GETTING READY FOR CHRISTMAS
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Now who could that be? Eileen Courtney wondered as she put the
fancy Christmas ball down carefully on a pillow and headed for the back
door, feeling greatly agitated.
"Please, Mrs. Courtney, may Holly come out and play with me?" Scott Weedham asked, looking wistfully up into Eileen's face, his five-year-old frame standing tall and erect in front of the frowning neighbor woman.

"No Scott. I told you once that Holly cannot come out today. She'll track snow puddles all over my freshly-waxed kitchen floor and leave them on the carpeting in the house. Now don't bother me again. I'm busy." With that Eileen shut the door and hurried back to the living room and picked up the expensive bauble-ornament.

She rearranged the holly on the fireplace mantel then set an exquisite solid silver candelabrum in its center. The scarlet-red candles in the holders made a striking contrast to the deep, dark green holly leaves. Next she placed the ornament carefully on a sprig of holly, adding another and another, until the mantel was a showpiece. Smiling, she stood back to admire the effect.

"Mama, may I help you? Please?" Holly asked half-fearfully, as she stood framed in the doorway, not sure that she dare set foot in the living room.

"Now Holly, you know I'm busy. Run along and play with your dolls."

"But Mama, I want to help you. I like Christmas. May I help to put the candles in the windows?" And the little girl took a daring step through the doorway on to the living room carpet.

"Take your shoes off, Holly! Can't you see that I just cleaned the carpeting? Now go . . . ."

Tears sprang into Holly's eyes. Immediately she turned and disappeared from the room.

Eileen continued her decorating. Soon an enormous wreath hung on the front door and every window in the house had a candle on its sill. The tree that occupied an entire corner of the living room was strung with tiny little pink-red lights and adorned with expensive ornaments. The room looked like something from a magazine, so beautiful and well-decorated it was. Now to finish the cookies, she thought as she left the room.
The phone rang. Eileen hurried to answer it. How she did wish people would not disturb her all the time! "Hello, Mrs. Courtney speaking," she said into the mouth-piece.

"You . . . no, Mrs. Fullerton. I'm sorry, I can't babysit Jamie. Yes, I know she's Holly's age. But I can't do it; I'm too busy. You . . . you're ill? Well, that's just too bad. I hope you get to feeling better. No, I just can't take care of her. I'm trying to get ready for Christmas. Try Mrs. Calloway, she may be able to take care of Jamie. And do try to rest. Yes. Yes, I'll call her for you. Goodbye."

Eileen stood looking at the phone in disgust after she hung up. "You time consumer!" she exclaimed, dialing Mrs. Calloway's number like she had promised. She let it ring and ring until she was ashamed of herself then she placed the receiver back in place. She had done what she promised she'd do, she told her conscience, and since there was no answer, she'd forget about Mrs. Fullerton.

She took the cookie dough out of the refrigerator and began rolling and cutting, slipping the filled cookie sheets into the oven for baking as fast as she could.

"You should call Mrs. Fullerton," a still, small voice urged her.

Eileen pushed the nagging thought from her mind and continued baking and frosting the cookies. She had too many things to do to get ready for Christmas to be bothered with other people's affairs and problems, she told her conscience.

The doorbell rang. Tsk, tsk, tsk-ing her way to the front door, she opened it roughly. Seeing Scott, she scolded, " Didn't I tell you not to bother me, young man! Now go on home and stay home. Holly can't come out and play. Do you understand?"

"But . . . but, Mrs. Courtney, Holly's running a . . ."

Eileen waited to hear no more. Slamming the door in Scott's face, she walked briskly back to the kitchen where the last batch of cookies was almost too brown for frosting prettily. "Ruined my cookies, that's what he did!" she exclaimed bitterly as she put them on the wire rack for cooling.
While the cookies lay on the counter top in row after row, waiting and ready to be placed in special cans and containers, Eileen changed the kitchen tablecloth from the cross-stitched beige one she had made to a new berry-red polyester and cotton cloth which she had bought especially for the Christmas season. Placing a sprig of holly on each matching napkin and setting a white candle in the center of the table, she complimented herself on the beautiful transformation. Almost, she was ready for Christmas. She sighed with relief.

A screeching of wheels and the loud bang of a car . . . door in the driveway made Eileen look through the kitchen window to the garage. She saw Fred all but run toward the porch. Her husband was home from work early today, she thought.

The door burst open. "Where's Holly?" Fred asked. "What's this I hear about her running away?" His face was ash-white.

"She's up playing with her dolls," Eileen answered.

"No she isn't!" Fred insisted, hurrying up the stairs to make sure he was right. "Mrs. Weedham called the office; said Scott saw Holly running down the street, crying like her heart was broken," he added as he ran.

Eileen turned from the cookies which she was layering so carefully into the containers and followed her husband. "It . . . it can't be true!" she cried. "Holly would's do anything like that. She's too little."

"Well, she's gone," Fred said in a forlorn, hollow empty kind of voice. Turning and facing his wife, he asked, "What did you do, to make her do such a thing? Oh, Eileen, I can't believe it. I can't!"

"Ma . . . maybe she's hiding," the distraught mother said, trying to buoy both her husband's and her own sinking feelings up.

"I looked," came the sad reply. "Oh where could she have gone? I watched for her as I drove home, but not a sign of her on any of our streets. Oh, Eileen! Eileen, what happened?"
"I told her to go and play with her dolls, Fred; believe me. She wanted to help me decorate and . . ."

"And as always, you made her leave the room. You'd rather have a perfect house than to have little, awkward hands . . . oh, so willing and ready! . . . to help you decorate and work! Oh Eileen! Eileen! You have crushed her little spirit once too often. You have so few kind words for our children; nothing but scoldings and fussing. And they are so little and . . . and sensitive. I'm beginning to believe you love your house more than you do our eight-year-old son and five-year-old daughter. This house is your god; the souls of our offspring mean little or nothing to you."

"Fred! I . . . . . I . . ."

"Let me finish," the husband cried, his face contorted in pain. "I suppose you think I didn't notice the many unnecessary scoldings you unleashed upon Peter and Holly. Well, I did notice. Inwardly, I cringe. Always, it's Don't do That! Now stop that noise! You can't play in here; how often must I tell you? Put yourself in our children's place; how would you feel? How would you react?"

"You just don't understand, Fred; I was getting ready for Christmas and . . ."

"I do understand Eileen. Too well! You want a perfect house, at the expense of Peter's and Holly's wholesome up-bringing. God's virtuous woman in Proverbs keeps a good house, to be sure, but she is a wonderful mother too. If all you care about and think of is this fuss and finery in 'getting ready for Christmas' then I'll be happy if we never have another one like it. Christmas is Christ's birth. Now come, we have a daughter to locate. And forgive me if I sound like I'm scolding; I'm not. But it's time that you get your priorities put in their proper perspective. Our children's happiness, and their security, means far more to me than spotless carpets and a few scattered toys."

Eileen felt numb with shock. Like a mechanical toy, she followed her husband toward the car just as the phone rang.

Fred ran down the hallway and picked up the receiver. "Fred Courtney speaking," he said into the mouthpiece. "Who? Oh yes. Mrs. Mangum on
April Drive? Yes. Yes, I know where you live. Thank you. We'll be right over. Keep her inside till I get there."

With a great sigh of relief, he placed the receiver back in place. "She's at the Mangum's," he announced in a quivering voice. "Thank God, she's safe!" he added tearfully.

Eileen said nothing all the way to the Mangum's house. Her tears flowed freely, however. She had been cross and unkind to her children, she realized, and she did scold and fuss at them more than she complimented and praised them. If it was true that children absorbed and reflected their parents' attitudes and teachings . . . . . . . . and it was true, she was sure . . . . . . . then she, Eileen Courtney, was producing two very negative and unhappy children: Children who, because of her continual nagging and scolding them, were insecure and unhappy and introverted. She hadn't demonstrated or manifested much love to either child, she told her broken heart. She had gotten the house 'ready for Christmas' but what had she done to prepare the hearts of her offspring for God's very special Gift, Jesus?

Fred stopped the car in front of the Mangum house and got out. Eileen followed him, in a mist of blinding tears.

Mrs. Mangum met them at the door. "She's rather upset," she stated of Holly. "Poor little thing! She said she wants to live at our house because I read to her and tell her I love her and don't scold her. She's up in Stephanie's room. They're playing together. I'll call her. I knew you didn't know she had slipped out of the house. And without a coat, too! Poor little thing!"

Holly came down the stairs at Mrs. Mangum's call. Seeing her parents, she cried, "Please Daddy, may I live with Mrs. Mangum? She loves me and . . ."

"And we love you too, Holly!" Fred and Eileen exclaimed, rushing forward to meet the little girl.

"But Mommy doesn't need me." Holly cried, "Mrs. Mangum does! I help her dust, and I dry the dishes when I come over to play with Stephanie. And . . . and . . . she doesn't scold me if I spill my milk."
Wrapping her arms around the slender little girl, Eileen sobbed. "Mommy needs you, Holly dear. And Mommy loves you very, very much. Daddy and I couldn't live without you. I'm sorry for all the times I scolded you unnecessarily; I want you to forgive me. I'm going to ask Jesus to forgive me too, when I get home. And Holly, you're going to have a different kind of Mommy when Jesus gets through with me. Now thank Mrs. Mangum for her kindness then we must go. Grandma will soon be bringing Peter home from shopping. We want to be there when he gets home. And I have more 'getting ready for Christmas' to take care of too; things like spending time alone with Jesus, and things like reading Bible stories to my dear little Holly and her brother Peter. I have a lot of 'catching up' to do so we must begin right now. This time, my 'getting ready for Christmas' will all center upon and around Jesus."

Fred folded Eileen to his bosom, praising the Lord as he did so.

Eileen smiled at her husband. "Thanks for helping me to see myself," she said brokenly and humbly. "And now, hadn't we better leave, dear?" she asked. "I need to stop by Mrs. Fullerton's and see if I can bring Jamie home with us. And I must go by the Weedham's and apologize to Scott for being so rude and cross and unkind to him today. I want to clear the way for Christ to be born again in my heart. I crowded Him out amid the cares and the activities of life. Like the multitude on the night of His birth, I crowded Him out of my heart. But today things are going to change; I am returning to Him. Yes, today I am 'getting ready for Christmas! . . . in my heart!'"

Tucking Holly snugly inside his ample topcoat and thanking Mrs. Mangum for her kindness, Fred started for the car, Eileen's hand in his.