

My Alabaster Box



"Even though Jamie was flat on his back, he had managed to get a special present for me. 'Open it carefully,' he said. 'It contains my heart.'"

By JACKIE BUCKINGHAM

Christmas six years ago was a dismal time for me. Jamie had been traveling extensively. He was overstressed—and 55 pounds overweight. At 47 years of age, he was incapable of relaxing. Living on junk food and airline meals, he was a prime candidate for a heart attack.

Ten days before Christmas he arrived home from a trip to the Amazon jungle. The day after Christmas he was to leave for an extended trip to South Africa. I didn't see how he could keep going.

Jamie and I had often talked about various Christian leaders who had burned out—and had severe family problems. I was worried. Could that happen to us?

At our home church meeting the week before Christmas, I heard Jamie say, "I'm weary. Just worn out. I wish I didn't have to go to South Africa."

That night I prayed, as he slept fitfully, "Lord, help him slow down."

The next morning Jamie woke complaining of pains in his lower right leg. By noon his leg was badly swollen.

The following day was Sunday and he was supposed to preach in our church. He could hardly stand, much less walk—but he preached anyway. Following his sermon, a doctor in the congregation pulled him aside and inspected his leg. The verdict: thrombo phlebitis—a blood clot in his leg which could kill him if it broke loose. The doctor put him on powerful medication and ordered him to bed for at least two weeks with his leg elevated higher than his heart. A telegram was sent to South Africa. He would spend Christmas Day on his back in bed.

Christmas morning was a strange time. All the children—most of them grown—were home. For 25 years we had gathered around the tree on Christmas morning to pray, sing carols and open gifts. We followed the tradition that morning also, but Jamie wasn't with us. He was upstairs in bed. I missed having him downstairs, sitting cross-legged on the floor beside the tree, pulling out presents, calling the

names of the various children, organizing the trash detail, and saving—as he always did—my gift for last.

In fact, I knew this year I would not



get a gift. Jamie always procrastinated buying gifts. This year, since he had been in bed for a week, I knew there would be nothing for me. But I was grateful to have him home. To have him alive. And to believe God had put him on his back to slow him down.

After the table was cleared, the children were all out visiting friends, I went up to the bedroom to sit on the side of the bed. Jamie was lying in that awkward position, his right leg propped high on two pillows so the clot would not break loose and rush to his heart or lungs.

He reached under the stack of papers and magazines he had been reading and pulled out a small box. "I sent one of the children out to buy it," he said.

It was a lovely alabaster box, decorated with gold trim and tiny blue birds. "Open it carefully. It contains my heart."

I opened the box. The aroma of perfume filled the room. Inside was a neat stack of carefully worded cards. The top card contained the scripture reference for Mark 14:3-9, the story of the woman who came to Jesus with an alabaster box of perfume and poured it on His head to

show her love. Under it he had written: "This Christmas I give myself."

The next card gave instructions. "Select one card each Monday morning for the next year. Make sure it meets your desires for that week. Present it to Jamie for fulfillment. Bonus cards may be used simultaneously with other cards."

I sorted through the cards. Each one contained a gift of self from Jamie to me.

"One long walk on the beach in the moonlight."

"Sleep late this Saturday morning. Jamie to cook breakfast and clean up afterwards."

There were six cards reading: "One hour of uninterrupted conversation."

There were other cards saying: "Picnic on beach with family"; "Chinese dinner for four—you choose the guests"; "One overnight visit with friends of your choosing"; "One afternoon of shopping at the mall with Jamie by your side. He promises not to gripe."

All together there were 52 cards—one for each week of the coming year. He had added six bonus cards—almost too good to be true. These included things like, "One week at a retreat center someplace in America where Jamie is not speaking."

I brushed a tear. "You'll need to keep me honest," Jamie grinned, "so mark the fulfillment date on each card."

I did exactly that. By the time 1980 was over Jamie had not only fulfilled all his promises, but the two of us had begun a radical change in life style which is not only adding years to our lives, but life to our years.

Occasionally when Jamie is away I'll go upstairs during the day, take the lid off my alabaster box which sits on my dresser, and smell the lingering aroma of the perfume.

I like to get still, and remember. It started with a prayer which God answered with a blood clot. It resulted in a box full of promises which—like God's mercy—remain new every morning. ■