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THE HAUNTED HEART
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Heather looked around the classroom in a frightened sort of way. With her slender white fingers, she caught a strand of long golden hair and toyed with it mechanically and nervously. If only the students would accept her and be friendly to her in a small way even!

A sob caught in her throat. It was hard, being the daughter of . . . Quickly she tossed the thought out of her mind. She didn't want to think of it again. Not ever.

She tried, honestly tried, to concentrate on what the teacher was saying, but so many other thoughts . . . unpleasant thoughts and unlovely . . . crowded their way into her muddled brain.

She had been in Telford a little more than five or six weeks and, except for the girls and fellows giving her an occasional wave of the hand or a casual "Hi," nothing more close and chummy had developed.

Again her eyes roamed around the room. She wanted to run away, just anywhere -- to someone or someplace that would accept her for her very own self and not associate her with her father's business as a distillery owner.

Heather groaned within herself. Bright tears fought their way to the surface of her eyes and trickled down her naturally-pink cheeks. With a quick movement of her hand, she brushed them away.

She was glad when class was dismissed and she could go home. Even though her mother was rarely ever home when she got in from school, it was still better to enter the emptiness and the loneliness of her home than to be an innocent victim of curious and meaningful stares.

She tossed the books on the desk in her private study room then wandered aimlessly out to the front porch. She sat in the swing and listened to the many sounds about her. Pleasant sounds they were. Happy bird songs and joyful children at play.

Spring was wonderful, she thought; and being sixteen was supposed to be wonderful too. It was sort of a magic age and time. At least she had always supposed it would be. How utterly wrong and disillusioned she had been!

"Hi, there!" A voice broke in upon her thinking. "You lonesome?"

Heather wanted to toss her answer to the winds and scream it to the world that she was lonely. Very, very lonely. Instead, she said softly, "Oh, hi. You're Jerry Malone, aren't you? I believe you're quite new here too."

"How'd ya know?" he said coarsely. Ignoring the fact that Heather hadn't invited him up on the porch, he dropped beside her heavily on the swing. "Hey kid, you're cute!" he exclaimed, sliding his arm along the back of the swing and allowing it to rest on Heather's shoulder. "Yea, you're cute. Awful cute! How about goin' for a ride with me? My jalopy's in the next block. We could have a ball, you an' me. . . ."

Heather's heartbeat quickened. She wanted friends, she did! But she wanted the right kind of friends. She had hoped (how she had hoped!) that some of the church girls and boys would include her in their youth meetings and make her feel welcome to the church; but so far, not a single person had so much as asked her whether she went to church even.

"Hey! How about it?" Jerry persisted. "You're lonely an' I am too. We'll be good for each other. . . ."

Heather stood to her feet. "I'm sorry, Jerry. I have studying to do. Exam's coming up this week."

"Phew! Who cares about school? Not me! None of that stuffy kind of thing for me. I take to the 'lighter' side of life. Come with me, kid; I'll show ya what livin's all about. There's a cozy little place down the road a piece. . . ." He had hold of her arm now.

"Jerry, no! Let go of me! Let go, I say! I . . . don't want any cozy little place." With those words, she wrenched herself free of his grasp and rushed inside the house, locking the door behind her.

She waited till she heard the sound of his footsteps die away in the distance, then she rushed to her room and threw herself across the bed where she wept uncontrollably. She was reminded forcibly again of her beautiful sister Andrea, just three years her senior and a maniac in a State Hospital . . . her mind blown on drugs. Andrea, a helpless, hopeless maniac . . . because of drugs! Another Jerry Malone type had shown Andrea the "lighter" side of the world. She became hopelessly "hooked" on the stuff and

one day shortly after her introduction to LSD, she "tripped" into the world of insanity and the maniacal, her mind never again to be restored.

Because of this, and the "prosperous" and flourishing distillery he owned, Heather's father thought it wise to move her away. Thus they had come to Telford.

Away from what? Heather wondered suddenly and anxiously. The past happenings and past memories? She feared not. News had a very subtle way of leaking out and following one, she realized, with an involuntary shudder. Even though her father's business was in the distant city and he was home only on rare weekends, she felt certain that the townspeople of Telford knew all about it.

She got to her feet, hurried to the kitchen and made a quick sandwich, then started down the hallway to the study. Her grades must not suffer. She told herself for the thousandth time that she would amount to something in life. She would go directly opposite from Andrea, whose desire to follow the crowd and do what the majority were doing, had been her downfall and her ruin. Nor would she ever condone her father's business even. She would ever and always be a "total abstainer." A fanatic, even, as her mother had once called her when she refused to go to a youth party in the big city.

Again Heather shuddered. It had been at a "youth party" that the lovely and vivacious Andrea had met Bart Stone. Bart could have been a good looking fellow, Heather remembered having thought when Andrea brought him to the house once, if he had had his hair cut, his beard shaved and a couple or more really hot baths. Bart had been Andrea's downfall. Her end.

From that fatal, heartbreaking experience, Heather purposed within herself that she would be different. She didn't want the partying groups nor the "tripping" friends. She wanted churchgoing people. People who looked like good, normal human beings. Oh, where were they? If only one such person would contact her. . . .

The doorbell made her jump with fright. Was it Jerry again? Had he come back? What should she do? She almost panicked.

It rang a second time.

Stepping to the heavily curtained windows in the living room, Heather peeked out to the front door. A young girl stood there, her face wreathed in smiles.

Trembling with fright at thought of Jerry, Heather opened the door.

"Good afternoon," the girl on the porch greeted pleasantly. "I'm Rachael Barber from down the street. I saw you in school as we were changing classes, then I saw you when you came home. I was right behind you but never could quite catch up with you. I'd like to be your friend."

"Oh-h!" Heather exclaimed in glad astonishment and awe. "I . . . I'd like that very much. I'm Heather Healey. Please come inside."

"What a lovely place you have here!" Rachael said, as she entered the living room. "But I didn't come to survey the house," she added lightly, laughing musically. "I came to invite you to go to church with me. We have our midweek prayer meeting tonight. Do you think you could go, Heather? Or do you already attend somewhere else?"

"Why, no. No, I don't," Heather said, still in a sort of shock. "And I . . . I would love to go with you, Rachael."

"Our church isn't a very large church but God comes and meets with us and the people who attend there love the Lord. They're real friendly, too, Heather, and I know you'd love the young people who go there."

Heather gasped a little happy gasp. "Oh, I know I'd love everybody!" she replied. "I just know I will!"

"I'll come by and get you, Heather. You see, I'm kind of new here myself and I thought it would be simply wonderful if you and I could be friends and could attend the same church. You must come down to our house. My father and mother would be delighted to have you; and they will rejoice when I tell them that the Lord has given me a wonderful friend in the same block as our house is located on. You'll love my folks, Heather, and Mom'll love you, too."

"That . . . sounds wonderful, Rachael. Almost too good to be true, really! I . . . I've been so lonely and so discouraged. I want friends. Lots of

them. But I want the right kind. Do you know what I mean?" Heather's eyes searched Rachael's. In her eyes she saw sincerity, love, understanding, trust and compassion.

"I understand, Heather. You don't want to chum around with the Jerry Malone type. Right?"

"Right. But . . . but how did you know?" Heather questioned.

"Remember I told you that I followed you from school? Well, I saw Jerry. You see, I planned on calling on you myself. But when I saw Jerry I just lingered and moseyed along the street. I couldn't help but see how repulsive and obnoxious he was making himself to you; nor could I help but see your face when he tried to force you to go to with him. . . ."

"You . . . you saw it, Rachael?"

"I did; and inwardly I was cheering you for your courage and for your stand. When you went inside, I hurried home to pray for you. Then the same sweet Inner Voice that has been prompting me for two days to come and see you, bade me come to you. So here I am."

"How wonderful!" Heather said in awe and wonder and amazement. "You talk so . . . so differently from any whom I have ever met and talked to, Rachael. I . . . I like it," she admitted shyly.

"I'm a Christian, Heather. Jesus makes all the difference in the world in one's heart and life."

"Christian? Don't you have problems, Rachael? I mean, you . . . you look so peaceful and so at rest."

"That's because I am at peace and rest, Heather. Both with God and with man. The Christian life is wonderful. Yes, we have problems; but when you get saved you take your problems to Jesus in prayer and He helps you to bear the burdens."

"Oh, that sounds wonderful, Rachael. In fact, I believe it's the very thing for which my haunted heart has been crying and searching. I . . . I feel a warm and very real response to what you're telling me."

"Say, Heather, why not come home with me now? Or would your mother mind awfully?"

Heather swallowed hard. "N . . . no. Mother wouldn't mind at all. I doubt that she'll be home till well after ten or eleven tonight. This is her big club night. . . ."

"Then you could come? Right now?" Heather nodded.

"Good! Then let's go," Rachael laughed. "This is my night to get the supper. Gather your books together and while the supper's cooking we can study some. We'll finish it after we eat. The washing of dishes falls upon my other two sisters tonight since they're not preparing the meal. We rotate the supper preparations and the dishes accordingly. Mom supervises . . . and does a lot of the work, really!" Rachael laughed. "It's fun. And at the same time we're learning how to be cooks, wives and homemakers. You should have seen and tasted some of our very first 'cook it alone' meals! Ugh! I never cease to be amazed that Mother and Dad are still alive!"

Both girls laughed aloud. "It sounds like real fun to me!" Heather exclaimed.

"Then let's go," Rachael said. "You'll be our 'fourth' girl in the household. Poor Dad! He says his 'girls' . . . including Mom . . . keep him on tiptoe."

As Heather hurried down the hall after her books, a song swelled in her heart for the first time in many months. Her desires, hopes, and wishes, were about to be fulfilled. She could feel it within herself.

Someday, when the hurt wasn't quite so keen and so deep and painful, she would confide in Rachael about Andrea and . . ., and her father's business.

Something within her told her that she was on the verge of a new beginning. The threshold of a brighter tomorrow . . . Christ.

She was humming softly as she joined Rachael at the door.