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The Guests

By Mrs. Paul E. King

From the June 7, 1981 Sunday School Beacon

"Well, what do you know!" Carma Archer exclaimed, letting the letter which she had been reading flutter to the floor. "What do you know, " she repeated again, her ordinarily sunny face wearing a look of misery and perplexity.

"Not much," her brother Chad replied teasingly. "I'd know quite a lot more if you'd tell me what's causing that look of consternation on your face though."

Picking the letter up from the floor, Carma handed it to her brother. "Here, read it," she told him. "It will clear up the mystery for you and put the same look on your face, too; I guarantee you it will."

"From Pamela!" he exclaimed, letting out a long, shrill whistle. "When was the last time we saw that proud cousin of ours?"

"At Grandfather's funeral four years ago, Chad. And you will recall that she scarcely took notice of us. She kept her head high in the air and fluttered around the place like some giddy butterfly."

"Or a proud peacock, maybe? Well, I guess I'd better read if I want to find out what's disturbing you."

"Whatever it is," Mrs. Archer told the two teenagers, " 'Charity suffereth long and is kind.' " It was a gentle, biblical rebuke.



She was looking on the one side only, Carma saw now.

"Say, that's something!" Chad exclaimed, getting to his feet and pacing the floor. "Inviting herself., plus Cork... to our house for a couple of days." Turning quickly he looked at his sister. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "You're really 'on the spot.' "

Carma walked to the kitchen window and looked out on the sprawling lawn. "I'll tell her yes, of course. But Chad, what if she's 'picky' again? You remember how hard she was to please when she was here years ago -- and how . . . how 'nettlesome.' " She finished the sentence with a sigh.

"Nettlesome?" Mrs. Archer asked. "You mean meddlesome, Carma."

"No, not really, Mother; meddlesome fits her, too, it's true; but I mean nettlesome. She's a real nettler . . . taking jibes at my friends and 'stabbing' them in the back when they're out of earshot and not around to defend themselves. Honestly, Mom, I... I hate to have her around. She brings nothing but unrest and turmoil with her. You have no idea!"

"And she's always poking fun at Carma and me for being Christians," Chad added on a sad note. "So does Cork. Says he is well able to get along without help from anybody, even God. To me, that's almost, if not altogether, blasphemous."

It was Mrs. Archer's turn to sigh now. "How desolate life would be without Christ," she exclaimed with a shudder. "I remember years ago when I was extremely ill and laid up for months on the bed, I came through a period where I couldn't feel God nor His sweet abiding presence at all . . . for weeks, yes, several months. I knew I hadn't sinned or transgressed, so, like Job, I cried aloud day after day through my tears, 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust in him... He also shall be my salvation.'

"It was a period of strictly walking by faith; and while it was one of the greatest and best 'growing' periods ever to come into my life, I literally learned and experienced that one doesn't go by feelings, but by faith in his God. Yet I shall never be able to forget the awful and dreadfully fearful feeling of desolation without the feeling of His presence. Oh, I wouldn't want to live one second., one moment., of my life without Him and His constantly-abiding presence."

"That's what I mean, Mom!" Chad put in quickly. "Cork and Pamela are . . . are skeptics. They . . . they're worse than heathens. Honest they are. Heathens go to church when there's one around; Pam and Cork make fun of church and of our going to church. They call us sissies."

Again Mrs. Archer sighed. "They're the byproducts of fight rejecters," she said, her voice breaking. "Both your Uncle and Aunt once knew God and walked on the wonderful highway of holiness. Ben's business expanded and prospered to such an extent that he spent more and more time working, giving less and less time to God. And, in the total absorption of his work, he left God -- crowded Him away completely.

"It's the oft-repeated and sad tale of materialism becoming one's god -- one's obsession. Cork and Pamela were too little and tiny to remember those things when their parents took them to church. But they used to go, regularly and consistently; nothing could or would have kept them away."

"Cork's sure a skeptic," Chad remarked. "We're 'squares' of the most repulsive kind in his eyes. And Pam's just as bad. Honestly, Mother, you wouldn't believe some of the things she says and believes!"

Carma sat down on a chair. Throwing her hands out in a gesture of utter futility, she said, "What can we do? We have nothing in common -- not one single thing. And now that Cork and Pamela are older, they'll want to run all over town day and night. All the time. They plan to come in Cork's new Thunderbird," she added. " 'A bright red, shiny, new thing' . . . Pam's words, Mother."

"You'll just have to take your stand," Mrs. Archer said softly. "We have rules and regulations and restrictions here, as both of you know, and they are every bit as effective and binding when you have guests and company as when we are alone., just the four of us."

"Oh, that's not any problem," Chad replied, "because I delight in keeping the rules and in obeying Dad and you. But what about Cork and Pare? Well, I mean, suppose they don't go along with what is standard procedure around here?"

"We'll face that mountain when it looms up before us, Chad," was the meaningful response. "Meanwhile, we'll do a lot of earnest praying and trusting God to make good come out of their visit. How many days will it be, Carma? Did she say?"

"Pam said two, but knowing Cork and her I'd say it would be more like a week -- if they like it well enough here, that is. They're both so restless all the time."

"Dissatisfied is the more fitting and proper word," Chad injected quickly. "But say, I wonder if the Lord's pleased with us, Carma -- all this negative thinking and negative talk about two people who are our exact ages and for whom Jesus died. I believe I'll go out to the garage and pray. It doesn't take much of this kind of thing to grieve the Spirit of God and soon one's soul is all dark and hazy with spiritual cobwebs of doubt and mistrust and wrong imaginations."

Getting quickly to her feet, Carma said, "You're right, Chad. I've been looking only at the one side of the coin -- the bad side and the dark side; now it's time I pray and find the sunny side, then write our dear cousin and tell her to come."

With that Carma hurried upstairs to her bedroom and shut the door. Nothing... absolutely nothing... could alter one's life and his thinking, she knew, like time spent alone on one's knees with God.

The bright red, classy looking and sleekly customized car slid to a stop in the Archer's driveway and Cork, ever sure of himself, stepped out of the car with the bearing of a king, Pamela at his heels.

Chad and Carma, hearing the door slam, hurried out to meet the pair.

"What wretched roads you have in your neck of the woods!" Cork exploded by way of a greeting. "Nearly wrecked that thing of beauty standing out in the driveway. I'm sure it's thrown off balance. Probably needs an alignment and . . ."

"Come inside," Carma invited pleasantly, interrupting her male cousin's complaints. "A bowl of Mother's steaming-hot, absolutely hearty and filling chicken corn soup with rivels will help you to forget about our 'wretched' roads, Cork. And Pam, do let me help you with your luggage," she added, hurrying to where Pam was digging suitcases out of the trunk.

"Here, both of you. Scoot!" Chad exclaimed, taking a hand and carrying the matching cases into the house and up the stairs.

"You're just in time for dinner," Mrs. Archer told her niece and nephew as they came through the front door.

"And am I ever hungry!" Pamela exclaimed, giving her aunt a surprisingly warm hug.

"Me, too!" Cork admitted grudgingly, his mind still absorbed with the roads and his Thunderbird.

The day passed in a surprisingly pleasant way, and when finally devotions were over and Pam and Carma were together in the bedroom which they shared, Pam said suddenly, "I'm so glad Cork said he'd bring me here when I asked him to. I used to think you and Chad and your folks were odd and 'not with it,' as my crowd terms someone who doesn't conform and adapt to the 'in' things and ways of doing things. But I see how terribly mistaken I've been."

Carma could scarcely believe what she was hearing. It all seemed unrealistic and too beautiful and wonderful to be true. She reached across the bed and took her cousin's dainty and well cared for hand.

Pamela raised her eyes and met the compassionate, sympathetic and understanding eyes of Carma.

With renewed courage she continued: "I'm not happy, Carma. Really I'm not. And I'm so ashamed of myself for playing the role of a snobbish and vain rich girl. I'm just not a good actress, I guess; or maybe it's simply that I just got sick and tired of trying to be what I'm not -- happy, I mean. Inside, I'm all tore up!" she exclaimed, suddenly breaking down and weeping.

"Do you want to find real happiness, Pare dear? I ... I... mean, well, you are serious, aren't you?"

"Completely serious," came the broken reply. "And . . . and Carma, I may as well tell you everything now . . . this first day that we're here. It will help me so very much, knowing that you know and that you'll be praying. Father and Mother are having trouble . . . serious trouble."

Carma gasped. She felt the color drain from her face.

"I... I'm afraid there'll be a divorce soon unless something happens to stop them. And, oh, I love them so! Both of them. You can't begin to imagine what agony and heartache and heartbreak this brings to Cork and me. Sometimes I feel perfect bitterness for Dad; then Mother does something hateful and mean and the pendulum of bitterness swings in her direction. We're torn between two loves, and it's sheer torment. I had to get away; I believe I'd soon have had a nervous breakdown."

"I . . . I'm sorry, Pam." Carma's sentence sounded so trite but it was all she could think of at the time.

"I wish our family was happy like your family is, Carma. You all love each other; and so far back as I can remember, I've never heard one unkind word spoken under this roof. Please, Carma," Pam begged, "show me what to do to be happy like you are. I know I used to make fun of you, but I see now that I have nothing. You and Chad and your family have everything because you have Christ in your heart and in your home. I want to know Him too, Carma..."

Carma's eyes were misted over with a shower of tears. Looking through them, she saw her cousin's face as she remembered having seen a beggar's face one blustery-cold day on the city streets . . . hungry and chilly and eagerly awaiting and expecting help. And, like she had met the derelict's need, pressing her last four dollars and ten cents warmly in his cold hand, she got to her feet now and, extending her hand to her cousin, she said brokenly, "Come, Pam, we'll pray. Jesus has rest and peace for your soul."

An hour later, the newly-converted Pam was sleeping as soundly and as peacefully as a baby. Carma, wide awake, too happy and overjoyed to go to sleep, wondered what was happening in Chad and Cork's room. Would tomorrow reveal the

glorious fact that two, instead of one, had begun traveling the "strait and narrow" road to Heaven?

"And to think," she whispered softly under her breath, "that I had almost dreaded having them come. Souls for whom Christ died. Why, they can stay a week, or . . . or . . . a month; or . . . forever!" she added, closing her eyes and sending praises to God for putting it in Pain's heart to want to come.

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THE END