

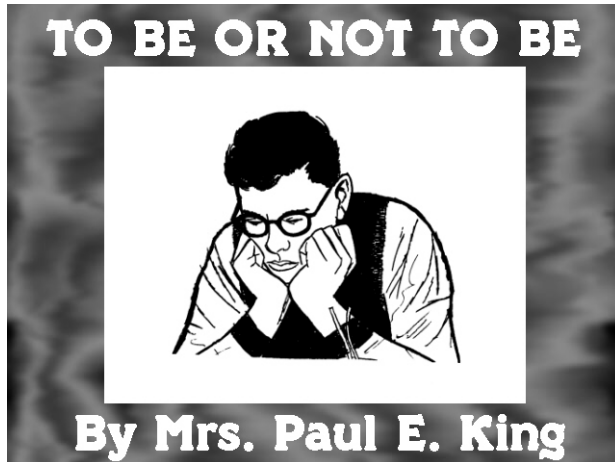
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TO BE OR NOT TO BE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

A soft puff of wind shook the sheer curtains in Wally Preston's bedroom and sent them swishing playfully and teasingly across his face and he lay on the bed. They tickled his nose, then swept higher and ruffled his already tousled, sandy-colored hair.

Wally opened his eyes, and with a quick hand he shoved the shimmering sheers back to the window where they belonged. Why couldn't he have plain old navy blue draperies at his windows? he wondered for the hundredth time or more. Sheers and ruffled curtains were all right in his sister's bedroom but in a boy's. . . .

He jumped off the bed quickly and surveyed himself in the dresser mirror. His hair was half over his forehead. He had the kind of hair which insisted on growing forward; it had done so when he was two; now when he was sixteen-and-a-half, he had no doubt that he would still have a forelock when he was ninety-one. Unless, of course, he went bald during the course of aging. There was always that possibility, but it was highly improbable, he reasoned, since none of the Preston men whom he knew had ever gone bald. At eighty-three, Grandfather Preston still had a full head of lovely hair. It was snowy-white instead of chestnut brown, to be sure, but it was still all there on top of his head.

The boy grimaced and made a face at his image in the mirror, trying to imagine how his forelock -- snowy-white like his grandfather's -- would look when he used a cane and was old.

Combing his hair back quickly and impatiently, Wally turned and gazed through the open window to the outside where robins were singing loudly and lustily. It was hot, and the maple tree tapping at his screen was sporting green leaves as shiny as his bicycle, bought a month ago and still all-new looking.

Another quick look into the mirror told him it was time to see a barber and get a hair cut. A real man's hair cut; not the kind he had wanted, but the kind his father demanded. Just this morning at the breakfast table his father reminded him (rather, ordered) that this was "the day." No further procrastinations would be tolerated.

He sighed. His thoughts weren't really tonsorial. They were turned inward, as they had been recently, ever since he came to Bentley High four months ago in April.

Why did the company have to transfer his father from Melburn to Bentleyville? he wondered again. And what must he do to become accepted with the fellows in Bentleyville? Furthermore, why wasn't he accepted? And what were the requirements for acceptance?

On and on and on the questions rolled, floating back and forth inside his head like a computer, he thought. But there was one difference between the two, he theorized, one big difference: computers generally gave related

answers to the questions; his cerebrum didn't. All he received from his queries and ponderings were massive doses of added confusion and frustration. If only he could have stayed in Melburn, where he was much-liked, sought after and recognized. Here. . . .

"Wally," his mother paged him from the kitchen. "Wally, you doing your homework?"

"Uh . . . er . . . I . . ."

"Finish it, Son, and stop feeling sorry for yourself. The barber shop closes at 5:30 . . ." her voice trailed meaningfully.

Wally checked his watch then slumped into a chair nearest the window. One whole hour for homework, he thought, opening the history book and giving its hated pages nothing better than a cold, blank stare.

Another puff of wind made him jerk to attention; he wanted to be outside. More than anything else, he wanted to forget about school and do like some of the fellows had done in Bentley High -- loafed. He guessed he must have done his share of it though, or he wouldn't be going to summer school to get caught up with the others who had been in his class.

In disgust, Wally slammed the book shut, leaned his head back against the chair and closed his eyes. Quite suddenly, something warned him; he opened his eyes; his mother was standing in the doorway. He sat up straight and opened the book, immediately at attention.

His mother was small, dark eyes, with wheat-colored hair. She worked part time in a nursing home, ran countless errands for the aged and infirm, taught the young-married people's class in Sunday school, was a free-lance writer and kept an immaculately clean house -- the latter with BethAn's help. Sometimes her energy made him feel like a bum.

He tried to be funny. "Don't look at me like that; you scare me," he teased. It didn't work; she continued staring.

"Okay. So I wasn't doing my school work, and I must get a hair cut. . . ."

She walked inside and began making like a "picking up machine" around the room.

"What's the good of studying?" he asked suddenly. "I hate Bentley High. Hate it with a passion. The kids don't like me; I'm not accepted. . . ."

His mother's tired sigh stopped him short. Tears shimmered in her dark brown eyes. "If you just looked at things differently," she exclaimed, hurt-like. "You aren't trying, Wally, and you aren't praying like you used to, either," she added tiredly.

Shrugging his shoulders, the boy said impatiently, "What's the use? Things will never be the same for me; I left my heart -- and my whole being back in Melburn, Mom. I loathe Bentleyville and I despise Bentley High. The kids here are snooty, vain, egotistical, unsociable, clannish, selfish and. . . ."

"You don't suppose they have the same opinion of you?" She reflected out loud, finishing making order out of the disarray and seating herself on the side of his bed. "You're quite judgmental," she said quickly, adding, "'Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged. . . .'"

Silence curled up beside Wally in his chair.

"You don't understand," he said after a long while. "Adults generally don't."

"Feeling sorry for yourself again, huh?"

Getting to his feet and speaking more loudly than he had meant to, he said, "Look, Mom, all I'm wanting is to be accepted. It's that simple."

"With whom? and with which crowd, Wally? Christians or sinners? The righteous or the wicked -- the worldlings?"

Wally gasped like a drowning man struggling for oxygen.

"Your heart is your big problem, Son," his mother said tearfully. "Yes, you want to be accepted, it's true, but with the wrong crowd. Yours is an inner struggle, a to-be-or-not-to-be kind of struggle. . . ."

"What a funny expression."

"Perhaps, but it's true, nonetheless. You cannot serve God and the devil at the same time, Wally. You will either be a Christian -- real Christian -- or you will not be a Christian. There's no middle-ground here. 'How long halt ye between two questions: if the Lord be God, follow Him: but if Baal, Then follow him.'"

"Oh, Mom, I'm not a Baal worshiper."

"Are you sure of that, Wally?"

"Mom!"

"Choose you this day whom ye will serve," the petite mother quoted, getting to her feet quickly and hurrying for the door. "But remember, Son, 'as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.' BethAn's not had any problems adjusting to the change. But she maintained a consistent prayer life and Bible reading time. Something dreadful's happened in your heart, Wally. Better get down to doing business with God. . . ."

Long after Mother had left the room, her words hung fearfully over his head. A Baal worshiper!? He knew he wasn't such in all actuality. But in another sense, his mom was right; his god didn't take on the form of a statue standing high on a hill somewhere or in a grove; his god was in worldliness, or world-likeness. Yes, he admitted silently but candidly, he did love the world; it was his god, having gained the preeminence in his soul when he backslid. It was a staggering thought and a startling revelation.

In an effort to thrust the bothersome thought from his mind, Wally opened his history book and tried to read. It didn't work. Quickly he rose to his feet and hurried to the window. A sudden and totally unannounced clap of thunder, so loud and so terrible as to shake the house and rattle the windows, made him jump with fear. The judgments of God, he thought, trembling outwardly.

A blinding flash of lightning and another terrible clap of thunder sent him to his knees. It was now or never, he decided, fully aware of just how much he had wanted to be like the so-called "in" crowd at Bentley High.

Suddenly he had come to the crossroads in his life; the direction he took today would be the determining factor as to which path he would travel the rest of his life -- the broad, wide road or the straight and narrow.

For a long while Wally knelt beside his bed, thinking, weighing the devil's suggestions and his arguments against the Word of God and what his better judgment told him he must do were he to have eternal life. When he finally decided to pick up the cross which he had so carelessly tossed aside after his arrival in Bentleyville, praying was easy.

The downpour of rain had ceased and the thunder long since had stopped rolling when Wally rose from his knees, soundly converted.

Hurrying downstairs, whistling as he went, he knew Bentley High would have one less summer school student next year (if Jesus hadn't returned for His Bride before then); he had been an A+ student in Melburn; by God's grace and help he would make friends with God's "in" crowd -- the holy, separated from-the-world young people. He would "fit" in with them; it was where he belonged.

Overjoyed, he hurried toward the kitchen and his mother.