The train screeched to a stop and, among the many others standing in the aisle, waiting to get off, I lurched forward, giving the woman in front of me a shove. She turned around and gave me an angry look, muttering something or other under her breath.
"I'm sorry, Ma'am," I said apologetically.

"Well, I'd think you would be!" she retorted icily, turning and giving me another of her cold stares.

I felt thoroughly embarrassed and chagrined. But the stop was made so suddenly that it threw me off balance.

"Hey, lay off the girl!" a tall, olive skinned man remarked. "You jabbed my ribs with that box you're carrying and I didn't chew you out, lady."

He was looking the irate woman, into whom I was shoved, full in her roundly-plump face.

"You'd think, young and slender as she is, she'd have better balance," the woman countered.

"Youth has nothing to do with it, lady. That stop caught us all off guard," the man said defensively, smiling down upon me. "You're a good kid," he remarked, still smiling. "I watched you all the way out here. You're different. Believe me, it was refreshing, seeing the likes of you. Don't ever change, little girl. Never!"

I felt even more embarrassed now. Shy by nature, being singled out in the midst of this motley crowd had only served to make me even more aware of my inherent nature. I wondered how many pairs of eyes were giving me the once-over, looking me "up and down, down and up." I was thankful when, finally, the door of the coach was opened and we began filing out one by one.

Having checked my luggage through from Centerville, my home town, I carried only a small case with me. I was glad I had no more than the little deep-wine colored case with me; the walk from the train into the main station was a long one. My irate "friend," who had really been hurrying ahead of me, suddenly stopped and set her box down. She was panting for breath and her face looked unusually flushed, I thought.

"Please, Ma'am, may I help you?" I asked, stopping beside her.

"You!" she exclaimed, wearing a look of total disbelief.
"I'd like to help you," I reassured her. "This is a long walk, isn't it? And the end isn't even in sight," I added. "At least, I can't see it."

Still breathing heavily, she said, "We have quite a bit farther to go yet. But I don't deserve your kindness . . . ." Her sentence trailed. She looked at me for some time. Then, "You . . . you are different," she said in a kinder tone of voice than that which she had employed inside the stream-lined coach.

"I am a Christian, if that means anything to you, Ma'am. A born of God, child of the Heavenly King. Please, will you allow me to carry the box for you? My little case isn't heavy; we could exchange loads," I ventured hopefully. "You seem to be tired and exhausted."

"It's my blood pressure again." She volunteered the information. "Periodically, my son insists that I come here so he can check me over for himself. For his own satisfaction, I mean. He's a doctor. His wife will be meeting me at our gate. The box contains all sorts of surprises for the grandchildren, and goodies for my son and his wife. That's why I'm so careful with it; I don't want anything crushed or broken."

"I'll take good care of it for you," I promised.

"It's dreadfully heavy," the woman added. "And you're such a dainty little thing. Are you sure you want to do this? After the treatment I gave you inside the train?"

"I do," I said softly. "Jesus would be kind and understanding with you if He were here. I am one of His children. . . ."

"Thank you," she said softly. "I'll carry your case."

I picked up the box ever so carefully; she carried my case.

"Since neither of us has another train connection to make, let's take our time," I suggested. "We'll walk leisurely, so as not to tire you so readily. I'm sure your son's wife will be less concerned and worried if she sees your cheeks a healthy rosy-pink rather than all flushed and scarlet looking. My grandmother on Mother's side has high blood pressure, so I know what it can do and how it can make one look. Am I going too fast for you?" I asked.
She merely shook her head no. "You . . . really are different!" she exclaimed again.

I thought I saw tears in her eyes. And as my brain was working, wondering how I could better reach through to her spiritual sensibilities and needs, I thought of the tracts which I had tucked into an inner compartment inside my purse. I knew that was God's answer to me. A piece of well-written testimonial, coupled with scriptural verses and references, could do more in those few moments of reading than I was going to have the time or the opportunity to do. My heavy load made speaking an added burden, so most of the way to the gate of the station was made in silence.

"There's Lavonne!" the woman exclaimed, as a tall, refined, and well-dressed dark-haired young woman stepped forward inside the gate. They embraced fondly. I was praised and thanked for my kind deed and, just before Lavonne whisked my friend away, I pressed one of the tracts into her hand, saying simply, "Read this, will you, please? And I'll be praying for you."

With a firm promise that she would read the little missive, she turned and fell in step with her daughter-in-law, who was carrying the box like it was some valuable, fragile thing.

They disappeared in the milling, motley crowd, and I looked around for Sharissa, my cousin. But no tall, smiling redhead did I see. Then I remembered that Mother once told me that Mildred, her sister and my aunt, had said Sharissa was never on time for anything, it seemed. So I hurried into a nearby snack bar, bought an apple and a banana, settled myself on one of the long benches in the enormous station and watched the never-ending influx and exodus of hustling, bustling people. Where was everyone going? I wondered, finally answering my own question with two words: To eternity!

Yes, no matter what city or town they were leaving for or coming in from, each had one common destination, ultimately . . . eternity! And where would the masses be residing in eternity? I knew what Jesus had said; so, largely, His saying answered this question: ". . . for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (St. Matthew 7:13-14.)
I shuddered as the verses hammered their way afresh and anew into my heart. These people . . . these milling, jostling, hustling, bustling people . . . did they know of Jesus' power to save them from their sins and to get them ready to meet God? Had anyone told them that God so loved them that He sent His only begotten Son to die for their sins so that they, in turn, might have salvation and eternal life? A heavy burden settled down upon me. I had to do something. But what? As with the woman, I remembered the gospel tracts tucked inside my purse.

Picking up my little case, and finishing the last bite of fruit which I had bought and discarding the waste in a nearby waste receptacle, I made my way into the crowd of flowing, moving, people, handing out tracts to whomever would receive one. How I wished that I would have brought more!

An elderly, white-haired man was coming my way. Extending my hand out to him, with the tract in it, I said, "Accept this with God's love, will you please?" He looked at me with contempt and disgust for a brief minute. Then, grabbing the tract from my hand, he tore it to pieces, stomped upon it and laughed like a raving maniac before melting into the masses.

"Forever more, Amber! What on earth are you doing?" I turned to see Sharissa staring at me with a horrified look on her face.

"I was passing out gospel tracts," I said.

"You, doing something like that?" She was incredulous.

"Why, yes, I was doing something like that."

"That's almost scandalous, Amber. I . . . I . . . well, it's plain to see that I'm shocked. And you, so shy and timid, too! What's gotten into you?"

"It's not what, dear Sharissa, it's Who! I've been this way ever since the Lord forgave me of my sins and sanctified me wholly. And that's been quite some years ago. You just never had to pick me up at an airport or a train station before. When I see all these people, and realize that many of them have never heard of Jesus and His power to save them from their sins, well, I just have to do something to help them. Shy or not, I feel strong as I witness for Jesus and pass out gospel tracts."
Sharissa shook her head in utter disbelief. "You . . . you insulted that man, Amber. And you made him very angry also."

"I did what I felt I had to do, Sharissa. The results are left with God. If only one soul receives help from the tracts which I passed out, it will be worth all the effort and the courage which I expended. Now, I believe you came to pick me up, didn't you? A train station can be a rather lonely place when you don't know a single soul passing in and out of its doors."

Sharissa stared at me for a while. Then she grabbed me, hugged me, and said, "Let's go. I'm sorry I'm late. Mother says she fears for my wedding day..., whenever that may be. She's positive that I'll be late for it and will scare the groom away, making him think that I copped out on him and just couldn't possibly go through with it! She even went so far as to say that when, and if, I die, I'd very definitely be late for my own funeral, were it not for the undertaker. Isn't that a nice thing for one's mother to say!"

"Have you ever tried to change, Sharissa?" I asked, fishing in my handbag for the luggage identification tags so I could collect the luggage which I had checked through.

Laughing carelessly and gesturing with her long arms, she said, "Not really. After all, I get done what needs done and I get to where I want to go. Or need to go. Eventually," she added with meaningful humor. "Like today; I'm here, aren't I?"

"It's a good thing you didn't need to leave on one of the trains, Sharissa. . . ."

She laughed again, getting the point. "I'd have been late, wouldn't I? And I'd have missed the train. Well, let's collect your pieces of luggage and head for home. I'm sure glad you could come. Mother and Dad went out of town for a few days."

I gasped.

(Chapter 2)
We wove in and out of traffic in the city until Sharissa got on the freeway. Then she made excellent time. She certainly knew her way around, I thought, admiring her skill and expertise at driving in all the traffic, which seemed to be one endless line of moving vehicles on all sides of us.

"You get used to it," she said matter-of-factly when I complimented her on her careful driving. "After all, Amber, I was brought up around this city. So I should be somewhat familiar with it, wouldn't you say?"

I agreed with her. Then I asked her where her parents had gone and for how long.

"They went to some big classical thing in Minneapolis," Sharissa said. "You know how well Mother likes anything of that nature. Daddy does, too, of course. But not quite so much as Mother does. There are a few German restaurants Dad wants to take Mother to, also, while they're there. They'll be gone two days and two nights, Daddy told me. He said he thought you and I'd like having the house to ourselves. I've invited a bunch of my friends in for tonight." She glanced sideways at me. "A party for my cousin," she added.

I turned and looked at her. Laying my hand on her arm, I said, "Sharissa, you know me. . . ."

"Meaning?"

"I'm a Christian. There are some things I can't do. I don't want to embarrass you, dear. But I do think you should know this. I haven't changed. Not ever. God gave my convictions to me. They are changeless and unchanged. In my heart and life, I mean."

She accelerated more heavily now and stared straight ahead. "Why can't you deviate just a little bit!" she exclaimed.

I looked at her for a long while, admiring her beautiful long red hair and her lovely face with its fair complexion and its exquisitely beautiful God-sculptured features. "You wouldn't want me to, would you, Sharissa?" I asked softly as tears stood in my eyes, knowing her answer.

I saw her softening. The question had hit its mark. Reaching for my hand, she squeezed it gently. In a low, sob-like voice, she said, "No, Amber.
No, I really wouldn't. I . . . I'd be terribly let down and disappointed if you did. You've always been different. It . . . becomes you."

"Thanks, Shar. Jesus, and His abiding presence, would become you, too. By the way, your hair is beautiful."  

Squeezing my hand again, she said, "I remembered what you told me the last time we were together."  

"What did I say?" I questioned. "I can't remember. We always have so much to talk about. But, then, we just don't get to be together enough. I surely do wish you lived closer to me. We'd take you to church with us all the time."  

"I'd go. I promise," my cousin answered quickly. "When you and I were together the last time, you told me that the Bible said a woman's long hair was her glory. Remember?"

"I remember now. You complimented me on my long hair when I was brushing and coming it one morning. And you asked if it had ever been cut, then wanted to know why not. I told you it hadn't been. Not ever."  

"That's the time, Amber. And since then, I haven't had mine cut at all. It's really long, isn't it?"  

"Long, and very beautiful, Sharissa. Doesn't your mother think so, too?"

"You know Mother, Amber. She's pretty much for keeping up with the latest of everything and the most current styles. But with almost anything and everything being considered OK and sort of proper today, she doesn't fuss too much. Once in a while, she'll say something about me needing to get to the beautician and have something done to my hair. But that's about the extent of it. And with me not being all that style conscious, she doesn't badger me too much. But say, aren't you hungry? We can stop at one of the fast food places after I turn off the freeway. There's all kinds of eateries along a strip only four miles from our home. What's your preference: seafood, burgers, hot dogs, chicken, beef, oriental? You name it; we'll stop."  

"I bought an apple and an orange in the train station, Sharissa, so I'm not too hungry. But I imagine you are. So stop anywhere and get what you're
hungry for. I like everything. Actually, and factually. It makes cooking a cinch, when those you're cooking for eat anything and everything."

"I don't get to do much cooking. Mother takes over whenever Mrs. Cokesbury has her two days a week off. Some days I'd just love to try my skill at putting a meal together. But such has not been my good fortune. Your folks' may have a lot less money than mine do, Amber, but in many respects you're the richer of the two of us."

"But your folks are good to you, Sharissa. This is something for which to be thankful."

"True. But they're too good, if you know what I mean. Being an only child has many drawbacks. I'd like to be like you, Amber. You cook, bake, sew, clean house, help care for your two smaller sisters. That sort of thing. Me? It's one boring round of parties and social events. And honestly, my dear cousin, some of these things are b-o-r-i-n-g! But Mother thinks they'll keep me in the limelight. And I could care less about that."

"And you've scheduled a party for tonight. . ." I trailed the statement in mid-air.

"Would you rather not?"

"I'm your guest, my dear. But, like I said a while ago, there are many things I can't do and I won't do. I am keeping my conscience void of offense toward God and men. In Jesus Christ, I have found the truest, best, and dearest Friend I've ever known or had. I guard my soul, in which He dwells and reigns supreme, with jealous care, Sharissa, lest I do anything to grieve Him away or make Him depart."

"I should not have done it, Amber. I knew it when I did it. But I thought maybe you had changed. People are pretty fickle anymore."

"I hope that someday soon I'll be able to convince you that I won't be changing. Not ever. In Christ I have found everything, Shar. Everything! Peace, love, joy, happiness, rest, contentment, satisfaction, eternal life and, ultimately, Heaven. Forever and ever! For me, there is no turning back: It's all forward and onward, toward the Eternal City."
"You make it sound so beautiful and wonderful, Amber."

"I only wish you knew, and could experience, just how beautiful and wonderful, knowing and loving the Lord is!"

Sharissa fell silent. She drove for a long while without saying a word.

"Is something bothering you?" I asked, trying to read her thoughts.

"As a matter of fact, yes. I wish I knew how to call that party off for tonight. I don't mind the girls coming; but the fellows can get pretty rowdy sometimes. I know you'd be uncomfortable and ill at ease in their presence. They're not your kind, Amber. Oh, dear, why did I do that?"

"Do you really not want the young men to come, Sharissa?"

"I don't."

"Then just call them when we get home and tell them the party's canceled. It's that simple."

"Suppose they ask me why. . . ."

"Tell them your cousin is a Christian. They'll understand, I'm sure, and find that statement self-explanatory. They won't want to come, Sharissa."

"Perhaps I don't understand that, but I'll take your word for it. I'll call them all; the girls too, and tell them the party's canceled. You better pray for me; they'll chew me out later on. But I feel so much better, and I have great relief, just thinking about doing it. I know we'll have a wonderful time together, just the two of us."

We took the exit off the freeway and drove until we came to the "eating strip," as Sharissa dubbed it.

"What will you have?" she asked lightly.

"I have an idea," I said.

"What is it?" Sharissa asked.
"Do you have food at home that's prepared? Or that we could prepare?"

"Ask if the ocean has water, or if the sky isn't blue!" she exclaimed. "Mrs. Cokesbury fixed enough food to last us for days. You'd rather go on home, right?"

"I was thinking of you, Shar. Now's your time to cook, bake, and do all sorts of homey things."

Sharissa came alive. I mean, alive! "Oh, Amber, you're a darling cousin! I never would have thought of that. We'll go straight home. And I'll show you that I'm able to do a little more than boil water." Her excitement mounted with every sentence she uttered.

A short while later, we drove up the curving driveway and parked the car. It didn't take long to get my luggage out of the car, take it inside and get it unpacked. Sharissa made her cancellations while I was unpacking and hanging clothes in the closet. Then she came into the room where I was just finishing.

"I'm all done," she remarked, smiling. "The fellows just merely said, 'Oh!' when I told them you were a Christian and that, as such, Christians couldn't, and didn't participate in wicked and sinful things. Oh, Amber, I feel so relieved for having done it. The girls didn't seem too disappointed. And since I know that several of the fellows would have brought some sort of alcoholic beverages, I'm so glad you mentioned about canceling. I don't drink; never even tasted the stuff. And my folks don't drink, either. But I just needed someone like you to give me the courage I needed, to do what was right. Oh, Amber, if only you were with me all the time! I know I'd be different."

"I can't be with you all the time, dear Sharissa; but I know One Who can. Only, you must invite Him to come into your heart. He'll stay with you always, if your heart stays pure and holy and clean and white. Jesus will give you the courage you need to say no to whatever is wrong and evil."

Sharissa jumped up from the chair in which she was sitting and, spinning me around in a merry whirl, she cried happily, "Praise the cook."
You're in for a feast. Dinner will be served in twenty minutes." Then she turned and all but ran down the stairs.

The food was delicious. I complimented her and told her so. When evening came, we made popcorn balls, fudge and, and of all things, mush! Plain old cornmeal mush. Sharissa said she had had it once at a friend's house and really enjoyed it; did I know how to make it?

We got ready for bed amid laughter, giggles and chatter. Sharissa declared she had never had an evening so pleasant and wonderful. And when I knelt to pray, before slipping between the clean, fresh linens, Sharissa's hand found mine. "Pray for me, Amber, will you please?" she said. "I'm ready to get saved and to give my heart to Jesus."

It was glorious. Glorious! She prayed clear through, and through clear. We went to sleep in a cloud of Heavenly glory.

(The End)