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Beyond Visible Horizons

By Mrs. Paul E. King

(A Sequel to 'Molly')

From the March 1--April 5, 1981 Sunday School Beacon

Chapter 1

Laurel Anders pushed her way carefully through the bushes which hung over the narrow path to the woods. Since Molly's death, she had frequently made the short trip from the orchard into the overgrown, busy field beyond the orchard and into the small woods.

Spiky tendrils of bramble shoots straggled across the path, catching at her shoes and snagging her hosiery, threatening to trip her at every step. Parting the leaves of a large bush, she saw the cottage, set just inside the woods. Stepping on to what had been, at one time, a trim little path, she followed it to the front door.



The cottage was derelict, but she liked it just the same. Its thatched roof had long ago collapsed in the middle, revealing mellowed wooden beams that pointed starkly up to the sky. The tiny, glassless windows gaped, like sightless eyes set in a grubby white face, and the heavy oak door hung aimlessly on a single rusted hinge.

Laurel walked to a favorite spot of hers behind the cottage then sat down. It was peaceful here -- so very peaceful; and she needed the tranquillity -- today of all days!

The cycle of the seasons had moved from the brightness of long summer days to the crisp, sparkling days of autumn. Beneath the emerald-blue sky, brilliant splashes of rust and gold, red and brown mingled with the green hemlock and spruce in the woods, and Laurel, from her stump stool, took the beauty in with appreciative eyes, wondering if perhaps Molly was looking down upon the spectacle of beauty. She had been gone six months now the girl mused, pulling a strand of tall dry grass and wrapping it around her fingers. How much she missed Molly and her words of wisdom, she thought, giving the grass strand a hard twist and breaking it in two.

The sun was bright, but a chilly wind, restless in the treetops, forced Laurel to button the coat around her neck and snuggle into the warm collar. Change was in the air, she knew. Any day now a cold northeastern blast could scatter each beautiful painted leaf, tearing them mercilessly from their limbs with icy fingers and leaving the naked branches in a shroud of winter gray.

Contemplating the beauty and the mystery of the changing seasons, she was reminded forcibly of the Scripture: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

Hunching her back, she pulled another blade of tall fall grass and knotted it together, wondering what was the purpose of Andy's last letter to her. It was lengthy, as usual, but lacked something. Was she to "read between the lines" and deduce its real meaning, or what? Whatever the intent, it was not the same wonderful Andy who left for Bible school in August, vowing that he'd wait forever for her.

Laurel sighed. The chill wind made her shiver. (Or was it partly from her uncanny intuition warning her that this was the end? That Andy no longer considered her his "special" -- that he had discovered other young women who were equally attractive and spiritual?) Whatever it was, she was fully confident in her God and His all-wise leading and direction; truly, He had a "purpose" for it, just like Solomon had declared in his Ecclesiastical writing.

Raising her eyes, she looked at the cottage. It was one day beautiful and lovely, she was sure, and sturdily constructed, too (didn't those lovely old beams attest to this fact?). Someone had lived here; and they had loved, planned, planted and reaped. But time and seasons and change had taken their toll on the cottage and its immediate surroundings. It had served its purpose for the owner and possessor of it, she was sure, and now all that was left of it was a memory to someone somewhere and a gnawing speculation as to what could have happened or might have happened to her. Yes, it had had its purpose and served its purpose well, but change had altered that original purpose and today she saw only the shambles of a once-lovely structure..., of a once-happy beginning for some one who had a dream.

Life was like that, she mused in silent meditation as her thoughts wandered back to Andy. She had given him no commitment when he left in August . . . no promise., that

she would wait for him until he graduated from Bible school. She couldn't bring herself to do such a thing, however many times Andy had tried to extract it from her lips. Love was too sacred a thing to be taken lightly, she thought. And her mother (God bless her!) had taught her never to trifle with a boy's affections, stating that she would someday answer to God for her actions and reap the rewards of her sowing.

She liked Andy, she realized -- very much. But did she love him? Each time she asked her heart this question, she had doubts. This would not be; (her mother had told her once when she had mentioned it to her) not if it were truly love. "You'll know it, honey," her mother had added. "My advice to you is, go slow, tread softly; love's a fragile thing -- too fragile to break another's heart in the process. God will lead you."

It had been her mother's wise counsel . . . her sound advice., that had held her steady and stable when Andy put pressure on her, she realized, catching a falling leaf that fluttered her way. More than anything, now that she was entirely sanctified, cleansed and purged from her old nature -- the carnal mind -- she wanted God's will for her life. She was no longer her own; she belonged to Christ: soul, body, mind, and spirit.

"Why not go with me to Bible school?" Andy had asked, all but insisting that she enroll for the first semester at least. "You could kind of get your bearings," he further enticed and advised. But always a restraining, invisible Hand had held her back.

Perhaps she didn't have "her bearings" as to what direction her Divine Commander wanted her to take, she soliloquized pensively, but she had no intentions of rushing into any thing either, not until she was sure her directive had come from God. The "BE still and know" of God was often far more difficult to obey and to do than the rushing into a thing.

Since Molly's death, she tried always to emulate that holy woman's calm and God-like ways and nature. Molly had been a guiding light and a shining star in her life, and though in her time of rebellion and her backsliding she wasn't aware of it, still Molly's life had been her beacon lamp, steering her away from the deep shoals of sin back to her biblical upbringing and teaching. This, she realized with sudden illumination and understanding now, was the reason for her complete unhappiness and dissatisfaction when she took the broad way. Molly's prayers, as well as those of her mother, had followed her everywhere she went. And they had not been in vain, she thought joyously as a tear slid down her cheek.

There was only one thing that bothered her about not having left for Bible school, Laurel thought, and that was the memory of Molly's heavy, flat box resting on the very bottom of the chest's floor. That money was designated strictly for a part of her tuition to a spiritual Bible school.

But Molly would not want her to make a wrong move, she knew; and she would understand why she had chosen -- for the present at least -- to remain at home with her mother and become strictly domestic help, a "keeper at home."

Molly's passing had brought radical changes in their home. She, Laurel Anders, had seemed to mature over night. Gone was the careless, indifferent, I-could-care-less attitude. The newly-converted, sanctified wholly Laurel now assumed full responsibility of the house -- and that willingly -- while her mother continued her nursing duties at the hospital. Closer than ever were the ties of mother and daughter. The loneliness and the emptiness caused by Molly's sudden homegoing had cemented the two together in a bond of mutual love and total understanding. And though Lois Anders accused her daughter of coddling her, Laurel enjoyed it (if indeed it was coddling). To her, it was merely doing that which was pleasing in God's sight -- the rendering of due respect and honor to her godly and beloved mother.

The chill wind rattled the leaves and shook the bushes, and Laurel, her heart a deep inner calm and rest, wondered why it acted so fiercely angry. She loved fall, it was true, but she dreaded seeing the beautiful leaves and flowers withering and dying, succumbing to the cold, chill winds, much like today's, only far more icy-cold and frigid than today's.

Still, she had so much for which to be thankful and so very many exciting things to look forward to. There was her class of little girls in church -- hers at the insistence of Bill Goodrey their Sunday School Superintendent and Pastor Williams. What a blessing that class was proving to be to her? She had grown in many ways since becoming their teacher but none more noticeably than in her spiritual life. Among other things, she was learning the real meaning of patience and the "line upon line, precept upon precept" Biblical injunction.

Then there was the arrival of Ted to be anticipated. He had written her mother and her that he would be passing through sometime in November. Would it be all right to stop by? he had asked. And Lois had replied immediately that he "must by all means come by," stating that his mother's room was still intact and open to him any time he chose to visit.

She had gone so far as to invite Molly's only child to have Thanksgiving and Christmas with Laurel and herself, adding that "it will help to fill the vacancy which Molly's death has incurred."

And Ted accepted both invitations, answering first by a telephone call and then by letter. He sounded excited and overjoyed, her mother had informed her when she put the phone's receiver back in place.

Thinking of Ted now, Laurel realized that there was a common bond between the two of them. They seemed to understand each other perfectly. The three days which he

had spent with them following his mother's funeral had been nothing but pleasant and wonderful. He had seemed like one of their family, like "he belonged" . . . as her mother said.

His stay had done more than merely acquaint him with his now-deceased mother's close and choice friend, Mrs. Lois Anders, and her daughter, Laurel; it had been God's blessing to both of them in helping to ease the acute pain and the feeling of intense loss in the home. Beside this, Lois, who had been given a two-weeks vacation from the hospital during the time of sadness, had been able to help piece together the puzzle of Ted's life by answering his many and varied questions regarding his mother, filling him in, in her magic way of depth and detail, on the numerous virtues and kindnesses of Molly.

Laurel remembered how misty-eyed Ted had gotten, listening to her mother as she related and unfolded the life of the saintly woman. She, too, had been carried away listening, learning things about her beloved Molly which had been kept secret from her, hearing incidences of sacrifice, heartache and heartbreak which sent tears gushing out of her own eyes down over her cheeks.

Laurel recalled how her mother, in all her various revelations of Molly and her many sadnesses, never once revealed to Ted... nor even so much as hinted to him.., that she, Laurel, had helped to inflict and cause some of his mother's heartache and grief. For this she was thankful. Thankful! She wanted to forget the past and all the sorrow and misery she had caused Molly and her own mother. She had become all new and different -- inside and out. This now was the transformed Laurel. She knew that's what her mother wanted Ted to see.

Getting to her feet, Laurel started homeward, no closer to the meaning of Andy's letter than when she had arrived at the little cottage. Of one thing she was sure: God was always opening new ways for His children and enlarging the scope of their lives, hers included. She was learning to lean heavily upon Him who promised never to leave her nor forsake her. This was growth, she realized happily -- spiritual growth and spiritual maturity; and growth was ever and always proof of life and vitality and wholeness, she reasoned, tucking her head more deeply into the upturned folds of her collar as she briskly retreated from her place of privacy and seclusion.

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Chapter 2

October's gloriously-golden, sun-splendored and brilliant days passed away and died as abruptly as the frost-bitten gentian and the faded rose. The trees, bereft of their colorful foliage, stood starkly naked and bare, shivering under the frigid blast of November's breath. The days were, for the most part now, generally gray, overcast and icy-cold.

Opening her eyes and looking through the window beside her bed, Laurel stretched and yawned. Then, giving the bed covers a hasty toss, she tumbled out of bed.

"Six-thirty!" she exclaimed, feeling exuberant and very much alive as she dressed then brushed her long honey-blond hair and arranged it neatly on her head.

"Six-thirty," she repeated again. "And what a beautiful day to be alive! 'This is the day which the Lord hath made,' " she quoted, "I will rejoice and be glad in it.' Gray though it may be," she added with a smile.

With the bed made and the room in neat order, she hurried down the stairs to get breakfast for her mother and herself, a thing she had assumed doing immediately upon Molly's death. Since her dear mother was the chief bread-winner of the home, it was only fitting and proper that she should take over the entire responsibility of the household chores, she had reasoned sensibly -- a thing she did much to the pleasure and the delight of her mother. And the arrangement had worked beautifully. Laurel found herself being drawn more closely than ever to her mother, her culinary skill and expertise all the while becoming more and more an amazement to her parent.

Precisely at seven-thirty, Lois Anders entered the spotlessly-clean, fragrant-smelling kitchen. Giving Laurel an affectionate hug, she remarked, "How nice it would be to hibernate during these dark cold mornings of winter! It requires terrific effort to get out of a toasty-warm bed and face the rigors of a freezing day."

Laurel laughed. Sliding golden-brown sausages out of the skillet and arranging them attractively around the eggs whose sunny-side-up bespoke of sunshine and golden daffodils, she said, "That doesn't sound at all like you, Mother dear. You tired?"

Lois smiled. "Not really, honey; just getting lazy, I fear. This change of shifts has done it. I'll adjust in a few days, Lord willing. And really, Laurel, once one has faced the ordeal of going out in the bitter cold, it can prove surprisingly enjoyable and invigorating, stimulating even. The feel of a chill wind painting a rosy glow on pallid cheeks can be quite an experience. I know you enjoy winter, and once I've adjusted to the change of getting up in the morning to go on duty I'll enjoy it every bit as much as you do, dear."

"I was over to that little cottage again yesterday, Mother, and the woods was just beautiful. I go there quite often after my devotions to think and to meditate and pray some more," Laurel said, seating herself across the table from Lois.

"Andy is giving you quite a time," Lois Anders said cautiously, not wanting to draw more out of her daughter than she wished to tell or to say. In time, she knew, she'd hear everything. Laurel was like that. So like her deceased, beloved John, she thought silently.

Sipping her tea, her eyes wearing a faraway look and her face showing its perplexity, Laurel admitted candidly, "I guess I just don't understand him. Frankly, I believe he has discovered that I'm not the only girl in the world."

Mrs. Anders ate in silence for a while then she asked, "Does it hurt you very much, Laurel dear?"

Nibbling on her cinnamon toast and taking a bite of sausage at the same time, Laurel replied, "Not really. Oh, I always thought Andy was somebody special. But the more I analyze my feelings, so much the more I realize that he isn't special enough in my heart and life to become serious over."

"Then why not tell him so? You know I have never believed in trifling with someone's affections. It's a serious thing, and one always reaps what he or she has sown,

"I've tried to tell him, Mother. But, well, you know how Andy is; he just shrugs it off and laughs about it. Only, now I don't know if he's trying to tell me something, but he's afraid of hurting me, or what. His letters just aren't Andy."

"Suppose there is another girl...?" Lois turned searching eyes on her daughter.

"That will be perfectly all right with me, Mother. Andy will always be a very special friend, but that's all. I have nothing but pleasant memories of our times together. Neither do I have anything for which to be embarrassed or ashamed. I always conducted myself as a perfectly moral young lady should. Thanks to you and Molly for training me and teaching me the whys and the hows of proper and lady-like conduct."

Lois Anders smiled. "I'm sure you have, Laurel," she answered. "Keep step with the leadings of God and He will direct your paths and guide you right. He has promised that; His word cannot fail. Well, I'll have to be going," she added, finishing her meal and getting up from the table. "Thanks for the delicious breakfast. Now we'll have family devotions."

Following her mother into the hallway after family prayer and Bible reading, Laurel said, "You did remember to ask for time off when Ted's here? The Bible says to 'Abstain from all appearance of evil,' and I certainly wouldn't want to be here alone with him, fine and gentlemanly though he is. I value my reputation too highly to give occasion for talking and sinful imaginations."

Lois beamed with admiration and motherly pride. "I did, and I will. Be here, I mean. I would never place you in any position that would be improper, or give room for people to talk, Laurel dear. As you know, I'm quite a purist for godly living and for proper conduct and deportment. Too many young people these days are careless and indifferent along these sacred lines, wanting always to be alone with each other . . . in

parked cars, in hallways and rooms. Don't I see it all the time among the patients! The younger ones especially. They don't seem to realize that they're playing with fire. It's a dangerous thing, this too much alone-ness in unmarried couples. Well, I must run, honey. God bless you. I love you."

Laurel watched till her mother's car disappeared from sight. Then she washed and dried the dishes and cleaned the house. Next she got fruits and nuts ready for a special kind of fruit cake she wanted for their Thanksgiving table. It needed mellowing and ripening -- two weeks, the recipe said.

She had just put the delicious-looking fruit cake in the oven and had begun washing the dirty pots and utensils when she heard the mailman drop their mail into the mail box on the porch. He was early this morning, she thought, finishing the work she had begun before going after the mail. This was another thing Molly and her mother had taught her . . . "complete what you have started before you begin to read; else the reading will dominate your time and your work will suffer."

Oh, it wasn't that she was denied reading time. Never! She had ample time for this, her favorite pastime, after the designated work was finished. The training had been invaluable to her, she realized with deepest gratitude and thankfulness now; it had been her schoolmaster in disciplining herself., a "bringing one's self under" and not allowing one's "rathers" and his preferences and best-liked-to-do-things dominate and overpower those myriad other not-well-liked but important and necessary things.

Putting the dish towel on a rack to dry, Laurel went after the mail. Among other pieces was a letter from Andy, not nearly so voluminous, she noticed before opening it even.

She smiled faintly, feeling that this would be the answer to her unanswered but much-surmised question as to whether or not there was some one else in his life. Dear Laurel, it began.

I hardly know where to begin or HOW to say what I'm about to say. It's hard, believe me. You see, you're such a SUPER girl, and I was always so sure that you were the only girl in all the world who would have any special significance and meaning for me. But time and circumstances have changed all this. GOD brought Jeannie and me together. [Someday I'll relate everything to you -- our providential meeting, I mean; then you'll understand.]

Jeannie has beautiful blonde hair like yours [her last name's Baker, by the way, and she's from Oregon] and her eyes are deep blue as the morning glory pool in Yellowstone National Forest. But, aside from her many lovely physical attractions and plusses, she's spiritual. I guess this is really what first attracted me to her. She'd be an asset and a real blessing to any man. Someday the two of you must meet.

I hope this will not cause you too much pain, Laurel, for the Lord knows I don't mean to hurt you. But I DO feel it's only fair that you know.

I want to thank you for keeping your equipoise when I tried to persuade you to come to Bible school as well as on many other lines. You'll ever and always have a warm spot inside my heart, for you have been my closest female friend. And Laurel, thanks, THANKS for being a perfect lady; you made it easy for me to be a real Christian gentleman and to keep my thoughts and heart clean. You did all this by your careful conduct and you were never aware of it even.

God bless you, and thanks -- a million times over-for being what you are and like you are. You'll make some man a choice wife.

Ever and always your sincere friend,
Andy.

Laurel heaved a great sigh of relief. At last the reading-between-the-lines was over; the guessing game was finished. Her intuition was correct, and suddenly she felt happy. Very happy. For Andy and Jeannie Baker; and for herself, too.

God's ways were past finding out, she mused in contented and contemplative silence. One could not always see around the corners nor understand His leadings and His ways, yet it was the keeping-pace-with-Him, the unbroken step by His side, in which one's faith grew and flourished, she knew. What lay ahead for her?

The question propelled itself into sudden motion, and Laurel, facing it calmly, her trust in her invincible, unconquerable God, could look up and laugh. For life was full of corners that she couldn't see around. Yet David had declared, "For by Thee have I run through a troop: and by my God have I leaped over a wall" (Psalm 18:29). She had her key words, she knew: "... by Thee" have I done thus and so, and "by my God" have I surmounted the obstacle.., the thing not visible because of the obstruction, the wall. Instead of having to scale the wall, brick by fearful brick, God had provided a better way . . . the leaping over it.

"Thank you, Lord!" she cried aloud happily. "Thank you, for working this out with Andy. And no matter what may be waiting around the corners of my tomorrows -- and my today even -- of this one thing I am confident: Thou art with me, and by Thee will I conquer!"

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Chapter 3

Andy's letter brought wondrous relief to Laurel, whose loyalty to a good friend.., especially to a special friend.., had almost put her in bondage lest she do anything to

break or mar and strain the bond which had existed between them these many years. To her, Andy was the man who was ever nearby when she needed male counsel or support. He was, to a large extent, her father, who had died when she was such a "tiny bit of a child." (Molly's words.)

For so long as she had known..., which was as far back as she could remember... Andy had ever lived a clean moral life. And he was kind to his parents, too. Oh, he had had his short period of rebellion, just as she had had hers, but he came back to God and became again the consecrated and devout Andy of her past and he never again wavered in his devotion to God.

The relationship, so far as she had been concerned, was a beautiful but strictly platonic one. Andy was her friend.., her true friend.., and that was all he had ever meant or been to her. And now God was rewarding him for all the many times he had helped her when she needed someone to talk to -- someone younger than Molly and her mother.

Andy would no doubt become a minister of the gospel or a social worker of some kind, she was sure. He had the ability and the tact to "listen." It was a rare gift, Laurel realized -- yes, a truly rare gift: the art of listening. And Jeannie? Well, Laurel was sure of one thing: if Andy said she was wonderful, then she was, indeed.

Laurel's heart felt light and happy. Their relationship was now the way she had always wanted it to be: a strictly good, close friendship and nothing more.

The mailman's brisk step on the porch some days later, informed her that he had put mail in the box, and when she went out to get it, she was surprised to find a letter addressed to her in beautiful handwriting. The name in the upper left corner made her gasp in pleasant surprise.

"From Jeannie!" she exclaimed aloud, hurrying inside out of the stinging cold. "Jeannie Baker! How nice!" Opening it carefully, she read:

"My Dear Laurel,

"I greet you in Jesus' name, not as a stranger but as my dear friend and sister in Christ.

"Andy has told me so very many things about you that I feel I know you. I really do. You must be a marvelous and wonderful person, and I am SO happy for your life of stability and deep convictions and Godlikeness. Andy said you were the big stabilizing force and factor in his life; he said what you believed in and stood for [or against] you did with all your heart. He said there was no wavering in you or WITH you.

"I appreciate this, Laurel, more than you will ever know. I have had a great decision to make, and Andy 's statement about your stability and your unwavering

attitude helped me to finally get my bearings and do what I feel God will be greatly pleased over.

"This will mean that when I return home at the end of this first semester, I will remain home. You see, I have an ailing mother, [a VERY WONDERFUL person, she is!]. Since I am the only girl [I have five brothers] and since my father passed away two years ago, well, I plan to stay home with Mother and do all I can to help her.

"This has been one of the highlights of my life . . . getting to come here to school; and now, Andy. But truthfully, Laurel, I was long in 'the valley of decision' before I finally enrolled. Always, before me were two questions: shall I go? shall I stay home with Mother? I wavered; and, pushing my better judgment aside, I came here, leaving my dear mother [whose wish it was for me to attend school here] to do the best she could under the circumstances.

"I feel so very happy since telling the Lord that I'll return home and stand by Mother until she is better. [The doctor said a year of rest would do wonders for her.] There are so very many corners in one's life, aren't there? Corners we just can't see around... "

"Corners!" Laurel exclaimed aloud. Hadn't she, too, felt this way? But prayer and faith in God had always propelled her safely around or over or through each fearful and darkly-foreboding corner. No wonder Andy had said, in his letter, that Jeannie and she were so much alike. They seemed to think alike even, Laurel thought, smiling and continuing with her reading.

"I didn't know, when I came here to school, that Mother's health would decline so rapidly, " Jennie wrote. "But it has. So you see why I feel God's will for me is that I return home at this present time -- AFTER this first semester. One does not always have visible horizons by which he is steered or into which he walks; many times the opposite is true. This, then, is when that walking by faith and not by sight verse is proven true; when it, like some brilliantly-glowing beacon in the dark of night, leads its yielding, unresisting loveslave out into the greater, brighter, better way and will of God. Oh, Laurel, my soul is so happy and blest, knowing that I am pleasing Him.

"I know I shall miss Andy dreadfully, for he has come to mean more to my heart than I guess I ever dreamed was possible. But such is the case, nonetheless. Not that I have told him all this yet; I haven't. [This is a strict confidence.] I guess most of my peers and counterparts class me as being grossly old-fashioned and 'out of touch' with both time and reality, but I still believe in Bible standards for courting.

So many of my very dear friends are SO free with their hands on their male friends. [Makes one wonder, if they're pawing and falling all over each-other in public, what goes on in the privacy of their lives!] Long ago I purposed within my heart that my days of courtship would ever and always have the full smile and favor of God upon them.

To this I hold true. Whoever that 'certain somebody' may be, he will have to abide by these things. Someday my husband will appreciate me and love me all the more for keeping myself pure and for making it easy for him to have kept his thinking -- as well as his heart -- pure and clean and holy also.

"I am writing you a miniature volume, Laurel dear; can you EVER forgive me? This is almost unpardonable. But I just felt I HAD to write you and tell you how much you are appreciated by both Andy and me and loved by me.

"May God continue to make you a blessing. If you can ever find it in your heart to write to one of your 'sisters,' I would feel so VERY honored to hear from you. I have the feeling that someday we will become FAST friends.

"It's been a real joy to have visited with you via the mail. Again, I would be delighted to hear from you.

"Joyfully His,
"Jeannie.

Laurel read the letter over twice before tucking it back into the envelope, feeling the warmth and the sincerity of it and thankful for the privilege of making a new friend. Of course she would write. She enjoyed corresponding with those of her own age. She felt a mutual bond toward Andy's girl friend.

She placed the letter in a nearby desk drawer for answering (that night if possible); then she put on her coat and boots and warm hand-knitted scarf and hat set. She had promised to run an errand for old Mrs. Tudbury and she must not dilly-dally any longer at home lest that dear soul become over-anxious and worry that something had befallen her.

Once outside, she felt sparkingly alive. The icy blast gave quick steps to her feet and pricked her cheeks in a tingly sort of way.

She walked through a small but densely wooded park where the first heavy snowfall of November had transformed the area into a fairyland of surprising beauty. Trees, whose heretofore bare branches stretched naked arms upward and outward, were now topped and crowned and adorned in icy snow confection and splendor, standing out against the gray, overcast landscape in crisp perfection and glory. A nearby frozen pond, surrounded by the silver-sheened branches of myriad weeping willows, appeared like some painted scene on a Christmas post card. Even the park benches looked regally, their hoary-white pates giving them a dignity and honor and regal bearing not seen in summer's gentle moments of autumn's flaming glory.

Laurel paused, reveling in the breath-taking beauty of her surroundings. She loved the warm, bright seasons of spring and autumn best of all, to be sure; but she knew that

in the all-wise planning of her all-wise God, nothing remained static. He had decreed that "while the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night, shall not cease." And what God had decreed and declared was never altered or changed, she knew. Oh, the faithfulness of her own God, she mused, feeling happy and blest in her soul. Yes, winter was as much a part of His making... His creation and design and plan . . . as were the other three seasons.

What a parallel, Laurel thought, mulling over in her mind the wintry scene before her eyes. If the sun shone continuously, day after day after day, year in and year out, from a cloudless, blue sky, and if the trees never changed their liquid greens for the flamboyant reds, oranges, yellows and scarlets of autumn, then, human nature being like it was, life would inevitably pall and lose its luster and man would welcome (with open arms) the cold of winter with its awe-inspiring beauty and splendor.

How often the cold, chill winds of sorrow and disappointment swept across life's pathway, she reasoned in her "parallel thinking vein," and one was blown hither and thither by the whirlwind of sudden upheaval and disaster. Then suddenly through the storm the light of hope was seen, pale and wavering perhaps, but for the man or woman with the mind and the vision to see and believe, the guiding light of hope led him back once more to beauty . . . to his "springtime and summer and autumn." His "winter" had passed. For another time at least

Nothing was more heartening than to awaken to an early morning haze of misty sunshine, she mused silently, walking through the park toward Mrs. Tadbury's house now. One knew full well that when the wavering fingers of mist were dissolved, then the full warmth of the sun would appear in all its blazing glory. So with life, she thought, making an allegory and seeing the simile: always, the sun was shining; it needed but the parting of the clouds, the burning out of the fog or the dissolving of the mist to reveal its ever-permanent glory. So through all her cloudy days, her Sun of Righteousness was ever-present. It was a blessed thought.

Laurel was amazed how quickly she made the walk to her friend's house, and as soon as she had done the errand for which she came and checked on Mrs. Tadbury's grocery supply, (would she need anything before she could go with her mother to the grocery store on Friday night?) Laurel prepared a nutritious stew for the woman, waiting until it began a merry boil, then she turned the burner down and prepared to leave, informing the aged woman that by the time she was ready for her meal the stew would be finished.

Walking back across the open fields and through the little park, Laurel felt that it was good to be alive, especially so when someone needed you!

The wind whipped the bottom of her coat around her legs. She quickened her steps and plunged her hands deep into the warmth of her ample pockets, thinking of the pies and rolls she would make for Thanksgiving and for Ted's arrival.

* * * * *

Chapter 4

It was the tantalizing aroma of browning turkey that made Ted Bowery sit suddenly up straight and tall and very-much-wide-awake in bed. The sudden realization of his surroundings and of where he was, cleared the haze of sleep away from his brain and, with this clearing, he slid quickly out of bed.

Warm sunshine was spilling into the room through the sheer curtains at the windows and Ted, pushing them aside for a quick peek outside, saw that more snow had fallen during the night. The world looked beautiful, he thought, beautiful -- the way his heart felt and was.

He turned quickly away from the window and made the bed, touching the snowy-white quilt with gentle fingers. How beautiful the quilt was, he mused silently, looking at the rows and circles of tiny, evenly-spaced hand stitches which had been put there by his dear mother, Lois Anders had informed him. It was a quilt fit for a queen, he decided, a quilt that love made.

Looking at the elegant design and the neat work, tears stole into the young man's eyes. The same hands that had put each and every stitch into the creation lying so spotless and clean on the bed, had once held his infant body and cradled his tiny person to her great mother heart before his father had ruthlessly and selfishly torn them apart and spirited him away with himself.

Never could he remember the touch and the feel of those gentle hands; he was too small when his father did the dastardly deed. But someday he would see her and she would welcome him with those same gentle hands (outstretched and immortal) and her open arms would crush him, motherlike, to her heart. Then all the years that were lost between them would be fulfilled in a moment of time. Eternity would be glorious, he thought rapturously, visualizing the Great Shepherd Himself standing by with His smile of approval while mother and son were re-united forever.

The thought was so sacred and so real that it drove Ted to his knees, and by the time he was through praying and fellowshiping with His Lord, it was mid-morning when he made his way down the stairs to the kitchen.

"Something smells good enough to eat!" he exclaimed brightly, entering the food-perfumed kitchen and greeting his hostesses with a pleasant "good morning."

"Oh, it does; does it?" Laurel teased, taking two steaming-hot mince meat pies out of the oven, followed by as many pumpkin pies and a golden-brown pecan pie.

"Say, you're quite a cook and baker!" he exclaimed in his soft voice.

"That she is!" Lois exclaimed emphatically. "Wait until you've tasted it!" she added.

"Now, now, Mother! It's neither good nor wise to brag on one's children too much," she teased, giving Lois' arm a loving and gentle pat. "It's simply a matter of enjoying what one does. I love cooking and baking; and quite naturally one usually excels in doing what he likes to do, or what he enjoys." Looking at Ted, Laurel admitted candidly, "I've become quite domesticated since my dear Molly went to Heaven. I used to think I wanted to become a nurse, like Mother. I prayed long and earnestly over whether or not I should attend Bible school, but somehow I've never felt right in doing either; so I have remained at home. I am trying to fill Molly's shoes, a thing which I shall never be able to do because she was one of the greatest and most godly souls I've ever known or met."

"I can only say this much," Lois told Ted, "Your mother would be very proud of Laurel if she were here to see the change. I am a thankful mother -- a mother who knows she has the most wonderful daughter in all the world. This is Thanksgiving Day so I can say all this!" she added with a twinkle in her eye to her embarrassed daughter.

"Are you ready for breakfast?" Laurel asked, suddenly changing the subject and directing her question to their guest.

"I believe you told me last night that we would be eating at twelve. Right?"

Both women nodded.

"Then I'll wait for the noon meal. Perhaps you would do me the honor and the kind favor of allowing me to peel the potatoes," Ted said, laughing softly in that easy-to-listen-to way of his when he saw the expression of shock and amazement on Laurel's face. "It won't take me long," Laurel declared.

"Why not?" Lois interposed. "Your father often helped me," she added. "He enjoyed it. I'm sure Ted's done it before or he wouldn't have asked."

"You're a wise woman, Mrs. Anders," Ted said. "Yes, I have peeled potatoes, many times. In fact, it was Father who taught me how to cook. He was quite some cook, Dad was. Guess he learned it from my mother."

Blushing prettily, Laurel got a paring knife and the potatoes.

Around the dinner table Ted said, "I told you I'd be here for Christmas, but I'm afraid I'll have to change that. You see, the people for whom I'm presently working want me to go abroad with them. We do Bible translations in various dialects," he explained.

"You... you're a Bible translator, Ted!" Laurel's exclamation came out in a merry ripple of joyful surprise.

He looked at her with equal joy and delight in his eyes. "Yes. Does it mean anything to you?" he asked quickly.

Laurel dropped her eyes. "I... I... think that's wonderful," she answered softly. "I know your mother would rejoice if she knew it."

"Perhaps she does know it," Ted replied. "At least the writer of Hebrews says '... seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses...' when he was speaking of those long-gone great heroes of faith. At any rate, and after much prayer, I feel constrained to accompany the Whitmores. They're well up in years, and while David Whitmore is an excellent translator, his age is beginning to take its toll on him. Both Sister Whitmore and he feel it is necessary that I accompany them."

"How long have you been doing this, Ted?" Lois asked, her eyes shining and expressing her joy over Molly's son and his vocation.

"It's really quite a long story," he admitted, "and I wouldn't want to bore you with detailed and lengthy facts. But it's a miracle of miracles, too."

"Please tell it to us," Laurel pleaded. "Mother and I are exceptionally good listeners."

"So I have observed!" he exclaimed, smiling disarmingly at Laurel, "To begin, I must take you back about six years ago. Father was super-cautious and careful with whom I ran around, guarding me like some treasured thing and never, under any conditions or circumstances, allowing me to become friendly with religious people regardless of their creed or belief.

"He was a business man to the very heart of him, Dad was, as you, Mrs. Anders, no doubt know. As I grew older I was introduced to men of power and prestige and influence, men whom my father rubbed shoulders with in his successful and very prosperous business. It was with the two sons of his closest friend that I was allowed to play and go around with -- none else. Neither of the boys was saved or went to church even, but they weren't exceedingly wicked boys either.

"We loved to go to the wharves, the boys and I, and see the ships being moored and loaded or unloaded, whichever the case may have been for that particular day or hour in which we were there. And one day while watching, my attention was drawn strangely and magnetically to a white-haired couple coming down the gangplank. The look of another world was etched in their sweet faces and I was sure their countenance shone. I remarked as much to my two friends, who were busy watching something else

and disappeared shortly thereafter. I was fascinated by the couple, dressed so plainly and modestly and so completely out of line with the world's fashions and her look.

"Seeing the little lady nearly fall trying to carry luggage which I thought looked entirely too cumbersome and heavy for her..., the man's the same... I rushed forward to meet them. 'Here, let me help you, please!' I exclaimed.

"With a relieved look in her tender blue eyes, she put the luggage down. 'Please, young man,' she urged, 'take my husband's. He's not at all strong or well. His heart . . .'

"Sensing the urgency with which she spoke and seeing the look of grabbing pain in her husband's eyes, I relieved the man of his bags, much to his pleasure. Then, taking the wife's much lighter weight luggage, we hurried away toward a waiting cab.

"Before boarding the cab, the man grabbed my hand in a tight clasp, saying, 'God bless you, young man. I'm going to be praying for you..., not just occasionally, but every day. Are you saved? Born again from above?'

"Needless to say, I was more than baffled and confused. I had never heard the word before. Never!

" 'Do you go to church?' the man prodded gently. When I told him no, he kindly replied, 'Oh you should! You should! Here,' he said on a bright note, 'take this card. It has our name and address on it and it also has the address of the church which we attend on it. Come and pay us a visit sometime; make it soon. Promise?'

"I was afraid to promise because of my father so I merely thanked him graciously and kindly and tucked the little card in my shirt pocket.

"That was my first encounter with David and Lydia Whitmore, but not my last. A week later my father had to go away on business. Something within me seemed to be begging to know more about what the man with the shining face had said and told me. So, not being told by Dad that I dare not go anywhere while he was away, I made my way to the Whitmores almost as soon as my father left.

"I was welcomed with such warmth and love by both that I felt like I had known them all my life. 'I have come to learn more about that born again something,' I told them immediately. 'What is it and what does it mean?'

"That was one of the greatest days of my life!" Ted declared emphatically as bright tears danced down his cheeks. "That day, I was converted. My world and my heart and life all were new and changed.

"Dad was away for two days and I could hardly wait for him to return so I could tell him what happened in my heart.

"Never, in all my years, did I see my father so angry as when I told him I had been saved -- then, and when I got sanctified wholly and told him I had. That's when he drove me out of the house.

"The Whitmores took me in and treated me like a son. And that's when Brother Whitmore told me that I was God's answer to his wife's and his prayers., they had been praying for God to send them a helper in their translation of the Scriptures and various sound holiness books."

"You . . . you've studied languages?" Laurel asked, fascinated and awed.

"Dad saw to all this from the first year that I entered school." Ted remarked. "He was preparing me for some sort of diplomatic position abroad, not knowing that God was preparing me for His greater work of translation and writing. I'm still studying, privately of course. But I'm far enough advanced that I can help the Whitmore's.

"David's poor health sent them home. Now that he is much improved, he feels he must return to finish what is still unfinished. Some day you both must meet Lydia and him. He delights in words, delving into their minutest details and scissoring syllables down to their very roots. As a small boy running his fingers through a pocketful of marbles, so this man rolls words around in his mind, testing for sound, rhythm and meter. Such accuracy is part and parcel of a daily life that overflows with words depicting precise shades of meaning. They are a remarkable and dedicated couple, and it is due to them and their interest in winning souls to Christ that I am a Christian today."

"Oh, the workings of God," Lois exclaimed, "and His way of answering your mother's many prayers and groans! It is truly wonderful and marvelous, Ted. Marvelous. Bless His name!"

"This trip . . . will you be gone long?" Laurel asked.

"That all depends," Ted answered, finishing the delicious pie. "You see, translating is no rapid-fire work. It takes months, and more often than not, years to complete a work. So there is no way I can say how long the Whitmores and I will be over there. I do know this, however, Brother Whitmore is concerned mostly with completing that which he was so far advanced in when poor health forced him home to rest. He says a year of hard work should finish that."

"It seems more like a dream than reality," Lois said softly, beginning to gather up the dirty dishes, "that Molly's long-lost son is sitting here at our table and that he is a devout follower of the Christ who meant more to Molly than life itself. Oh, the ways of God!"

"They are 'past finding out!' " Ted added emphatically.

"How very, very true!" Lois answered quickly. "And now, I'm going to take care of the dishes. Laurel, you and Ted make yourself scarce while I get the kitchen in order."

Putting up a restraining hand of resistance and giving her mother a gentle shove, Laurel said, "No. No, dear. I am going to clean up the kitchen and do the dishes. You are to lie down and take a nap. Orders from the one who loves you best of all." She laughed pleasantly.

"I say a big second to that," Ted remarked. "I'll help Laurel. I'm really quite capable since Father always left the dishes for me to do."

Laughing in her sweet gentle way, Lois retired to the living room to read.

It was when the dishes were all washed and dried and the kitchen put in neat order that Ted said, "Let's go for a walk in the snow, Laurel. Or don't you like walking in it?"

"O but I do, Ted; I do. I love it. You should be here and see me some days. Ask Mother . . ."

"That dear soul has neither ear for hearing nor eye for seeing right now: your mother has fallen asleep in the reclining chair. Her Bible is open to where she was reading when the body-restoring medicine overcame her. So I will not awaken her to ask, presently," Ted teased, helping Laurel into her coat and wrapping the scarf around her neck.

It was cold outside. The snow crunched and squeaked beneath their feet as they headed for the orchard and the little woods some distance beyond.

In a gentle way, Ted took Laurel's arm and placed it in the crook of his own, steadying her as she walked. It felt comfortable there, Laurel thought, listening to the many interesting things of which he spoke.

They reached the derelict cottage and Ted, wiping snow from a fallen tree, seated her beside him on it. All was peacefully quiet and silent, blanketed deep in winter's blissful solitude.

"I've been wanting to talk to you, Laurel," Ted said, breaking the magic spell. "I'm sure Mother would be very happy if she knew that I was in love with you, which I am. I ask nothing hasty out of you. By that I mean I don't expect you to marry me just yet although I hope and pray that someday you may find it in your heart to love me enough to do just that. What I would like to know now is, do you care at all for me? Or do you view me as a good friend only?"

Laurel shuffled her boots in the snow, digging snow troughs of thought and meditation. Then she lifted her eyes to meet his, honesty and uprightness illuminating their inner chambers. "I do," she said softly.

* * * * *

Chapter 5

Laurel walked to the little woods, and finding the fallen tree upon which Ted and she had sat, she brushed the snow off its rough bark and let herself gently down upon it. Here it was that she had confessed her inmost feelings to the one man in the world whom she could love. Ted's eyes and his face were reward enough when she had answered his simple question with, "Yes, Ted, I do care for you, very deeply."

The revelation had come to her two days before that Thanksgiving. He was sitting in the reclining chair in the living room talking to her mother and her when God opened the windows of her heart and let her see that she was in love. With Ted, of all people. The realization of it had rendered her shy and timid around him, afraid lest he suspicion and suspect her feelings.

When Ted had to take his leave, they parted with the lovetie strong and secure between them, planning a wedding as soon as possible after his arrival back in the States. Now two years had come and gone, and neither the Whitmores nor Ted had been heard from in over a year.

A civil war had broken out in the remote area in which the translating was taking place, it was reported. From what her mother and she could piece together from news reports and the printed page, all Laurel knew was the "three Bible translators were taken as hostages and were secreted away, to no one knows where." (The newspaper account.)

Word had come repeatedly that the three had been killed-ruthlessly tormented then slain. But Laurel, hoping against hope as it were, refused to believe the reports.

Pulling Ted's last letter out of her deeply-set coat pocket, Laurel unfolded the pages and read the contents. (For how many times? God alone knew the answer to that question; it had been read and reread, over and over again and again.) There had been no hint of unrest or trouble in his letter. But then, Ted wouldn't write such things, lest he cause her pain and bring worry to her heart. He was too sensitive of her feelings and her happiness, she thought, as tears fell from her eyes and danced onto the page. "The translations are moving along well," he had told her, "more rapidly even than Brother Whitmore and his dear wife expected. All praise be to God! At the rate we're going," he had continued, "we could be returning home within a month or two, at the most -- barring trouble, of course. The natives here are quite unpredictable, highly temperamental and

extremely suspicious. Not the real Christians, of course; they are indeed diamonds out of the rough-jewels of the choicest kind, dedicated followers of the meek and lowly Christ.

"I am eagerly longing, waiting for and looking forward to my reunion with you, my wonderful Laurel; and after we are husband and wife, I will tell you all the many beautiful things my heart and soul has thought about you and called you. I am still old-fashioned enough to believe that many of a lover's secrets should be repeated only after the sacred wedding vows have been taken and each has pledged himself and herself to the other. Oh, Laurel, my heart has so much it wants to tell you, so many things it wants to reveal to you that I think I can even now hear the wedding bells ringing!"

Finishing the rest of the letter Laurel caressed it to her heart; then she folded it and put it lovingly back into the envelope and the deep pocket in her coat. After a season of earnest prayer, she made her way back to the house, thinking of the mystery of life and of the past, of which every hour influences the present. And seeing with new eyes that if loved ones could stay with one, the day would come when they must leave, for here we have "no continuing city," but there is one to come -- a meeting again with those whom one has "loved and lost awhile."

Knowing that nothing was better for healing one's pain and hurts than keeping busy and trusting with an unwavering faith in the One who did all things well, Laurel baked a choice, airy-light, delicious, tall sponge cake for the old lady who had only two months previously moved into their small community. She frosted it with her creamy butter-pineapple frosting and topped the whole with a thick mass of coconut, creamy-white and sweet. A single daffodil, plucked from a pot of blooming beauties growing on the windowsill, was laid carefully alongside the cake, completing the beautiful picture.

She surveyed the regal-looking delicacy; then she got into her heavy clothes, and putting the cake into the old but still-good car which her mother had bought for her use while she herself was at work, Laurel drove away.

Mrs. Granger was a very peculiar woman, she mused as she drove. She was a sort of a mystery woman who alienated all her neighbors. When she did emerge from her retreat -- the small but neatly-kept stone house on Brookstone Street -- it was usually only to find fault and to criticize. She refused every offer of friendship and was adamant about coming to church. Stubborn, even, to a fault. After several weeks of her repeated rebuffs and snide remarks, people in the community ceased trying to be friendly. Let her sink or swim; she had made her bed, she could lie in it seemed to be the general feeling and consensus of the great majority.

Not so with Laurel and her mother, nor the people from their church. They saw in Mrs. Granger what others failed to see: a soul for whom Christ died and a thoroughly unhappy woman.

Brookstone Street consisted mainly of a row of old-fashioned, sturdily-built but small and neat stone houses near one of the more fashionable churches in town. Most all of the houses had gardens and large plots for flowers and bushes. Mrs. Granger's was the exception: hers had nothing but grass. How she must have longed for at least one blooming flower when she bought the place and moved into it in late August or early September, Laurel thought, pulling up in front of the house.

Stepping up to the porch, she noticed that the curtains were pulled closely together and everything was silent. The brass bell and letter box were the only two things that would attest even mildly to a casual on-looker or passer-by that life existed behind the drawn drapes.

In eager anticipation of seeing the strange woman, Laurel rang the bell three times then stepped back from the door and waited.

The deep silence was frightening. Giving the brass bell another three rings, she again stepped back and waited. She repeated the process four times without success and was almost ready to leave when the Scripture came to mind: "The kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matt. 11:12).

Persistence! she thought with renewed hope. Persistence was the key, the answer. It worked in prayer, why not in her effort to get to speak with this strangely-odd woman. Thinking thus, she rang the bell again, a bit more urgently and insistently this time.

Slowly, oh so slowly, she saw the curtains flutter and move inside the window. Then a face . . . just a bare corner of it . . . showed around a corner of the drape. Then, impatiently and harshly, came the question: "What do you want? You know you're not welcome here."

Undaunted and undeterred, Laurel cajoled sweetly and pleasantly, "I have a gift for you, Mrs. Granger. Please open the door and get it. I'm afraid the flower will freeze unless you take it inside."

The woman said something that Laurel couldn't understand (she was scolding, no doubt) then the door opened a crack's width.

"Here," Laurel said kindly. "One of my mother's favorite cakes. For you." She thrust the cake with the buttery-yellow daffodil adding its special charm and beauty toward the partially-open door.

Mrs. Granger surveyed her visitor with a cynical smile and a critical eye. "You're one from that little church at the edge of town."

Laurel nodded, not sure if the remark was a statement or a question.

"I thought I made it plain to everyone when I moved here that I'm not interested in church . . . no one's church!"

Whether from the cold or what, Laurel didn't know, but the woman was opening the door wider as she talked then closing it even tighter and farther than when she had first opened it. Fearful lest she bang the door in her face and crush the beautifully decorated cake, she stuck her foot in the door, pleading softly, "Please accept the cake and this bright daffodil as a gift from one who is concerned about you and loves you."

"All right. All right!" the woman replied impatiently, reaching for the cake and slamming the door shut tight.

Laurel heard the latch click and she knew that the door had been locked. Calling after the retreating footsteps she said, "If you ever need us, Mrs. Granger, don't hesitate to send for us or call. Mother and I love you and are praying for you."

"Be gone!" the woman shouted through the locked door. "And never come back again."

Turning to go, Laurel remembered the tract in her coat pocket. Sliding it carefully under the door, she hurried off the porch to the car and made her way home, praying all the while that the tract would do the work she had hoped to do.

What a dreary, dreary world the woman must live in, she thought -- curtains pulled closely together and drapes drawn tight at all times.

Involuntarily she shuddered. Her love for light and sunshine and the glory of God's great, beautiful outdoor world reflected and admitted inside one's house as much as possible was as much a delight and joy and uplift to her as anything. What good were fine furnishings and elegant tapestry when the glory and beauty of the brilliant sunshine was locked tightly outside. Again Laurel shuddered, thinking how much Mrs. Granger had become a prisoner in her own house. A prisoner with dark, black attitudes, thoughts and feelings.

Returning home, she discovered a letter from her now very close and dear friend Jeannie Baker in the mailbox. Jeannie's letters had proven to be a real blessing to her heart and a definite spiritual uplift to her soul. Today's was one such inspiring letter, with the additional good news that Andy and she were being married the month following Andy's graduation from Bible school. Would she be maid of honor?

It was such a beautiful letter, and Laurel found herself quite unexpectedly in tears. "Oh, dear God!" she prayed aloud. "Please, please, if it be Thy will, don't let Jeannie's dreams be shattered! Protect Andy, and may their wedding become reality. Please!"

Her own great disappointment and deep sorrow crashed in upon her with such fierceness and intensity that she dropped to the floor in an agony such as she had never known.

Her mother found her there when she returned home from the hospital.

* * * * *

Chapter 6

The heavy winter snows melted, swelling the streams and rivers, and soon came spring. The world was bursting with revival and rebirth. Tulips, daffodils, crocuses and hyacinths, stretching their cold shoots and stems, showed their healthy heads above ground and were soon a riot of colors; trees put on tender-green garments and bird songs filled the air. Oh it was wonderful to be alive, Laurel thought, as she hung the wash on the clothesline to dry.

A walk to the orchard, where she had begun going for her early morning devotions now that the weather was warm, revealed sluggish bees outside the hives moving about in the warm sunshine. Soon the orchard would hum and buzz with their busy round of activity and work, she knew, visualizing the many trees in full bloom once more. How wonderful if Ted could be here, she thought sadly, marveling at the healing, soothing effect of hope upon one's aching heart.

She walked through the orchard, checking on the trees and noticing at the same time the perfect pruning job Mr. Miller had done on them in the cold of February, her mind wondering where Ted was (if he was still alive) and how he was faring.

She stood for awhile at the edge of the orchard, looking to the meadow and the small woods beyond. Then she stepped briskly out into the open field, its great amount of weed-clutter still in the tender-plant stage. Dandelions bloomed and blossomed in wild and carefree abandon and Laurel, looking across the meadow land, felt that it looked like the most beautiful golden-yellow piece of carpet she had ever seen. It was a literal sea of soft, yellow-headed dandelions, and they were beautiful.

As she walked, she remembered the many times in her childish years when she had appeared at the door with her fists bulging with the golden-yellow flowers and had presented Molly with her offerings of love. And Molly had taken them, gently and carefully, from the small hands that crushed them in their tight grasp and put them with water in the choicest vase she could find.

A smile tugged at her mouth, remembering now. One of the lowliest of earth's flowers had received regal treatment from Molly's hands! But Molly was like that, ever and always. Little things . . . insignificant things . . . were never really small nor insignificant to her, especially when it came from a little child.

Walking down the path toward the woods now, the tender tendrils of the bramble bushes caught at her legs. Yes, spring was really here, Laurel mused, when bramble bushes began their rapid growth along the way. Their young, tender delicate green leaves were a thing of beauty to her. How beautifully each was shaped.

The little cottage loomed up ahead, its deterioration and external decay looking less shocking and sad with spring's lacy-leafed filigree and its brightly-colored flowers adorning it on all sides. Laurel, walking quickly to its front door with one lone rusty hinge, was brave enough to look inside. Nothing looked quite so fearful and frightening, she mused, when spring dropped sunshine and beauty at one's doorstep. The transformation was radical and phenomenal.

As she tried to move the lopsided, half-hanging door so she could go inside and look around, a bird swooped past her, making a frightened, eerie sound. Trembling with fright over the sudden appearance of something she had no idea was there, she quickly let go of the door and hurried away, deciding that further exploring was totally out of order for her this day. Furthermore, she theorized, why barge into another's territory? It was all too evident that the cottage had become the habitation of birds -- possibly even bats.

At thought of the bats, Laurel shivered. For so long as she could remember, she had had a dreadful fear of bats, harmless though they were.

Well, the bats could have the cottage, she thought, glad to be away from the door.

She walked around the house to the fallen tree upon which Ted and she had sat, noticing that the earth's floor was covered with beautiful purple violets. She gasped in awe, stooping and picking hands full of them. How delicately fragrant they smelled, nothing strong nor pungent and heady, just a delicate, ultra-feminine fragrance, she noticed, holding them for a long while against her cheeks, enjoying both their perfume and their velvet coolness.

Deciding that the sweet-scented pink Arbutus were growing in the woods also, Laurel found what she deemed a most likely place for their growth. As she dropped to her knees, her hands gently pushing the decaying leaves aside, she received her reward. There, hiding beneath the rotting leaves and blushing a beautiful deep pink, were the low-growing, healthy and very much alive Arbutus.

It was as if she had found buried treasure, so excited and thrilled and happy was she. They had been here all the time, she realized, hiding beneath their blanket of earth-brown leaves. The reason she had never found them before was because she had not searched for them. So much like God's exceeding great and precious promises, she

thought, which were in the Book all the time, waiting for one to 'uncover' them and claim them for his own.

Deep in thought and excitement over her find, her nose pressed into a clump of the exquisite blooms while reveling in their deliciously-sweet fragrance and delicate beauty, she didn't hear the twig that snapped close by. She must uncover more of the shy flowers, she decided, which were (in line with her comparison and her analogy at least) like the beautiful, God-given but buried and hidden talents of many whom she knew.

Working carefully, "raking" the dead leaves gently aside and away with her fingers, she came upon patch after patch of the gorgeous beauties. Raising her head for a look at her accomplished work, she saw a man. Startled, she got to her feet to run. Then a voice gripped her attention. A soft, deep and gentle voice.

"Laurel! Oh, my dear, dear Laurel!"

"Ted," she whispered. "Ted/" With a happy cry, she burst into tears.

She moved toward him then, like one in a dream. Was it really him? He was much too thin and pale, this man.

"Stay where you are, Laurel, for yet another moment," he said gently in his soft, deep voice. "I want to feast my eyes upon you a while longer. It's been such a long time! And this.., this moment I want; so I can engrave it forever on my mind and in my heart. I've been watching you for a long time," he confessed, laughing softly while tears trickled down his cheeks.

"Oh, Ted. Ted! It is you! Really and truly you!" Laurel exclaimed, rushing to his side. "I never gave up hope, dear Ted. Never!" she exclaimed as happy tears washed her cheeks. "I knew God would take care of you."

"He certainly did, my dear little Laurel. It's a miracle -- a modern-day miracle. But then, our God specializes in miracles, doesn't He? O but it's good to see you again! And what, may I ask, were you doing just now?"

Laurel laughed through her tears. "Oh, Ted," she said, "let's talk about you and how you got away. I was uncovering Arbutus. They're so very beautiful, but so shy and modest that I decided it was time for the world to see the beauty which grows beneath apparent death and decay. But come, let's get the violets which I picked and go back to the house. You look hungry. Rather, I should say you look like you have had very little food to eat for quite sometime."

"Food is the least of my interests right now, Laurel. Tell me, do you still feel the same toward me as you told me you did when I was here that Thanksgiving day?"

"Oh, Ted, yes. Yes! Only, I love you so much more now than then."

"My dear, dear Laurel. Thank God! Then when can we be married? We had decided it would be upon my return home from the assignment . . ." he reminded, his sentence trailing meaningfully.

"I am a woman of my word, Ted. But please tell me how you managed to get away. We prayed so earnestly and fervently for your protection and safety. Are the Whitmores safe? Where are they?"

Walking hand in hand back to the house, Ted said, "God sent us a deliverer in a native tribesman. When the fighting was at its zenith and we were taken as hostages, we were locked up in a building outside the village. Guards were around our prison

crack in the door. This continued for many months. But please, Laurel dear, spare me the details for the present; it is all still too fresh in my memory and.., too bizarre to dwell on for long. Suffice it to say that two of those wonderfully devout and humble saints of God from the Christian station and church lost their lives in saving ours. The Whitmores are safe, though extremely frail and emaciated. A daughter and her family are taking excellent care of them now and should soon have them fully recovered from their malnutrition and the effects of the shock. It was quite traumatic, believe me!

"I remained with them long enough to make sure they were all right. Then I started for my favorite little town and for the only woman who has ever had special meaning for me. I stopped along the way once and tried to call you; but, receiving no answer, I got immediately back into the car and pushed steadily onward."

"You're tired then," Laurel said quickly, looking anxiously into his eyes and face.

"Strangely enough, no, Laurel dear. The sight of you and of your kind, sweet face has revived and refreshed me, both in body and in spirit. When I got to the house, I felt as though my heart would burst with in me over the love I have for you. Getting no response when I knocked and seeing the freshly-washed clothes on the line, I thought you had gone to the store. I waited and waited and when you didn't return, I decided to visit the sacred place where we revealed our love to each other That's how I found you among the flowers. Oh, Laurel, you can't imagine the beautiful picture you presented! I will cherish and treasure it for so long as I live . . . head bent diligently, cheeks flushed pink, several strands of hair loose and curling prettily and femininely about your face in a damply-moist way, your hands, all the while, caressing the flowers which you had so carefully and tenderly uncovered. But the look in your eyes; how can I define or describe it! Shining lights? Indeed! But deeper than that even."

"Oh, Ted, you must not flatter me so. I was simply overjoyed with my discovery that Arbutus plants do abound in this little woods. And I'm simply overjoyed, also, that you found me! No, rather, that we found each other."

"Not us, Laurel dear, God! He led us all the way. We only found and discovered each other through the mysteriously-wonderful leadings and workings of God. And now, my God-sent one, I have a secret to reveal to you. The land upon which we are walking and in which you discovered your Arbutus . . . pronounced right, I hope..."

Laurel laughed, admitting he had a super-intelligent mind.

"That land, my dear Laurel, with the woe-begone cottage, is ours."

"But Ted," Laurel said quickly, "no one knows who owns that land. At least no one around here seemed to have any knowledge as to where the owner is or what happened to him."

"You are looking at the owner, Laurel. I bought it all -- plus a generous share beyond and behind the woods. It is one of my surprises for my lovely bride-to-be. When I was here that November, I made diligent inquiry about the land, and when I learned the man's whereabouts I contacted him immediately about selling it. He seemed relieved to know that at last he could dispose of 'such an out-of-the-way piece of property' (his words) which had no significance for him. So, before leaving with the Whitmore's, I flew to New York City -- where the man lives -- and the property became mine."

Laurel gasped in happy surprise. Then she asked quickly, "But what about your work? I mean, well, the translating. If you are called of God, then you must obey."

"But I have never been called of God to that specifically. I went with the Whitmores to help them out. It was out of my gratitude and thankfulness to God and my desire to help the much-recovered but far-from-well and still-ailing Brother Whitmore that I went. I am an author. And what better or more suitable place to work and to write than in these peaceful surroundings. Why, I shall receive inspiration after inspiration seeing my beautiful bride on her knees beneath the dogwood, the maple, oak and beech trees, uncovering Arbutus and gathering violets for our home from the earth's floor in our very own yard."

"I... I don't know what to say!" Laurel's candid exclamation came out in a barely audible voice. "It's all so... so very wonderful and almost too good to be true, Ted. You mean that our home shall be built in that beautiful woods?"

"Right. Somewhere near where the cottage stands now. A bit deeper in the woods, perhaps, but in the same general vicinity of the derelict house, the Lord willing."

"What will happen to the cottage?"

"It will be removed, of course. Why do you ask?" "I was just thinking of the birds."

"The birds?" Ted asked gently. "What relation does a dilapidated cottage have to the birds, my dear?"

"They have nests in there. At least I think they do. One flew over my head a short while ago while I was trying to get the door open so I could have a decent look inside. Then, too, I'm sure it's a haven for them from the winter storms. They can easily get in and out of those broken-out windows, and while it's true that the roof has caved in in the middle, I'm sure they're free from the worst of a bad winter blizzard by roosting inside some of the rooms within the cottage."

"Then you want the cottage to stay, Laurel? Beside our new home?"

The question was asked with a bit of dry humor and wit, and Laurel, seeing the point Ted was trying to make, laughed pleasantly.

"Well . . . no," she said quickly. "That would look ridiculous."

"And we can always have bird shelters built in the woods, my dear. Shelters and feeders. And I promise you, we'll have them both, God willing, plenty of them. I am quite a bird watcher and a naturalist myself."

"And here we are, at the house, Ted. Now, before I do another thing, I am getting you something to eat."

"Wouldn't it be a wise thing to call your dear mother and let her know that I am safe and sound and under the protection of her friendly roof? And then, wouldn't it be wise that you go into the city and do a bit of shopping for a wedding gown, my dear? You told me before I left that you wanted a simple wedding, nothing elaborate nor showy; and since it doesn't take long, after one has obtained their licenses, to be married, well..."

"The gown is all ready for the beautiful ceremony. Ready and waiting. And while they say it isn't proper for the husband-to-be to see one's wedding dress before the wedding, you have broken the rule..."

"I have done such a foul thing? Why, Laurel, bless you! You... do you mean it? You will be wearing my mother's wedding gown? It's the only one I have seen, you know. And you brought it out of that quaint old chest of hers and held it up for your mother and me to see."

"It's the most elegant and beautifully fashioned gown I have ever seen," Laurel commented with a faraway look in her eyes, "so modest, and such simple but elegant

lines. It's waiting inside my closet, Ted, all cleaned and carefully pressed by professional dry cleaners and covered tightly so dust nor dirt collects on it. Molly would be so happy and excited if she knew."

"Lets go and tell your mother, Laurel; my car's right here. And frankly, I'm not at all hungry right now. She'll need to have time off for the wedding, you know. ' '

"Wonderful, Ted, as soon as my violets are put in water and after I've washed my hands."

Hurrying inside, Laurel dropped to her knees beside a kitchen chair and offered a prayer of thanksgiving and praise to God. Not always did one have visible horizons by which to walk, she realized poignantly; but it was the walking, by faith, in spite of the invisible, which ultimately brought one out victoriously and triumphantly and more than conqueror through Christ.

"Coming, Ted," she called, drying her hands and hurrying out the door.

Taking her hand, Ted guided her to the car and helped her inside. Smiling, Laurel sighed. What a lovely, lovely surprise God had kept for her, she thought as Ted slipped behind the steering wheel.

* * * * *

THE END