

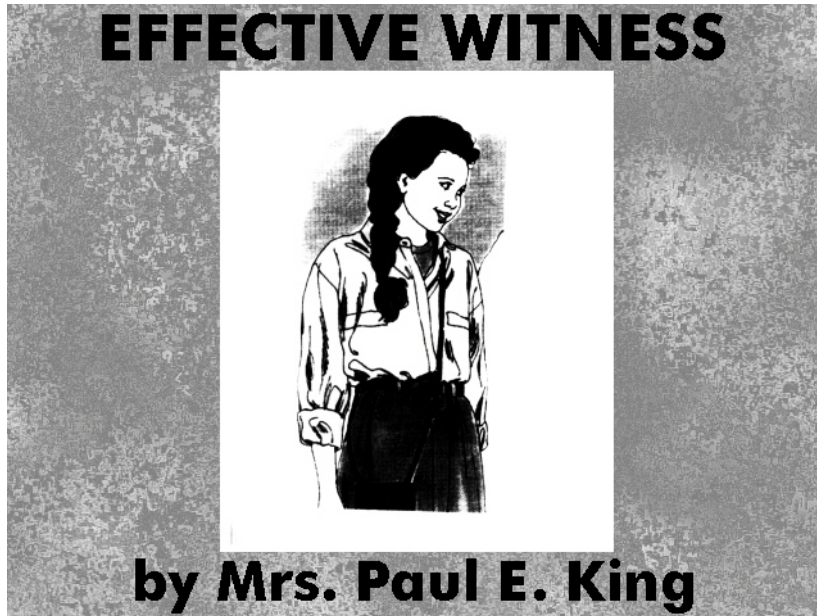
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EFFECTIVE WITNESS
By Mrs. Paul E. King

I had just settled myself at the desk in my room, my face pretty much hidden behind an English-Literature book and my mind deep in concentrated thought over what I was reviewing and studying in preparation for the following day's exam. Mom's voice floated up the stairs to where I was. "Telephone, Magayra," she said. "It's Sherri."

Placing the book carefully on the desk, its pages open to where I was reading, I pushed the chair back and hurried downstairs to the phone.

Sherri Jones was my very best friend. More than that even, Sherri was "true blue" -- not the least bit of sham or hypocrisy about her. Totally unpretentious, realistic and completely genuine, she exuded a spirit of righteousness and true holiness constantly. Though I didn't agree with her on certain things -- her old-fashioned standards of dress, to name but one -- I had utmost respect for her and I admired her greatly and deeply.

"Hi, Sherri," I bubbled into the mouthpiece of the telephone. "What's new?"

Sherri's laughter sounded musical across the line, almost like tinkly bells, I thought. "Need I have something new happen to call a friend?" she teased. "Actually, I was wondering if you'd like to go with me to Rushville tonight. Special services at our church all this week."

I swallowed. There was silence on the other end of the line now. But that was Sherri; no long monologues nor lengthy recitals on what, why, or the wherefore of a thing; always straight to the point. Like when she set cold beef and noodles before me one day. "Try them, Magayra," she invited. "They're good." That was all. There was no elaboration on why they were good nor why she was sure I'd even faintly think they were good. But knowing Sherri like I did, and knowing that (generally) if she said a thing was good or all right that it actually was like she attested it to be, well, I tried that thing -- cold noodles. And, yes, you guessed it: I love cold beef and noodles now, every bit as well as my friend does. Same way with her concoction of crackers, peanut butter and bananas. "Have some," she told me one afternoon after school when I stopped by her house to get a recipe for Mom. I liked what I tasted and now, like Sherri, my favorite before supper snack is four saltines spread with crunchy peanut butter and topped with a medium-thick round of banana.

"You there, Magayra," she asked softly.

"Sure am."

"How about it? Will you go? I really want you to."

"I can't, Sherri," I replied. "Big exam tomorrow, and I'm not fully prepared for it."

"Tomorrow night then, Lord willing?"

I swallowed again, knowing no reason why I shouldn't go. "Well..." I hedged, not knowing what to say.

"Good!" Sherri exclaimed, deciding for me. "My folks and I'll be by to pick you up at 6:45, the Lord willing. Bring your mother with you; we'd love to have her go too. . . ."

Mother go to revival? The thought was preposterous. Not my mother, I thought, as I put the receiver in place and hurried upstairs to study my books.

I tried hard to concentrate but Sherri's "Lord willings" kept popping up in my brain. What a funny statement, I thought. Why did she use it every time she planned anything for the future? What did it mean? "What did Sherri want, Magayra?"

I jumped, forgetting all about Sherri's "Lord willings" and my study book. I hadn't heard Mother come up the stairs.

"For me to go with her to some meeting they're having at their church." "Are you going?"

I looked quickly at my mother; was there a note of wistfulness in her voice? of longing desire, even? It sounded like it. "Why? Did you want me to go?" I asked casually, hoping she couldn't hear the loud hammering of my heart.

"Why not?" she countered softly with a question of her own.

I gasped. Incredulous! Positively and absolutely incredulous. My mother wanting me to go to church with Sherri. I could scarcely believe my ears.

"Are you going, Magayra?" she prodded gently.

My mouth flew open. "I . . . I can't," I stammered. "At least not tonight; big English-Literature exam tomorrow," I explained, remembering (with a

smile on my face) that Sherri would have added her "Lord willing" here. "I'm not ready for the test," I added, "and I do want to retain my A+ grade."

Mom seemed unimpressed with my answer. "Tomorrow night then?" she asked quickly.

"Sherri said her folks and she would stop for me tomorrow night. Yes," I related, "and she told me to bring you along. . . ."

I made the last statement without looking at my mother, letting my sentence trail for impact. Generally, her reaction to things religious or church-related was anything but tolerant and nice. For some reason (or reasons) unknown to me, my parents were far from being charitable toward anything spiritual and I knew better than to question them or ask why. My inquiries would have been met with a violent rebuttal of sorts and I would have been informed in no uncertain tone of voice that it was none of my business. So I left well enough alone, not wanting to incur the wrath of either parent by being too inquisitive.

I stared at the words in my English-Literature book, not really seeing them, while I listened to Mom's loud breathing and the pounding of my own heart, hoping all the while that things were changing inside Mother's breast and that she'd say she'd go with me.

When she finally spoke, her voice sounded all choked up and little and funny. "I . . . I'll go with you, Magayra," she declared quickly before backing out of the room and hurrying down the stairs.

I sat in dumb, stunned, but pleasant silence, listening to the receding footsteps which had a determined step and tread to them.

Feeling too dazed (with an undefinable joy and gladness) to pursue studying for the time being, I suddenly wondered why Mom had consented so readily to accompany me to church. What had motivated and given impetus to her hasty decision? I wondered. Or was it hasty? Could it be that somewhere, sometime in her childhood my mother had had religious training?

Thinking thus, I recalled the time when I was home from school with the flu. Mother hadn't heard me enter the house, and being too ill and feverish to make my presence known, I headed straight for the stairs and my bed where

I burrowed down between the covers and lay shivering and shaking, listening to Mom as she sang something about an unclouded day and bells of heaven ringing because someone had come home.

I'll confess, I didn't know what it meant nor did I understand anything about the lyrics. I didn't say anything about it to Mother when she came upstairs a short time later and discovered me in bed. But the following day, when I complimented her on her beautiful voice, I asked her where she had learned the songs. Immediately she became irritated, and, flushing scarlet, she flounced out of the room telling me to forget that I had ever heard her sing.

But I couldn't forget. Not for a long time afterward. My heart felt strangely warmed and mellowed and moved upon. It seemed as though an irresistible force drew me to the words, the music and the lyrics, and frequently I, too, sang the songs when I was by myself. And now, sitting alone in my room recalling the strangely-beautiful songs and my promise to go with Sherri, well, I had a feeling that soon I would understand their meaning fully.

Pulling myself together, I forced my brain to the business of intense study, not stopping until each lesson we'd had in the six-week interim was thoroughly viewed and understood. When I finally tumbled in bed, it was with a feeling of satisfaction and attainment; I was ready for the examination.

Sherri met me in the hallway the following morning -- our daily routine. She looked tired, and I noticed that her eyes appeared red and swollen. But she wore her ever-constant smile and flashed it warmly upon me when she saw me, so I said nothing about her eyes.

"Hi, sleepy-head," she greeted me softly. "I beat you here this morning," she teased.

"Not by too many minutes," I countered pleasantly. "My alarm clock failed to ring. I told you there was something wrong with it, remember?"

"Oh, Magayra, not really. Isn't that the one your cousin sent you from Germany? It had the dearest, sweetest-sounding alarm I've ever heard."

Sherri was quite a sentimentalist -- where rare gifts were involved, especially.

"That's the one," I acknowledged. "But don't cry over it. I've had it for ages."

"Twelve years isn't exactly 'ages,' Magayra," Sherri corrected.

"You know what I mean."

"I do, but what do you suppose God thinks about it?"

"I guess I never gave Him much thought," I admitted sadly, wondering what made Sherri say what she did.

"God is truth, Magayra," she said; "He loves truth, from our lips and from our heart. It's wrong to say something that isn't true. We should never exaggerate."

I was speechless. Never before had I heard Sherri reprimand me like this.

"I've been praying for you, Magayra," she said, giving my hand a tight little squeeze. "And I'm so happy you're going to church with us tonight. You'll not be sorry that you've gone," she added quickly before hurrying away to her homeroom.

It was when I was finished with the test that I thought of my commitment to Sherri. What did the night hold for me? I wondered. No, us? I thought, recalling that Mother was going also.

At thought of Mother attending a church service -- or whatever kind of religious service it was -- my heart did a happy kind of flip-flop and tingles of excitement raced through me. I almost felt that I was dreaming and that I'd awake and find it wasn't reality at all. But when the school buzzer sounded and I filed out of Mrs. Dereck's room and walked down the hallway to Mr. Kimmel's Math class, I knew it was more than just a pleasant dream; I was wide awake and Mother was going.

She had supper a bit earlier that night and she seemed happier than I had seen her in a long time. Daddy noticed it too: "You act like a young girl again, Lorri!" he exclaimed. "What's going on?" he asked, looking at Mother in a puzzled kind of way.

"I'm going to church with Sherri and her folks -- Magayra and I. Why not join us?"

Daddy's mouth flew open wide in shocked disbelief. "You . . . you're . . . kidding," he finally managed to stammer.

"No, I'm not, Art. We're going to church, Magayra and I." "But . . . but, Lorri, I . . . I thought. . . ."

Whatever it was that Daddy thought, or was going to say, he left unfinished and unsaid.

"Go with us, Art," Mom invited again, to my utter amazement.

"Two of my family going is enough," Daddy said, grabbing his coat and hat and leaving the house.

So many questions floated around inside my head and I desperately wanted to know the answers to them, but, like always, I knew better than to ask Mother, pleasant frame of mind though she was in at the moment. So I kept them bottled up tight inside of me though of one thing I was now sure: my parents had had religious training of some sort in their earlier years. The thought was both thrilling and frightening, though why it should have been the latter I couldn't understand.

Sherri's folks were right on time, and when we entered the church a holy but fearful something gripped my inmost being. Leading us down to the second pew from the front, where it was apparent the Jones family always sat, I felt perfectly comfortable -- kind of like I, too, belonged there.

The singing was beautiful and uplifting, and the songs were not at all unfamiliar to Mother, whose lovely soprano could be heard above all others around me. The preaching was plain, beautifully-simple and to the point, and as I listened, I became aware of the fact that I was a creature, not of time, but of eternity; that there were but two places to which a soul went when death claimed its victim -- Heaven or Hell. I suddenly realized that, in the light of the

truth I'd just heard, I was no fit candidate for the first mentioned place nor did I want to spend eternity in the latter.

Perspiration broke out upon my forehead and my hands felt clammy. What was wrong with me? I wondered. Was I dying? If so, I'd go to hell; I wasn't ready for Heaven. What should I do? What? Even now, my breathing was labored; my heart felt as if someone had tied a rope around it and was pulling it tighter . . . tighter . . . tighter. But wait! Mother was on her feet. She was running to the altar in front of the pulpit. And she was crying. My mother, crying! Praying! She was! She was!

Without caring what anyone may have thought, I stood to my feet. Screaming to God for mercy -- to save my soul -- I knelt beside my mother who, by now, was shouting loudly for joy and urging me to, "Pray! Pray, Magayra! Tonight's your night. . . ."

And she was right; it was my night. Her night, too. Each of us got rid of a load so big, heavy and cumbersome as to be crushing. In its place we received joy, peace and happiness. Mother and I traded our sins for salvation that night, and all because my friend, Sherri Jones, had invited us to a "special service" at her church.

Oh, and one more thing: Sherri's consistently holy living was the convincing factor that made me want to get whatever it was she possessed and had. Yes, my parents were backsliders, having once known the way but having departed from it due to pressure from worldly friends. But this time, Mom said, she was on the Highway forever -- determined to get wholly sanctified and make The Eternal City at any cost.

I wept for joy. Our home was now well on the way to becoming another happy Jones household.