

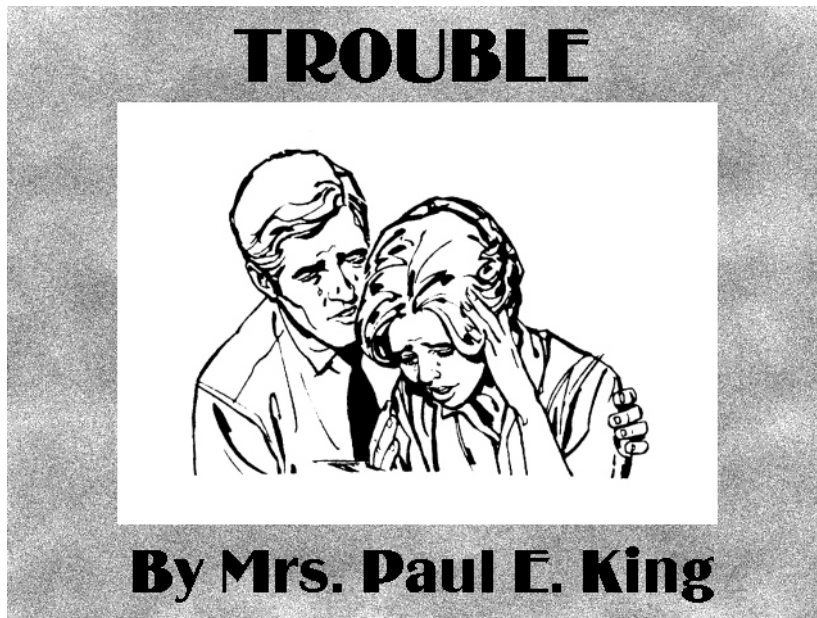
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TROUBLE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Nathan turned the key in the front door and slipped quietly inside, not wanting to make noise lest his parents were asleep and would be awakened by his arrival home. He checked his watch to make sure he had obeyed orders to be home no later than 11:15 and discovered it was barely past 11:00 o'clock.

He smiled and started down the hallway to his bedroom, his mind on Cherene. He was sure he was falling in love with her. What a fine young woman she was! he thought, as he heard sounds coming from his parents' bedroom, arguing sounds, two doors away from his room.

He groaned, feeling sick in the pit of his stomach. And then the bedroom door opened and his mother came out into the hallway. She was crying again. Lately she'd been doing a lot of crying.

"Mom," he cried, rushing to her. "What's wrong? Why are you crying? I'm home almost fifteen minutes before Dad and you told me to be home," he added kindly, hoping this would be of some encouragement and uplift to her.

"Thanks Nathan. You're a wonderful son; so obedient and kind. So is Nathaniel."

"Mom, we love you and Dad. You know we do. why are you crying? what happened?"

Nathan heard a deep, heavy sigh nearby and, turning, he saw his father. He looked so tired and depressed. He, too, was crying.

"What's wrong, Dad?" Nathan asked, feeling a choking sensation in his throat.

Again Mr. Harmon sighed. He looked at his wife; she looked at him. Taking a deep breath, he said, "I wish I knew, son. I wish I knew. Lately your mother and I can't seem to agree on anything."

"Are . . . I mean. . . ." and Nathaniel stood beside his father and looked up into his face with intensely large and dark but frightened eyes. "Dad," he cried, "you . . . you and Mom aren't going to . . . to divorce, are you?" Tears rolled down his ruddy cheeks and bounced to the floor.

Mr. Harmon gasped. "Divorce? Oh son, no."

"Bu . . . but Dad, this is the way Buddy's mom and dad acted before they divorced. Buddy told me so. They were nearly always arguing and fussing, Buddy said. And, instead of laughing and talking and having fun around the table when they'd eat, Buddy said they sat in silence, almost like

everyone was afraid and scared to speak. You and Mom didn't used to be like . . . like you are . . . lately . . . to each other. Did you and Mom fall out of love? And if you did, why . . . why did you fall in love in the first place? Buddy said his dad told his mom he didn't love her anymore, so I figured out that he meant he fell out of love with her. But Dad, why'd he do that? Why did he fall in love with his mother in the first place, if he knew he was going to fall out of love with her later on? It doesn't make sense to me. And it makes even less sense to my best friend, who sits and cries and misses his dad like you wouldn't believe it." Nathaniel's eyes were swimming with tears as he finished.

Mr. Harmon stooped down and wrapped his great, strong arms around the eleven-year old and sobbed, letting his tears shower the head of his son. After a while he said, "I wish I knew the answers to all your questions, my boy. I love your mother; she says she loves me. . . ."

"Life has become so complex. I'm sorry, boys," Mrs. Harmon said sadly as she wiped more tears from her eyes. "We didn't mean to bother you with our troubles. Honestly and truly, we didn't. Your father and I love you very much. It's just that we can't seem to agree on anything anymore, and . . . and . . . we don't even seem to understand each other either. It's crazy."

Nathan was silent for a while. Then he said, "Do you remember those sermons the pastor preached on the home some time ago? I think he took three or four Wednesday nights just to preach to us on God's order for the home. 'To help each one of you here,' he said as he looked the congregation over. Then he added, 'This is for all of you who are married -- and some of you have been married for more than sixty years; some twenty, thirty, forty -- ten, and less. God's order for the home works only when and if it is properly applied, instituted and followed and obeyed. Single folks, this is for you, too. Someday, God willing, you will be finding that special someone and you will marry and establish your home. Will it last and stand the storms of life or will it disintegrate and crumble and fall in divorce and bitterness and wreak havoc on the innocent children, like so many marriages are doing today?'

"I listened closely," Nathan continued, "because I'm sure I'm falling in love with Cherene. I'll graduate from Merryville High this year, the Lord willing, and while I don't plan on getting married for a few more years, I know the day is coming when I'll be asking for Cherene's hand in marriage. I feel she's God's helpmeet for me. So, like I said, I listened intently and closely to

everything our pastor said. I even took down notes on his sermons. I have them somewhere in my note book of important things, and things I want to remember.

"The pastor said all the 'pieces' must be in place, in their proper order, for the marriage to be a success and to work -- the husband, wife; father, mother, children -- a family. The husband, whom God designated to be the head even as Christ is the head of the Church, is to love his wife as Christ loved the church, and gave Himself for it. And, too, as the head, he is to love his wife as he loves his own body.

"That really got me to thinking; that about loving one's wife as he loved his own body. Would I hurt my body in any way? I thought. Well, I knew the answer without pondering long on the question: no way would I inflict hurt or pain on my body; not of any kind. Love your wife as your own body. Whew! That's serious business."

"But Nathan, you don't understand," Mrs. Harmon said. "It isn't as simple as it sounds. Life becomes so complicated when you're an adult. Things just don't seem to be as clear as when your father and I were first married."

"But haven't we always believed that Christ has the answer to all our problems?" Nathan asked. "Even to Dad's and yours. I've been taught this all my life, and I've found it to be true so long as I did what God required of me. Always, He has had the solution. Many times the problem was of my own making; then I've had to do some heart searching and come to grips as to the reason for my motive or action. And if I were wrong, or had a wrong motive and a bad attitude, well, I repented. I honestly did. And then the Lord solved the problem. But not until I had first done what He showed me I had to do. It's so easy to grieve the sweet Holy Spirit out of our heart. I believe this is the reason the Apostle Paul wrote, 'And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption' Ephesians 4:30.

"After the pastor's messages were through," Nathan continued, when no one else spoke, "I decided to find out what kept some of the couples together for 48, 52 and even 63 years in our church. So I went to them. Mrs. Edershime was the first. After all, I figured for a couple to have lived together for 63 years there must be some very special things and reasons as to how they stayed together that long and in love."

"Since we're all wide awake and not at all sleepy, I'm afraid," Mr. Harmon said, "let's go out to the kitchen and have a cup of hot chocolate while you tell us what Sister Edershime told you, Nathan. I want to hear it. I want our marriage to last and to hold together too."

"So do I, John," Mrs. Harmon said, wiping fresh tears.

Around the kitchen table, with cups of steaming hot chocolate sending its aromatic fragrance into the air, Nathan said, "I asked Mrs. Edershime what 'formula' she and Brother Jeremiah used to solder their marriage together so solidly and for so long, and still be in love to the day he died."

"What did she say?" Mrs. Harmon asked quickly and eagerly as she wiped more tears away.

"She smiled at me and said, 'There is no magic formula for a successful marriage, Nathan. Jeremiah and I had some serious disagreements in our years together. But we had the Lord! Yes, we had the Lord. If we hadn't had Him, and known Him in the intimate and wonderful way we did, well, maybe we'd have gone our separate ways, like so many of today's couples are doing.'"

"But Mrs. Edershime," I said, "what about the couples who say they are saved and who read their Bible but still have trouble in their marriages? When I get married, I want my marriage to last; to stay alive and well for as long as I live. Know what she answered?"

All eyes were upon Nathan. "What?" came the simple question.

"She said something that got me to thinking. I mean, thinking -- deep thoughts; profound thoughts; heart-searching thoughts. 'When all is said and done,' she said as she looked at me seriously, 'even when we are married, Nathan, we are still responsible to be individually obedient to the Lord and to His Commandments. Jesus Christ laid down His own life because He loved us. We must also lay down our own selfish interests and even, sometimes, our personal preferences if we would love our mate as Christ loved the church.

"Real love,' she said, 'means doing what is right and good for the other person. Some of Jeremiah's habits used to bother me dreadfully. They were so annoying to me until sometimes I thought I couldn't stand it; when he cracked his knuckles especially. I tell you, Nathan, sometimes I thought I'd lose my mind if I had to listen to this one more time. Well, I got to praying about it -- really praying about it. And the Lord seemed to whisper to my heart that I, no doubt, had annoying habits that bothered Jeremiah every bit as much as his bothered me. So I wept and prayed some more and asked the Lord to please help me to be the kind of wife He planned for me to be, and to just give me more love than ever for my husband and to furnish the grace for me to put up with the knuckle cracking.'

"I asked her if it was easier to listen to after she had prayed. She chuckled, and said, 'Nathan, this is why it pays to pray and pass all these disagreements and annoying things over to God and then leave them there: You see, after I prayed that prayer, Jeremiah came to me one day while I was darning socks on the front porch swing, and he asked me if he had ever done anything to annoy me. He told me first of all how very much he loved me, and then he asked me, I forgot to mention that first part to you.'

"She said she could hardly answer him; she was so amazed and awed by what she felt God was doing. So she answered him with a question of her own -- was she doing anything that annoyed and bothered him? She said he sat beside her on the swing and said that, now that she had asked, there were several things -- and he named them. Then again he posed his first question and she told him in a kindly voice what annoyed her.

"She said they laughed and cried over their foolish annoyances and then, holding hands, they prayed together and told the Lord to take them away forever. And she said He did. And then she said, 'Nathan, it is so often the little things that grate us the hardest and wear our love down. Soon they're not little anymore; they have a way of growing and enlarging until, unless the two people are really committed and have a determination to make their marriage work, they separate and go their separate ways, a thing God never wanted or intended to happen.

"I realized then and there how important it is to be truly born again and wholly sanctified in order for one's marriage to work and last. Over and over, she stressed the importance of really and truly knowing the Lord. I learned too, after talking to her, that success in marriage, as in any other relationship,

depends less on finding the right person, and more on being the right person. I've been doing a lot of praying since then," Nathan remarked quietly. "It made me see and realize that marriages can work and will work, but only as we work in full accordance to and with God and His perfect order of things. Oh, Morn and Dad, when I marry, I want mine to last." And Nathan was crying. Looking at his parents, he said, "And I want yours to last, too; till death."

Mrs. Harmon was sobbing brokenly and Nathan's father was weeping bitterly. "I want ours to last, too, son," he stammered. "Your mother and I didn't mean to implicate you in our struggle to find the answers to our problems," he added on a broken sob. "But since you know, and since Mrs. Edershime said what she did about Jeremiah and her needing the Lord and His Word to guide them through their disagreements, I see where I, as husband and father, have pretty much taken things into my own hands instead of turning with all my heart to God for the solutions and the answers. I'm sorry. Oh, so very sorry."

"Oh John, I'm just as guilty," Mrs. Harmon lamented, breaking out into long, great sobs. "Oh, may God forgive me! May God forgive us!"

She reached for her husband's hand and, together, they fell to their knees in fervent prayer, crying for forgiveness for their selfishness and unyieldedness to the other's ideas and will and desires.

Nathan and Nathaniel knelt side by side, pleading with God to help their parents and to keep their home together. Nathan knew that only his parents could solve their own marriage problems, a thing he felt was happening and becoming reality as they cried upon God for mercy and help, pausing every now and then to ask forgiveness of each other before getting back to praying again.

Kneeling there, Nathan realized with sudden, fearful fright that any marriage could fail and go to pieces unless the two who were involved in the marriage commitment walked close to the Lord. But Mrs. Edershime and Jeremiah had learned the secret that could hold two people together for 63 years and keep them in love with each other. In reality, it was no secret at all, he thought, but a total death to self and one's desires and a complete commitment and abandonment to God. A close walk to God and obedience

to His Word for guidance, ah, that was the answer to a happy marriage. The only answer.