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## Coals Of Fire

By Mrs. Paul E. King

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Joy worked diligently about her flower beds, humming softly to herself as she did so. Her heart was overflowing with happiness: Russell had asked her to marry him and she had consented to be his wife, the date being set for that very summer, even! Since the death of her mother and now, her only sister, it seemed as if the Almighty had taken pity upon her and was sending her a companion to fill the vacancy left in the humble cottage.

"My, you sound happy this morning!" Mrs. Moran exclaimed, pausing to visit briefly on her way to the grocery store.

"I am happy," Joy answered, setting the plant she had in her hand and on the ground and smiling into the neighbor woman's face. "Russell and I are to be married this summer, the Lord willing."

"Congratulations, dear girl! You deserve a happy life. God has taken note of your tender care over your dear mother and now your sister, too!" Mrs. Moran sighed as she said it, feeling the loss of her neighbor keenly.



"Miles Miller!" she said softly. "I always thought you didn't notice me . . ."

At mention of her mother, more beloved and dear to Joy's heart than any other mortal on earth, and Jean Ann her sister, hot tears stung her eyes and fell unashamed on to the earth she was working. "I miss them so...!" she sobbed.

"But there is One who is watching over you, Joy dear! And we are all praying for you. Why not come up to the house for supper tonight? Jack and the children and I would be most happy to have you."

"I can't tonight, Mrs. Moran. Thank you kindly. Russell said he was coming by the cottage on his way to work. Perhaps some other time I could, Lord willing."

"Tomorrow evening? Would that be better?" Mrs. Moran asked pleasantly.

"That will be fine," Joy said with enthusiasm.

The neighbors had all been so kind and thoughtful and helpful, Joy realized again, as Mrs. Moran took her departure.

In spite of the ache and loneliness in her heart, the day passed quickly. As she entered the kitchen, she wondered if the humble cottage would ever be the same again with the dear familiar voices silenced by the grim, cold reaper, death.

Mother's big, bright gingham apron still hung on a nail just inside the pantry door. Joy couldn't bring herself to take it down and wash it and put it away. Mother had hung it there the night she died. More than once she had buried her face in its folds and wept her grief out into it. She thought she could still smell the delicate fragrance of mother's body dusting powder clinging subtly, hauntingly to it. She longed to hear the beloved, wonderful voice . . . if only one more time.

With Jean Ann's sudden and unexpected death, caused, the doctors had said, by heartbreak from her frail, weak heart, Joy's burden seemed almost overwhelming. Had it not been for her anchor in Christ she could not have endured it. But she had an anchor that held her steadfast and sure. Unmoved, too.

She was sitting in the swing on the porch when Russell drove up. At sight of him her heartbeat quickened and a faint color flushed her cheeks.

"What a perfect picture you are!" Russell exclaimed, coming quickly down the cobblestone walk and seating himself beside her in the swing. "You look lovely, Joy! And I missed you terribly today."

"It's nice to see you again," she confided shyly.

Quickly he reached into his pocket and brought forth a small case. With a flick of his finger the lid flew open, revealing a brilliant, sparkling diamond on a deep, red velvet cushion. "For you, my darling!" he said, lifting the ring carefully from the case and reaching for Joy's hand.

"No!" She exclaimed involuntarily as she drew back from him. "Oh, Russell, no! I don't wear jewelry nor any superfluous adornment.."

"But this is an engagement ring, Joy! You're engaged to be my wife. I want the world to know it." Again he tried to get her finger.

She arose quickly and stood near the porch railing. "Please!" she pleaded. "I don't wear jewelry. Not even an engagement ring. I have convictions against such things."

Russell was speechless. He sat and stared at her. "You... refuse my ring, then?" he asked, color mounting in his cheeks.

"Yes, I do, Russell. I don't need an engagement ring to prove to the world that I am to be married: my department will attest to that fact. My conduct also."

"You will not accept a wedding band either?" he asked quickly.

"No." She spoke without hesitation. "Oh Russell!" there was an expression of pain on her face and in her beautiful brown eyes. "I... thought you were a Christian," she said simply.

"I am a Christian; only I'm not one of those 'narrow' kind," he said, rather unkindly. "And what, may I ask, is so wrong with wearing an engagement and wedding ring? Our new pastor's wife wears one of each!"

Joy sighed deeply. This is what made matters worse . . . when one's own Pastor and wife no longer upheld the standards set down by the Word of God as preached by holy men of old.

"What I have to say is rather lengthy, Russell. Do you want to hear it to the finish? I don't wish to become tedious to you but I cannot stand by and not speak out against those things which are wrong... "

"I want to hear your argument. All of it," he answered, putting the ring back into the case and snapping the lid shut.

"I shall not argue, Russell," Joy said softly. "Right needs no arguing. My reasons are simple. In the first place, the Bible forbids the wearing of gold. I Timothy 2:9 and I Peter 3:3.

"The custom and symbol of the wedding ring came from heathenism. Heathen mythology dictates that the finger that the ring is supposed to be worn on is the third finger on the left hand because this finger alone has a special nerve running directly to

the heart. Thus the third finger on the left hand was made to accommodate the symbol of never ending love. This, as I stated before, is heathen mythology."

"I think it's quite beautiful, myself," Russell said tartly.

"The child of God is not to follow the fashions and customs of the world, Russell. I Corinthians 6:14-17 states this very forcibly and plainly, as does I John 2:15-16. Read these Scriptures when you get home." Joy said.

"The entire concept of the wedding ring, be it gold, brass, or stainless steel is of heathen origin and has been propagated by apostate churches, and opposed by the true church," Joy continued.

"The wedding ring has its origin in ancient Babylon, the ceremonial, man-made religion adopted by apostate Rome. This symbol and its ceremony is foreign to the Bible, the True Church and Protestantism. (i.e.) In the formation of the Anglican church in England, under Queen Elizabeth, when the final break came with Rome in 1559, the Puritan reformers were recalled from French exile and stamped out of the young Protestant church all that smacked of Roman Catholicism, including the ring and its part in the marriage ceremony.

"Methodism came from Anglicanism. The early Methodists forbade their people to use the wedding ring. From Methodism came the Holiness bodies, which all took a stand against this heathen custom. One by one the Protestant bodies have apostasized and condoned the usage of the wedding ring, which is still an abomination to God, who never has nor ever will countenance nor bless that which belongs to the world or darkness. This is why I cannot accept your engagement or wedding ring, Russell."

"So that's how you feel, Joy! You actually believe that nonsense?" Russell threw his head back and laughed mockingly. "How very, very Puritan you are, Joy my girl! So very old fashioned! We're living in a different age. Don't you realize that? Certainly you cannot help but be aware of this fact!" he said sarcastically.

"True. We are living in a different age . . . an extremely wicked and sinful age. But God hasn't changed; nor His Word, either. I'm terribly disappointed..."

"That I'd expect my bride to wear my engagement and wedding rings?" he said, suddenly interrupting her.

"I... thought you were a Christian!" Joy said again, sadly, looking out across the garden where dusk was beginning to lay its shadows.

"I am a Christian!" Russell said, loudly and angrily. "I'm of the newer, 'broader' thinkers, however. Goodnight, Miss Kennedy!" He arose abruptly and strode angrily, haughtily down the steps toward the car. "Forget about the engagement," he called as

he started the motor. "It's off. For good!" With that he accelerated and the sound of his motor was soon lost in the stillness of the gathering dusk.

Joy stood as one glued to the spot on the porch, her mind and senses too shocked and stunned to believe she had heard rightly. Full realization dawned upon her suddenly and as one walking in a daze, she hurried inside.

She found the dear old rocking chair near the south kitchen window and dropped to the floor on her knees, her head and face buried in the cushion upon which her mother so often sat and read the Bible or did the mending and darning.

She wept until she could weep no more then her heart poured out its sorrow and hurt and grief to One who understood perfectly. The Healer of broken hearts poured in the oil of healing and made her heart to rejoice with peace and gladness and comfort.

It was late when she locked the cottage doors and lay her weary body down to rest. God did all things well. She was thankful to Him for allowing her to see the real Russell . . . this preview of what the real man would be like all her married life had she gone ahead and married him. This was all a part of God's goodness to her, she realized gratefully. She wanted nothing other than the will of God for her life. Consoled in the knowledge of that fact, she was soon sleeping soundly.

Some days later, Russell stopped by the cottage for a reconciliation.

"It's off, Russell. For good! Using your own words, of course and no sarcasm meant by it," she said sweetly and softly. "So far as I'm concerned I don't want to see you again., not under the same circumstances and in the manner of courtship, I mean. I shall always be a friend to you but nothing more. I pray God may help you."

"I'm sorry I acted so rashly and hastily that night, Joy. And I . . . well," he stuttered and stammered.

"You merely portrayed your real self, Russell," Joy said kindly. "It's better that I learned the real you now while I'm still single than that I should have been deceived and married you. I could never marry one who is not a genuine Christian."

"But I am a Christian!" he protested. "Not everybody needs to see as you see, Joy."

"God's Word applies as much to you as it does to me," Joy said firmly. "God doesn't make allowances for a select few. You may be a 'professor' of Christianity but your display of temper and carnality are direct giveaways that you are not a born-again Christian nor a sanctified one, either. I'm sorry, Russell, but extremely thankful, too. Good-day." And she hurried into the house.

"I know someone who'll be only too glad to have me!" he retorted hotly, stomping to his car.

Joy stood inside the door, trembling. "Oh, God," she wept, "I didn't mean to hurt him but I couldn't marry him knowing how he is. I'd be yoking myself up with an unbeliever..."

A soft comforting voice spoke to her then, "The steps of a good man (woman) are ordered by the Lord; and He delighteth in his ways!" It was like a great calm after a tempestuous storm and she wept for joy and gladness over her obedience. God's presence and peace meant far more to her than marrying . . . especially to a man totally unspiritual.

Five weeks later she heard that Russell and Mildred McCoy had married suddenly. Mildred was a woman of the world. Quite a fashion slave and extremely worldly. She had always been very popular with the male set but had made much sport of Joy and her old fashioned beliefs and standards. Joy hoped they would be happy in their marriage and not wind up with their names in the column of those divorced.

Under her loving and tender care, the flowers budded and blossomed and bloomed around the cottage door and down the winding walkways. She purposed that she would keep everything looking just as it had looked when mother and Jean Ann had lived.

Neighbors paused to visit and to console her heart; others came seeking spiritual help from her as they had from her mother while she was living. Joy began to see a part of God's plan for her life. She rested in His will. Her life was rich and full of spiritual blessings and she was happy indeed.

A full year had passed since Russell and Mildred were married now and as she was working in the garden one summer evening Mrs. Moran hurried to her gate.

"Oh, Joy, can you do something to help Mildred? I hear the girl's terribly ill. Possibly dying even. She's been too snobbish and hateful to have many friends but if you'd be so kind as to pray with her and see what you can do ...."

Joy stood up from the bent-over position she had assumed with her work and said quickly, eagerly, "I shall be most happy to comply, Mrs. Moran. I'm sorry I didn't know about it earlier. I shall go immediately."

Hurrying down the street to catch a bus for the Russel Pointer home, Joy thought how terribly lonesome Mildred must be with Russell somewhere in Viet Nam. True, she had a housekeeper, but knowing Mildred, Joy knew she wouldn't tolerate too

much friendliness from the lowly Mrs. Griggs. Mildred considered herself above her common help.

Mrs. Griggs' face lighted up at sight of Joy. "My, but I'm glad to see you!" she exclaimed in glad surprise.

Joy patted the aging woman's hands affectionately. "Mrs. Moran told me Mildred's a very sick woman. I've come to pray with her and see what I can do to alleviate her pain and suffering."

The housekeeper shook her head sadly. "She's a stubborn one, Joy! And so irritable these days. More likely than not, she'll rant and rave when she sees you. She's not a happy woman, I'm sorry to say. But come," and Mrs. Griggs led the way to the bedroom.

"Mrs. Pointer," Mrs. Griggs called softly, "Joy Kennedy's here to see you. Mrs. Pointer!"

With eyes that were sunken deep in her head, Mildred's eyelashes fluttered then opened wide. Joy looked at the young woman in utter disbelief. Mildred, looking like this! She was nothing more than a mere skeletal shadow of her former beautiful self.

Joy sat on the edge of the bed and took one of the thin pale hands in her own.

For a brief moment it looked like Mildred was ready to scream in protest.

Joy did a strange thing. For a reason unknown to herself she raised the bony hand and kissed it motherly, tenderly. "I'm here with you, Mildred," she crooned softly. "I love you. I've come to pray with you."

With the words, Mildred's expression changed immediately. She now wore a deeply pained look. A look of remorse.

"I love you, Mildred," Joy repeated.

"Love me? When I have hated you, mocked you and made fun of you? Impossible. It's impossible for you to love me!"

"But I do!" Joy insisted. "And I've come to have prayer with you. May I?"

Mildred tried to raise her body up in bed but was too weak.

"Oh, Joy, I'm going to die! I know I am!" she wailed, almost screamed. "And I'm not ready to die! You're a real Christian, will you please pray for me? I don't want to die! I don't! I'm not ready, Joy. Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you?"

"Yes. Yes, Mildred. That's why I'm here: to try to help you get ready to die," Joy said gently, persuasively.

"Tell... Russell... to forgive me, Joy," she begged. "I've hated him. But I can't die with hatred in my heart. We haven't been happy," she confessed. "And when I received this last letter it filled me with hatred for him. But I want to die in peace. Where can I find it? Where?" she was almost frantic with fright.

" 'Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,' " Joy quoted. " 'Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.' "

"Sins . . . scarlet That's how mine are!" Mildred exclaimed weakly. "Oh, God, make them white as snow. Forgive me, please. I'm sorry I sinned so wickedly..." All the sins of her past were poured out and emptied from her penitent heart as she confessed willingly, eagerly.

"White as snow!" she exclaimed suddenly, her face radiant. "He has forgiven me. I'm saved!" she cried in a voice that was rapidly failing.

"Write a letter for me, Joy, Quick! For I'm dying. Tell Russell to forgive me. I was unfaithful to him when I learned that he no longer loved me and had found him another sweetheart and lover. I made life miserable for him. Tell him I'm sorry and truly repentant. Then tell him to get converted and sanctified and meet me in heaven. And Joy," she said, in little more than a faint whisper, "thank you . . . for... coming. You obeyed the Bible command, 'Do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you.' Thank you, Joy. I want to go Home now. I'm so-o-o weary. I hate it that I have nothing other to give Him than my heart and this body full of disease.., because of... my sins..., but since He... forgave me ... I know He'll . . . understand. Good-bye, Joy."

All the way home Mrs. Griggs' words sounded in her ears, "You got here just in time!" Yes, a little longer and it would have been too late! So engrossed was she in the events that had taken place that she failed to notice anyone had sat beside her on the crowded evening bus.

"Looks as if you have deep thoughts!" A voice broke in upon her musings.

"I beg your pardon! I hadn't meant to be rude." She turned and saw Miles Miller seated beside her. Her eyes lighted up with pleasant surprise. "Why Miles, I didn't know you were due home yet. Have you finished your college training?"

"All finished," he said cheerfully. "Graduated last week. I thought I'd surprise mother. I'm home a day earlier than I planned. Got a ride with a man going to Chicago and I took the train from there. My luggage is down at the station. I'll be going after it

this evening. Could I pick you up and take you along? May I see you this evening, Joy? It's terribly important to me. I didn't have the courage to ask you before I went away to college . . . thought it wasn't fair to you to keep you waiting four years. But I'd feel honored to have your presence and your company..."

"It would be delightful to go with you, Miles. I should enjoy it immensely," Joy answered truthfully.

He gave her a warm and tender smile. "Mother kept me informed about you all these years. She told me how noble and godly you were and how exemplary your life has been. I thought I couldn't stand it when I heard about your engagement to Russell. I really prayed for you..." Miles said.

"And God, who is ever faithful if we but listen and heed, was faithful to me, Miles. I'm inexpressively thankful that He showed me the real man in plenty of time to do something about it. Speaking of Russell, Mildred just passed away. I'm just now coming from there.

"Mildred? Gone? And she was so young, too," Miles said sadly. "She was quite a sinful girl, Joy."

"But the mercy of God is unfathomable!" Joy exclaimed, burying Mildred's confession of her sinful life deep in her heart to never be mentioned. Like herself, Mildred was a redeemed soul through the precious blood of Christ.

"I must get off at the next stop," Miles said, "but I'll see you around six-thirty this evening, Lord willing, and I'll make it an evening you shall cherish in the memory of your heart forever. I promise! Four and a-half years I've waited for this privilege; and now that God has kept you for me and my Theology training is completed I mean to do something about it. I hope and pray the day will come when you shall feel toward me as I feel towards you, Joy."

She watched him as he walked to the front of the bus, fine looking, clean-cut and noble. Any woman would be proud to walk by his side, she thought silently.

He turned and smiled, then waved as he stepped from the bus.

She returned his smile. Joybells began ringing in her heart. This time there was a feeling of rightness about it, like all heaven was smiling down upon her, giving her a prelude of what lovely things God had reserved for her because she had been faithful to the Word and obedient to Him Who is the Author of that Word.

"Miles Miller!" she said his name softly as she let herself into the cottage. "And I always thought you didn't notice me in the sense a woman likes to be noticed!"

Outside the kitchen window a robin burst out lustily in song. Happy, she joined in the melody.

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**THE END**