. For a moment I was speechless. Then I realized what he meant and I answered quickly, "The heels only. When will I be able to pick them up?"

"How long will you be home? Furlough, is it?"

"Yes, sir. Nine more days."

"Day after tomorrow be all right?" he asked, sliding the small identification ticket across to me.

"That'll be fine," I answered. "Thank you."

I left the shop in a sweat. The question startled me. Sure, he meant the sole of my shoes; I realized it now. Still, it startled me. Worse still, it began to play across my brain like a needle on a broken or stuck record -- How about your sole? Only the spelling should be soul instead of sole.

I slid behind the steering wheel, turned the key in the ignition and pulled away from the curb, still the message played and replayed across my mind -- How about your soul? How about your soul?

I drove to the main street and parked in front of a candy store. They made Dad's favorite coconut bon bons and Mom's favorite nut candies. I bought a box of each, had them gift wrapped then hurried out to the car and drove away. The startling question followed me. It rode me -- on top of my head; inside my head, on my brain. Back and forth; back and forth -- How about your soul?

I remembered my second year in the Army then. The face of a young private came before me: Harold Feldman was his name. I marveled at the boy. He had courage beyond any describing. Quite religious. In fact, consistently religious. Never a day went by that he didn't read his Bible and pray. Not one! He was mocked, made fun of, spat upon, criticized, ostracized, kicked, and laughed at. Bible after Bible disappeared from his duffelbag. Some were hidden; some were thrown in the trash; others were torn to pieces, page after page.

Harold remained constantly sweet and kind and continued praying and reading from a small New Testament which he carried in his pocket. To all

who did him ill and treated him vile and evil, he "paid" them in deeds of kindness and goodness, telling them he was praying for them and that he loved them.

The young private never ceased to amaze me. His courage to stand up for the Christ he loved and served amazed me most of all. And when he'd tell me he was praying for me, every day, I thanked him, took it as a compliment and forgot about it. Now, however, Harold's face refused to leave me, and like the startling question which shook me from top to bottom, his, "I'm praying for you every day, Lieutenant Conley," only added misery to misery. And suddenly, I was afraid. Something -- or Someone -- greater than all, had a hold of me. I felt weak and helpless, and hopelessly lost. And then, like a thousand lights were turned on inside my head, I knew what I must do; not only what I must do but what I wanted to do.

I pressed down on the accelerator. Harold Feldman wasn't there to pray for me but Mother's friend -- and Mother -- would be joyously happy to do so.

The car sped down the road. I could hardly wait till I reached Mrs. Heathrow's home.