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HAUNTED
By Mrs. Paul E. King

The dim light on the desk in the study of the church cast a shadow over the head of the man whose face was buried in the open palms of his hands. Tears fell uncontrolled, hot and salty, into the open hands, stinging his face like his conscience stung his soul. He looked old; he felt older. Overnight almost, his once dark hair had turned silver-gray. But he was not old, not really: unless one at forty-three was considered thus.

He tried to pray. The words exited his lips, then, like a boomerang, they ricocheted back at him, taunting him, mocking him, haunting him.

"Oh, my soul! My soul!" he cried as he raised his head and stared at the light on his desk. His face was a study of pain; his eyes were pools of terror and fear. Terrible fear. Dreadful fear. Getting to his feet, he paced the carpeted floor of his church study.

"My soul! Oh, my soul!" he cried out again in great anguish, recalling the where and the when of the great darkness that covered his soul like a shroud and kept pushing him on, deeper and still deeper, farther and still farther, from principles and absolutes and truth.

It had seemed such a little thing at the time, such an insignificant thing: his bent toward the world and liberalism. He had thought it didn't matter, not really and actually. After all, he would go only so far in that direction then he would call a halt. He knew how far to go, didn't he? All this business about the minister needing to "cry aloud and spare not" about the evils of the day, naming sins -- actually and truly naming sins and preaching against each one of them -- was pure fanaticism. And this matter of dress--let each woman and/or man be accountable to himself or herself as to what was modest or immodest. Sure. Sure. He knew he would be asked to preach in some churches where his wife's dresses would have to be well below the knees and her neckline and sleeves modest. No problem: she had two "standards" of attire; one for the conservatives where he had evangelized, another for the modern-liberals. No problem. Or so he had thought.

He paced nervously across the lovely carpet in his beautiful church study. Fear wrapped its dreadful cloak more tightly about him. If only he could pray. Oh, if only! Even the walls of the study seemed to mock him when he tried; hurling his words back at him, slamming them in his face. And the ceiling seemed to be as high as his prayers would go; no higher. And never, through.

He wrung his hands in distress then he ran his fingers through his prematurely gray hair. When had it turned gray so suddenly? Oh, yes, he remembered. How well he remembered!

"Dad," one of his sons had said, coming into the study one day, "who was right? Maybe I should say, who is right, you, or was Grandpa?"

"Wh . . . what do you mean, Son?" he had asked with a trembling voice.

"Just what I asked; who is right? Grandpa preached one thing, like you used to do, and now, for the past five or six years you're saying Grandpa's kind of preaching isn't necessary."

"I . . . I don't believe I . . . er . . . ever said that Grandpa's kind of preaching isn't necessary. . . ."

"You didn't use his name, no; but you said it wasn't necessary to preach against how women and men dress, that the Spirit within them would tell them how to dress. And you say it's all right to go to movies so long as they're not bad movies. What's the difference, Dad? I mean, well . . . Grandpa said the movies were wrong. I remember hearing all the church leaders with whom we were once affiliated preaching out against these things and giving us book, chapter and verse for what they said was evil and wrong. Was it wrong at one time and isn't it wrong now? I mean, well, I'm confused. Sometimes, when I go to church, I wonder if I'm in a big, modern, stylish church or . . . or if I'm still in a Holiness church.

"Dad, do you feel God is pleased with the way our church is going? I mean, well, are we holiness? Really? Do you like the way the people look and the things some of them are doing? Oh, I wish Grandpa were here! I wish I could talk to him. I have so many questions I'd like to ask him; questions I need answers to. I know he wouldn't ever want to come back to this earth again. I know that. He's so happy in Heaven. But Dad, if it took all that rugged preaching, all that crying out against sin and naming sins instead of generalizing, to get Grandpa and our forefathers Home to Heaven, will we get there on anything less? See what I mean? I'm confused. Has God changed, or did you? I know this church isn't like Grandpa's churches were. Oh, Dad, help me. Help me! Something's wrong, and I'm so confused. I know what the Bible says; but you are my dad, and I'm wanting to believe you, too. . . ."

The man groaned aloud now, recalling the words. The questions. The pathos in his boy's voice and the plea for help. When he failed to reply

immediately, his son had turned and walked away, quickly. And two days later he left home for a job in a distant state.

The man had forgotten about the new job: he was too busy trying to help others' sons and daughters; trying to get them out to church, for the sake of numbers -- a big crowd. Yes, he had to admit, he liked numbers. Big, high numbers registering on the prominently-placed Sunday School and Morning Worship register board.

He was proud of his rapidly-growing church. Too proud, he realized now as he continued pacing. His carnal pride had fed and stimulated his ego to the point where he was obsessed with numbers. Not that numbers -- people-wise -- were wrong; not when one's motives were pure and holy with an eye single only to the winning of souls for the glory of God and not for the glory or the praise of men. His objectives and motives, however, he realized with a sudden painful awareness, were mainly for the praise of men, and for a good showing in the community.

The night darkened. In the distance came the roar of thunder; a prelude of an approaching storm.

"Oh," he cried aloud quickly, "if only the storm in my soul would pass as will the approaching storm! Oh, my soul. My soul! Where is thy God? I search for Him but I find Him not. Have I pulled the blind down once too often on what I know of the Word of God? Have I slammed the door for the last time in His face? Has my stubborn pride of doing things my way instead of His 'Thus saith the Lord,' closed forever the door of mercy and pardon and forgiveness for me? Has it? Oh, my soul! My poor, poor soul!"

He ran nervous fingers through his hair, pacing, pacing. Pacing. Remembering -- revivals: Prayed down, Holy Ghost revivals. Not sings. Nor plays. Not entertainments. Nor suppers. Revivals/Holy Ghost fire falling. The town coming out to see. To hear. Conviction gripping hearts. Mighty Holy Ghost conviction. Sinners repenting; getting saved. Changed lives and hearts. Changed ways and attitudes and looks. Men and women and boys and girls getting sanctified wholly. New motives. Holy ambitions. And all for the glory of God. Nothing but the glory of God. He remembered it all; it seemed but as yesterday.

Groaning aloud, he continued pacing. His mind raced quickly to the boy again. His boy. Their boy; his wife's and his son. How could he ever forget the recent conversation he'd had with him -- his son -- on the telephone!

"Son," he had asked, "are you going to church?"

"Church ? Why do you ask?"

Was there a note of bitterness and mockery in the question? And skepticism, too? The man was sure there was.

"I just wanted to know, son. You should be attending somewhere, you know."

"Should I? Now, really, Dad! Why are you concerned? Have you changed? There was a time when I believed everything that was in the Bible. Everything! Until my father changed his preaching. . . ."

He had trembled like a palsied man and shaken violently as the boy's words came across the line. He was speechless. Positively and absolutely, speechless.

"Listen, Son. . . ." He had tried to reason. "Listen to me, please. . . . "

"You know what the Bible says about the physician, Dad -- heal thyself. Thanks for calling. Goodbye." The man dropped into a comfortable, thick, overstuffed chair now. He felt old and exhausted. His strength seemed to have gone; drained away with the memory of the telephone conversation. What had he done? He hadn't intended, when he began to let down a little, for his family to go as far as they had. No, he hadn't. Neither had he meant to go as far as he had gone. But he had, he realized with fear. It had been so easy to give in a little here and a little there; to let up on this thing and let up on still another thing. Not too much; just a little. And little by little, his family had followed him down the pathway of liberalism and no harmism. And now they seemed to have nothing to hold on to. Each had pretty much become a law unto himself, doing whatever seemed good and right in his own eyes and whatever he chose to do.

The man's head dropped. He groaned aloud. He was exceeding fearful. He had led his family down the wrong road and he was taking his

parishioners down the same road. He had let the spiritual people down by failing to preach all of God's Word and by compromising with sin and wickedness and worldliness. Instead of crying aloud and sparing not, he had coddled, pampered and condoned. Gone were the old time sin-killing Holy Ghost revivals, with altars lined and sinners repenting and praying clear through and finding God, and believers dying out to sin and self and to people, and having their hearts purged, cleansed and made holy and pure by the mighty power of the Holy Spirit. Gone, too, were the all-night prayer meetings and the days of fasting.

He shifted uneasily in the plush, comfortable chair. His soul was in trouble. Deep trouble. If only he had stayed on God's Bible Line. If only he had contended for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints instead of joining hands with those who believed not. Reckoning day was coming, he knew. And horror of horrors, he would stand before the King of kings for an accounting; a reckoning. And he would be speechless!

Lightning zigzagged eerily into the room; its lurid flash danced along the study wall. The man's body trembled. The once-distant thunder now roared and rolled ominously overhead. It was a frightening thing. The man's heart was cold; like stone. "My soul! My soul!" he cried into the vacant air. "I knew better. I knew better!"

The words rose no higher than the ceiling. They ricocheted off the walls and boomeranged back to him, slapping him in the face. Mocking him. Taunting him. Haunting him!

"There is a way which seemeth right unto man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" Proverbs 14:12.