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# Introduction

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ONE DAY SOME years ago, I received an unusual phone call. “Virginia, you don’t know me, but a mutual friend suggested I call you. I am so ashamed of myself. Last evening I got so angry with Rick that I actually threw a bowl of hot lima beans in his face. Virginia, what am I going to do? I am a Christian and I know that wasn’t right, but I get so frustrated.”

I understood. I, too, have known the pain, the heartache, and the hopelessness of life with an unsaved husband, and I understand the fears, conflicts, and frustrations that the Christian wife of an unbeliever faces daily. I know the concern that my husband’s ungodly influence would outweigh my own in our children’s lives.

Many Christians understand little of the stress faced by the spouse or children of an unsaved husband. My husband was an alcoholic, something that can be especially devastating to a believing wife. The responsibility of holding the family together and of being security for the children falls on her. Frequently she must cope with financial pressures that result from her husband’s addiction.

Coupled with these burdens come some staggering realities. Her husband may not appreciate her efforts; he may even resent them. He may belittle her and accuse her of a multitude of wrongdoings. She may face threats to her physical and emotional well-being; she may even experience physical abuse.



# Chapter One

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## HOW IT HAPPENED

HAD ANYONE SUGGESTED to me as a teenager that I would marry an unbeliever, I would never have believed it. Me? No way! Why, look who I was! Look at my background. No one in my family would think of doing such a thing.

I am a descendant of a long line of Anabaptist believers who originated in Switzerland and Germany. My Grandfather Showalter was a circuit preacher in the Virginia-West Virginia mountains during the early twentieth century. Several of my uncles were ministers and one was a bishop.

Although the Lord never called my father to preach, my parents dedicated their lives to the Lord's work. Each summer, from April through September, they bundled their four children into our old car—we were too poor to afford a late model—and drove to one of the churches in the highlands where they conducted Sunday school. When I was a baby, Mama set me on the classroom floor as she taught a group of children.

During those years Papa and Mama served regularly at two places—"back in the Gap" (close to home) and in two small mountaintop schoolhouse-churches, one on each side of the Virginia-West Virginia line. They held Sunday school in the West Virginia schoolhouse in the morning. Then, after eating our packed lunch, we backtracked four miles to the schoolhouse in Virginia for an afternoon service. My future husband and his brothers sometimes attended Sunday school at the Virginia location.

My parents taught us to shun strong drink. Mama refused to use a much-loved family physician in our small town because of his reputation for using alcoholic beverages. She instructed us never to accept a drink from neighbors who used alcohol. "Don't even go into the house," she warned.

Then how did I become the wife of an unbeliever, an alcoholic one at that?

## SPIRITUAL GROWTH—THEN PRIDE

The year following my graduation from high school, I worked as the hired girl for a local Christian family. These children and I had attended school together, and one of the girls and I graduated in the same class. But nothing had prepared me for what I was to experience.

My mistress expected me to go ahead without supervision from her, but I did not know how to "go ahead." Although I tried valiantly, it seemed as if I never could do anything quite right. A spot remained on a bedspread, or I missed some dust behind a dresser, or I failed to catch a cobweb trailing from the ceiling. If nothing like that happened, in my anxiety not to be clumsy, I sometimes overreacted and chipped the plaster when dragging the vacuum cleaner up the winding staircase. How I hated that vacuum cleaner!

Toward the end of that nine-month period, I began literally to count the days and the hours until I could go home. Mama and Papa had no idea I was so miserable. Mama told me later that if they had known, they would not have expected me to stay. For my part, it did not occur to me to quit.

The trials of that year kept me on my knees and in the Word of God. The next year Satan threw a punch I was not expecting and did not know how to handle.

A popular and sophisticated schoolteacher dropped in one day to see me. "Would you consider babysitting for Janie this year while I teach?" she asked. "I want someone who uses good grammar, and I know you do. I remember how well you did in my junior English class several years ago." Her compliment put me off guard. As she continued to exalt my character, I cast aside any reservations I may have had about the position and accepted the job.

My employer treated me like family. She bragged about "my Virginia" to the other teachers, her personal physician, and her family. She even boasted of my Bible knowledge, small as it was then in comparison to what I have learned over the years since. I was blind; I did not realize what Satan was doing to me: using pride to set me up for a fall.

I cannot say at what point it happened, but I began to neglect reading my Bible in favor of other books. I fell asleep during my evening prayer and finally did not bother to pray at all. Before I realized it, I was a backslider. I had tasted sin and liked it. I decided I wanted more.

## A TEACHER—THEN A WIFE

During this period, at the suggestion of my employer, I applied for the position of teacher at the one-room school in the mountains where my parents conducted Sunday school and where my future husband

had attended. Due to a lack of teachers, the school had been closed for four years. I intended to teach several years, save my money, then go to college and get my degree. The superintendent of county schools had known me since childhood and agreed to the proposal.

So I became a teacher. I boarded in the home of my future husband. I quickly laid aside any indications of being a Christian and threw morality to the winds. Before the second school year began, Gene and I were married.

Yes, I knew he drank. I knew the history of alcohol use in his family. His father, who died the winter before I became a teacher, had operated a still during Prohibition.

So why did I marry him?

I was woefully ignorant of the effects of alcohol. Gene and his younger brother, the only boys at home at the time, confined their drinking to times when they left the mountain. This limited my contact with alcohol and its effects. Besides, I liked the romantic mood Gene assumed when drinking.



*Wedding day, September 3, 1949*



*Virginia (center, back) with her siblings and parents, 1949*

Although we had lived in the same house for nine months, Gene and I hardly knew each other. Looking back, I marvel that our marriage survived. He may have loved me; he said he did. For my part, I am sure my emotions were more infatuation than love. You must know someone to love him, and I did not really know Gene.

Neither did I foresee the rocky road that lay ahead.