Too Late
by Mrs. Paul E. King

She sat alone in the kitchen, rocking back and forth in the rocking chair. How old was that chair? Well, she mused in silent retrospection, it rocked Earl when he was born. (How proud she and her husband were of their baby!) And it had rocked her husband, too, when he was born, so her mother-in-law had told her. Even before Harvey's birth, the chair had been in the family she knew. But for how long before, no one seemed to know for
certain. Comfortable chair, she thought, trying to divert her attention away from the mainstream of thinking. Yes, very comfortable. How many times had she rocked Earl to sleep in it? No need even trying to recapitulate; the times were too numerous. And sweet, too, she was quick to admit.

Sweet? Well, yes. Yes. Only, the pain of certain memories had left more of a bitter-sweet remembrance. Yes, that was it; some things had proven more bitter than sweet. Only, he had said he'd be home this Christmas. That's what his scanty little note had stated. He had promised as much for the past ten Christmases though, hadn't he? But this Christmas would be different; he would come.

She closed her tired eyes, rocking slowly to and fro, and dreamed. Earl was such a tiny, little baby. But so very sweet. She remembered that first time when she cradled him in her arms and pulled him to her heaving bosom, scarcely believing the reality of the fact that, finally, Harvey and she had been able to adopt a child. A baby. Newborn. They had prayed for years for a son of their own. But that wasn't in God's plan for them. So they sought an alternative -- the adoption agency. For six years, they waited, hoping and praying. And one day, the long-awaited call came: the hospital had a baby boy, born to a young woman who did not want her child. They could come after their baby that very day.

She recalled her excitement and joy. (Yes, she had actually cried for pure joy that day.) Hurrying into their bedroom and opening the cedar chest, she had quickly removed the many waiting baby items from within its hidden interior . . . booties, caps, two sweaters, warm flannel gowns, undershirts, socks, three tiny, little suits, blankets, sheets and pillow cases. Then she had brought the bassinette down from the attic, cleaned out the dust, scrubbed its sides and legs inside and out and put the sheet over the small mattress, added the blankets, fluffed up the soft pillow, and waited for Harvey to come home for dinner.

They skipped dinner that day, so eager were they to bring the tiny, infant boy home. And Harvey was almost late for the afternoon work shift; he wanted to do nothing but hold their child.

She had watched the rise and the fall of the tiny chest as their Earl breathed the fresh, clean country air inside his new home and her mother heart felt at last fulfilled and happy. Her days took on a new meaning now . . .
an added dimension . . . and even the wakeful nights (when he was sick or had a fever) were sheer pleasure and a delight. Love flowed from Harvey's and her heart into every part of the child. No child could have received more love and tender care than Earl received, enough to keep him happy and make him feel wanted and welcome, but not so much as to smother him with it and by it. They had tried to be wise parents. Upright and righteous, too. And God-fearing.

The baby grew and waxed strong. An intelligent little chap. Unlike most children, he never really did crawl, but stood on his own two, solid feet as soon as he could manage to pull himself up. And then one day (she was baking cookies, wasn't she?), she felt a tiny hand grasp her skirt. Looking down into sky-blue eyes and a cherubic face, Earl gave her a mischievous but triumphant smile and toddled nobly away, walking from that day on.

Those were good days for the three of them, she mused, smiling to herself. They were so very happy together, Harvey, Earl and she. They had such high hopes for this now fastly-growing child. Such fond dreams. Holy dreams, really, and lofty aspirations. He must be educated and prepared to do service for Jesus, be that service great or small: a minister or missionary, teacher, doctor, or a farmer. Yes, they would do their part so that if God should want him in some special field or service for Him, the young man would be ready and equipped so far as they could equip him. No man was ever really ready, nor equipped properly, they knew, without the infilling of the Holy Ghost in sanctifying, purifying, purging power. That part was a matter which the boy and God alone could settle. Oh, how they had prayed to that end!

He had made a start toward God in childhood's tender days. Oh, how Harvey and she had rejoiced when he walked out of the church pew and ran to the altar for forgiveness of all his sins on that memorable Sunday night. And he was changed after that. Yes, he was. But he never went forward in search of a holy and a cleansed heart. Often, they had spoken to him about being sanctified, Harvey and she. He had smiled, saying, "Someday, maybe. I have a few things I want to know first."

She remembered questioning him, asking him what it was he wanted to know. He smiled and, shrugging his shoulders indifferently, he merely replied, "O just some things that wouldn't interest you."
They had pressed him, gently so; entreated him, too, to get a pure heart. Always, they got the same reply.

They were disappointed when he enrolled in a liberal arts college and not the old-fashioned Bible college which they had chosen for him. "I can't become an attorney studying Bible subjects," he had stated kindly.

Attorney? Dream number one was shattered. "Are you sure that's God's choice for you?" Harvey and she had asked.

Again that smile, that indifferent shrug of the shoulders. "That's what I'm going to become," he had stated positively and firmly, a settled fact.

He had gone away to college. Letters were few and far between to the two of them, Harvey and she. But they had been faithful; every week found her writing a thick, newsy letter to their son. Sometimes twice a week and, a few times, three. Each day, they waited eagerly for the rural mailman to bring their mail to the mailbox in front of their gate, and each day, their disappointment grew. Oh, they received mail, to be sure, but seldom ever any from him. What had they done wrong? Where had they failed? They had been good parents without being too good and giving the boy everything he wanted or asked for. Strict, but not without "full measures, running over" of love and compassion and understanding.

The day he wrote to tell them that he was searching for his "real mother and father" was more than Harvey's failing heart could tolerate; he died the following week. And now she was alone, had been alone for ten years. And each year now, for the ten years since Harvey's decease, Earl had promised her he'd be home for Christmas.

She thought she heard a car and, opening her eyes wide, she got to her feet, stiffly. Taking measured steps, and slow, she made her painful way to the window and scanned the lane for a car. Nothing. Nothing but the wind swirling the snow around in funnel-like shapes and filling the road with drifts.

She leaned her body weight against the sink, watching the snow as it fell and drifted. It piled up in the corners of her windows and settled on the sill like mounds of thick, deep unbaked meringue. She liked snow, thought it
always cleaned the world up, if not in fact and actuality, in appearance at least.

She hobbled to the stove and, lifting the stove lid, she added another thick piece of wood. She wanted the house cozy and warm for Earl when he came. Oh, she hoped he wouldn't disappoint her this Christmas. It could well be her last. Truth of the matter was, she was sure it would be. And she had told him so in her last letter.

She lifted the cake cover and smiled with pleasure. It had been both painful and tedious to make the special cake, but she had asked God for strength to do it one more time and He had granted her this request. The cake was as beautiful and light as any she had ever baked. Earl would be delighted. It was his favorite. So were the apple and chocolate pies, sitting on the counter top.

Again, she tottered to the south kitchen window, the window facing the quarter-of-a-mile long lane. No car. Not even the sign of a car. Nothing except the wind-blown snow swirling, dancing down the lane. She felt suddenly very tired. And very, very old, too. And her heart was paining her again. She clutched toward it with her hand -- her heart. Oh, that crushing, excruciating pain! If only Harvey were near! Or Earl! "Dear Lord, help me!" she cried as she tottered stiffly and painfully toward the comfortable rocking chair.

"Earl!" she moaned as she sank weakly into the chair's seat. "You've disappointed me again. But I love you still. Love . . . you . . . still . . ."

The wind moaned a sad little moan as it skittered past the kitchen door, lingered for a brief second, then skittered back again and laid down with a sort of sob-sigh.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the chair's back. How comfortable it was! Yes, how very comfortable! Then she fell asleep.

A kind neighbor found her, still asleep, that evening. How peaceful she looked, and relaxed. The kind woman searched for a pulse; there was none. She brushed a tear from her eyes, kissed the white head fondly and affectionately, said sadly, "You loved so deeply, and were so ill-treated . . ."
The door burst open and, with a flourish, the man deposited his armload of beautifully-wrapped gifts on the familiar kitchen table. "Mother! Mother!" he exclaimed, rushing to the comfortable, rocking chair. But there was no responding voice, no joyous greeting of glad surprise. "Mother!" he cried in anguish, dropping to his knees in front of the chair and burying his face in her ample skirt.

Wisely, the kind neighbor made her silent exit. She could always return later. Yes, she could always return.

"Mother! Mother! Oh, how much I love you! I love you. Can you hear me, Mother? I said, I love you!"

With anguished face and pain-filled eyes, he looked up at the gentle-faced woman who was a real mother to him. Oh, how foolish he had been to search out his blood mother and father! He had been so disappointed in them and in their lifestyle. Drunken sots, that's what they were. Sinners above any sinners he had ever met or known. These were the things he had "wanted to know," before he would yield himself, body, soul mind and spirit to God in utter and complete consecration. And, like the prodigal in the Bible, he had "come to himself" and returned to his mother. And now, it was too late. Yes, too late!

A sob tore his manly frame. Oh how badly he had treated his wonderful father and mother -- the two people on earth who had truly loved him! And now it was too late to make amends. Yes, it was too late! "Oh Mother . . . Father . . . forgive me! " he cried with a sob. "Forgive me. I love you!"

Raising tear-filled eyes, he looked into her gentle, peaceful face. Then, cupping his face between his hands, he sobbed uncontrollably. "I'm sorry I neglected you and Father like I did. I confess my wrong; my sins . . ."

A sudden thought entered his mind; it was too late for her to hear but not too late for him to come home to his Heavenly Father. No, it wasn't too late. And he would return. Now! Someday, yes, some glad, glorious day, he would meet them again! He would. He would!

The wind danced the snow around the house, the snow swirled itself into soft, marshmallow mounds clean-looking and white, and a young man's heart was made whiter than the snow as he returned to Father's House.