I am a P. K. I was born a P. K., and I suppose I shall die—a P. K. I have known the obligations and privileges, the sorrows and joys, the tragedies and comedies of membership in the Royal Order of the Society of P. K.’s, all because my father is a minister, and I—a PREACHER’S KID.

Itinerant life with its varied experiences has been mine to know as a P. K. The thrill of packing—denuding the walls of their brown pictures, robbing the shelves of their badly-thumbed books, hiding the dishes and clocks amid the billows of old clothes in the washer; the tearful regrets at parting with a beloved doll too tattered to take along to a new community; that woebegone feeling as the moving van, groaning under its load of furniture, finally lumbers down the street; the haunting sound of footsteps among the mocking echoes of the deserted rooms—all these have I known. Locking the door, finding a seat between the bags and boxes in the “Lizzy,” and waving a final farewell to the kindly neighbors have been an oft-repeated ritual in my life. I have known the suspense of the journey and the excitement of our arrival in the new town; I have known the sorrows of unpacking—finding new scratches on the piano and new cracks in the glass of the china closet. I have known the turmoil as we puzzled over how to turn the piano to hide the worn place in the rug or how to make three bedrooms out of two. But eventually that certain shyness at meeting inquiring glances of strange faces in the new church and that terrible fright on the first day in the red brick schoolhouse on the corner have been overcome; the cycle has then been completed.

Once more life as a minister’s daughter has begun for me in a new town.

This life, on the whole, has been one I would not have traded for all the gold of Midas—and yet, as I look back over my childhood, I remember that the restraints imposed on me as a P. K. often were very annoying. I disliked being reproached for some misdeed with the remark, “And you are a minister’s daughter!” Right for right’s sake appealed to me, but right merely for the sake of my father’s church members was a bit distasteful. I can easily understand why P. K.’s often go astray when I think of those whispers, “And did you know that the Minister’s little girls—”—whispers that spread so alarmingly whenever we children misbehaved, either at home, at school, or at church. Like normal children we were sometimes noisy in our play; unlike noisy children we were called to account for desecrating the church parsonage. Usually it was some old soul subtle as an elephant, well-meaning but forgetful of her own childhood, who singled me out as the oldest and began in a quavering voice: “You know, our other minister didn’t have any children. As I walked by your house the other day, I couldn’t help remarking to Mrs. Jones how different the air of the parsonage is now.” At school we had to be on our guard not to displease any children who attended our Sunday school—not so much because it was wrong, but because we might annoy some of their parents, causing them to “quit the church.” At church little short of cherubic behavior was expected. The baby frequently defeated this expectation with shrill shrieks during the sermon. Daddy himself some-
times gave the lie to our angelic characters by "calling us down" in public for the benefit of other little harumscarums. Sitting in a row of children reading The Junior World in church, we would hear him say, "Now, Rachel and Lois, put away your Sunday-school papers until after church. You can read them when you get home."

If my father failed to see our misdemeanors, however, he was promptly informed of them. I remember that at four I was often the recipient of a yard-sticking after a church session. Daddy was determined no one should complain of my behavior in church in vain. Model children—perfect specimens of ladies and gentlemen—these were the standards so many unthinking church members demanded of us.

And no matter how displeased we were with our "judgment-sitters," we learned to show partiality to them. Every barbershop operator, every grocer, pharmacist, mercantile salesman, or what have you, attending our church, was in line for preferential treatment. No matter how much I disliked Mr. Dusseldork for telling Daddy of my attempt to cross heavy traffic without looking both ways, I had to screw up my courage and ask him for that 10-cents' worth of bologna. When Mother wanted a box of hair pins, I walked past Rohm's Drug Store and bought them at the store two blocks further which was owned by a member of the Official Board. In every world affair, preference to church members was required of me. Those people in the church, however, we had to treat exactly alike. Every Sunday-school teacher was as interesting as any other so far as we were concerned. Showing my preference for the company of Sally Smith as opposed to that of Georgine Boren, both pupils in our Sunday-school, was unthinkable. One of the great tragedies of my life was the refusal of a birthday party because Mother was afraid she would offend some child by omitting him from the ranks of the chosen.

Of course I could have invited only my immediate Sunday-school class, but there were only eight of us—obviously too few for a party of any proportions. The whole department invited, our house would not have recovered from the shock for days. All these, I say, were childish grievances.

At an older age, however, I learned to accept being a P.K. philosophically. I took my responsibilities as a matter of course. As the oldest of our family I expected to find burdened with tasks no one else would or could perform. "The pinch hitter" was my role. If the Sunday-school superintendent needed a teacher for a class, I taught. The ages of the pupils and the extent of my lesson preparation made little difference. Because of the knowledge of this responsibility, a teacher's tardiness created in me a paroxysm of fear. Sitting tensely on the edge of my seat, I thumbed frantically through the Quarterly to scan the comments on Paul's missionary journeys or Samson's escapades. I still remember the halo that seemed to envelop the teacher of the "wiggly boys" class as she cautiously opened the door and slipped into her seat. If the pianist was absent or tardy, I played. Knowing this, I have, more than once, cut off my conversation at the last stroke of the 9:30 bell to glance hastily in the direction of the "anxious seat." No one occupying it, I prepared for the sinking feeling that swept over men when Daddy gave me the "high sign"—that certain anxious look that meant "Begin the prelude." (I will confess, though, that it was sometimes a pleasure to have the opportunity to play on a piano with keys rising and falling individually; at home they rose and fell en masse.) If an alto was needed in a quartet for the Sunday morning services, I sang. If no special number was available for the church services or an unexpected funeral service, it was my job to corral my sisters and by dint of pleading, cajoling, or threatening per-
suade the other two-thirds of our Allison girls' trio to perform. Convinced that Mary Ellen really had the toothache, and Lois a sudden case of laryngitis, then I sang a duet with Daddy. If the committee for the Ice Cream Social or the Children's Day program needed an assistant, I served ex officio — occasionally to the extent of accepting three different roles in a single dramatic performance.

Pinch hitting in the menial tasks of the church fell to my lot also. In an emergency of the Ladies' Aid or the Fellowship Dinner, I donned an apron and went to work in the kitchen. I cannot cook, but I can slice cabbage. And at one dinner I did — tons of it. In the absence of the janitor I collected the papers and dusted the pews on Sunday morning. The climax of my pinch-hitting career came, however, when I accepted the janitorship of one church for a whole year because everyone else living near the church refused to shoulder the burden of its time-taking duties. At the end of the year I understood why all the other ex-janitors had considered their salaries inadequate. Occasionally I was a pinch-hitting secretary. When my father required an assistant with the temperamental mimeograph machine, I was drafted. My hands and face covered with black smudges, I patiently pulled each bulletin off the cylinder as Daddy turned the crank, and later, as patiently folded the readable copies. On those days when Daddy was attending a county meeting of some sort, my task involved typing the announcements for the newspapers or preparing a form letter to remind folk of their stewardship obligations. In the light of all these responsibilities surely no one could suggest that I had hidden my talents or wrapped them up in a napkin. That opportunity is denied to a PREACHER'S KID.

Anxieties on Daddy's account were another feature of my membership among the P. K.'s. On some occasions I have suffered with him; on others, for him. The delivery of his sermons were frequently anxious occasions, especially when I knew he had kept vigil the preceding Saturday night at the bedside of one of his parishioners who lay dying, or had spent the week shocking corn for the farmer injured in the tractor accident. Secretly I prayed that the Holy Spirit would guide him, even though I knew he had failed to help him out with his diligent sermon study at home. Listening to his sermon illustrations sometimes filled me with a vague uneasiness. By the time he had told the tragic story of the sinking of the Titanic four times in eight weeks, I really feared lest some of the members had heard it more than twice. Church attendance was another concern. On bleak wintry mornings the story of vacant pews told by the handful of cars filled me with melancholy before I entered the church. On rainy mornings I resolutely turned my attention to the side wall in order to avoid seeing the gloomy attendance record. In mining sections I have looked anxiously over the congregation wondering, wondering whether the men had had to work or had agreed to leave church-going to the deacons and elders. The presence of some people, however, made me more nervous than their absence. As a very little child I shared in Daddy's concern over problem people. When he prayed, "Lord, help me as I lead my flock," I knew he was thinking in particular of that butting ram who annoyed all the other sheep. Sometimes it was that generous-hearted, good-natured old man who made the anthems sound like bass solos and exasperated the teacher of the Men's Bible Class with such foolish questions as "Where did Cain get his wife?"; sometimes it was that Mr. Mean-well who insisted on singing solos on Sunday morning, even though the church members threatened to get up and
leave; again it was that self-righteous farmer who angered board members with his sermons on the fate of tobacco-users in the hereafter; at other times it was that elder who went around proclaiming the doctrines of another church. Whoever it was, I supplemented Daddy’s prayer with one of my own, “Lord, help Daddy to know what to do with Mr. So-and-so.”

The peak of anxieties, however, came with the board meeting. On those Tuesday evenings once a month I waited in suspense for Daddy’s return home. I listened eagerly for the merry whistle telling me everything had gone well. It was at those rare Sunday night board meetings, when Daddy asked for a raise in salary, though, that I suffered most. Sitting on the back seat, waiting for Daddy to take me home, I watched the progress of the meeting impatiently. Time seemed to move with leaden feet. All sorts of forebodings raced through my mind: What if the treasurer insists that the finances of the church are at a low ebb; what if Mrs. Marner reminds the board that a new carpet for the rostrum is more imperative than any raise in salary for the minister; what if Daddy forgets to mention all the gasoline he has used on nonessential errands for the church; what if Mrs. Thompson makes a motion to lay the matter on the table! That fatal signal—the clearing of Daddy’s throat—terrified me more than a perilous mountain descent.

But there were bright spots in my career as a minister’s daughter. Membership among the P. K.’s is not a doleful burden. The thoughtful acts of kindness on the part of the congregation were load-lighteners. Invitations to Sunday dinner we received with exclamations of delight. And no wonder! Such feasts as were prepared for our “orphanage!” The table fairly groaned under its load. Sometimes there were three meat courses and four kinds of dessert. Because of that old story that chicken is a universal favorite with preachers, we nearly always had it. I have never doubted that Lamb was unacquainted with chicken a la Indiana when he sang the praises of the roast pig (although at butchering time that tenderloin is “powerful good.”) My brother, of course, was chiefly interested in the dessert. He had a jolly time gauging his potato consumption accurately enough to “take in” the chocolate cake, marshmallow surprise, cherry pie, and ginger cookies. Yet it was not the food alone that made these occasions memorable—it was the glorious fellowship. Sitting at the dinner table, Farmer Brown forgot his anger at Brindle for kicking over the milk bucket and swapped, with Daddy, anecdotes of their childhood days. We laughed until we cried at some of the pranks confessed. As for Mrs. Brown, she surprised even her husband with her amiability. When one of the “kids” dropped his fork repeatedly or knocked over his water glass, she smiled and said, “Well, those things will happen.” (They frequently did, too.) For the younger set, Sunday afternoon was often more pleasurable than Sunday morning. Occasionally Ruth Ann whispered irreverently during the sermon, “Won’t me and Paul have a good time riding on Sally Dreen’s pony this afternoon?” As we older ones played and sang after dinner, troubles vanished in thin air.

There were unexpected gifts of the congregation that brought us joy, too, whether they came as donations, showers, or, as they are dubbed in West Virginia, “poundings.” Nothing could be more thrilling than opening a box left mysteriously on the back porch. Such a box sent the family frenziedly searching high and low for a knife, a pair of scissors, a razor blade—anything to cut the heavy strings around it. Even more exciting than individual presents was the genuine surprise shower. The so-called surprise shower was some-
times a painful ordeal. It was hard to act astonished when some well-meaning lady had already warned us, “Now I just thought I had better tell you folks not to go away on Tuesday night; the Ladies’ Aid has something very special for you.” There was always that fear, too, that one of the “kids,” growing impatient, would blurt out, “Are you all going to have a shower on us?” Of the genuine surprise shower we were completely “in the dark” until the event came to pass. Then the sly winks and smiles exchanged by the congregation just before the close of the prayer meeting or church services were our only source of enlightenment. What the presentator said at these events we never remembered. We were too busy wondering if that jug really had sweet cider in it and how many cans of peaches there were. At home we looked for the tags on the sacks of flour; the cans of peas, beans, rhubarb, pickles, and apples; the bags of beans. The name scrawled on each one gave us the feeling, “God’s in His heaven; all’s right with the world.” These occasions will ever be happy memories.

But some of my most treasured memories are those of the family that was ours because of Daddy’s profession. Out of the experiences we shared as a minister’s family grew a “tie that binds.” We came to realize that in a minister’s family as truly as with states in a union, “united we stand; divided we fall.” We worked together. Moving could never have been accomplished without the combined effort of all. We played together, when we had time. In winter we often gathered around the table for Chinese checkers; in summer we made excursion trips in the woods and hills. We laughed together. At the dinner table each one told of the humorous incidents that had befallen him during the day. We cried together. Every misfortune of my father depressed us all. This bond, I say, grew out of the itinerant life and the problems and pleasant phases of church work which we shared. But it was not only our experiences that tended to draw us together. It was a common belief in spiritual values. For us children ours was the rare privilege of learning to pray at Mother’s knee. As youngsters we were told of God’s protecting care and, also, his sorrow at our naughty deeds. At the age of five I had a slight conception of the function of a Supreme Being in the world when I prayed in Daddy’s presence, “God, bless Daddy and all the other poor folk.” An appreciation of the literature of the Bible and the Christian principles set forth in it united us. Early in the life of each of us we were taught the names of the books of the Bible. When Ruth Ann was four years old, she could lisp, “Gensis, Exodis, Biticus, Num-bers, Deuteromony.” Out of this training grew a disregard for material possessions as such. Of course, we never objected to a higher salary. It was hard, too, for Mary Ellen to have to wear cardboard in her shoes so Lois could have a new dress to wear to the party. But we learned that “money is not everything”—that happiness can come to those with little of this world’s goods. “I’m the Child of a King” became our theme song. My philosophy has been based upon my home training and upon all the joys and sorrows of being the eldest of a band of P. K.’s.