

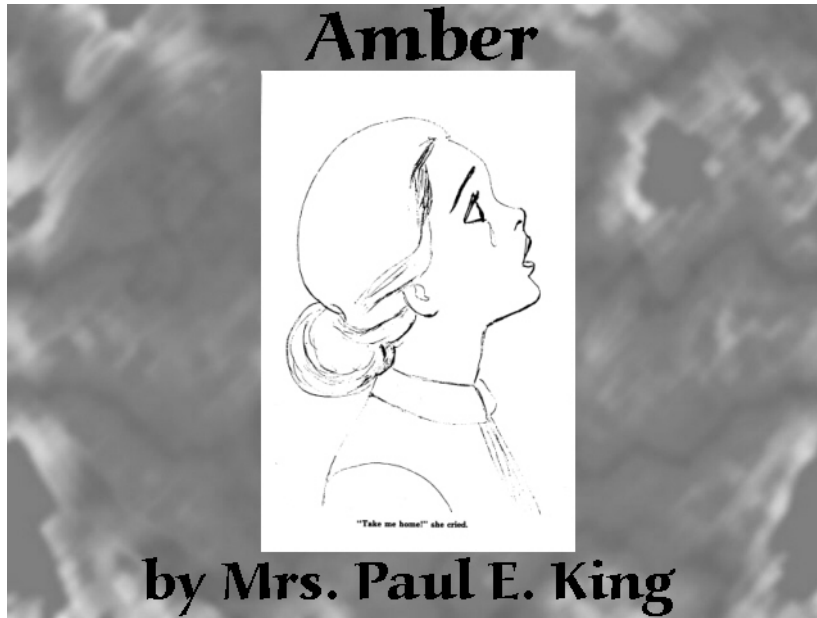
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AMBER
By Mrs. Paul E. King

I pulled into the church parking lot in a hurry, parked the car, helped Julie out on her side of the car then marched us both together into the youth service just as Vernon Stodded finished leading the group in a rousing chorus which we had just learned a month earlier. Everybody was standing up, and since the back rows of seats were already filled, we had to go down near the front -- a thing Mom and Dad had drilled into Julie and me anyhow

since they felt the back seats should be left open for newcomers, those who may be too shy and too timid to move to the front in a new or strange-to-them church. Then, too, our parents said the front of the church was the best possible place to get the most out of the entire service. One noticed too many things from the back and had too many distractions to take his mind off spiritual things. That's what we were told, and I know Mom and Dad spoke the truth; they always did, and always have. We trusted them and their words and judgment implicitly.

I remembered my dad's "Help your sister, Robert. Always be courteous to her and treat her like the lady she is." So I helped her out of her lightweight coat then shed my own. It was when I draped the coats over the back of the pew that I noticed her. She was new; at least I had never seen her before. I was all but knocked off my feet, figuratively speaking. She was beautiful! She had enormous blue eyes . . . they reminded me of the blue morning glories that bloomed on two of Mom's trellises in the yard . . . and a pair of eyelashes so long and thick that you'd think they'd have made her eyelids tired. Or droop, even. Her hair was a crowning halo of glorious gold-blonde, soft looking and shiny-clean. She looked more like an angel (to me) than an earthly, mortal being.

I felt a slight tug at my sport jacket and dropped onto the seat with a thud. It was Julie. "Everybody's sitting down but you, Robert," she whispered in embarrassment.

"Huh? Oh! Hey, I'm sorry," I whispered back, dropping from cloud nine into the land of reality. "Sorry," I whispered softly again.

"What's wrong?" Julie wanted to know. "You have a lapse of memory, or something?"

"Lapse of memory! That's mild! I was catapulted into space on a cloud. Nine, to be exact."

Julie looked at me like she thought I had lost my sense of reasoning, or some such thing. Then she sighed and leaned back against the pew, listening with her heart (as well as her ears) to what was being said from the pulpit by our youth leader, Gerald Brown. She had tuned me out, entirely. I could tell it by the look on her face. She was tuned in 100% to the service.

Me? I had floated up to cloud nine again. Who was this angelic-looking being. Where did she come from? Was she a visitor? Permanent resident? I sneaked a look at her across the aisle; she wasn't laughing, like some of the others had done because I had remained standing when everybody else was sitting; she was half-smiling. She had noticed me! Me!

I'm ashamed to say it, but I didn't get anything much out of that entire service except for the fact that there was an angel among us sitting in our youth service across the aisle from Julie and me. And she had smiled at me!

It shook me; that I couldn't get my mind off her and concentrate on the service. But, try as I may, I couldn't. I bowed my head and prayed for help.

Mentally I checked my appearance: white shirt and brown slacks, cleaned and pressed and conservative looking -- thanks to Mom; brown and tan tie in softly muted tones; shiny-clean, freshly polished and shined dress shoes and brown-tan plaid sports jacket. My hair was combed back and kept in neat order with a couple of dabs of hair cream. It had been cut only three days ago so I had no fear that I looked anything other than a man. Dad never allowed me to go over ten or twelve days without getting my hair taken care of. No long haired men in his home! "Let a man be a man," he often said, "and a woman be a woman!" And, personally, I liked the saying, as well as what Dad stood for. It was in the Bible -- the part where it says it's a shame for a man to have long hair, I mean. So, all in all, I decided I was in pretty good shape to introduce myself to this angelic looking human who had actually smiled at me.

Right after service, I made my way across the aisle, but black-wavy-haired Eldon Durben, smiling handsomely, had her elbow and was steering her toward the door.

Julie tugged at my coat in her light-as-a-cloud way and said softly, "Your coat, Robert. Don't forget your all weather coat. And hadn't we better be getting into the church auditorium? It starts in five minutes. You'll have another chance to learn her name, I'm sure. And if you don't, well, maybe God doesn't want you to meet her."

I swallowed. Julie was such an expert mind-reader. I hadn't said one thing to her about her. I grabbed my coat and started following Julie, who

was already halfway out of the youth room, her lightweight coat draped softly over one arm.

I sat one pew behind Mom and Dad and Julie, who were in the third pew from the front, and as soon as the church service was dismissed I rushed over to Eldon. "Hi, Eldon, how about you and your friend joining Julie and me for a snack at our house?" I asked.

"Thanks, Bob, but I'm not sure Amber would care to do that tonight," and Eldon started down the aisle, steering the angelic-looking being away from me. Away from everybody.

I followed at a discreet distance. "Aren't you going to introduce us?" I inquired.

"Huh?" Eldon kept walking.

I stepped closer to her. "Pardon me, please," I began. "I'm Robert Addison."

"I'm Amber Stream." Her voice was as silky-soft as her hair and her skin looked as smooth.

"Pardon me," another soft voice broke in near my shoulder. "I'm Julie Addison. We are so happy to have you in our services. You're new here, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. And I am delighted to meet both of you." Amber studied Julie; then she looked at me and studied me for what seemed like an hour. A beautiful smile . . . almost like sunshine on a stormy day . . . broke out on her face. "You play in the school orchestra, don't you?" she asked, looking from Julie to me then back to Julie again.

Julie smiled. "I'm trying to become a good flutist," she answered meekly and shyly. "Do you play an instrument?"

"Saxophone. I thought you looked familiar," she said, looking from me to Julie this time. "Both of you, I mean. I signed up last Friday. You're great on that trumpet," she said, looking straight at me with those enormous blue eyes that transported me instantly to cloud nine again.

"Th . . . thanks," I stuttered, feeling suddenly very shy and inadequate for such a compliment.

"First chair, I noticed," she added with a smile as beautiful but as shy as any I had ever seen before.

"He's good," Julie said, noticing my embarrassment and loss of speech and coming to my rescue. "But then, he should be; he practices at least an hour every day."

I felt more embarrassed than ever now. "Aw, Julie, if I didn't have the Lord helping me I'd never get off the ground. It's because of Him that I can even play into the lip piece," I said. "You remember the struggle I had with that mouthpiece. Trombone, yes; trumpet, struggle. Struggle. Pray. Pray. Pray. I loved the trumpet. That was the instrument for me, I decided four years ago. And thanks be to God, my praying and my persevering paid off. Now I don't have any problem at all with that mouthpiece: how one must position his lips to play it, I mean."

Eldon was getting nervous. "I play a stereo and a tape," he said quickly. "Excuse us. We must be going." Eldon is handsome in a muscular, ruthless sort of way. And I had to admit that as they walked away, him, tall, and darkly-handsome in his dark suit, and Amber, petite, dainty and blonde beside him, they made an outstanding couple. Striking, really.

My head was still floating around on that ethereal cloud, even though I didn't see how I'd stand a chance with Amber so long as Eldon was in the running race, when I suddenly looked at Julie and said, "I wonder how she saw us but we didn't see her."

Julie furrowed her brows together in thought for a moment. "Last week," she said thoughtfully. "Friday. Oh, yes, now I remember: I was in the bandroom for just the first few minutes of orchestra period; then we had that special flute practice in another room... Marie, Lois and I. Our special assignment. Remember?"

I wasn't sure that I did remember so just stood there looking puzzled.

"You were too busy working on your solo part for that special upcoming program for our parents, friends, and who-have-you, to notice anything or anybody. You were totally and completely oblivious of your mundane surroundings," she teased with a smile.

Then I recalled it all. Julie was right. Smiling, I said, "You really have the brains, Sis. I'm glad we're brother and sister."

"I'm sure Mom and Dad are glad of this, too," Julie said lightly. "-- And if this Amber is as wise as I think she is, she'll see the spiritual depth and the quality of my brother and will someday be walking down this church aisle and out the door with you instead of with Eldon. You really like her don't you, Bob?"

I felt color creep up my neck. "That's the strange thing, Julie," I said. "I noticed her. Yes, I like her."

Julie smiled. "I knew you did. In a way, it's funny. Funny-nice, I mean. You never seemed too interested in girls. I told Mother I thought your trumpet would rob you of ever getting married, that most of your spare time was spent practicing on the trumpet. Morn said you had plenty of time for girls and, that, when the right one came along, you'd notice. And now, you actually have noticed. Amber's a pretty name, isn't it? I wonder what her middle name is."

Julie's such a sweet little innocent thing, and so open and transparent, too. Communication with her has always been easy. "Yes, Amber is a pretty name," I admitted, as we fell in step with our parents and headed for the parking lot, my only desire that God's will should be done in my life regarding this young woman who had tripped something off inside my heart.

I made it a matter of prayer. An important matter of prayer. I would be graduating in the spring, the Lord willing, and then in August I would be nineteen. I hadn't been interested in dating before; but suddenly, I wanted to ask Amber to go with Julie and me to an upcoming zone rally that our church was participating in. But there was Eldon; he was dating Amber. Or, at least he had been sitting with her in church and they had walked out together. I wanted to be ethical, to treat Eldon as I would have wanted to be treated under the same circumstances and condition. So I left the matter entirely in God's hands. Entirely.

A few days later I saw Eldon. He looked glum and unhappy. "Hey, Christians are happy people," I remarked. "Why so glum and gloomy looking? How's Amber?"

Eldon gave me one of those don't-ask-me looks.

"Sorry," I said apologetically. "I didn't mean to pry."

"She's a strange one," he said quite suddenly.

"Really? How's that?"

"I finally persuaded her to go to The Fence with me for one of their super tenderloin sandwiches. Well, on the way there, I cut loose on the car, had it up to 85. You know those rolling hills on the way out there," Eldon said. "It's climb, then dip; climb then dip. On one of the hills, Amber turned a deathly white, then she screamed a blood-curdling scream. I almost wrecked the car. She scared me so badly that my hair felt like it stood on end. And I almost lost my grip on the steering wheel, too."

"But you might have been killed!" I exclaimed. "And you could have killed Amber! What did she do after she screamed; faint?"

"No. Nothing like that. 'Take me home,' she begged, in a voice so low that I could barely understand her. I told her we were on our way to get a super sandwich and that I'd not heavy-foot it again. But she insisted that I take her home. So I did. And when she was out of the car, she said, 'Thanks, Eldon. Don't come after me anymore; I won't be going with you. I believe if one has salvation and is sanctified wholly it takes the daring and the show-off out of him. I lost one of my best girlfriends through a show-off boy and his girlfriend.' With that, she walked into their house."

We went our separate ways then, Eldon and I, but believe me, it left me feeling weak. Eldon could have killed both Amber and himself. I had heard he was a show-off type when he was with a girl and I had not wanted to believe it. Now I heard it from his own lips.

I walked on, praying silently for Eldon and at the same time thanking God that He had protected them both from being killed. Then it dawned on me; the field was open!

My heart felt suddenly very happy. I would ask Amber to go with Julie and me to that zone rally, Lord willing. She may not go after her harrowing experience with Eldon, but, somehow, I felt that she would. And, in the meantime, I would make it a matter of prayer. Yes, of serious prayer.

I began whistling as I hurried into the supermarket.