

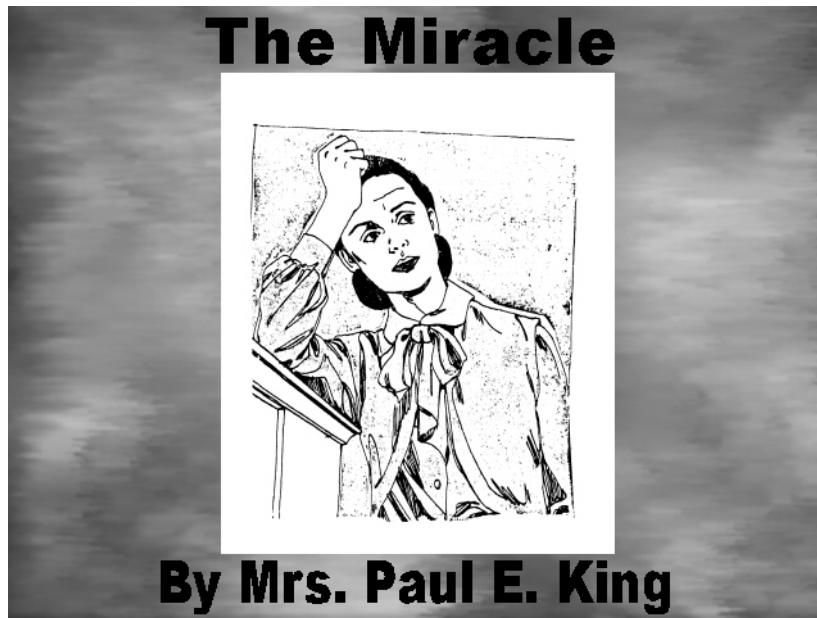
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THE MIRACLE
By Mrs. Paul E. King (Chapter 1)

Four days. Just four days before Christmas! Adrienne pressed her nose against the window and looked out at the gathering shadows of dusk. The sky was overcast and gray, making for an early twilight. Silent tears slid from her pale-blue eyes; she brushed them away quickly. Each year now, for the past two, just before Christmas, she stood inside the window, looking, hoping, longing and, yes, praying.

"O God!" she cried with an almost indistinguishable sob.

"Send him back, please! Wherever he is, send him home."

"Mama...."

She spun around quickly, making sure the tears drops were brushed from her cheeks. "Holly, I thought you were still napping, dear," she remarked, stooping and gathering the little girl into her arms.

"Why were you crying, Mama?"

"Let's talk about something pleasant, shall we, Holly?"

"If you won't cry. . . ."

"It's a promise; I won't. Not for now, my darling."

"Never, Mama? Won't you cry again; not ever? I don't want you to cry, Mama. It makes me feel sad when you cry. You miss Daddy, don't you? I miss him, too. When is he coming home?"

Adrienne swallowed hard; the lump inside her throat seemed as if it were choking her. "I don't know when, Holly. I honestly don't. But I know God knows," she added brightly, pulling the five-year-old closer to her bosom and planting a kiss upon her taffy-colored hair.

Holly wiggled gleefully in her mother's arms then, freeing herself, she said softly, "Could we make the cookies now, Mama? Please? You said we would after I took my nap."

"I certainly did, honey. And those cookies are almost as good as made. Now come to the kitchen and let me tie an apron around you. Get out the cookie cutters; I believe the little gingerbread man cutter is still your favorite."

Holly laughed and skipped merrily into the kitchen, announcing sweetly that the star, too, was a favorite cookie cutter. "It reminds me of the wise men who came looking for Jesus," she added. "Maybe this year Daddy will see the star, Mama. Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful if God would put the bright star

above our house and Daddy would see it, wherever he is, and follow it home to us?"

"It certainly would, Holly."

"I'm going to make stars, Mama; all stars. Lots and lots of stars. And I'm going to ask Jesus to send my daddy home this Christmas."

"You do that, Holly. . . ."

The cookies had long since been baked and stored carefully away inside their special containers and stacked upon other containers filled with numerous varieties of cookies and candies and Adrienne, surveying the abundant supply, offered up her own heartfelt prayer for the husband/father who had deserted his family exactly three years ago to the day.

Why he had left had remained nothing short of a mystery to her. She had always been a kind, loving, and dutiful wife to him and a good mother to their little daughter, delighting in fulfilling the Biblical role pattern designed and fitted to her by God's Holy Word. He had always seemed restless, she recalled; especially so after losing the job due to the plant shut down.

She hurried into the candle-lighted bedroom to check on the sleeping Holly and make sure she was covered; then she went into the living room and sat down to read her much-loved, greatly-treasured Bible. From its pages she received the needed strength and courage to face her lonely days and nights and, too, from its pages she derived and received the instructions needed to raise her daughter as a single parent.

She was thankful that Holly was blest with a sunny disposition and was easily molded and shaped in the path of righteousness and uprightness. Oh, that God may ever keep her like this! she thought, realizing that not forever would the child remain tittle. All too swiftly the days of teaching and training would be gone; she must make use of every moment and utilize to her fullest capacity the opportunities afforded her now to train this special joy-gift from God, and prepare her tender, young heart and life for God's kingdom use. She had no greater responsibility, the mother realized; no more pressing and urgent duty than this.

She sat in the chair and stared at the familiar pieces of furniture in the room, seeing but not thinking upon what she was seeing. Her mind was far away at a Bible school. She was nineteen the year she enrolled as a student. In spite of the fact that she had had no specific calling to a specific field or vocation, her parents had felt it would be a profitable year for her spiritual person; a good year in which to mature even more, spiritually.

The year had gone by rapidly. She had grown marvelously and wondrously in the inner person. Her voice was used mightily to bless others as she sang in the school choir and in the girls' trio.

She first saw and met Ron at a church service in which the trio sang for a youth weekend meeting in another state. She was now into her second year of Bible school training, having gone back so she could learn even more about and from God's Word. Ron was the young people's leader in the church. He seemed to be a spiritual young man, and Adrienne recalled, now, how impressed she and the other two girls in the trio were.

"He's terrific!" Miriam Showalter exclaimed, after their first service there.

It was a mere statement, or observation, made by Miriam, whose romantic attachments were all centered upon and around a young, Spirit-filled, dynamic preacher finishing his last year in the Bible school. Their wedding date was set for September, after his graduation in June.

"He has charisma," Anna Myers added, "and he's dynamic with the young people. Adrienne," she giggled, her eyes dancing with mischief, "may I tell him you're not dating? Not that you could not be dating, Miss Hard-to-Get!"

Adrienne remembered swatting playfully at Anna, exclaiming seriously, "Please! Please! Don't, Anna. God has the right one for me. I came to Bible school to learn, not to find a husband."

"And what better place to find a good husband!" Miriam exclaimed proudly, smiling upon Adrienne.

"Hey, Mom," Adrienne had remarked quickly, "I'm as happy as I can possibly be for you. I didn't mean it that way. And I feel greatly honored to be a part of your once in a lifetime very special and wonderful day in September,

Lord willing. But it's just that I'm not interested in getting serious, boy friend wise, yet."

"You've passed up some good ones," Anna put in. "Joseph Longford is true-blue."

"But he got too serious!" Adrienne had defended softly. "Two months after our first date he was talking marriage. I feel a couple needs more time than that to get to know each other better. The same with Jordan Mercer; too soon serious. I'm happy for you, Anna; you and Jordan make a beautiful couple."

Anna's face was wreathed in a smile. "You did me a favor," she had said. "When you stopped dating him and he asked me out, I thought the world was one cloudless day after another. He's truly great, Adrienne. Nothing will make me happier than to wear his name. With the prefix, Mrs., attached, of course."

"Are you engaged?" Miriam had questioned, grasping Anna's hand and searching her honest eyes for the answer.

"Yes," Anna had answered quietly, happily. "But please don't tell it to anybody; Jordan wants to go to my folks' home and ask my father for my hand in marriage. This is the way the young men used to do, you know. He is such a beautiful Christian gentleman." Rushing over to where Adrienne was standing, she hugged her soundly and pressed a kiss on her cheek. "Thanks, my precious friend," she added, as happy tears trickled down her cheeks. "Thanks. I love him so!" Adrienne recalled how she hugged Anna to her, saying, "Oh, Anna, I'm so happy for you! God leads each of us rightly if we but wait His timing. You and Jordan were meant for each other. See how wrong it would have been for me to continue dating him when I felt nothing more than friendship for him? You will be so happy together. Oh, Anna, I love you. You and Miriam and I will always and forever be special, special friends. Even after we are married, we will share our joys, our sorrows, our happinesses; our good times and our bad.

Tears suddenly spilled down Adrienne's face. The bittersweet pain of poignant memories and moments of the years past became almost too much for her. Anna and Jordan and Miriam and George and she had, indeed, shared. Each of the trio members was in the other's wedding as it took place.

Miriam and George were the first to marry. What a beautifully-sacred and spiritual ceremony they had! Adrienne had never recalled any like it. All the way through it she had sensed God's awesome, smiling presence; His Divine approval. She had been highly honored to have been one of Miriam's bridesmaids. She and Anna. The young couple took a pastorate immediately after returning from their honeymoon. And always, she and Miriam were in contact with each other.

Anna and Jordan's wedding was equally and sacred and beautiful as Miriam's was. It took place eight months after Miriam and George were married. Anna had always said she wanted to be married on her parents' wedding anniversary date, and she was.

The 23rd of May was a magnificent day, Adrienne recalled. Full of sunshine, early flowers, singing birds, a cloudless blue sky, and the warmest and gentlest of spring breezes. Anna emerged from the front door of her home leaning upon her father's arm, and walked down the garden path to Jordan and the waiting minister, maid of honor, bridesmaids, wedding attendants and many friends. It was a wedding (as Miriam stated between happy bouts of wiping tears) that she would never forget. And Adrienne had agreed.

The happy couple settled in a Cape Cod house midway between Jordan's parents and Anna's, where Jordan took over the managership of a hardware store.

Adrienne had thought little about the young people's leader in the church where their trio had been called to sing for that special weekend meeting and it came as a real surprise to her when she received a letter some months later with the name of Ronald Manners showing in the upper left hand corner of the envelope. The letter had been mailed to her in care of the Bible school and was forwarded on to her at her home.

"Do you know the young man?" her mother had asked, when she, Adrienne, had said he had written, asking if he could come and see her.

"Only casually; through a weekend meeting, Mother. I mean, Miriam and Anna and I sang in the church where he was the young people's leader.

God gave a gracious meeting; quite a few young people prayed through to victory."

"Do you like him, Adrienne?"

"Like him? If you mean as a friend, yes. I don't actually know him that well. I think I'll just tell him not to come. We'll soon be going to our district camp meeting, and then there's that brush arbor meeting Brother Sandy wants me to play the piano for as our young people sing for it.

"I'm excited about that, Mother Just think, a real brush arbor meeting in that out-of-the-way place, as some say! It will give all of us young people a small taste of how you older people came up, and of the great spiritual blessings you enjoyed as God came down upon you. We'll be sleeping in tents, you know. I only hope the piano will be sheltered from the rain. Brother and Sister Sandy said they'll have a dry covering for it. But you know how dampness can cause the keys to stick! Well, I'll run along and just tell Ronald Manners it would be best, at this time, for him not to come. . . ."

(Chapter 2)

Ron's letters had continued to come, however, and one day, between Miriam's and Anna's weddings, he called her on the phone. Her mother, answering the phone, had told him kindly that she was not at home. He had asked if she was not going back to Bible school and was informed that she was now working as a secretary in her father's small business and was staying very busy.

Shortly after returning home from Anna's wedding, Adrienne was surprised by an unannounced visit from the young man. He was a perfect gentleman, extremely courteous, kind and spiritual. Adrienne was impressed, as were her parents. They began a steady correspondence, with Ron visiting as often and as frequently as his work allowed. A year and three months later, she became Mrs. Ronald Manners.

Their wedding, like that of her two best and closest friends -- Anna and Miriam -- was a beautiful but simple one. Her parents' old-fashioned flower garden on the back lawn made a perfect background and setting for the Victorian-style wedding gown which she wore. Adrienne's mother was as excited as a child that the beautiful old wedding dress, once hers, was again

to be worn, this time by her lovely, spiritual, Spirit-filled and morally clean daughter. Adrienne recalled how delighted she was to be wearing the modestly-beautiful creation.

Ron had taken her to the house he had built and she had felt that she could never have been happier. He continued working at the plant and serving as young people's president in the local church. Soon she, too, was extremely active and involved in the church, organizing special prayer meetings for the young people, both the married and the unmarried, and, with her very-active young husband, calling, door to door and house to house, on the people in their small city and its outlying areas and extremities. They were so happy, so fulfilled, they felt they could not be happier. Then God sent Holly into their home and, suddenly, they realized just how complete and full was their fulfillment now.

Adrienne first noticed Ron's restless behavior when bits of news sifted out about the plant's closing. She had told him often that God would provide for them and meet their needs even if the plant closed its doors. This, however, seemed only to fall on deaf ears.

Her husband's shock over the confirmation that the plant was, indeed, closing its doors and moving to a far distant state, was devastating. He became listless and morbid and morose. Their once-happy home seemed to be plunged into the abyss of morbidity and gloom, and nothing Adrienne tried or did could elevate or clear the atmosphere, so far as Ron was concerned.

He began immediately to search for work but his efforts seemed to be in vain, and the morning that he left to sign up for his final unemployment check was the day he walked out of Holly's and her life.

Adrienne recalled that day now with intensely-acute pain in her heart. It seemed as unreal and strange as ever; time had certainly not healed the hurt inside her caring, loving wifely breast. All day, she had waited for Ron to come home, listening for his footsteps on the porch and looking from inside the window for his dear, familiar face. The house was fragrant with beef roasting in the oven and an apple pie cooling on the counter top. She had prepared his favorite of all meals for supper, a silent gift of love from her to him. She hoped it would help to cheer him up and to lift his spirits.

Darkness had fallen and, with its arrival, she remembered that Holly needed something to eat. They sat down to the table together. Holly, in a sweetly trusting voice, thanked the Lord for her supper and prayed that God would bless her daddy and help him to find work. Adrienne had eaten little that night; she waited for a footstep that never was heard. The supper got cold and, finally, she cleared the table and put the food into the refrigerator.

Holly's bedtime story hour was a painful time that night. "I want Daddy," she cried. "Daddy's going to read to me, Mama."

"But Daddy hasn't come home yet, honey," Adrienne had replied softly and kindly, picking her little daughter up and pulling her close to her heart. "I'll read to you tonight," she had added cheerfully. "We'll snuggle up together in Daddy's big chair and we'll hear all about The Three Little Pigs; then I'll read your favorite Bible story."

Holly had laughed gleefully then and, being sweetly compliant and easily entreated, she wiggled free of her mother's arms and hurried away after the books, her long, warm nightgown giving her the appearance of a cherub.

Long after Holly was asleep that night, Adrienne sat by the window waiting for her husband's return. Toward the early morning hours she fell asleep in the chair, her eyes wet with tears and a silent prayer in her heart.

Snow was falling when she finally awoke. She hurried to the bedroom, thinking -- hoping -- that Ron had come home and had not wanted to awaken or disturb her. When she saw that he was not there, she fell to her knees and sobbed, crying out to God for sustaining grace and keeping power. In her heart, she seemed to sense that her husband was gone. It left her with a numbness but also with a total and complete reliance upon her God. He had never failed her. He had never forsaken her nor left her; His Holy Spirit was constantly and always within her: He would be with her in this, the darkest, blackest hour ever, of her life. And He was! She had proven Him faithful and true over and over again and again.

That was two years ago, she mused sadly, silently, now, and not one word of her husband's whereabouts nor of why he had done what he did, in leaving her. To keep the monthly bills current and paid up, she did typing in her home for her father's expanding business, making periodic and routine

trips to his office to keep his books in order. Holly enjoyed the trips immensely, and the companionship and love and devotion of her grandparents made the loss of her father less painful and sad. The bonding between granddaughter and grandparents was a God-send indeed. Holly adored the two who were so much like Jesus that it made her want to be more and more like they were. Small though she was, Adrienne noted with joy the spiritual depth and growth of her little daughter.

She concentrated now upon her Bible reading, trying to push all other thoughts from her mind. The past was just that, past. She could do nothing to change what had happened and taken place. Like Paul the Apostle, she meant to press toward the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus and to use each day wisely and prayerfully to do something for Christ and others.

She turned the table lamp off after an hour of reading and sat in silent meditation and prayer. The candles in the windows glowed warmly and from somewhere nearby she heard the soft musical chimes of a Christmas carol being heralded from the tower of one of the churches.

She listened with rapt attention, not wanting to miss a single note. Her being became absorbed in its beauty and in its message. She knew the carol by heart; it had been one of her favorites. The message of joy rang from each verse. It heralded the dawn of a new day-the birth of a Savior.

She must have dozed; but the sense that she was being watched, from her inner subconsciousness, made her sit up with a start. Or was it some faint sound? she wondered, getting to her feet quietly.

Before she could turn around and hurry down the hallway to make sure that Holly was all right, a voice called her name. Softly, gently and tenderly it was spoken, "Adrienne. . . ."

Fear gripped her being. Was she imagining? Was it real?

"Adrienne. . . ." And now he stood beside her. "Ron! Ron! Oh, my husband!" Tears filled her eyes.

They stood and faced each other for a moment. Then Ron reached for her hand.

"May . . . may I hold it?" he asked humbly, fearing lest he was trespassing. "I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I'm here to tell you I'm sorry and to ask your forgiveness, Adrienne. Can you find it somewhere in your heart and in your being to forgive me? Please? I have not been immoral -- not in any way. Thanks be to God for this! But I still broke my marriage vow in that I failed, for two years, to provide for you and Holly, and to love and care for and protect you. Oh, Adrienne, I am so ashamed of myself. I don't deserve your forgiveness but. . . ."

"Oh, Ron, Ron, you are forgiven. Freely and fully, forgiven. Holly and I have prayed daily for you. But what about you and God? Have you gotten everything taken care of with Him, and in your soul?"

"Everything! Oh, praise His name! He forgave me and then He cleansed my heart. This is why I'm here; home, where I belong. I never realized how proud I was until I lost my job. It was more than I could bear. And the thought that I would no longer be able to provide for my family as I had been providing for them whipped and lashed me until I did the most radical--and wrong -- thing I had ever done, and left my home and family.

"I was determined that I would find work. After signing up for that final unemployment check so you and Holly would have something to live on for a little while, at least, I took the bus to the city two hundred miles from here. I had heard there was much work there. And Adrienne, my plan was to get a good job, then come and get you and Holly. I left the car here so you would have transportation. I walked to the unemployment office and then to the bus station."

"If you had only told me you were leaving, Ron; going to try to find work! I was so concerned and . . . worried. Then I turned it over to the Lord: I had to have peace about it. He has sustained me wonderfully."

"I'm ashamed, Adrienne. Ashamed! Like I said, I didn't realize the depth of carnal pride in my heart. I honestly believed I was sanctified wholly. It took this to reveal the real me. When I was able only to pick up odd jobs with sub-standard pay, I felt even more unmanly and I was humiliated beyond any description. I knew I couldn't provide for you and Holly and, dying though I was inside to see you both and to be with you, my pride had the ascendancy.

"I must find something more substantial and with more money, I told myself. So I stayed on working and, at the same time, looking for the big-paying job, which eluded me. Then, not many days ago, God gave me a glimpse of my heart. It frightened me. He brought me face to face, that same night, in my shoddy little efficiency apartment, with the real me. And He let me know that I was on a par with Jonah, in a way: I had run away from my family and my home, a gross sin and wickedness

"Needless to say, I couldn't sleep that night: it marked the beginning of this marvelous change in my heart. I prayed and wept and wept and prayed for forgiveness in running away to my 'Tarshish,' and God heard and marvelously answered and washed my sins in Jesus' precious blood. I knew I was forgiven. It was glorious and wonderful. My heart found peace with its God. The joybells rang afresh and anew in my soul and the song birds began to sing once again.

"But God had already shown and revealed to me the inner thing that caused me to take the course of action which I did, and I loathed it. With all my heart[Pride is destructive, Adrienne; it devastates the individual. It will destroy him unless it is removed, root and all, by the Holy Spirit's purging fire. I purposed within my heart that I would stay on my knees until the Spirit of God burned up all the old carnal nature, and took it out of my heart in its entirety. And I was not denied; He came! He sanctified me wholly and entirely.

"I may not be able to provide for you and Holly as largely and abundantly as I did when I was supervisor in my department at the plant; but if you will have me back, I will do my best for you, God willing."

"Have you back! Oh my dear, dear husband, Holly and I have prayed for this every day. And many times a day. This is another miracle of answered prayer."

"Oh, Adrienne, thank you! I love you so much!" And in an instant, Ron had gathered his wife into his arms, burying his face in the thick hair on her head and wetting it with his tears.

Awakened by the voices, Holly bounded out of bed and ran along the hallway to the candle-lighted living room. Seeing her father, she cried out joyously, "The star, Mommie! God sent His star and guided Daddy home!"

In one great bound, and laughing happily, Holly was in her father's strong arms, murmuring softly, "I knew He'd do it, Daddy; I knew God would bring you home to us! And this time you'll stay, 'cause I asked God for this."

Crushing Holly to him, his tears wetting the soft curls of her head, he replied, "Yes, dearest Holly, this time I'll stay. Nothing but death will part me from your dear mother and you."

Squeezing his neck tightly, Holly finally wiggled free of her father's arms and said, "Cookies, Daddy. Lots of cookies. Come."

Hand in hand, the three went into the kitchen.