THE BIRTHDAY SURPRISE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Callie felt as excited as a child again. Yes indeed, every bit as excited. Maybe even more.

She giggled softly to herself as she piled the soft mounds of marshmallow looking frosting on the beautiful, tall cake, still wondering just how Jason Carson had managed to get his crippled wife out of the house
long enough for her -- Callie -- to slip in and clean it thoroughly and then decorate the big enclosed back porch for Evelyn's birthday.

She looked out her window to the lawn that joined the Carsons', fenced in beautifully with a gate near the back of the lot so the two neighbors could come and go as they chose to.

Callie smiled, recalling the many enjoyable visits and pleasant times she and her dear late husband had had with the retired minister and his wife. Until crippling arthritis had laid Evelyn Carson low, she was an energetic livewire of activity and industriousness; an ideal minister's wife and a perfect helpmeet for her husband.

They loved people. All classes of people. Sinners especially. They went after them; the sinners. And they brought them to the Savior who changed them and transformed their lives. Today, the church pews were filled with men and women whom the Carsons had sought out and gone after until they came to the Good Shepherd and were gloriously converted and sanctified wholly. And God's work had been so real and gloriously wonderful in their hearts, so deep and genuine, until a great portion of the fruit of the Carsons' labors were strong, stalwart Christians and pillars in the church.

Collie felt tears of joy and thankfulness trickle from her eyes, remembering all the many years of faithfulness given unselfishly and uncomplainingly -- in genuine demonstration of Divine Love -- by the Carsons. They never asked how much they could get from the church -their congregation -- but were concerned and burdened only over how much they could give.

She smoothed the creamy-white frosting up the sides of the cake in long, straight lines, giving the already tall cake the illusion and the appearance of being even yet taller. Then, gently but expertly, she swirled the frosting on top into flower-like curly-q's. In the center of each curly-q she put a tiny red candy teaberry. Then, standing back, she eyed it with delightful satisfaction. It was not only beautiful, she thought, but it would be delicious, as well. It was an old tried and true recipe, used many times over, and it was Evelyn Carson's favorite.

Callie washed and dried the dirty pans and cleaned the sink, then she untied her apron and hurried into the bedroom and changed into the soft
blue, tiny print dress her Benjamin had always liked. She wanted to get over to the house before the guests began arriving. What if Evelyn heard noises and wondered what was going on? Surely Jason would think of something, or of some way, to buffer and conceal any sound made by the guests, she thought. He always seemed to know just what to do and how to handle any and all circumstances.

She slipped out the back door and hurried through the open gate, across the lawn, and along the side of a flower bed, well-kept and beautifully groomed, then into the cheerful and sunny screened-in porch.

She put the cake in the center of the long table, set up for the express purpose of celebrating Evelyn's birthday. Then she sat down in one of the white wicker chairs and waited. She knew Jason Carson was chuckling to himself and that he was as excited as she.

She heard loud music coming from inside the house. What a smart man the dear, retired minister was! she mused silently as the beautifully recorded hymns floated loudly and clearly to where she was. Then she chuckled to herself, wondering that Evelyn's ear drums hadn't burst. Or Jason's!

The guests arrived right on time, and obeyed instructions to perfection.

"I've never seen this side of the house," one of the ladies remarked.

"I guess most of us haven't" another remarked. "But it isn't the Carsons' fault; we're all too busy with our own little world to come by here and pay a visit on these dear, most wonderful people. I feel ashamed of myself. And, God helping me, I'm going to do something about it. I'm going to make time to come here. I feel guilty and so ashamed of myself; I neglected them. And they have always been so faithful to me and my family. Anytime we needed them, they came."

"I'm just as guilty," another confessed.

"I think we're almost all guilty" one of the men added. "But let's give Sister Carson a year-long gift by each of us coming by at least once every month to see her and to have prayer with her."
"Count me in!" came voices from all over the room. "They'll love that!" Callie exclaimed, wiping tears from her eyes. "And now, let's invite our guest of honor in, shall we? At the count of three, begin singing happy birthday as loudly as possible. I'll open the door. Ready?. One, two, three . . . ."

Callie swung the inside door open wide, and just as the singing began, she saw Jason pushing Evelyn Carson toward them in the wheelchair.

"Happy Birthday, Sister Carson!" the group shouted in unison.

With a mischievous twinkle in her dancing blue eyes, Evelyn thanked her friends, then she turned to her husband. "So that is why you wanted the music turned up so loudly!" she laughed. "You didn't want me to hear! Well, I'll tell you" she added, facing the smiling group before her, "I thought the roof would go up with the volume. And every time I'd ask Jason why he had it so loud, he'd say, 'Loud, eh? Did you say loud?' I was worried, I tell you; I thought he was going deaf."

The room rang with laughter and Jason, after things quieted down somewhat, said to his wife, "If you'll whisper 'I love you,' I'll demonstrate my still-good and perfect hearing to you, my dear.

"Oh, I believe you, Jason, without making a public verbal announcement of my deep feelings to you"

Again there was loud laughter. Then Callie took hold of the wheelchair and pushed the minister's wife up to the head of the table, beside her husband.

"How beautiful everything looks!" Evelyn Carson exclaimed. "And Callie, you baked my very favorite cake! Oh, how sweet and kind of you. Thank you."

While the guests were sitting down, Callie unpacked the basket of dainty little sandwiches one of the women had brought, all ready for serving, then she poured delicious, ice-cold lemonade in each glass.

Evelyn Carson was nearly beside herself with joy; again and again her eyes spilled over with tears of happiness and gratitude.
It was not until all the guests had left that she turned to Callie. With merry-bright eyes, she said, "Now, my dearest and closest friend, I have some errands I'd like for you to do. See all this money -- "

Callie nodded. "Everybody loves you," she said. "The gifts are for you to use and enjoy now; the money is for you to buy anything you want or need and whenever you want to spend it. We all planned it this way and wanted it to be like this."

"So I understand, Callie. And since my few needs have all been met and supplied, I want you to go down to Wilson's Hardware Store and buy a new steam iron for Mrs. Tillis. I understand her old iron can't be repaired. It's had its years of service, and what long years it has served! Steam, Callie, this time. Why, I doubt the dear old soul has ever used a steam iron in all her life. Show her how to use it" the kind woman advised. "She'll like it, once she gets used to it.

"Then I understand old Brother Kelly's winter coat is in shreds, practically. The Men's Shop is having a sale on right now. Size 42, I found out from Jason. Have it delivered to his house, with the little enclosure card on the inside saying merely, 'From one Christian to another, In His Love.'

"The Merrills are having quite a struggle just now. Mr. Merrill, like others at the plant where he works, is laid off. I'm of the understanding that their pantry shelves are quite bare. I want you to go to the Giant Market and load one of those big grocery carts down, to overflowing, with everything a big family may need. Things like dried beans and macaroni and noodles and rice and spaghetti stretch far when accompanied by ground beef and cheese and ham"

"But Evelyn," Callie protested, "this was given to you so you could. . . ."

"Have a happy birthday" the starry-eyed retired minister's wife said, finishing her friend's sentence. "I was told to use it whenever I wanted to; that it was given so I'd have a happy birthday. This is my way of having a happy birthday, my dear. The greatest joy comes, not with the receiving but in the giving, Callie. I don't need to remind you of this; you know; you have experienced it many times yourself. Now, back to that grocery order: Don't forget peanut butter -- the biggest bucket the store has. And meats and eggs and milk. And they'll need fruit and vegetables, of course. And flour and
sugar. Oh dear, I know I don't have to remind you what to get. Why, you've been grocery shopping for years. You know what to get. Don't spare on the necessary items. With all this money, I can afford to spend

   Callie felt tears form in her eyes. She turned quickly and brushed them away.

   "I wonder, while you're at the grocery store, Callie, if you'd buy two cases of canned milk for the Franklins' new baby. She's allergic to the formula and can't tolerate cow's milk such as we buy from the dairy counter. But the canned milk has been working fine for her. Only they have very little income, as you know. And just tell them, and the Merrills, as well as old Mrs. Tillis, that everything is a gift to them from a Christian friend. Jesus told us not to do our alms to be seen or noticed of men. You will keep my little secret?"

   "Oh, Evelyn, you dear, dear woman, of course I'll keep your secret. 'And the God who seeth in secret shall reward thee openly,' "Callie quoted, brushing more tears away."

   "This has been the happiest birthday of my life," Evelyn declared, handing the money to Callie.

   Well, Callie thought as she left the house to carry out and fulfill Mrs. Carson's wishes and requests, this was quite a switch: she had planned the birthday surprise for Evelyn, but that dear lady had reversed the order completely and now she, Callie, was the most surprised of all. Well, she might have known. Yes, indeed. Neither of the Carsons lived for self. Always, it was for Christ and others.

   Callie brushed still more tears away from her eyes. And suddenly she felt extremely happy, knowing by actual and personal experience Evelyn's feeling of joy and satisfaction in giving. Of a truth, it was "more blessed to give than to receive."