

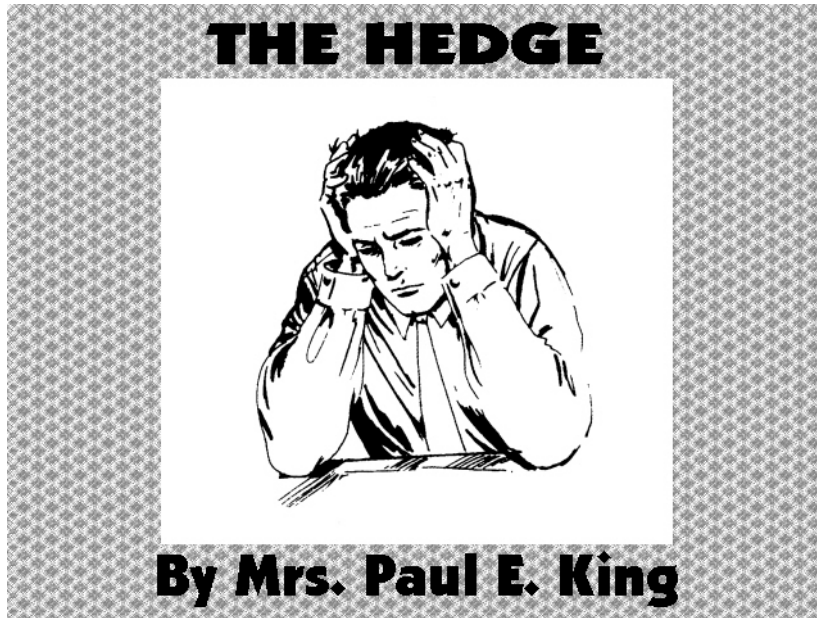
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**THE HEDGE**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

"That hedge must go!" I stormed at Joan, my wife. "I'll not tolerate it another day. It's unsightly and spindly looking and it detracts from the beauty of our place." I paced the floor restlessly.

Joan merely sat and looked at me in a hurt, shocked way.

"Today it goes!" I exclaimed loudly, making sure she heard me.

Joan's eyes filled with sudden tears, the way they always did when she was hurt or grieved. "Jack, do you think . . . are you sure you're doing the right thing? God's way, I mean?"

I almost exploded then. The right thing! Hadn't I asked Bill Haskins, more times than I could remember, about trimming the unsightly looking prickly hedge? and each time he had shaken a long, bony, trembling index finger in my face and ordered me to "Leave that hedge alone, young fellow! I planted it for privacy," he'd said. "The hedge remains." I swallowed hard, remembering his words.

"Love worketh no ill to his neighbor." Joan's words cut through me like a sharp two-edged sword.

"He needn't be so bull-headed and stubborn!" I interposed, more casually than I was wont to speak to Joan.

"Oh, Jack, I . . . I hope and pray the Lord will enlighten your heart and mind," she said, walking quickly away.

I slumped down into the nearest chair and mopped the perspiration from my brow, determined to have the landscape-gardener specialist of Brookdale to cut the hedge.

The hedge was a symbol between Bill Haskins and me. A very real and meaningful symbol. Its high prickly growth was symptomatic of the barrier between us.

"Try seeing the hedge through Mr. Haskins' eyes," Joan had said brokenly to me one day as I brought the subject up at the supper table. "I feel sorry for him, Jack," she'd said. "He's an old, old man with not a soul to love him, nor care a thing about him."

"Little wonder, that!" I'd retorted bitterly.

"Oh, Jack, please be sweet and kind!" Joan had pleaded. "To Mr. Haskins we are nothing more or less than a bunch of selfish intruders. He lived here all his life, long before suburbia reached out its grasping, expansive fingers and surrounded his home and his acreage. The hedge is merely

representative of his annoyance at being swallowed up by row after row of new houses. For him, the birds no longer sing as they did in those years so long ago when the woods and the fields and grasses grew all about him, and the deer and rabbits no longer come to feed and browse on his lawn. It is kind of sad. My heart aches for him. I have been praying much for the dear man."

Praying, Joan had said! How utterly ridiculous. It was only too evident and obvious that the taciturn old man with the withered looking eyes and leathery appearing skin didn't want a thing to do with either God or man.

Highly agitated, I walked through the kitchen to the back door. Joan was busy stirring batter in a mixing bowl. "You making a cake?" I asked, feeling sheepish and ashamed at my sharp, trite answer to her.

"Um-hum."

"But we already have a cake," I reminded, pointing to the cake caddy on the counter top. "Why bake another?"

"I have a very dear friend who will appreciate it," Joan answered sweetly, continuing with her beating and counting of strokes.

Feeling wretched and miserable, I walked outside, making sure my back was turned to the detestable hedge. I hated it! Why did my house and lawn have to join Bill Haskins' acreage, over whose grounds walked a mongrel sort of dog looking every bit as old and shriveled as his master, as well as two cats and three hens?

I heard speaking nearby and turning, I was profoundly surprised at his tone of voice. It was sweet and pleasant, if all trembly, as he talked to the three old hens. He was feeding them, I judged, from the bits of conversation I overheard. "Now, now, Bitsy! Not so greedy!" he ordered. "Share with Blackie and Red. There's plenty to eat. Be kind, Bitsy. Kind! That's a good girl. No, no, Blackie, you mustn't peck at Bitsy. You two must learn to get along. . . ."

Get along! Why didn't the old man practice what he was trying to instill into three hens . . . one a leghorn, another a Plymouth Rock and the last one a Rhode Island Red?

Disgusted, I walked into the workshop at the far end of the lawn where I was doing all sorts of odd jobs for my friends in my off-hours.

As I worked, Joan's hurt look and her appealing eyes marched in swift but bold succession before the work bench. "Love worketh no ill to his neighbor." Her voice sounded like a soft but stirring peal of thunder in my brain. "Oh Jack, I hope and pray the Lord will enlighten your heart and mind. . . ." Just what had she meant by that? I wondered.

As the sander buzzed away and my hand caressed the wood product, feeling of its satiny-smooth texture as all the rough harsh places were reduced to nothing more than a fine, powdery dust, God's voice probed my soul -- its inner extremities and its very depth.

I knew I had been born again. My past life was radically and drastically changed. The things I once loved I now hated and those things that once I hated I now loved. But I couldn't quite see the need of this heart cleansing that Joan spoke so frequently about since her recent sanctification. The terms carnality and the old man were highly obnoxious to my way of thinking. I felt no minister with culture and refinement would use such terms.

"Someday God will bring you face to face with the hard fact that you are carnal," Joan had said sweetly, in no way argumentative. "And, Jack, promise me that when you see yourself, and when the carnal nature manifests itself, that you'll flee to Christ for cleansing. Carnality's dreadful," she said. "With the temper you have it's lethal!"

My hands began suddenly to tremble. I turned the sander off and laid the sanded piece on a table nearby. What was wrong with me? Was I getting soft or . . . or silly? Or both?

Involuntarily, a cold sweat broke out all over me and I felt cold. My breath came in short, quick gasps. I was scared: almost petrified with fear, as I remembered the feeling I'd had inside of me as I all but shouted at Joan, telling her the hedge must go. Was it not a feeling of intense wrath and anger, that I felt I could have killed old Bill Haskins? Yes, it was! I couldn't deny it. It was. And in God's sight I was a murderer!

I was jolted clear out of myself. I never stopped to think how objectionable nor how obnoxious the terms were now. Ah, no! I flew straight to the fountain

filled with Blood and there, begging and pleading for forgiveness for my explosion earlier in the day, I was restored. After this I sought to have my heart cleansed and made pure. I stayed on my knees, in the middle of the shavings, nor did I leave until the Comforter had come to rule and to reign supremely and completely on the throne of my heart.

Wiping the tears from my eyes and brushing the sand dust from my be-smudged face the best I could, I started for the hedge. There was a small opening through which I was sure I could pass.

Bill's back was to me as I strode across the thick carpet of well-kept lawn on his acreage.

"Bill," I said, coming up behind him. "Bill Haskins, meet your new uncontentious neighbor. I'm sorry for all the fuss about the hedge. I'm to blame, Bill; please forgive me. . . ."

"Wh . . . why . . . what you talkin' about?" The old man's voice stuttered and stammered and trembled.

"There'll be no more trouble, Bill. The hedge remains. It's beautiful in its way and it is the only privacy you have left. I just now got sanctified wholly and I tell you, Bill Haskins, it sure takes all the fussing out of a man's soul."

Bill's mouth opened wide. His withered, faded eyes developed a shadow of a merry twinkle as he said quickly and in an enlightened sort of way, "So-o! So-o! Now I understand. I often wondered what that wife of yours had that kept her sweet and unruffled under trying circumstances . . . namely, you and me. I'll tell you something, Jack Sutherland, your wife's real. Genuine! She's like my Jenny was. And don't let anyone kid you, her kindness and compassion and her goodness and delicious cooking and baking that she has brought me faithfully ever since you moved here, got to my heart. Today she prayed with me. I got saved. But if there's more of what that little lady had, I want it. She's living proof that she's in the world but not of the world."

"Right you are, Brother Bill. And now I'd better go and tell Joan."

"Hurry, Son! Hurry!" the old man urged. "She'll be greatly pleased to hear it, I'm sure. And . . . and, Jack, when you're through telling your wife, would you mind calling that landscape specialist and tell him to get out here as fast

as he can. This unsightly hedge needs a good cutting and grooming and . . . and Jack, I want a sort of gate cut right through here . . . from my acreage to your lawn. Never can tell when we'll need each other. . . ."

I fairly flew to the house. The cut hedge would still be symptomatic and symbolic . . . of "love that worketh no ill to his neighbor."