

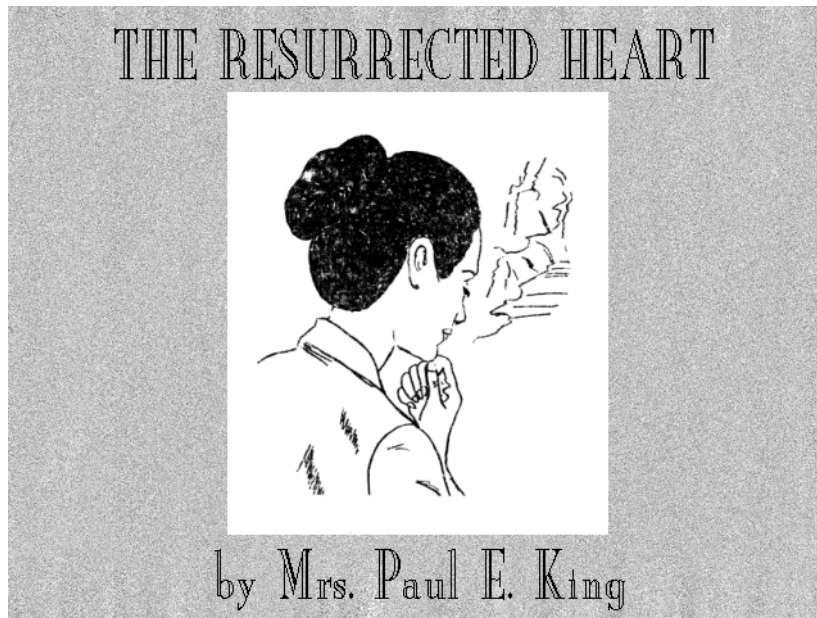
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THE RESURRECTED HEART
By Mrs. Paul E. King (Chapter 1)

I should have known, when I saw John ready himself for church that Sunday morning, that I could not hold out against God forever. Yes, I should have known. Truth of the matter is, I did know. But the "deceitful" heart of Jeremiah's description is just that . . . deceitful. And desperately wicked, too.

"Morning, Becky." John's soft, well-modulated voice greeted me warmly and tenderly as he came back into the bedroom and grabbed a tie. "Coming with me today?" His voice held a hint of sadness, I thought.

"I wish you'd come, Becky. This is Easter Sunday, my dear. I miss you."

Grabbing a house-coat off a hanger and wrapping myself in its warmth, I said, "Don't ask me anymore, John. You know my feelings perfectly well. When you go back to preaching in a decent church I'll accompany you again. Until then, forget about asking me."

John looked at me with tears in his eyes, then he left the room. Before leaving, he poked his head in the room and said a soft good-bye, blowing a kiss my way. I heard the kitchen door close behind his fading footsteps; heard the car's motor start then die away; heard, too, the ringing of the church bells in the city.

Tears stung my eyes then marched in salty protest down my cheeks. I got to my feet and stood, looking through the bedroom window to the sun-drenched, dew-sparkled world outside, feeling miserable, wretched and alone. My heart was filled to overflowing with self-pity. How could John do this to me? To us? It was humiliating, to say the very least. Degrading, really. At least in my book of proper and improper things to do or not to do, it was.

Turning from the window, I walked into the living room where all was neatness and orderliness. I sat down in one of the beautiful overstuffed chairs, missing the Sunday paper dreadfully. Involuntarily, I got up and started across the thickly carpeted room to turn on the television when remembrance washed over me with nauseating force: We no longer owned a television set; John had gotten rid of it the day of his conversion.

Defiantly, I picked up the nearest thing at hand and threw it across the room. John had become a fanatic. And this thing called "Holiness of Heart" was positively ridiculous. I was furious; anger boiled like a seething caldron in my heart.

Out, of sheer boredom, and not knowing what else to do. I hurried back to the bedroom and made the bed. There were none of John's clothes to pick up; all were either hanging neatly inside the clothes closet or were in the clothes hamper, ready to go into the washing machine. Whatever had

happened to him made him a better husband along this line, I had to admit. John had been a really careless man about his clothes prior to his radical heart change. Frankly, I was super-happy with this change, though I never let him know.

A chorus of merry laughter drew me to the window. Looking out, I saw a group of smiling, laughing children led by a pleasant-faced, middle-aged woman making their way down the sidewalk toward one of the churches.

My heart smote me. Never had I missed going to church on Sunday. Never. Not until John's humiliating deed. For so long as I could remember, I had gone to church. My parents had taken me regularly when I was small; it had become a weekly habit with me and for me. And so long as John had pastored the High Street Church, I was totally and completely happy to attend church with him. Truth was, I was proud to be known as Mrs. John Stillman, pastor's wife.

I felt hot with remembering. Then I broke out in a cold sweat. We had had a good church. A big church. By that I mean that we had a large congregation. They paid us well and took good care of us, furnishing us with a beautiful parsonage in which to live. They loved John and I; we loved them. For nine years and ten months we had been their shepherd and shepherdess. Then John came home one evening stating that he had read something in the Bible which had arrested his soul "I must look into this, Becky," he had added. "I've never been born again and, suddenly, I feel like I'm an hireling. I've been leading my people astray." He had looked smitten. I tried to console him, telling him that he had the finest ministerial training possible.

"Book learning, yes," he admitted sadly. "But a born again experience, no, Becky. And Jesus told Nicodemus in St. John's Gospel that except a man was born again, of God, he could not enter into Heaven. We're lost, my dear, you and I. We've never been born again. Oh, Becky, I'm sorry I failed you. Failed our people, too. Unless I repent, and confess my failure for not preaching the whole truth to my people, I'll face God with blood on my hands."

I had gasped in shocked disbelief over what I was hearing. Then I exclaimed, "Don't be ridiculous, John!"

You're a good preacher. You're not offensive to your congregation by what you preach. Some men seem to take great delight in making their people angry and . . . and . . . uncomfortable by what they say. This born again something, what will your board members say if you dare preach it from the pulpit? How will they react? After all, John, we're getting a good salary here, and we do have a comfortable set-up. You'd better take these things into consideration. Don't become a fanatic."

John looked like I had slapped him across the face with my words. "Do you suppose that I will allow something so small and earthly as a good salary and excellent living conditions to block my entrance into Heaven?" he asked, incredulous with disbelief over my words.

"Well, you don't need to become a fanatic," I countered with anger.

"If being born again makes me a fanatic in your eyes then I'll have to be called that: I mean to take God's way no matter what it may cost me, nor whom I may have to offend. Before God's recent revelation to my heart, I was ignorant of these deeper, spiritual matters. Always, I relied solely upon books for my sermon material; modern books. I have been a blind, lost shepherd, having need of someone spiritual and Spirit-filled to lead me."

"John Stillman!" I exclaimed, indignant over his humiliating confession.

"But it's true, Rebekah," he insisted. "And I have been leading my flock down the broad road toward hell. Oh, can God ever forgive me! I'm sorry I never read the Bible like I've been reading it lately . . . with an open heart and mind. Oh the light that is pouring into my soul! And not only the light, but the revelation, too! Of my heart and its lost condition and its utter depravity and concealed wickedness!"

I had walked out of the room, not wanting to hear more. My husband, I was sure, was either losing his mind or going off the proverbial "deep end" of religion.

We lived in two separate worlds after that conversation, though we lived beneath the same roof. Shortly thereafter, as John continued to preach about his new birth experience and his subsequent entire sanctification, he was asked, by both his superior officers and the church board, to leave.

He resigned the church. And I had to admit to myself that his spirit and humility was that of a true saint if I ever saw one. Needless to say, I was humiliated to ashes. The fashionable women members of our church patted me, petted me and offered all kind of condolences, saying, "We feel so sorry for you, Mrs. Stillman. You deserve better than this. Has he lost his mind, do you suppose?"

I merely stood by in mute silence; I had no good answer to give them: I, too, had wondered if, perhaps, John was losing his mind. Only, each time I looked at him and listened to him talk, (and heard him pray), I realized he was every bit as rational as my very best friends were.

He was changed, this I had to admit. Too, I had to admit to my heart that his change was very definitely for the better. By that I mean he became a much better husband in myriad ways: He was now unusually kind and thoughtful toward me and my needs. He became sensitive to my likes and dislikes, put forth a real effort to correct those areas or avenues in which he had previously been negligent, careless and thoughtless. Yes, he was changed. Radically so. I liked the change. But my heart was bitter because of what we lost when he moved us out of the comfortable parsonage of the High Street Church into a much less commodious and spacious house in a far less desirable neighborhood.

Since God had called him to preach and, too, since the gifts and callings of God were without repentance, as he claimed the Bible said, John felt led of the Holy Spirit to rent a small store building in a poorer section of the city and begin a work there. My humiliation became even more acute and intense, and for many weeks I refrained from going into any of the stores in which I was, formerly, an avid and excited shopper. My old friends and former acquaintances and associates would poke no finger of shame at me; I wouldn't give them a chance! So I remained home, sulking and brooding over my losses and my humiliating circumstances while my husband continued going to church and working for the Lord.

I felt restless and uneasy, sitting and recalling the past, as I was so often prone to do since becoming so humiliatingly "demoted" from being Mrs. John Stillman, pastor's wife of the High Street Church. The Mrs. part still belonged to me, to be sure, but I was now only known as such. Or was I even known as John's wife where he was now pastoring? Or trying to pastor, I should say. To be truthful and candidly frank, I had no idea as to the people

who attended my husband's church nor even how many attended. I didn't care. It didn't matter to me. Not at all.

My husband was a brainy man with a brilliant mind. When we met in college, I was instantly impressed with his wit, his humor, and his intelligence. He was destined for great things, I was sure: For prestigious positions. For power. In the reading of the class will upon graduation, John was one of those declared to "get to the top. One most likely to succeed."

He had toyed with the idea of becoming an electrical engineer for a while during that first year in college, until someone told him of the need for ministers in their church's denomination. That struck his fancy, and he immediately made preparations to become a minister.

He graduated from college with honors then went on to pursue his studies and his ministerial training in the denomination's Seminary where, once again, he graduated with honors and received his Doctor of Divinity degree.

We were married a year and a half before his graduation from the Seminary. To say that we were happy would be stating it too mildly; we were blissfully happy and so very much in love with each other that the world, to us, was filled with happiness and nothing but sunshine and roses.

Upon his appointment to the High Street Church, we were ecstatic with happiness. John had now made it to the place where I always knew he would someday be; to the top! The fashionable and prestigious High Street Church was known throughout the denomination as one of its better, if not the best, of its churches. We were welcomed warmly into the church and we fit beautifully with its fashionable and prestigious members. Until John did what he did, that is.

Thinking. Thinking! That seemed to be my favorite pastime anymore, I realized, shuddering slightly and getting to my feet.

(Chapter 2)

Church bells chimed from a nearby church, "Christ, the Lord, is risen today. Alleluia, Alleluia." They pealed the message loud and clear for anyone

within earshot to hear, and I, who had never missed going to church until John's sudden change.., his radical change-about.., felt smitten in my heart. John's words about being born again seemed to beat a steady staccato somewhere in my brain and hammer my 'heart with its message. Another thing that bothered me was the fact that John said God had called him to preach, now that he was saved and sanctified wholly.

"That's foolishness," I had countered, more caustically than I had meant to sound. "It's a vocation, just like any other field one chooses to enter," I added emphatically.

"Until I met Jesus and was born again, that's all it was, Becky dear," John had stated. "It was merely a vocation, but not anymore. God called me to preach the gospel to all people. I must go to the poor; to the down-and-out class of forgotten men and women; to those whom society no longer cares about, nor wants."

"John, you're crazy!" I felt like screaming my opposition to him. But the serenity on his face and the tears streaming down his cheeks curbed my screams. My husband looked like some Heavenly being. He was different, Divinely different.

In spite of my learning, and the various and varied arguments I set forth to dissuade him with, I knew my husband had something that was both genuine and real. He had found something that no amount of book learning nor head knowledge could have given him; and now, sitting alone, while church bells chimed out their message that Christ was risen from the dead, my heart felt suddenly hungry and lonely for something. No, rather, for Someone.

Tears, so seldom seen on my face or in my eyes, surfaced and ran wildly down my cheeks. Things which John had said to me about the church, and which had fallen, seemingly, on deaf ears, now took on significance and meaning. Though I hadn't wanted to hear, my mind, like a computer, had registered or stored the information which was "fed" to me by my husband and was now playing it back in accurate form and fact:

"God has given us two new families, Becky. They've been saved out of horrible sin. My, how they are growing in grace and in the love of God! I wish you could see them. . . ."

"A little girl was saved this morning, Becky. Her sweet face shone like the face of an angel. Tonight she brought her parents and they came to the altar and were converted. The Fair family came back again, too. And Mrs. Johnson was gloriously sanctified. We're having some wonderful services down at the church. God meets with us. . . ."

"We had a gracious prayer meeting tonight, Rebekah. God is giving us so many new people. We're going to have to build. I located a lot. . . ."

"My, I do wish you could have been in church today, Becky; God filled the sanctuary with His glory and His presence. There was another new family out this morning. The mother came weeping to the altar and was converted. The father didn't yield. But I believe he's going to. Yes, I believe he will. . . ."

"I'm tired tonight, Becky. The building's almost finished. The people are so excited. I wish you'd come and see it. . . ."

"The building will be dedicated Easter Sunday morning, Becky. I do wish you would come. . . ."

Easter Sunday morning! Why, that was . . . yes. Yes!

I shed my housecoat with haste and rushed into the bedroom and opened my clothes closet bulging (almost) with clothes. Everything I looked at seemed out of place with the experience my husband had received from God. Not that John dressed shabbily; he didn't. But my dresses were too expensive and/or glamorous looking to wear to a church where one's husband pastored the outcasts of society; the "down and outers" of the world.

Quickly, I pushed the dresses along the bar in the closet until I found a modest-looking pale blue one. It was quite old, I realized, but the simple fact that John had always liked it best on me kept me from giving it away.

As I dressed, a voice prodded me gently: "Adorn the inside as well. Give Me your heart. Ye must be born again. . . ."

Because of everything John had said, and told me, and though I had thought I was sluffing it off, I found that each and every thing said had fastened itself soundly and solidly upon my heart and mind. Suddenly, and

without further argument, I knew that I, like John had discovered, was a wretched and vile sinner and that I needed God badly.

I tossed the pale blue dress on the bed and dropped to my knees in prayer. I was like the publican in the Bible who smote his chest with his hands and cried out penitently, "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner."

It's amazing how God rushes to the rescue of the soul who, with no pretense or hypocrisy whatever, really and truly desires Him and seeks His mercy and pardoning grace. I arose from my knees feeling like my heart had been made new. The load of sin rolled away and the guilt and condemnation was gone. I felt free. For the first time ever in my life, I felt free; unchained from all the past sins of my life. Without any shadow of doubt, I knew I was born again. John's peace and inner joy could in no way have rivaled mine, I was sure. Overcome by His forgiveness and won by His matchless love, simultaneously, I wept and shouted for joy.

I remembered John's words about the dedication service then and dressed quickly. My hair, which my husband had forbidden me (sweetly but firmly) to cut, I arranged in a becoming way on my head. Then, like a young bride going forth to meet her bridegroom at the church altar, I stepped out into the bright but cool morning.

I knew the street where my husband had felt led of God to erect the church; knew, too, that it was not in what was recognized by our city's prestigious ones as the best part of town. But little matter, now that my heart was made white and was washed in the blood of the Lamb. My feet felt like I was walking on air or floating on a cloud. I could scarcely wait to arrive at the church.

It was almost forty minutes later that I set foot on the church property. And what was my surprise and admiration to find, not a "thrown together" bit of boards and mortar and blocks but a lovely brick church with a landscaped lawn and an invitational-look that seemed to say, "Come inside and worship God with us. You are welcome."

I opened the door into the vestibule and stepped inside. Everything smelled new and fresh and good; not foul and dank and dirty, as I had thought a down and outer's church might be. No! No! All was fresh and clean and light, like the pastel crocuses blooming on our lawn at home. But then,

my heart told me, God, who had just minutes ago cleaned my heart up of its dirty and sinful habits and ways, could just as easily clean up the outside of the converted, once-forgotten men and women.

I stood, marveling at the neatness and the beauty of this simple but adequate building when children's voices, sweet and pure and sincere, reached my ears. They were singing. Oh, such singing! I felt, for a brief moment, like I was in Heaven's vestibule listening to angels singing. Tears sprang to my eyes. My heart was full.

I heard John's voice then. Was he leading them? Yes. Yes, he was. Softly, he began each chorus; then as the children crescendoed and led out, his voice faded away. Tears rolled down my cheeks. Dear John! Always, he included the children in everything.

I put my hand on the door into the sanctuary and opened it softly. Noiselessly. A man stepped forward to greet me.

"I am sorry I was not in the vestibule to greet you," he apologized. "I am an usher. But my children are singing in that group and I just had to hear them. Again, I am sorry. I will show you to a seat. . . ."

I told him I preferred a seat down near the front and I was led, immediately, to the front seat where I sat beside a middle-aged couple whose eyes seemed to be glued on the singers.

Instantly, I was caught up in the spirituality of the service. God was everywhere, it seemed. These people, my husband's congregation, didn't come to display their Easter finery nor to see who had what on; they came to worship God. It was obvious. The reason was clear and plain. And the spirit of the service demonstrated their utter and entire dedication to worship God.

I looked down at my dress and smiled. I had forgotten that I had no new Easter dress. My husband's favorite of all my dresses seemed proper and perfectly in order and in place. What's more, I felt the Lord's smile was upon me for having clothed myself modestly.

The singing ended and John turned around to face the congregation. Scanning the almost-full church, his eyes fell upon the first pew to his right where I sat. For a moment, he was speechless. Then, eyes shining with

happy tears, he stepped over to where I was and, taking my hand in his, he led me to the platform.

"Dear ones," he said brokenly, "meet my lovely and wonderful wife." Turning to face me, he said, "You look different, Becky dear. You're saved, aren't you?"

I squeezed the hand that held mine and, looking into my husband's eyes, I said, "I want to ask your forgiveness, John, for the way I have treated you. Yes, I am saved. New-born, in Christ."

I turned to the congregation and confessed my pride and uncooperativeness to them, adding, "I have been forgiven by God and I now ask that you do the same. Like you, I was a wretchedly-vile sinner; but this morning, thanks be to God, I became a new creature in Christ. My heart has been resurrected from deadness in sin to newness of life in Jesus. From here on out, till death shall part us, I mean to stand side by side and shoulder to shoulder with my husband in the work God has called him to do. I have been extremely proud, but God has humbled me. I want the way of Holiness, which my husband has spoken to me about and which he has demonstrated and lived so beautifully before me. Today I go on record as being one of God's children and one of you. . . ."

I felt John's arm go around my waist and heard his soft voice say brokenly, "Welcome to God's fold, Becky dearest. And welcome to our congregation."

I took my seat back in the pew and listened as my husband preached. Never had I heard a message with such unction! Such power! And, sitting there, I understood what made the difference between John's preaching in the church called High Street and our church here: it was the anointing of God, the indwelt Spirit of God.

I was my husband's first seeker that morning, seeking the wonderful person of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying, cleansing power. Others followed, so I heard and learned, but I didn't know it at the immediate time: I was too intent upon getting Rebekah Stillman's heart purged entirely from its pride and its self-will and stubbornness.

The church was dedicated to God, to be sure; a beautiful service indeed. But more than wood and stone was dedicated: forever and ever, a heart was sanctified wholly and a life was dedicated to God. Mine!