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How Far To Christmas

By Mrs. Paul E. King

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Indriali smoothed her long hair softly back from her forehead and braided it into two thick shiny-black brads that fell well below her hipline. She arranged the sad becomingly about her slender body and took her heaviest cape from its hanger in the closet.

"You going somewhere?" her roommate asked, brushing a thick coating of mascara onto her eyelashes.

"Yes, I am," Indriali answered, speaking flawless English.

"A date?" and the mascara brush was poised in mid-air now as Midge faced the shy but beautiful Indian girl who had been her roommate the past three months.



"No, not a date. . . not exactly, that is." Indriali's eyes fell to the gold carpet on the floor.

"Not exactly" Midge exclaimed, laughing carelessly. "Look, Indriali, either you have a date or you don't have a date. See? It's that simple. Who is the boy? You could have plenty, I'm sure, but . . ."

"My father did not send me to America to marry, Midge." The piercing dark eyes looked solemnly into those of her roommate. "He sent me here to get an education. I am not interested in men . . . at the present."

"You . . . you're not normal then," Midge asserted, laughing loudly and getting back to the task of applying the mascara.

"Perhaps I have a lover of my own at home," Indriali answered sweetly, draping the cape softly about her slender shoulders.

"Where are you going, Indriali? Or is it not any of my business?"

For a long while the dark-haired girl stared hard at the floor, saying nothing.

"I have a date with Keith Gourmley tonight," Midge volunteered, making conversation. "I'll be the envy of every girl on campus at this party. Sa-ay!" Midge exclaimed suddenly, "You must have a partner if you're going to the Christmas party, Indriali. Who is he? You can't dance alone, you know."

"I . . . I'm not . . . going to the party, Midge." With her eyes still on the carpet Indriali asked softly, her voice barely more than a whisper, "How far is it to Christmas, Midge?"

Midge wheeled around. "How far to Christmas? What a silly question. What do you mean?"

"This." Indriali pulled a tract from her small purse. "Unto Us . . . ; A SAVIOR! AT CHRISTMAS." The title was printed in large black lettering.

"Oh! That!" Midge heaved a sigh of relief. "Don't pay attention to it. There's a church group here in town who feel they've got to convert the world. They think all of us here at the university are sinners of the worst degree. They disapprove of drinking, dancing, card-playing, and just about everything. They've handed me tracts, too. I tear them up . . . in front of their eyes."

"But . . . how far is it to Christmas?"

"I don't follow you, Indriali. Do you mean how many days till Christmas? If that's what you mean, it's tomorrow."

"Oh, no! No!" Indriali shook her head sadly. "This piece of paper tells how a Savior was born: AT CHRISTMAS, it says."

"Pooh! That's too stuffy for me," Midge exclaimed. "The Savior part's been cut out a long, long time ago for me. Who cares about that outdated religious bit of it. Christmas! Well, for me it's dancing, drinking, parties, presents, and dates, dates, and more dates. Get with the lighter side of things, Kiddo!" Stepping to the closet, Midge took a gaudy, sequin bedecked, low cut dress from its hanger and slipped into it. "Like it?" she asked

the sober-minded, shocked Indian girl. "Grant you my father paid a pretty penny for this!" She strutted in front of the full length mirror, proudly surveying herself.

Indriali walked softly to the door and made a quiet exit. Thoughtfully she hurried out into the night. She must find Christmas! Something about the writing on the paper tract had gripped her heart. If everything printed on the tract were true, why had she not heard before? she wondered. Maybe Christmas was closer even to India than it was to America.

Oh! She had been foolish to have asked Midge . . . Midge the worldly-minded, the careless, unconcerned roommate! Her heart told her that anyone so wicked and worldly-wise as Midge could not have shared in or partaken of any event as sacred and wonderful as the tract stated had taken place.

She crossed the campus quickly. The crisp, cold night air had a way all its own of hastening one's footsteps. High in a steeple, bells were chiming some beautiful melody. Indriali could not remember of having heard it before. "How . . . how beautiful!" The Indian student exclaimed to the wind which seemed to be rising considerably. "How I wish I knew what it is. The melody is beautiful. Beautiful!"

The soft melodic strains of "Silent Night" were being repeated when a sudden thought filled the searching girl's mind: "I'll go to the big cathedral," she said halt aloud. "Certainly the parish priest will be able to tell me how to get to Christmas."

She walked rapidly now. Stepping lightly into the vestibule of the mammoth cathedral, Indriali heard loud rapid chanting. How repetitious and like India's worship it all sounded! Noiselessly, she seated herself in the very last pew in the cathedral and listened respectfully as the priest continued his ritual and chanting, the people all the while making signs and fondling beads.

Rising quickly, Indriali made her exit through the same door by which she had entered. The parish priest could not help her, she was sure; he was too much the pattern of the "holy men" of India and its worship, and they knew nothing whatever about Christmas and a Savior. Furthermore, she understood not a word the priest had uttered.

Should she go on? she wondered pulling her cape more tightly about her shoulders. Was there any use? Did the gods of America satisfy one's soul any better than India's? Oh! what should she do? If . . . if only she could find the girl who had handed the tract to her. She would be able to help her, she was sure.

The thought, along with the vision of the girl, spurred new hope to Indriali. How peaceful the girl had looked, and how utterly different and undefiled from those who attended the City University! While the girl didn't wear a sari, her dress was definitely modest, becoming, too, and extremely simple but attractive and neat. Her hair had been long, too -- done up in a neat way at the neck, but long, nonetheless. There had been no

make-up on the face either. All of these things had seemed different to Indriali, pleasantly different from the society she had rubbed elbows with on the university campus. The girl's countenance looked, well, dare she say "holy!"

"Yes. That's it" Indriali exclaimed aloud. "She looked holy and so 'at peace' within. She must have been to Christmas. If I could but find what she has!" And the distressed Indian girl pressed the tract tightly to her breast "This Savior . . . did He come for Indians, too? I must find Christmas! I must! My father must know, my mother, too, and my people. The tract must be sent home. Perhaps they can find Christmas if I cannot find it in America. Oh, please, please, can't somebody help me?" She smote her breast and wept softly.

Boisterous laughter, loud talking and foolish jesting broke suddenly in upon her impassioned soul. Four limousines drew up in front of the mansion she was passing. Strange, she hadn't noticed the myriads of soft lights flickering dreamily from every evergreen on the sprawling lawn, and spiraling up the towering columns, then reaching their colorful tentacles intricately along the snowy-white grill work of the verandah uppers, making the place one of fantastic beauty.

She stood in rapt wonder, comparing the luxuries and extravagances of America to her own poverty-stricken country when a coarse hand came down on her shoulder.

"Come inside," a man's voice bade. "No need to stand outside when it's warm within."

Indriali stepped quickly away from the man. His boldness and freedom both frightened and angered her. Instinctively, she compared him with her own gentle, careful father. There was no comparison. Searching his face, she asked innocently, pleadingly, "Sir, how far to Christmas?"

"Christmas!" The heavy, nauseous odor of liquor came out with the exclamation. "Christmas is right there." He pointed to the elegant mansion. "Come along, my little pigeon," he stammered with thick tongue, "I'll show you where Christmas is and what. There's plenty of liquor, food, and cocktails for all; dancing, too." He tried to encircle Indriali's slender waist with his arm, his mind, body, and passions already highly inflamed from the effects of alcohol.

"No! No!" The girl exclaimed, tearing herself quickly from him and fleeing madly down the street. Was this all the world thought of? she wondered. First, Midge; now that mob back at the mansion; and each one had told her that was Christmas! Could it be she was searching in vain? Could it?

The angelic face of the girl -- the tract girl -- came into sharp focus just then. Her words, too. "Read this," she had invited Indriali as she handed the tract to her. "It is the way to peace and rest . . . salvation, too."

Read it! Of course she would . . . over and over again and again. In fact, she had read it so many times until she had it memorized, word for word And to think that Midge tore hers up! How ungrateful her roommate was for the printed page when India's millions never had a sufficient amount of literature and reading papers!

On and on she walked, past house after house of merry-makers. She didn't know where she was going nor on what street she was; yet her search drove her on. She felt sick inside. What was Christmas; and where? In India she had never heard the word, but now that she read the message on the little piece of paper she knew she would never again be satisfied until she found it for herself. Lovingly she held the Gospel tract before her, comparing its message with the dancing, drinking, and immorality she knew was going on at the campus party and the mansion. Midge, she knew, wouldn't be in till dawn, if then. How she detested the odor of alcoholic beverages Not a few times had she left the room she shared with Midge because of the obnoxious odor being spewed out with every breath the girl breathed. Poor Midge! How she needed to find Christmas . . . the Savior of Christmas !

Indriali was nearing the edge of the little city when strains of jubilant song rang joyfully to her listening ears:

"Joy to the world the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heav'n and nature sing,
And Heav'n and nature sing,
And Heav'n, and Heav'n and nature sing. "

She ran in the direction of the singing. Her feet seemed to have wings now. Turning a corner she came face to face with a group of happy young people.

"No more let sin and sorrow reign . . ." they were singing now.

Rudely, almost impatiently, Indriali tugged at the sleeve of a young girl. "Please, Ma'am," she begged . . . pleaded, "How far to Christmas?"

The girl turned quickly and smiled happily into the face of the inquiring Indian girl. "You read the tract, I see." She commented with a pleased smile.

"Read it!" Indriali exclaimed. "I have memorized it word for word, and I must go to Christmas . . . to the Savior. How . . . how far is it? Where is this Savior of which the writer has written?"

"How far is Christmas?" The young girl repeated the question thoughtfully. Drawing Indriali aside she whispered softly, "Christmas! How far?" Suddenly her

countenance lighted and she said happily, reverently, with tears spilling down over her angelic face, "Christmas lies beyond the mountain of the skeptic and the valley of the agnostic, over the hill of doubt and disbelief into the blissful sunny clime of faith. Would you like to go there?"

"Please! Yes, please take me there! I, too, want to meet this Savior. He is real, is He not? This is not a myth? Oh! I beg you, tell me the truth. Midge . . . she's my roommate at the university . . . told me Christmas is dancing, drinking, presents, and . . ."

The patient voice of the girl repeated softly again, "Christmas lies beyond the mountain of the skeptic and the valley of the agnostic . . . remember?" The girl's eyes and her face radiated the same inner peace and contentment Indriali had seen there the day she had receded the beloved tract.

"Yes, I remember. I do remember, and I see what you mean. But how can I get there. I believe everything you have told me and every word on this tract. Oh, I must know I must I feel I will die unless I find out. My heart has been feeling so strange and hungry since hating read this wonderful bit of news." Indriali was weeping hard now. She would not be denied . . . not ever! She would give up her studies at the university and journey to the ends of the earth to find the Savior.

"Come with me," the girl said gently; "I'll show you how to get there." Whispering something to the group of carolers she led Indriali down the street to a humble cottage.

"I'm Paula Stearns." She introduced herself. "My heart is filled with great joy to be able to help you. I have been praying for you very, very much." She gave Indriali's hand a tight little squeeze.

"Thank you kindly," Indriali said softly. "You may call me Indriali."

"Let's go inside," Paula said as they climbed the few steps that led to the porch and the door. "Mother and Father will be happy to meet you. I told them how I handed you a tract. From that day on we have not ceased to pray for you."

"I've brought a friend," Paula said, throwing the door open. "And Mother and Father, she wants to find the Savior."

"Yes! Yes, please!" Indriali sobbed. "How far is it to Christmas and . . . and . . . to . . . this Savior" She held the tract before the sweet-looking couple who sat before a glowing hearth-fire, a Bible open on each lap.

"You want to find the Savior?" Paul's mother asked, rising and taking the cold hands of the girl in her own.

"Oh, yes! I must find Him. I, too, want to worship Him. He must be wonderful. Never have I read anything so wonderful . . . so truly marvelous."

"Then we shall go to Him right now, dear," Paula's mother said, her own eyes spilling over with uncontrolled tears.

"Right now? Oh, can we, please? I will need no other clothing? I am ready . . . right now -- just as I am?"

"Yes, He will take you just as you are," Paula said brokenly. "Kneel here beside Mother and me, Indriali. We will all pray for you."

"I will do anything you say," Indriali said, weeping, "Only help me to find Him."

"Have you ever prayed, dear?" Paula asked. "To the gods of India, yes."

"Then you pray after me," Paula said encouragingly. "The Lord is going to help you."

Not for long did they kneel. The impassioned soul of the Indian maiden, drawing courage from Paula's prayer, soon broke out in fervent prayer of her own, the Holy Spirit helping her to make full confession of all sins. Suddenly, like a flash of lightning, the wonderful transformation took place; Indriali was a new creature in Christ Jesus. The old Indriali was gone; her sins were gone, too.

"I . . . have found Him! I found the Savior!" she shouted happily, hugging Paula soundly. "Oh! Oh! What joy and peace is mine! This is too wonderful to be true. I am still me, Paula, am I not?"

"You're the 'new in Christ' Indriali," Paula said happily.

"Thank God! Thank God! I . . . this is the meaning of Christmas! I see it. I feel it. I know it! I have found the Savior! My heart now possesses the peace and joy I saw radiating through you, dear Paula. Oh, thank you for caring enough for my soul to give me this little piece of paper."

Sitting around the kitchen table in the Stearns' home later in the evening, Indriali spoke again: "I shall be terminating my studies at the university this semester. Father felt I should prepare for one of the good government portions available to those who are capable and prepared, but I feel my Savior needs me to labor for Him as a nurse for my needy people. I shall go into nurse's training in the hospital here as soon as this semester ends. Through nursing I shall be able to show my people the way out of their superstition, their darkness and their night as I point them to the True Light . . . my Savior. I will perform double duty, helping both soul and body."

"You must remain here with us, then," Paula's mother said graciously. "There is a spare bedroom here; you may use it while you are in training. We shall all go to church together and pray and read and sing together, building one another up in holy faith, as the Scriptures say."

Late that night Indriali stood on the steps of the dormitory and watched until the Stearns' car had disappeared out of sight. Lovingly she placed the New Testament they had given her as a gift to her lips and kissed it reverently; then she pressed it tightly to her bosom. Snow began filtering softly, silently earthward, covering her dark head with a covering of white; still she stood, thanking, praising. Somewhere in the city a group of carolers were singing jubilantly.

"How far to Christmas?" she asked the snow, smiling angelically upward. "How far? In my heart!"

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THE END