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THE CHALLENGE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

It was snowing!

Patty Fairway stood entranced inside the lovely apartment building where her best friend, Linette Shumwood, lived. It had been so long since she had seen Linette, and now that she was actually with her Patty was filled

with mixed emotions. In some ways, Linette was still the same; in others . . . well, Patty was aware of radical and acutely dominant changes. She sighed.

When had it begun snowing? she mused, staring in wonder at the swirling white flakes glittering in the soft glow of the turn-of-the-century-style street lamps.

How beautiful, she thought; so like a scene from a Victorian Christmas card. Her mind filled with questions regarding her friend, then it was filled with a sense of wonder as she glanced up and down the street, taking in the tall, stately buildings that lined it. Everything reminded her of years past, when she grew up in the same town; when Linette's parents and her parents lived in the big red brick duplex on Monroe Street and only a banister divided and separated their front porch; when Linette and she used to sit on the banister-divider or on each other's porch swing and talk and giggle the hours away. And now, for all the old and precious familiarity of the scene of her surroundings, Patty experienced the same sense of surprised wonder and awe at the first snowfall of the season just as she did when she was a girl.

She sighed. Did Linette realize -- and appreciate -- what beauty the town possessed? Actually, it was more like a little city than a town since its expansion down across the years. It had a special ambiance, the look and feel of a time gone by. The dedicated citizens of the little city worked hard at maintaining the quaint and unique appearance of the place; the downtown area especially and particularly.

Patty watched as the large snowflakes pirouetted before capricious gusts of stinging wind and a sense of homesickness for the duplex on Monroe Street wrapped her in its blanket of nostalgia. Tears filled her eyes and tumbled down her cheeks as she recalled the many happy times -- all her growing-up years, really -- which she had had there with her parents and brothers and sisters. And Linette and her family. It was through her own dear parents that the Shumwood children got to church and were, one by one, converted. The children, in turn, worked on their parents -- Linette especially did so -- until Mr. Shumwood relented one Easter Sunday morning and took his entire family and went to church and was converted. Mrs. Shumwood soon followed.

Patty stared through the window now, marveling at the changes which life and years had brought: Mr. Shumwood had passed away a year after

their last child graduated; Mrs. Shumwood moved in with an aging aunt, to care for her, in another town; their sons had married and worked in plants out of State. Linette, their only girl, had graduated from college with a degree in business administration and was now manager and part owner of the best department store in the town, or little city. The apartment in which she lived was both elegant and elaborately furnished. It was at Linette's insistence and a round-trip plane ticket that she -- Patty -- was here.

She walked to the sofa and sat down, wondering what it was about her friend that kept niggling her at the back of her mind. Linette and she had maintained an "in-touch" kind of contact via Christmas, Easter, Birthday and Thanksgiving cards, with brief notes enclosed, but that was the extent of it, since she, Patty, stayed continuously busy, it seemed, teaching under-privileged children in the deep South, as well as tutoring two exceptionally brilliant children in the area. Linette, of course, was totally wrapped up in the large and beautiful department store -- L and J's Department Store, by name.

She was certain the L stood for Linette; she had no idea for whom the J stood, nor, even whether it was a male or female partner for whom it was thus lettered. Linette had never told her, and she had not inquired of her friend who it was that had gone into the buying-partnership with her. Patty was not one to pry into the affairs of others. Never. She had tried always to heed the proverb's injunction about not meddling in affairs not pertaining to her.

She looked for a Bible on the end table but discovered there wasn't any. Nor on the coffee table. Nor anywhere else that she could see, in the room. Strange! she mused. Very strange. Always, since Linette's conversion, she had kept her Bible on the coffee table or on an end table in the Shumwoods' living room, enjoying following what her father was reading in his Bible for family worship, after his conversion.

Getting to her feet, she hurried to the elegant spare bedroom -- her bedroom while visiting her friend -- and picked up her own Bible. Oh, how she loved God's Word! It was her most prized earthly possession and treasure; her "gold mine," as she called it.

Sitting down in one of the expensive ivory-colored overstuffed chairs, Patty opened to where she had left off in the early morning hours before

landing at the airport and began to read. She was surprised when she heard voices in the apartment.

"Patty? Patty, where are you?" Linette came quickly into the bedroom. Seeing the Bible, she gasped. "You don't mean you still read that!" she exclaimed on a note of disgust or disdain, or both. Patty thought she sensed both. She was surprised to see Linette home so early.

"It's still my favorite of all books, Linette. I don't know what I'd do without it. I love this precious Book." Patty felt tears sting her eyes.

Recovering quickly from her shock at seeing the Bible in Patty's hands, Linette offered a wan smile, saying airily, "Oh well, we're all different. Come, I want you to meet someone who is special in my life." Grabbing Patty's arm, she pulled her to her feet, then led her back into the spacious living room which she had vacated less than fifteen minutes earlier.

"Patty," Linette said brightly as she walked quickly to the side of a tall, well-groomed young man, "meet Jared Wilcox, my fiancée and my partner in business. Jared, this is my long-time best friend, Patty Fairway, originally from this very area."

"I am truly delighted to meet you," Jared stated sincerely as soon as the introduction was over. "Linette has told me so many things about you until I almost feel like I know you."

"It was all commendable," Linette put in quickly, adding a hasty-quick concession: "I did tell him, though, that you have one glaring fault. . . ."

Patty felt the color rise in her cheeks: she blushed so readily and easily until at times it embarrassed her.

"I told him you're too picky about the men you date. And it's the truth. Why Patty dear, at the rate you're going you'll never get married."

Patty felt her face flush; it was, no doubt, a scarlet-red blush again. She felt utterly embarrassed. "I want only God's will for my life," she replied in a soft-spoken response. "If that's 'picky,' well. . . ."

"We're going to help you, Patty. The new year is about to be ushered in: I've arranged a blind date for you." Linette winked at Jared.

"Linette, please!" It was a plea. "I date only Christians. When I have the time to date, or if I want to date, that is."

"Jared and I have the perfect date for you, Patty. First, though, we're going to take you out to dinner at one of the marvelous new restaurants five miles out of town. We left early, purposely. Tonight we dine out; tomorrow night we celebrate the arrival of a brand new year."

"Linette, you know what I do on New Year's Eve. I don't need to remind you, dear, for we always went together to the watch night service at church. I continue following the same spiritual practice. I thought that, perhaps, you would know of a good church and we could go there together, like we used to do."

"Are you kidding, Patty, my dear, you're looking at a business woman. My life, and my interests, no longer pivot around church and Sunday school and everything else involved with it. I'm living, Patty! Living! And I'm enjoying the excitement that accompanies my new life style."

Patty was aghast. She could scarcely believe what she had just heard. Softly, she asked, "Do you mean you'd rather have excitement than the inner peace and joy of the Lord? Did I hear you correctly, dear Linette?"

"Oh Patty, let's not get preachy. OK? Grow up, my dear. Grow up, and enjoy life. You have no idea what fun I'm having. But, say, let's go; our reservation's made for the next hour, and till we get through the traffic here and drive the five miles out in the country it will be time for us to sit down to dinner. You look fine in that dress; no need for you to change into anything else, my dear."

"It's very becoming on you," Jared stated, smiling. "In fact, it's every bit as becoming on you as your blushing is, Patty. It's still pretty wonderful, I think, to see a woman blush. It's almost a thing of the past, however, I guess this is why I find it so very attractive."

"Thank you, Jared," Patty replied. "Pardon me for not acknowledging the introduction, which was interrupted by Linette's and my conversation. I am glad to meet you and. . . ."

"Let's go," Linette said, interrupting Patty's unfinished remark. "With the falling snow and the fact that we must drive across town, we'll just about make it there in time to get our table. We can talk in the car, OK?"

Patty hurried to the clothes closet for her coat and scarf and gloves but was back in a very short time: she didn't want to keep Linette waiting. Oh, how she did long for her prayer closet! The burden on her heart for her friend felt like a weight inside her.

She reveled in the sight of the beautiful large flakes of snow that were falling and found to her delight that Jared seemed to be a decent young man. At least he drove carefully and cautiously and he didn't use profanity. She was confident, as he talked, that he had at some time in his life, known much about spiritual things. Like Linette, she thought, as she listened to what he was saying.

Every part of him the gentleman, Jared helped both Linette and Patty out of the car and escorted them graciously into the spacious restaurant upon their arrival there. Patty felt at ease around him; she was thankful that he was to become her best friend's husband.

Their table was off to one side of the restaurant, in an alcove with windows facing a small woods and a lake. What a view! Patty thought, as she watched the beautiful snow glistening and sparkling beneath the well-lighted area. Overcome by the thought of sins forgiven, she quoted Isaiah 1:18 reverently and softly, "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

"Oh, Patty, please: Please:" Linette cried out in disgust. "Can't you leave your religion back where you came from? Don't spoil the evening for Jared and me, please."

"I'm sorry, Linette, I didn't mean to upset you. I quoted that beautiful verse for my very own benefit: my heart overflowed with thankfulness to God for saving my soul and for washing me whiter than the snow; and for

cleansing me too. I feel so unworthy of all He's done for me; the praises just naturally flows out: I can't help it."

"It's offensive to me," Linette declared angrily. "And I'll appreciate it if you'll say nothing more about God or salvation and sanctification -- cleansing, as you phrased it -- in front of Jared and me."

Tears sprang to Patty's eyes. She was speechless with shock.

Jared reached across the table and placed his hand lightly on her wrist. "I didn't say you couldn't say anything about God to me, Patty," he stated calmly but emphatically. "Don't take Linette's rebuke too seriously," he added. "I'm half of the 'team' and I, personally, enjoy hearing what you have to say. You remind me of my grandmother, who taught me about God and took me to Sunday school and church every Sunday of my young life. So talk on. . . ."

"Jared! I can't believe that you'd . . . do this . . . to me!" Linette's eyes were pools of rage and anger. And shocked surprise.

Sitting on the edge of his chair, Jared faced Linette. "It's about time that I do something," he said quietly. "First you rig up a blind date for Patty, a date with a married man, then you try to 'reduce' her to your changed values, if I dare call them values. This is wrong! All wrong. I want you to know, Patty, that I had nothing to do with any of this."

Patty brushed a hand across her eyes. "A married man, you say!" she exclaimed, incredulous with shock. Facing Linette, she asked tearfully, pleadingly, "How could you do this to me, Linny? How? You know how wrong it is!" Wiping tears from her eyes, she said with unfaltering voice, "I'll never do it, Linette. Never! I love you, but I'll never knowingly violate God's Word and what I know is right and wrong. By God's grace, I mean to stand before Him having kept the faith and having maintained a pure and a holy heart. I won't go out with the man, Linette," she repeated. "I had no intentions of dating anybody tomorrow night, should God spare us till then, and certainly not a married man."

Getting to her feet, Linette said, "Take me home, Jared."

Easing back in his chair, Jared said kindly but firmly, "Not until after we have eaten, Linette. Sit down, my dear, we'll go home after we have done

justice to the excellent food we have ordered. And here comes our waiter now."

Obediently, Linette sat down. She looked at Jared with awe and shock and respect. The fire of anger had gone from her eyes. It was as if she was seeing him for the first time.

Patty noticed it all and, in her heart, she rejoiced, feeling that someday Jared may well be God's instrument in bringing her back into the fold -- as he himself became converted.

Reaching over, she took Linette's hand in hers. "I love you, Linette," she said, "but I love the Lord more. You'll always be my best earthly friend, but my dear, kind Heavenly Father is the best and truest Friend I've ever had and ever known. I should not have come, I guess; and when we get back to your apartment, Lord willing, I'll see if I can't get an earlier flight back to the south. I'm sorry to have caused trouble for you and. . . ."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Jared declared emphatically. "The woman I plan to marry needs you around. So do I. My grandmother always said that any home not established on the Rock Christ Jesus was an easy prey for the devil: I want Linette's and my home established on something more durable than on stocks and bonds and wealth and riches and high living. Don't we, Linette?"

Placing her hand in Jared's and wiping tears from her eyes, Linette said brokenly, "Yes, my dear. Yes!" Turning to Patty, she said tearfully, "I'm sorry, Patty. Please forgive me. I thought if I could break you down and get you to do something wrong and sinful I wouldn't feel so lowdown and wicked myself. I'm glad you haven't changed. And I'm so thankful that you won't compromise. We do need you around. You will know how to help both Jared and me back. . . ."

Patty could scarcely contain her feelings. In her heart, she knew she would be in a watch night service somewhere praying the old year out and the new year in, and she felt sure that she would not be alone: Linette and Jared would be with her.