My Special Christmas Gift
By Mrs. Paul E. King
From the December 12, 1982 Sunday School Beacon

I all but ran out the living room door and slushed my well-booted feet along the sidewalk, feeling simply wretched and miserable deep in my heart. The joy and peace which I'd felt earlier had vanished and fled away. Gone; it was gone!

Hot scalding tears stung my eyes and rolled quickly down my cheeks, making me feel more like a real baby than an almost-eighteen-year-old young woman. But I couldn't help myself; I simply couldn't. With Melissa coming, this was impossible.

Melissa and I were cousins . . . first cousins, to be a bit more explicit; and she was absolutely and positively the haughtiest and most vain of all my many cousins. Her vanity and strut and pride made her obnoxious and nauseous to me. I knew this would be the most horrid Christmas I'd ever had. Instead of it being a time of beauty and joy, it was turning into a nightmare. And for two full weeks, too!

I dug my gloved hands deep into the pockets of my coat and moaned with the wind as it whistled its mournful way through the naked branches of the trees. Why our home? I wondered. Why not Aunt Helen's or Aunt Diane's or... or... ? Well, there were so many other relatives that I just couldn't figure out why she had decided to come to our house for Christmas. And tonight, at that!
I had never been asked or consulted if it would be all right if she shared my bedroom nor if I'd be glad to see her. Oh, it was all so very, very unfair and . . . and brazen-bold of her, barging in on us this way.

I knew one thing, and that was a certainty, that if I'd have had my blood pressure checked right then, it would have been sky high.

I was almost past Raymond's house when I brought my booted feet to a quick halt and turned in at the gate. Knocking lightly, his mother opened the door and welcomed me inside.

"Why, Cherissa!" Raymond exclaimed, hearing my voice and coming into the living room. "Whatever brings you out on a night like this? It's bad enough that the city crew must be out clearing the streets, but . . . but you! What's wrong? Something's bothering you, I can tell."

Raymond was closer to me than any of the other young men in our church group. He was like an old well-worn shoe, "comfortable" to be around. And I guess he understood me better than almost anybody I knew, even better than my many girlfriends did. He was always patient and kind, and in every walk of life, he demonstrated and exemplified the spirit of Christ and of true holiness. And now, standing before him, the fountain of tears gushed from my eyes.

"Whatever is wrong?" he asked anxiously.

"Do tell us," his mother begged, laying a gentle hand on my shoulder and removing my coat as she led me to a comfortable chair.

"It... it's Melissa!" I finally managed to blurt out.

"Melissa? Oh," Raymond said, brightening, "Your cousin. What about her?"

"She . . . she's coming to our house for . . . for two whole weeks. Imagine it! Two weeks in which to put up with vanity and pomp and strut and pride. I can't bear the thought of it. I can't!" I cried, burying my face in my hands and sobbing uncontrollably.

Raymond must have studied my remarks for awhile because there was utter silence in the room for a long time. Then he said kindly, "What is a candle for, Cherissa? And why did Jesus say the Christian is the salt of the earth?"

Brushing my tears aside, I said quickly, "Well, if you think it's easy to let your light shine before her 'Vain-Highness,' you just need to try it while she's here. Talk about conceit; that's Melissa, my cousin."

Again, Raymond was silent. Then, "Perhaps the Lord directed her to your home..."
The sentence trailed meaningfully.

"She doesn't want spiritual help, Ray; not if that's what you mean. Why, she makes fun of our 'brand of religion'... her words. I tell you, she'll see to it that I have a miserable Christmas."

I guess my last statement shocked Raymond, for when I looked up at him, his mouth was agape and his face wore a look of utter pain and incredulity.

"I'm sorry," I apologized humbly, feeling shocked at my inner feelings, "but you just don't know Melissa. She's impossible to live around. Utterly impossible!"

"I think we'd better have a word of prayer together, Cherissa. I believe you're looking too much at the negative side of your cousin. You just don't know what's in her heart. She may be searching for God."

"Melissa searching for God! Who are you trying to kid, Raymond? I know her..."

"Well, let's pray anyway. She has a soul to save, and I mean to do everything in my power to try to help her while she's here."

I felt the tears springing up in my eyes again, and as soon as Raymond finished praying, I excused myself and started for the door.

"You mustn't go out on a night like this," Raymond said kindly. "I'll drive you home."

I appreciated his kindness but I'd much rather have walked. That way I could have had more time to sort out my feelings about some of the things he said. But he insisted, and when I was inside his old but well-kept Chevy, I had to admit that I was thankful for the warmth and the protection of the car.

I thanked him when we reached our driveway, and the moment I stepped on the porch, I knew that Melissa was already at the house. My youngest sister was chattering like a magpie and flitting around inside like a June-bug on a hot bulb. It was disgusting. Bracing myself and taking a great, deep breath, I walked inside.

"Hi, Cherissa," my cousin bubbled effusively.

Ignoring the warmth of her greeting, I replied coldly, "Hi, yourself."

Melissa's an extremely beautiful young woman and, to her credit, she's almost always smiling. My icy unwelcome, however, was like throwing a storm cloud across the
sun. Her ordinarily sunny disposition took on a look of such pain and pathos that for a brief moment, I felt sorry that I had acted so hateful and mean to her.

"What have I done," she cried, "to make you hate me so?"

Her words were like a slap in my face. Hate her so? Did I actually hate my cousin? If so, I was classed as a murderer.

Frankly, I was shaken. From the top of my head to the tips of my size 5 shoes, I was shaken. But the new feeling stirring inside me had thrown me into a frenzy. Raymond remembered Melissa, and he was sure to have remembered her beauty and charm as well, and he said he intended to help her all he could!

Up until now, I had thought of Raymond only as a good friend, comfortable to be around and with--a good pal. But now, with Melissa's arrival and her unusual beauty, plus the fact that my closest male friend intended to help her, I realized just how much more than a friend Raymond was to me. The fact that I was just rather ordinary looking and no raving beauty added further to my distress and misery.

I ran upstairs, leaving Melissa to the bubbly chatter and laughter of my nine-year-old sister, ShannaAn, who was delighted with the new visitor and house guest.

The sight of her beautiful dresses hanging inside my clothes closet filled me with even more contempt for her. She had name brand clothes, with price tags to match the names; mine were basically hand-me-downs or homemade by my mother, who was, I must admit, an efficient and expert seamstress. Alongside Melissa's, my dresses looked so very plain and ordinary.

I closed the closet door and threw myself across the bed and wept. And then, while in my fit of crying, God began speaking to me. He showed me things and attitudes which shocked me. Frightened me, really. Always, I had considered myself a good Christian. But now, with God's searchlight turned full blast on my heart... my inmost me...

I saw that I was nothing but a sham. I was a phony, a hypocrite.

The revelation was so startling and blinding as to make me tremble. I was full of bitter envy and hatred and strife, and for the first time in my deceived life, I saw that the pearly gates would never swing wide to give me entrance or admittance. Were I to die now, I'd lose my soul in hell.

With impending doom hanging over my head, my knees hit the floor without a moment's hesitation or wait. I was as lost as any soul could, or ever would, be.

Never in all my life did I pray and plead with God the way I did while in my bedroom. I saw myself for what I actually was and not for what I thought I'd been. Don't ask me how long I prayed; one doesn't count time (by anyone's clock) when you feel
you're dropping into hell and may never again hear the voice of God or feel the tug of the gentle Spirit. All I know and all I can tell you is that I prayed and wept, confessed and repented clear to the bottom, and He came. Oh, the glory, the pure joy and the rapture of it all. My soul was transported into the heavens; I was born of God . . . saved. Saved! All the wicked and hateful thoughts I'd had toward my cousin were now changed to nothing but love and kindness.

Rushing down the stairs, I ran into the kitchen where everyone was assembled and, throwing my arms around Melissa, I begged her forgiveness. "I'm so sorry for the way I treated you," I told her. "It was jealousy in my heart, jealousy and selfishness. But that's all gone," I added, "I'm converted and I love you--love you."

Melissa looked at me in utter amazement and astonishment, then she broke down and cried. "Oh, Cherissa," she said brokenly, "I'm so happy to hear you say that. You've always been my favorite cousin and... and the reason I came here for Christmas was because I thought you had something that none of my other cousins had; and... and I was hoping you would be able to help me. I'm not one bit happy," she confessed. "And when you acted like you weren't even happy to see me, well..."

"Oh, Melissa!" I exclaimed tearfully. "I'm so sorry; so very sorry. It was so unkind of me, so unChrist-like. But I'm new, believe me. You'll see the wonderful change. And I promise to make it all up to you."

Seldom can a heart be lonely
If it seek a lonelier still--
Self-forgetting, seeking only,
Emptier cups of love to fill.
--Francis Ridley Havergal

Well, believe me when I say that I never had a more blessed or wonderful Christmas. Gifts? They didn't mean a thing to me. You see, I found and received the most priceless of all gifts: Jesus, my wonderful Lord and my Saviour. Oh, yes, one thing more, my heart was made perfect in love shortly after my glorious conversion . . . divine love! I was thoroughly, throughly and entirely sanctified. Melissa and I are now making plans for her next visit here. She's changed entirely, too. After my humbling down, it was easy to lead her to Christ. Like myself, her best and most priceless gift was the Christ of Christmas. What more does anyone need?--Nothing, absolutely nothing.

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THE END