

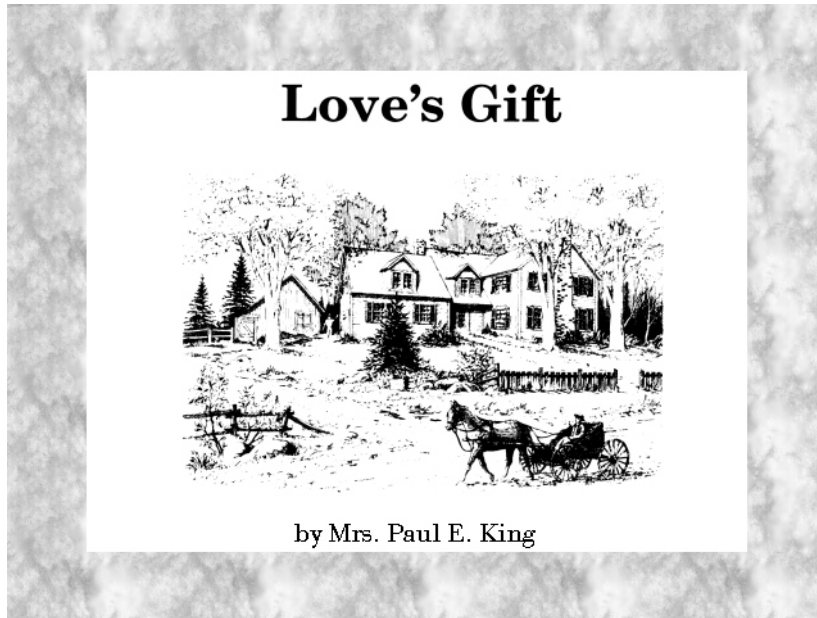
Copyright 2001 By Lucille King
All Rights Reserved and Duplication
Of This Publication Is Forbidden,
Except For Personal Use

* * * * *

Digital Edition 10/22/2001
By Holiness Data Ministry

* * * * *

The Sunday School Beacon
December 28, 1997



LOVE'S GIFT
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Shanna marveled as she rang the merchandise up on the cash register of The Vogue Department Store. Since 8:00 o'clock, when she had come in for the day, she had been busy ringing up sales for the customers who patronized and shopped, mainly, at the expensive and fashionable store. She was incredulous at the amount of merchandise she had checked out since the early morning opening at the store. There seemed to be no end to the

steady line of customers upon whom she was waiting and no limit to the amount of money each was spending either. To Shanna, the intake of cash was awesomely overwhelming.

Returning a credit card to one of the elegantly dressed women whose bill had registered well over \$600.00 dollars, Shanna wondered how much appreciated the gifts would be when they were opened on Christmas morning. Would the clothing be worn, even? she wondered, as she recalled the many returns after the Christmas season. Like a record, one particular comment that accompanied the returned gifts played back to her:

"Please take this back and give me the money instead. Auntie has no taste for clothing whatever. She doesn't know what's 'in' nor what's 'out.' She goes mainly by color."

"Do you have your receipt?" How often she had asked the question, she thought, wearily.

"No, I don't: it was a gift, and gifts don't come with receipts, generally. Now, do I get my money? Auntie has scads of it. Money, I mean. She won't mind."

Shanna recalled the many times she had to call for the supervisor to know what to do: to get his approval (or disapproval) before paying back the price of the gift without its accompanying receipt slip.

"Please wrap these gifts for me." The credit card holder cut a slice into Shanna's thoughts.

"Gift wrapping is up on the mezzanine, Ma'am. They do a beautiful job of wrapping," Shanna replied.

"Please, wrap mine here. I'm in a hurry. . . ."

"I'm sorry, but I can't. I have no wrapping paper whatever, and we're to wait on our customers by checking out their purchases only. This is my full-time job."

"I'll be waiting forever up there," she replied, jerking her head toward the mezzanine where lights twinkled and glistened from the ceiling and the beautifully decorated tree.

"It's so beautiful up there," Shanna stated softly and pleasantly, "and the sofas are cushioned for your comfort as you wait."

Grumbling, and picking up the purchases which Shanna had folded neatly and placed in large plastic bags with handles for easy carrying, the woman said tartly, "You'd think they'd have a bit more concern for those of us whose sales are of an appreciable amount, such as mine have been. I'm one of the best customers here, I dare say."

"You are," Shanna stated softly, "and I'm sorry." But the woman was out of hearing.

Shanna watched her until she was lost in the crowd of shoppers in the store. She would have to wait for the wrapping to be done, she was sure, since Christmas was an exceptionally busy time for the girls up on the mezzanine. But it was ever so cozy and comfortable for those who had to wait. The exclusive and expensive store for men and women only, had made the mezzanine into a very pleasant place, with magazines to browse through and a lighted fish aquarium with all kinds of fish, to relax by and watch.

A quick look at the clock gave her a sinking feeling. She was bone weary, but the thought of what faced her when she got home gave her a sickening sensation. She felt suddenly all alone and so afraid. If only she had a room of her own or a small efficiency apartment. If only. . . .She didn't want to go home. Oh, she didn't!

Ranata came behind the counter and replaced her for the rest of the day and into the closing evening hours.

"It's wretched outside," Ranata declared. "I don't like snow; not even the first few flakes, like some people say they do. I wish I could move South. But when one is married that's easier said than done. Especially when one's husband has a good job and thinks hunting and fishing and traipsing through the mountains in the snow is the most wonderful thing in all the world to do."

Shanna's lips parted in a wan smile. "It's nice to know someone's happy, though, isn't it?" she asked, not knowing what to say.

"I guess maybe it is, Shanna. I hadn't thought of it in that way. Ralph's really a great husband to me and a marvelous father to our two small children. I'll try to remember this when I get the 'snow blues.' You'd think I'd be used to it, since I was born and raised right here. Were you busy today, or is this a trite question?"

"It's been one of the busiest days I've ever had. And one of the largest cash intakes ever too. Just look at all those shoppers, Ranata! One wonders where they're all coming from."

"I'm glad this is only part-time for me and that I'll be home with the children again after Christmas eve. Ralph still hasn't figured out what made me want a part-time job this year," Ranata said, laughing. "But he'll understand why when he unwraps three of his boxes. I couldn't ask him for money to buy his own gifts with it. I wanted to pay for that hunting jacket and the boots and insulated underwear myself; with money I had earned. Well, here comes customer number one for me. Have a good evening."

Shanna felt tears sting her eyes as she hurried away after her coat and boots and purse. If only she would have a good evening. Just one, for a change.

Slipping into her boots and depositing the shoes into the plastic bag she'd brought along from home, she wiped the tears from her cheeks. No one must see her cry. No one.

"Shanna!" It was Jill from the ladies sportswear department. "Shanna, you were crying!" Jill's voice was filled with love and compassion. "What happened?" Her arms encircled Shanna's slender shoulders in a gentle way.

"I'll be all right, Jill. Thanks."

"Something's wrong, Shanna," Jill stated kindly as she shrugged into her coat. "Please, let me help you. I pray regularly for you, Shanna. You're hurting, I can feel it."

Shanna was speechless. Jill was the closest of all to being her friend. If she had had a friend, that is.

And Jill said she prayed for her. Her! Regularly! "Thanks, Jill. I . . . I'm glad to hear you say that I need your prayers."

"I wish you'd open up, Shanna, and let me behind your wall so the Lord and I could help you. It makes me very sad to think of the heavy burden you must be bearing and carrying all by yourself. If you'd only allow me the privilege of sharing this with you it would make me very happy."

Shanna couldn't stop the flow of tears that seemed to pour from her eyes. She looked at Jill with longing, wanting to tell her everything but afraid to do so. It was such a painful thing and, was it the right thing to do? She buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

"How are you getting home?" Jill asked suddenly.

"I'll walk," came the small-sounding, barely audible answer. "It's only five blocks."

"I'll take you home. Come, please. We can talk better inside the car. It's too public here, with the clerks coming in and going out."

"Thanks much, Jill, but I really don't mind walking. It . . . it delays, for a little while, what I . . . I wish I could avoid seeing and . . . and being confronted with."

"Please, let me drive you home. It's snowing heavily tonight, and I want to pray with you, Shanna. Jesus and I love you. We care greatly about you. I'll not push you to talk unless you want to. But I do wish you'd let me be your friend. Open the gate to your heart and please let me see what's behind that wall which so stubbornly keeps any of us from becoming your close friend. I want to help you. Oh, how my heart longs to share whatever it is you are bearing. Please, Shanna, let's go home together; in my car, I mean."

"All right, Jill. I'm sure that, sooner or later, you'll find out the story of my life and of my home, anyhow, so I might as well tell you everything myself. At least you'll get the straight, hard, truthful facts this way and not a distorted version."

"Are you up to eating something? I mean, well, I'm sure you must be hungry. . . ."

"I'm too nervous to be hungry, Jill. Everything tastes almost like sawdust to me; and it chokes me like sawdust, too. Thanks."

Unlocking the car and letting Shanna inside, Jill said, in a coaxing sort of way, "I'm sure a bowl of hot soup and a sandwich would do each of us good. I'll drive over to that new soup and sandwich restaurant that opened less than a month ago. I'll call Mother after our order is in, so she'll know why I'm not home at my usual time. Will your parents need to know?"

Shanna sucked her breath in quick-like. She felt almost like she was suffocating. Or drowning. Tears spilled onto her gloved hands. "No. No," she said agonizingly. "I wish they did, though." Then, like a great floodgate had opened, she cried, "Dad isn't home anymore. Never. He left Mother for another, much younger woman. He didn't even let us know where he went. He's sure Mom will find someone new, too, at the bar they patronized. This is where he 'discovered' the 'new' woman, so his brief note which he left on the kitchen table stated.

"Oh, Jill, I feel like my whole world has caved in; like I'm all alone in a . . . a vacuum. Our once-beautiful home, so well cared for years ago, is getting the most tired and dreary look to it that you've ever seen. It's run-down and in need of ever so many repairs. It wasn't like this, not ever, until my parents got in with a few people where Dad had a wonderful job, who believed in 'social drinking.' From then on, from paycheck to paycheck, almost all monies have had their starting and finishing point at the bar. Mother always went down and met Dad at the bar. She's an alcoholic, Jill. An alcoholic!

"If ever she's home when I get home, after I get my paycheck, she fights with me and screams bloody murder when I refuse to turn the money over to her. Oh, Jill, what am I to do? I can't allow her to kill herself with booze, which is what she's doing, literally. All she wants to do is drink! I buy the groceries and keep the electric bill paid so we have heat and lights and the stove to cook on. Mother eats very little, no matter how much I coax her to do so, and no matter how delicious the food smells and tastes. Her everything is booze. Lately, she's been staying out all night. I'm afraid she's selling her body for drink. She does have a boyfriend, so she told me a few

nights ago when I got home from work. It made me feel sick all over. Our once happy and stable home is no more. It's in ruins."

Guiding the car along snow-piled streets, Jill asked, "What are you going to be doing on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, Shanna, God willing? The store is closing early our last holiday workday, as you know."

"I'll be alone, I'm sure. So I'll be doing some cleaning."

"Would it be possible for you to be our special guest? Please, I want you; and I know my parents will insist that you spend Christmas with us if you're going to be alone."

Shanna's eyes widened and filled with tears. "Why are you doing this?" she asked in amazement. "After all, I've been almost unfriendly to you. But Jill, it was only because I didn't want you, nor anybody else to know what happened in our home; not what's been going on. My mother is a tiger when she's drinking. She gets unbelievably mean and aggressive. Abusive too. That's how come that bump on my forehead."

"Oh Shanna, you dear girl. Please say you'll come, God willing. You need to get away. We can come over and clean your house together that day after Christmas, the Lord willing. The Bible tells us to love one another, and I love you. So does Jesus."

"I felt like nobody loved me anymore," the weeping girl confessed. "We once were so happy together -Father and Mother and I. The demon of booze divided our home and split us up completely. It doesn't seem real. But I am a terribly frightened and crushed byproduct of its stark and painful reality. I'll come over for Christmas since I'm almost sure Mother won't be home for days. This has been her and Father's pattern over Christmas and New Year's since they began drinking. Now that Dad is gone, I'm afraid she'll be home even less."

Jill pulled into the parking lot of the eating place and together they went inside and found a table.

"I'll call Mother," she said after ordering, "then I'll be right back." with excitement ringing in her voice, she added, "I'm going to tell her about your coming for Christmas, Lord willing. She'll be so happy."

"Oh, Jill, you are so kind. So good. What makes you the way you are?" Shanna asked while they ate.

"It's Jesus," came the soft reply. "He lives within my heart. It is He who keeps me joyful and happy. Our soul was made for Him to dwell in and to take up residency in. Without Him, we wander aimlessly in life, always feeling empty and lonely and thirsty. Inside, I mean."

"Could He help me, Jill? Do you think He could? I don't mean would He bring Dad back, as much as I miss him and wish he were still here; but could Jesus give me joy and . . . and something to live for? Something like you have?"

Reaching across the table, Jill's eyes were shining. "Yes, Shanna. Yes," she cried. "Jesus is the only One who can satisfy that deep, empty longing in your soul. He offers you the most wonderful gift of all -- the gift of His redemption and salvation. It is Love's finest Gift, and it is free. The price was paid on an old rugged cross many years ago. All you need to do is confess your sins to Jesus, repent and ask Him to forgive you and to come into your heart."

"Now? May I ask Him now?" Shanna's eyes searched Jill's face eagerly.

"You may, dear friend; and if you are sincere and mean what you are asking, He will forgive you and come into your heart."

"Then I shall ask Him. . . ."

For Shanna, it was new; all new. But what a Gift she received -- Love's Gift!