INTERRUPTED CHRISTMAS
By Mrs. Paul E. King

I stood looking through the window to the snow-covered lawn outside, hands in my pockets, watching the boys across the street. They were having a merry time tumbling and rolling in the snow and building a snow fort.

I smiled enigmatically, recalling those years when I was there with them. But of course, that was a positively ridiculous thought. The neighbors
would wonder if I'd lost my marbles or had become suddenly senile, or some such thing. Not, that I didn't enjoy making snow sculptures with fellows my own age: I dirt. But tumbling with little folks? No. Still, it would be fun, if some of the other teens from church would help, too.

I turned away from the window just as the mantel clock struck ten. Was the clock keeping correct time? I wondered, rubbing the hollow part in my stomach. It felt like a cave; a huge, empty cave,

"Hey, Mom," I called, "what time did you say we were having our Christmas dinner?"

"One o'clock, James. Why?"

"Is this clock right'? I mean . . . well, it just now struck ten o'clock."

"That's right; and a good thing for me that it is. I have a few more things to get ready for dinner. Why are you asking?"

"Cause my stomach feels like it's rubbing my rib cage. It's empty, hollow. And you know what kind of echoes come from hollow things, Mom! What time will Dad be home? Calling again?" I stood framed in the kitchen-dining room doorway of the old but well-constructed parsonage.

"Your father said he'd be home long before the meal is ready, James. And yes, he is calling. Mrs. Pitkin."

"Ugh!" I grunted. "She'll keep dad all day. She's neurotic; the biggest complainer in our church. I wonder what God doesn't get weary with her continual complaining. He did with the Israelites," I added by way of emphasis.

Mother turned and faced me. "Don't say that, James; not ever again. I'm afraid that we who are well and have strong, healthy bodies, don't, know how to sympathize with those who suffer. I say this to our shame. Perhaps if we endured the pain which some of our parishioners suffer constantly and continually, we'd be able to better understand them and their reason for needing and wanting prayer and Christian fellowship. And we'd be far more careful and cautious about calling them neurotic, too.
Here, help me with the vegetables; this stalk of celery needs to be washed and the carrots must be taken care of, too."

"Aw, Mom, must I? I mean, well, it seems sort of sissy . . . me cleaning celery and carrots. How about some other job?"

Without any more words, Mother handed me a vegetable brush and motioned for me to get busy. I wished I'd have kept my mouth shut and just sort of made myself extinct, or some such thing. Anything would have been better -- and more manly -- than having to clean and scrub vegetables. Why if Carolyn would see me, she'd . . .

At thought of Carolyn, I felt my face redden. Horror of horrors, were she to bring my gift now! (She told me in school she had something for me.)

I brushed furiously, trying to pacify the hunger pains with an occasional mouthful of vegetables, and hoping for all that was within me that Carolyn would forget about the gift until the day was far advanced.

I should have waited, and taken her my gift today instead of giving it to her last night, I thought, looking anxiously toward the door every now and again. But I couldn't wait -- like a child with the proverbial penny (or nickel or dime) which "burned a hole" in his or her pocket, I felt my gift to Carolyn had to be delivered (in person) and given to her on Christmas eve. Carolyn, on the other hand, declared there was no time like Christmas day for giving and receiving gifts.

The door chimes tinkled musically, cheerily. I jumped with fright. Carolyn! It just must be her! Wouldn't you know it! Dropping the brush into the sink, and wiping my wet hands on the towel, I almost ran to the door. Doing my best not to look either feminine or kitchen-ish, I threw the door open wide.

"A very Merry Christmas to you!" a male voice chirruped warmly and sincerely. "A plant from one of your church members, have a happy day."

"Th . . . thank you," I stammered with relief, "And a truly wonderful Christmas to you, too."
He smiled, then left as quickly as he had arrived. Holding the enormous poinsettia in my hands, I glanced surreptitiously down the street. Seeing no one, other than the disappearing floral van, I heaved an enormous sigh of utter relief then closed the door and carried the beautiful plant in to Mother. "A plant from one of the members," I quoted as I drew the card from its small envelope where it was nestled in a bed of petals and leaves.

"How nice. How very nice, and so thoughtful, too!" Mother exclaimed, sniffling ever so softly.

I hurried to the sink, to my almost-finished job of vegetable cleaning, not wanting to watch my mother cry. She was so sentimental. Whenever anything nice happened to her -- which was frequent and often -- her tear ducts had an uncanny way of unlocking and running rampant.

Hearing her sniffe again -- louder this time -- I began humming. Then, turning the volume of my voice up, I went into a lusty and joyful rendition of The First Noel. I sang it through twice, pausing briefly at the conclusion of each verse to "hear" how things were progressing or subsiding behind my back.

"You may stop now, James," Mother said, when I had begun the first verse for the third "repeat performance." "My tears are spent, I promise."

Turning, we faced each other. Then, simultaneously, we began to laugh.

"It would be nice if I didn't have to cry each time I received a gift; but I can't help it," she said as she opened the oven and slid a cherry and an apple pie into the oven.

I wanted to tell her that I, too, wished she wouldn't cry over such beautiful and thoughtful things, but instead, I said, "Well, I guess you wouldn't be Mother then. And Jeanne and I wouldn't want you to change, not ever. I sure do miss Jeanne." I added. "This will be the first Christmas we haven't been a complete family."

Mother sighed. "We'll have to get used to it," she said softly. "I miss her dreadfully. But she's fulfilling her calling and this fills my heart with joy. We prayed for a missionary."
I finished the last piece of celery. "I'm happy for her, too," I admitted, "and maybe someday I'll be visiting her mission station. But it sure seems empty without her."

"That's true, James. We all miss her. Yet this was one big reason we asked the Lord to give us children . . . that we may give them back to Him for service. Long before your sister and you were born, you were given to the Lord. It was much the same as Hannah. who asked God for a child then gave him back to God after he was weaned. Jeanne is winning souls to Jesus. Our joy is full."

Mom's statement sobered me; it got me to thinking. I mean really thinking; great, deep, serious, spiritual thoughts, I knew the Bible said that I was not my own, that I was "bought with a price" -- the Blood of Jesus. And now, hearing what my mother and father had done -- made a sort of contract with God -- well, I knew I'd have to obey that call I'd been trying to shrug off for better than four months.

When Mom's back was turned, while she was pouring the pumpkin custard filling into the two unbaked pie crusts on the counter top, I slipped quietly out of the kitchen, to my bedroom.

It was almost as though the Lord was waiting for me; as if He'd been expecting me, for when I dropped on my knees beside the bed, He was there. Just like that! And this time, instead of telling Him how utterly and completely incapable and unqualified I was to be a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I wept brokenly and humbly as I said one great big eternal yes, to do what He wanted me to do, be what He wanted me to be, and to go where He wanted me to go.

Words are such inadequate tools in describing one's inner knowledge of peace and joy. I mean, well, how can anyone explain overflowing and ceaseless rivers surging up and pouring in, billow after holy billow, of holy joy and inner peace! It's impossible; only the experiencing, receiving heart can know its glorious and indescribable effects. And this clay, on my knees, I became the recipient of a wholly sanctified, perfectly cleansed and purified heart.
Unable to contain my joy, and wanting to give testimony that I was finally, and fully, dead unto self and alive unto Christ. I hurried down the stairs to Mother.

"It's settled!" I exclaimed, coming into the kitchen. "I'm wholly sanctified. And I'm going to preach the gospel of full salvation, too. Oh, I have such wonderful peace and joy!"

"Praise the Lord"

I hadn't known Dad was home, and his hearty "Praise the Lord" took me by surprise. In the next minute, we were locked in each other's arms, crying for pure joy and happiness.

"You'll never be sorry," Dad said. "The yielded life is the happiest, most blessedly-blissful life one can have."

"I'm sure of it, Dad, and this is the happiest Christmas I've ever known. Today, I've experienced why God sent Jesus into the world; to be my Savior, yes, but also to be my sanctifier."

The turkey browned tantalizingly delicious in the oven and mother's pies stood cooling on trivets on the counter top, steam vapors rising ever so faintly from the tiny vents in their top crust. I checked the clock for time, trying to decide just how much better the turkey would have to smell before Mom decided it was time to remove him from the oven, when (to my pleasant surprise) she asked would I please lift the roaster up on the counter top for her.

"Need help?" Dad asked quickly.

"No thanks. Go and rest a while," I told him. He looked weary, I thought.

"If you need me," he remarked, "I'll be handy." Then he disappeared into the living room.

He must have napped, for when dinner was ready, Mom had to call him several times before he heard and responded.
We sat down to the table and, after returning thanks, began the delightful, delicious joy of eating. The turkey was fork-tender and mild, the body roasted to a golden brown, and the dressing was super. The vegetables were super, too: and the relishes. Everything was perfect. Jeanne's chair looked terribly lonely and empty, but it was a wonderful family Christmas in spite of the distance that separated her from us and us from her.

We had just gotten well into filling our plates when the phone jangled noisily. Dad nearest the phone answered it. Reaching for a pen, he scribbled a name on his napkin. "I'll be there." he said before hanging up.

"Something wrong?" Mother asked, wearing a concerned look on her face.

"A Mr. Hawkins," Dad answered, taking a quick bite of turkey and dressing. "He's dying. They want me at the hospital."

"Hawkins?" Mom questioned. "I can't place him."

"Neither can I," Dad replied. "His daughter said he heard me preach on the radio some time ago, and he's calling for me now. He's not saved."

I dropped the bit of dressing meant for my mouth and stared at Dad. "Hawkins. That must be Darrell's dad. He's a Hawkins. And he told me at school that his dad's terminally ill. It must be him, Dad, Oh, don't let him die without finding God! I've witnessed to Darrell numerous times. Maybe this will help to bring him to God."

"I trust so. But now I must be leaving. I'm sorry about this Peg," Dad said, patting mother gently on her hand. "But you understand . . ."

I looked at Morn, then I looked at the table spread with food fit for royalty. Then I decided.

"Wait for me, Dad," I called, hurrying out the door after him,

"Your Mother," Dad said, sliding beneath the steering wheel of the car. "She'll be alone, James."
"I . . . I know. But Dad, I must go; Darrell needs me. And this may be the key that will unlock the door of his heart."

"I feel sorry for your mother, James."

"I do, too. But Mom's dedicated to God and to you and your work. She'll understand."

Dad looked over at me and smiled. "You're getting broken in and initiated early," he declared. "But it's just as well, Yes, it's just as well."

We rode in silence after that, a bond of mutual love and compassion and understanding between us.

It was Darrell's father all right, and I was thankful that I obeyed the urge to come with my dad. Darrell was torn to shreds, emotionally. Sobbing great heaving sobs, he asked, "Why did this have to happen to my dad? Why, James? He was a good father . . ."

"Maybe it's to draw you to God," I answered without preamble.

He looked shocked; almost disbelieving.

"It's true," I stressed. "God sometimes has to take someone we love to get us to thinking about Him. He does it to bring us to Himself; to get us saved, ready for heaven."

"But my dad's not even saved, so why should I be saved? He's gone through life this way."

"And why do you suppose he called for my dad to come, Darrell? Look at him. Listen to him; he's scared to die without God to take him across the river. You need the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to help you through life and to prepare you for heaven. You can only die peacefully if you have made adequate preparation for what lies beyond the grave, and this peace is found only in Jesus Christ."

Darrell looked at his father, gasping for breath and begging for prayer. Then he said, "You make, sense, James, Perhaps I'll do something about it."
"Not perhaps, Darrell: make it a final, positive 'I will.'"

Looking toward the bed again, where my dad was now praying, Darrell whispered brokenly, "I'll do it, James, I will; get ready for heaven, like Dad's doing now. I don't want to wait till I can hardly breathe . . ."

We left the room an hour later, staying until Darrell and his father prayed through.

I thought of Morn then, and how she no doubt had cleared the table and washed the pots and pans and put each back in its proper place, She missed Dad, I knew. But she was "far-sighted"; her vision looked beyond the myriad interruptions to the needs buried deep in the hearts of men and women. She was in close contact with the Man "acquainted with grief," the One Who came to earth, not to be ministered unto, but to minister -- to others.

The phone was ringing as we came into the parsonage. Mother handed it to Dad, saying, "For you, dear, tired husband."

Dad's conversation was brief; his message to us briefer still. "He's gone," he said simply. "Mr. Hawkins just passed away."

I sat on a kitchen chair staring at the floor. Then I said, "God got to him just in time, Dad. Oh, I'm so glad he got saved." Suddenly, I realized there were many more important things than big Christmas dinners. An interruption could be a God-send, like today. I was thankful for a dedicated father and mother whose lives were lived wholly for Christ and for others.