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**THE RIGHT INFLUENCE**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

"Hey, you!" Rod shouted, his long legs taking quick strides down the hallway toward the new fellow he saw in his math class. "Hey, wait up!" he called pleasantly.

The boy wheeled about, not sure whether it was he or someone else who was being spoken to. "You talking to me?" he asked, smiling broadly, his index finger turned toward his chest in a questioning fashion.

"Yeah, you," Rod answered, falling in step with the young man. "You're new here, aren't you? I'm Rodney Crockett. I want to welcome you to Hillcrest High. It's a great high school. Now some of the fellows . . . well . . ." his voice trailed meaningfully.

"I'm Gary Maynard," the young man said, introducing himself. "Already I like it here. My dad's with an oil company and if you're familiar with oil companies you know there's a great deal of moving for some of their employees. But I kind of enjoy it. Guess maybe you'd say I'm used to it and, like Mom says, we're reconciled to the fact of moving every now and then."

"That would be great, Gary! Moving, I mean. Me? I'm as permanent a fixture in Hillcrest as the eighty-year-old court house on the square. No moving luck for me. My dad has the hardware store near Tooley's Curio Shop. Been owning and running it since he was twenty-four. It's a family affair, that hardware store. My grandfather owned it for fifty years and his father before him."

Gary shot Rodney another of his broad warm smiles. "Say, that's great! I mean, that's a long time for a hardware store . . . or any store, for that matter . . . to be in one family. Sounds interesting to me."

"It's kinda nice," Rod conceded, never before having stopped to think about it in that light. "You should see what the old original store looked like!" He paused and let out a long whistle. "Talk about an antique! That was it! But my father and grandfather updated the place. It's ultra-modern now, with the latest cash registers and the latest everything. Stop in and look some evening."

"Thanks. I may do that some day. But of course I'll tell Mother before I do, so she'll not worry if I'm not home at my usual hour."

Rod stopped dead still and almost fell over backwards. "You . . . you . . . must you report to her as soon as school's out?" he stammered.

"I wouldn't exactly say I must; but it's one of the ways I say 'I love you, Mother, and appreciate you.' If I see I can't make it home from school or my part-time job at the usual time I am expected to return, I always call my folks and tell them why I can't be home at that time. No point in putting gray hairs in their head through my thoughtlessness and neglect."

Rod thought he'd choke on the lump that popped into the very center of his Adam's apple. A guilt lump. He managed to wet his lips sufficiently to say lightly, "To each his own, I guess. Well, I'll be seeing you. I have a chemistry class next. Oh, by the way, how about coming to church with me? Our preacher's a not-too-bad sort of pastor and some of the fellows are great. Great! You know; enough church about them to make them look respectable but not as 'far out' as those that go off the 'deep end' and become fanatics.

"Why, some of the young people are missing out on all the fun in life. They feel mixed bathing is sinful and evil, as are joy riding and eating out in restaurants on Sunday plus many other things, like skipping classes and playing hooky, et cetera. The best excuse writer in all the world is right here in Hillcrest. He makes up the most fabulous and sincere sounding excuses you can imagine . . . and our parents never do know the difference. As I said, we're none of the fanatics." Rod paused and chuckled a bit before continuing:

"These fanatics . . . you'll find a few of them here at Hillcrest; but they're in the minority. Good folks, I'll have to admit but, well. . . ." With that, Rodney threw his arms in the air and walked away, disappearing behind the door to his chemistry class.

Gary gulped several times. Fanatics! Rodney had called the spiritual young people fanatics. If only the deluded young man knew who that group was! They were the "salt of the earth." At least that's what one of the preachers had said in a sermon.

"Hi." A pleasant voice cut into his thinking, over his shoulder. A pretty blonde haired girl fell in step with him. "I'm Betty Crockett. Forgive me if I appear bold and brash; I'm neither. But I noticed you were new to Hillcrest and, since I'm the young people's leader in our church, I wanted to invite you to our services. Here," she said, handing Gary a card with the name of the church, the pastor's name and address and the time of the regular weekly services printed on it.

"Th . . . thanks," Gary stuttered, completely taken back by the soft gentle voice and the modestly attired and attractive girl walking beside him.

"You're new here," Betty repeated again, "and we all want you to feel welcome to Hillcrest."

"Yes, I'm new here, but I like it greatly already. I'm Gary Maynard from upstate New York. At least that was our last address." He laughed as he said it. "Dad's an oil man; consequently, we see quite a lot of the world."

"That sounds interesting," Betty ventured. "Do you attend spiritual churches wherever you go? We have a wonderful church and pastor and wife and family. He's a Spirit-filled man who preaches under the anointing of God. You must come and hear him soon."

Gary swallowed and gulped, feeling suddenly unexpectedly shy and backward in Betty's presence. Words eluded and escaped him. He blushed scarlet. From the roots of his thick, slightly-wavy auburn hair to the very tips of his toes, he felt hot.

"You do go to church?" Betty asked gently, sensing the young man's embarrassment and trying to put him at ease.

Ye . . . I . . . that is, yes," he replied stammering. "Good. I thought you did," Betty exclaimed softly. "Please do me the honor of coming to our church. We'd all be so happy to have you."

Gary regained his equilibrium. Glancing down upon the lovely girl by his side, he said, "I'll be there. As sure as Sunday comes around I'll be there!"

"Thank you; and thank God! We've been praying for the Lord to lead us to more young people and to give us more." Looking intently into Gary's face, Betty paused, then asked, "Are you converted, Gary? I mean, is Jesus living in your heart? It's wonderful . . . being saved from one's sins and being sanctified wholly. Wonderful!" she repeated.

Betty's eyes were like liquid pools of deepest blue and something about their penetration made Gary answer truthfully, "I . . . I'm not sure I know what you mean."

Bright tears surfaced and rolled down Betty's cheeks. "I'll have our prayer group pray for you, Gary. You will know when you are converted. It's real! Salvation is real and oh, so wonderful! I must hurry or I'll be late for Home Ec. See you Sunday, the Lord willing, and Gary, I'll be praying hard for you."

Gary watched Betty until she was out of sight. "What a girl! I didn't know there were girls like her around anymore," he said.

Collecting his senses, he started for his next class. Just as he was halfway through the door a hand came down upon his shoulder. "Hi, fellow," a voice said. "I see you're new in town. How about getting acquainted a bit after class. Meet me at exit B; we'll skip school for the rest of the day. A lot of us fellows do it. Some of the girls, too," he added in an undertone.

Gary turned and faced the voice that was speaking so close to his ear.

"I'm Knuckles," the young man said, laughing coarsely. "Bill Treacher in real life; Knuckles to the gang. Want to join? We'll show you what living's all about. If you're interested meet me at exit B immediately after class."

A look of disgust registered on Gary's face. Disgust and a sort of indignation. Was this brash young man one of those whom Rod had referred to as "great" and was he one of those who used church attendance as a guise and cover-up for his shoddy way of living-for cutting classes and having phony excuses written and presented to the teacher as truth? Was he?

"Thanks, Bill, I'm not interested. Now nor ever!" As he slid into the desk seat, Betty's words slowly penetrated his heart: "Do you attend spiritual churches wherever you go? Are you converted? Is Jesus living in your heart? . . ."

Spiritual churches? He reasoned soundly now. No, No! His parents and he had never attended a spiritual church. Oh, they had gone to church. First one, then another, as they were moved from one state to another state. But never, in all their moves, had they found a church that was what Betty had called "spiritual."

"Are you converted? . . . is Jesus living in your heart?" A sudden and deep hunger surged up inside Gary. This was the very thing for which he was seeking and searching and, yes, reaching after: Jesus, the Giver of peace.

He opened his textbook and tried to concentrate on the lesson but found it virtually impossible to do so. Peace! The thing that had eluded him so long was now at his very finger tips. He must learn more about being converted. Not until he had experienced it himself could he tell his parents about its satisfying virtue and power. He must find peace for his heart before he could show his dear father and mother the way.

Peace, he soliloquized thoughtfully, begins in one's heart. His heart! Thereafter, its concentric rings widen to include those in the home and the school; one's neighbors across the street or across an ocean.

All day Gary hoped for just a glimpse of Betty and a talk with her, but he saw nothing more of the lovely young woman who had stirred something deep inside his soul and it was with a sigh of relief that he heard the bell for dismissal.

Taking long strides he cut across the school yard and started down Elmwood Lane for home. His feet made deep furrows in the thick carpet of multi-colored leaves that lay fragrantly sweet and humbly submissive on the ground and, his eyes, which ordinarily would have noticed the golden splendor before him, saw nothing other than the mental picture he carried of Betty's face and her look of total and complete inner peace and calm serenity. He needed whatever it was she had and he needed it badly!

Taking the card she had handed him, from his shirt pocket, he scanned the address carefully. A Scripture, printed at the bottom of the card, arrested his attention: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" Matt. 11:28.

It seemed to be a direct answer to his inner yearning "Come. . . ." The verse involved action. Action on his part. "O God!" he cried aloud, "I'm so ignorant about this but I believe You. You said, 'Come.' Here it is, Lord, right on this card." Gary held the card upward. "I'm coming as best as I know how. Please give my heart rest and inner peace. You know I've never been satisfied with just being good and going to church . . . neither are Father and Mother Always, we've been searching . . . searching. And not until today has

anything ever witnessed to my heart that this was the right way. You did it, I know, in answer to my deep but secret heart yearning. Now give me whatever it is she has and forgive me for all my sins."

Indescribable peace surged through Gary's soul. He knew he was forgiven. Saved: the heavy load of sin and condemnation was gone. He laughed aloud for joy and would have walked into someone in front of him had she not spoken. "You sound extra happy, Gary." It was Betty. Brushing the tears aside so he could see properly he said, "I am happy! Oh, so very happy! The happiest I've ever been!"

"You look different," Betty ventured reverently as they faced each other.

"I am different, Betty. Very, very different Thanks to God and you! I just got converted and it is wonderful. Wonderful!"

Tears of thankfulness spilled down Betty's cheeks. "Thank God!" she said in a soft, emotion packed voice

Gary said, "You have a tremendous influence, Betty . . . for righteousness. No wonder the church picked you for their young people's leader. I'm so thankful my heart was inclined toward things more noble and lofty and manly than those proffered me by Rod and Bill. . . ."

Betty's head dropped "Do . . . do you know Rod? I . . . I mean, did you meet him?"

"In the hallway this morning."

"He's my brother, Gary. And . . . and Rod hasn't always been like he is now. . . ."

Gary's mouth flew open in shocked surprise. Crockett! Of course. Hadn't Rodney said he was a Crockett, the same as Betty?

"I . . . I'm sorry," he apologized suddenly "I . . . I guess Rodney's last name just didn't register. Please, again, accept my apologies."

"That's quite all right, Gary. Rodney's a wonderful brother, really. It's just that he got in with the wrong crowd at school and he backslid. But we're all praying for him."

"And now there'll be another one praying for him," Gary said, pointing his thumb toward his chest. He was thankful as he could be that this move of his father's would, from all indications, be their final move since his father was promoted to an office job with the company . . . in Hillcrest.

Walking together down the street, Gary thought of Days to come. Days (after he had gotten sanctified, as Betty phrased it, and proved to Betty and all the community that his walk with God was genuine and real and a consistent one!) when he would be taking this lovely specimen of perfect womanliness and ladyhood and Christlikeness to church in his own old but clean jalopy. She would grace its well-worn interior like a queen

Until the time came when he dared to ask her, he would keep the sacredly sweet and secret thoughts sealed tight in his heart.

Bright colored leaves skipped down the sidewalk in front of them. His soul was soaring with them . . . Heavenward!