NEVER ALONE

BY MRS. PAUL E. KING

NEVER ALONE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

The clock on the mantel chimed four melodic chimes and Jill Skews roused herself from the half-dozing, nearly-numb-from-shock state she was in and got to her feet. She felt mechanical like, much as a wound-up toy when it moved stiffly across the floor. She must eat, she told herself, but the desire for food was gone. It left her when Joe did. Would she ever be able to eat again? she wondered. Or sleep?
Tears, always so near to the surface since Joe's short illness and his death, now ran freshly and warmly down her pale cheeks. She felt like she was detached from everything and everybody. Oh there were many friends and the three children, to be sure, but none of them could ever take Joe's place in her heart and in her life.

They had been so happy together, Joe and she. After the last of their three offspring had married and was settled in her own home, Joe had taken her on sort of second honeymoon trip to the mountains, where they had relaxed and hiked and reveled in the beauty and splendor of God's creations. He had been so kind and good to her. And thoughtful, too. And now he was gone. Never again would she hear his voice or feel the gentle pressure of his hand upon hers. Not in this life, she knew. But there was a better day coming; a day when they would once again be reunited,

She put water into the tea kettle for boiling. A cup of bouillon should give her a bit of strength, she thought, as the emptiness of the house overwhelmed her. His chair especially. Again she wept. Would life ever again function normally for her? she wondered.

The water bubbled inside the teapot. She filled the cup and sat down at the table. Bowing her head, she thanked God for the broth; for her blessings; for the good life she had had with Joe. Forty years of married bliss she had shared with him. Always, when she had needed strength and courage, he had been there to give it to her.

She wiped the tears from her cheeks. The journey through life had its avenues of sorrow, its valleys of heartache and its rugged hills to climb, she knew. Of these, none was greater than the loss of the beloved traveling companion of the years. With this happening, life's final adventures would be made in unchosen solitude.

With the death of her beloved, the journey seemed to have lost part of its excitement and its meaning. What was once thrilling was now an ordeal. The grand views were no longer so spectacular, the milestones less eventful. Already, without Joe's helping hand, the climb seemed steeper.

Their shared journey of life was a beautiful thing of sheer pleasure. The mountains of accomplishment and the valleys of discouragement were taken
in stride by two sweethearts loving, laughing, caring, sharing, toiling, sorrowing, rejoicing.

She leaned her head in her arms on the table and wept again. It was part of the healing, someone had told her; this weeping. Would the pain and the hurting ever go away? Would it?

The answer came back in unmistakable clarity: No. His life with her was over. The loneliness had begun. Time may heal, but the emptiness would remain for a long, long time; that feeling that the greater part of her was gone would also be present. For how long? She had no idea. Only Christ could help her, she knew. Wasn't He the Healer of broken hearts as well as of broken, sin blighted lives! Ah, yes. Yes, He was.

She sipped the hot, nourishing bouillon slowly, realizing that traveling solo had never been for her. She enjoyed companionship too much for a solo journey. She would have to change her lifestyle. Rather, Joe's untimely death had done it for her. Could this suddenly-thrust-upon-her, solitary journey be made compelling and enjoyable? she wondered.

True, this lonely path had been trodden by countless others before her. They had left signposts and markers to point the way and ease the tedium and the monotony of the journey, she realized. But she hadn't been prepared for empty rooms and empty arms. Oh, some who had lost their companion-mate had told her about this but never, never had she really nor actually been able to fully understand their feelings until Joe was taken. Now she knew. From her heart!

She brushed tears off her cheeks. Memories! Yes, she had years and years of these. Pleasant memories, they were. And now, in her widowhood, she would harvest the good memories and the habits of loving service each had had to the other. Yes, she would do this. Hadn't the Bible admonished her to think upon the things that were lovely and pure and true!

Jill sighed, realizing that unless she trusted God to get her through one day at a time and stopped thinking about the tomorrows, her physical being wouldn't hold up under the strain and stress of it all. "Take no thought for the morrow," kept sounding itself in her ears.
Some things in life could never be prepared for, she knew. But still, she must face the fact of her aloneness with courage . . . courage to be alone at church, alone at night, alone in decision making, alone during special moments, alone when "their" anniversary date came up on the calendar; when his birth date showed on the same calendar but in a different month.

"The first time through things alone will be the hardest," a widow-friend had told her right after Joe's decease, adding," and there will be so many first times."

How right her sympathetic friend had been! "You have to keep going," this wise friend had continued, "to adjust to the point where you enjoy life. There is hope, Jill. Time has a healing, softening influence. In meeting the events of each day, you will find satisfaction in ways not yet known. It is surprising how unpredictably beautiful and lovely the journey of life can be.

"It starts by duty, by a willingness to take on commitments and become involved again.

"A purposeless life is a life of fatigue, Jill. We become tired while doing nothing. A life without purpose is totally void of meaning. And God never planned this for His children. Staying busy, and working, is truly therapeutic for the total person. And, once an avenue-outlet is found for our God-given energies, innate powers come to life and then expand to meet the task at hand. I have proven it true."

Jill thought for a long while upon what her friend had said. The Bible, too, had something to say about the widow. Yes, it did. In essence, it stated that the widow, now that she was alone, had more time to think upon God and deepen her spirituality: The myriad duties of caring for the family were now over and she would be better able to devote more time in communion and fellowship with God. It is by struggle that strength came, she knew. And out of the ashes of tragedy a more independent spirit needed for the years alone could be given and afforded her.

A sudden enlightening sent a measure of healing and joy to her heart: So long as she was preoccupied with her love for Joe, her heart was full. Now, with an empty and open heart, she was freer to meet the stranger; to listen to another's heartbreak and struggles; to offer a helping hand, an open
heart and a listening ear . . . to give love where love and understanding and compassion were needed.

Her time would now be more flexible, her commitments fewer and less fixed, her heart more open and available. The grandchildren needed her love and understanding . . ., weren't their young hearts equally as broken and sad as hers, but in a different way! The sick needed care and sympathy. The shut-ins would delight in a visit.

That she was yet alive was itself proof positive that God had something for her to do; a divine purpose still not fulfilled and finished. She could still "bear fruit" for God.

She would have time now for memories and reflection. Time to think deeply; to understand (in part at least) what had transpired; time to put things in proper perspective.

Jill added hot water to the cup. The end of the journey together was not an end at all but an interlude, she knew. The faith and the courage to go on was being sustained by the knowledge that the deep love of the years would blossom again in the City of God where all the pure, the righteous and the holy would dwell forever and ever, world without end.

A Holy Presence entered the humble kitchen. A gently-soft voice whispered comfortingly, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world."

Tears sprang to Jill's eyes. She wasn't alone. No, she wasn't. Never had been. He was with her all the time. Even in the dark cloud of Joe's death. The last miles of her earthly pilgrimage would be her most courageous. Even if she must traverse them without Joe.

Always, she would have the constancy of her loving Savior who would never leave her alone. In the decision making, He would guide her; in the darkness, stay beside her; from harm and evil He would hide her; through this valley walk beside her. Yes, Joe may be gone from her but she was not alone; not even for a single moment: Christ was her ever-present and constantly-abiding Friend. He had helped Joe and her through the myriad tests and trials of their years together and He would see her through the rest
of her life's journey till the Lights of Heaven shone for her. And He would give her comfort and solace for all of her lonely tomorrows, too.

She took a cracker out of the cracker canister and ate it. It tasted good. Maybe she would be able to eat after all. Yes, maybe she would. She would try to do so, at least. Her body was the temple of God; she would do her best to keep it in good physical condition for His glory. And Joe would want her to eat.

With the thought, Jill decided to scramble an egg. With God's help, she would eat it. And she was determined that this time every bite of it would be cleaned off her plate. The recovery had to have a starting place, she decided with sheer will power and unwavering determination, and the recovery-healing process might just as well begin now as at any time. She would do her part to help the process; the rest was up to God. And time.

Feeling a measure of relief, she put the small skillet on the stove burner.