Turning the key in the lock of the shop's door, Matilda Norton set to the task of straightening the merchandise on the counters and putting things back in their proper places. People--some of them at least--had such annoying ways, she thought. Why couldn't they take things back to the proper counter if they decided they didn't want them, instead of dragging them off to the farthest corner or shelf and depositing them where they didn't belong? she wondered, feeling highly agitated, her mind never totally free from nor rid of the longing, wistful eyes of Travis Eastbrook.

Pulling the dark green shade on the window of the ancient door (against the eyes and the ill-intentions of curious passersby) she made her way into her living quarters above the little shop, which was her sole livelihood since her husband's death some better than four years earlier.

Dropping the heavy black shawl from her shoulders and draping it on a nearby chair, she turned the stove burner on beneath the blue and white porcelain teakettle, thinking how good and refreshing a cup of steaming-hot tea would be before eating a bit of supper . . . nothing much, really; she wasn't hungry -- Travis' eyes had taken the keen edge off her ordinarily voracious appetite. His eyes, and his words.

Waiting for the water to heat, Matilda walked through her comfortable kitchen-dining room into the living room. Standing by the window, she looked down on the
street below, her thoughts and her mind one great state of spinning, troubled turmoil. And all because of Travis, she thought dismally.

The snow, which had begun falling in mid-afternoon in such a gentle, lazy, beautiful sort of way, was now a blinding thing as the clouds literally dumped and poured their heavy burden upon the dark bosom of the earth.

Matilda, standing inside the window enjoying the cozy warmth of her sizzling, steaming hot water heat, watched the swirling, driving snow as it was pushed and tossed and slapped against her windows with powerful force. Beneath her, it spun and pirouetted in gray-white circles, making her head feel dizzy as she watched. The wind, which was virtually nil during the day, had suddenly shown its anger and risen to gale force, shaking the house with its mighty breath and rattling the windows with its icy fists, its high-pitched whining, whistling cry all the while screeching and screaming like some wild, demented thing as it tore around the eaves and the corners of the old but well-kept, three-story house.

Was the boy Travis warm? she wondered suddenly. And did he have enough to eat for supper; or had he gone to bed hungry? And what about his request. Could she do it? Would she?

Turning from her look-out point at the window, Matilda hurried to the kitchen where the teakettle's merry whistle let her know that that cup of refreshing tea was hers for the pouring, the making.

Over the tea and a quick sandwich of cold roast beef, the woman mulled over in her mind what Travis had said: "Please, Mrs. Norton," he had asked politely and courteously, 'May I have these two warm sweaters to send away in a missionary box for children who are always cold and have no clothing to wear?"

She remembered how she had gasped indignantly before snapping crossly, "Where's your money, young man?"

The boy looked up at her, his eyes appealing, begging her for understanding and for help. "Please, Mrs. Norton, I'll pay you; I promise I will! Here's the first payment..." and, digging into the frayed pockets of his too-thin jacket, he brought out a handful of coins.

"How much is there?" she had asked impatiently.

"Three days lunch money, Ma'am."

"And you think that will pay for two sweaters! No, Travis, I can't do it."
"But Mrs. Norton, I . . . I'll give you my lunch money for as long as I need to until the sweaters are paid for. Please!" he begged. "It... it's the only way I can give for the missionary box."

"And who is getting this box up? I mean, whose idea was it? And how do you know that it will go for heathen children?" She had asked the questions with rapid succession and indignance, unable to comprehend the urgency with which the boy spoke.

Undaunted, Travis' eyes brightened perceptibly. "Our Sunday school class is doing it. Mrs. Thatcher -- she's the best teacher in the world --"

"Mrs. Thatcher!" (She hadn't meant to sound so shocked ! )

The large, round, expressive eyes were radiant now. "Yes, Mrs. Thatcher. Do you know her?"

It had been such an innocent question. So very innocent, but so disturbing, too.

"Do you know Mrs. Thatcher?"

Again the question and the questioning, probing eyes -- like miniature search lights, she had mused silently. "Go on," she replied, more brusquely than she had meant to as she ignored the question.

The eyes looked at the floor now, their inner glow extinguished. With quivering lips, he proceeded, "Mrs. Thatcher said for each of us to bring something to church Sunday morning. The missionary box will be up in front of the church and we will march by the box and present our gift for those poor little children."

"Then why do you want two sweaters, if you need to bring only one gift."

"Because... well, I love the Lord Jesus so much that I thought since He saved me and made me all happy on the inside, that that should be one gift. My other gift I would give -- for the little children who are so very poor -- because He gave me something else after I was saved and had my sins forgiven, and that was a clean heart. He sanctified me wholly, Mrs. Norton. Now I want to do something special for Him. Especially since this is the time we remember His birthday."

Without waiting to hear more, she dismissed him with, "I'll think about it; come back tomorrow."

Sitting at her lovely table now, Matilda did think about it.

Mrs. Thatcher, Travis had said. She was still teaching! Why, she must be pushing seventy . . . or seventy-two. (How many years ago was it when Mrs. Thatcher had
taught her?) And that little woman was still as missionary-minded as ever. Not just foreign missions either, she mused contemplatively, but home missions must still be equally high on her list. Home missions that included the little boys and girls in her neighborhood.

Matilda’s thoughts turned to Travis now. Poor little waif! Oh, he had a mother, to be sure. But what a mother he had -- hanging out at bars and places of ill-repute till all hours of the morning, with only Mrs. Hoakey, the landlady, to look after Travis during those long dark hours.

The lunch the boy got at school was the only half-decent meal he got all day, Mrs. Hoakey declared. And now he was willing to forfeit that small, much-needed bit of nourishment for "poor children!" Poor indeed, she thought, over another cup of tea.

It was beyond Matilda’s comprehension, but she made a hasty and final decision: Travis should have those sweaters. Thus thinking, and that settled, she washed her few dirty dishes then retired early.

Right on time the next day, Travis entered the store. "I have more money for you," he announced with manly pride in a business-like manner as he placed the additional coins in the palm of the store owner's hand. "May I have the sweaters, please?"

"They're yours; if you're still sure you want to deprive yourself of your lunch, Travis. But won't you get terribly hungry?"

The light came on in the great, dark eyes. "I won't mind at all, 'cause I do get something to eat sometimes; they..., they..., those poor little children stay hungry all the time, Mrs. Thatcher says. Why, they don't even know what sweaters are, nor . . . nor how nice and warm they can be. Oh, Mrs. Norton," he exclaimed suddenly, his face shining, "You have made me so happy, and..., and now I will be able to give, too! God has answered my prayers. Thank you! Thank you!" Impulsively, Travis rushed over and pulled the woman's face down to his level and kissed her.

Turning quickly lest he see the tears sparkling in her eyes, Matilda boxed the sweaters and wrapped them in shiny red foil paper, making sure that each box had equally-bright ribbon on it, too. Then she handed them to Travis, whose hands trembled with excitement and emotion as he received them. Thanking her, he hurried from the store.

After he was gone, Matilda stood dumbfounded. What had possessed her? she wondered quickly. Suppose Travis would not give her the money. That the boy had "taste," there was no question: he had chosen two of the best sweaters she had.
But were they really going to heathen children? or did he, like his vagrant father (who disappeared ten years ago and was not heard of since) and his bar-running mother, have the beginnings of dishonesty and wickedness in him?

Chiding herself for her "softness of heart," Matilda decided it would never happen again. After all, her loss would be too great.

The following day, precisely at the same time, Travis hurried into her store. "Here, Mrs. Norton," he said happily; "my lunch money for the sweaters."

Matilda swallowed, trying to get rid of the enormous knot inside her esophagus. "Th ... thank you, Travis," she said, turning away lest he see how close to tears she was. "But . . . but aren't you terribly hungry?"

He was honest; he is honest! Her heart told her so.

"Not terribly; just a little bit. But I feel so warm and good on the inside that I don't mind it one bit." "But what will your mother say?"

"She won't know. Each morning, when she pushes the money into my hand, she tells me to 'beat it,' that she's too tired and sleepy to talk. So you see, she doesn't even know about the gifts for the poor children. She never listens to me. But Jesus knows, and Mrs. Thatcher will sure be pleased." Wistfully, he added, "I love Mrs. Thatcher; she's kind to me, Mrs. Norton, and... and she'd sure be proud of you if she knew what you did for me. Well, I must be going..."

"Are you in a really big hurry, Travis?" Matilda asked quickly, her heart feeling suddenly all soft inside.

"Today I am. You see, Mr. Keneer asked me to shovel the snow off his sidewalk -- said he'd pay me for it, too!" His eyes were shining; his face was beaming.

"Stay here, Travis," Matilda ordered. "I'll be back in a jiffy. You can't work on an empty stomach. No man can!" she exclaimed, hurrying upstairs and returning with two roast beef sandwiches and a banana.

"You mean this . . . this is all mine!" Travis exclaimed, his great, round eyes looking larger than ever.

"It's all yours, young man, and I want you to eat every bite of it before you tackle Mr. Keneer's long sidewalk. You'll need it. And while you're eating, I'll find a pair of gloves for you and a warm sweater, too. That coat's entirely too thin for a snow shoveling man -- a working man."
When Matilda returned with the items, a pair of insulated socks and a warm scarf among them, Travis had finished his generous and sumptuous meal.

"That sure tasted wonderful, Mrs. Norton," he said, beaming up at his kind benefactor as he dropped the banana peel into the wastebasket. "I've never had anything so good tasting in all my life. Thank you."

Turning to face her, he added as an afterthought, "Did you know God will bless you for this? He will! The Bible says so. Well, I must be going; I promised Mr. Keneer I'd be back as soon as I saw you." "Then get into these warm clothes," Matilda ordered like a fussy mother. "No sense in going out half-clothed and catching one's death of cold."

"Now run along," she said, business-like, when Travis was bundled up. "And tomorrow, when you come by after school with the money, I'll have a hot meal prepared for you. You hear?"

"Thanks, Mrs. Norton; I hear."

Thursday and Friday found the boy (and his lunch money and snow shoveling money, too) at the Norton's store; and each evening, at precisely the same hour, Matilda Norton had a nutritious, well-balanced meal ready and waiting for him, herself enjoying the company of the delightful and intelligent Travis.

Saturday came, and with it no school and no lunch money.

Early Sunday morning (awaking long before her customary hour) Matilda made a great decision. She would do it! she thought, feeling as excited as a child with a new toy. Yes, she would; she would go to church. (Wasn't today the day Travis would present, or give, those sweaters!) Someone should be there to see him, she decided; it was the least she could do for the boy.

Long before the church bell rang, she was ready; and when she stepped inside the building and sat down in the very last pew, her heart hammered wildly inside her chest. Everything was so familiar. She had a sudden impulsive feeling that she had just come home.

During the singing of the beloved old hymns she dabbed at her eyes with a silk handkerchief, feeling strangely moved upon -- the first time in years.

The singing ceased and a hush fell over the congregation, a holy hush. Matilda closed her eyes. God was here; yes, He was! It was a holy hush. It was awesome. Awesome and holy. God was in this place -- like He had been when she was young -- and He was holding His hands out, beckoning her to come, to return.
Silently, for she was not a boisterous, clamorous person, she closed her eyes and said a decisive, "Yes, Lord Jesus, come into my heart. I want you. I need you. Forgive me for my sins and heal my backsliding.

Sudden tears rolled copiously down her cheeks, but they were now tears of joy and pardon and forgiveness. She heard singing -- such singing! She was sure it was the heavenly choir rejoicing over the prodigal daughter's return to the Father.

Opening her eyes, she saw little children, rows of them. Standing like shining sunbeams, their mouths open wide, "O Holy Night" was sung like Matilda Norton had never heard it sung before. It was raising her -- up, up, up off her pew. She was happy; she was blest; what's more, she couldn't contain what she felt -- what she knew! She shouted, she laughed, she cried, (and she so timid!) and when she finally sat down a little hand reached over and entwined his fingers around hers.

"I knew you'd get saved, Mrs. Norton; I asked God to make you my 'special' Christmas present by answering my prayers," Travis said happily.

Matilda gave his hand a tight little squeeze. Then patting him gently on his head, she said, "Aren't you supposed to be up there? I didn't see you drop your gifts into the big missionary gift box. I came to see you do it, Travis."

Smiling and whispering a hasty "I'll be back," Travis walked down the aisle and took his place with the happy, cheerful group of gift-givers and Mrs. Norton, watching from her rear pew, thought he looked like an angel. But then, he was an angel -- God's Angel to get her to church and, ultimately, back into the fold.

Sighing with contentment and inner peace, Matilda lifted her heart in praise to God. This was her best Christmas in years and she would see to it that Travis had his most wonderful Christmas ever, she decided. And it would be a year-long gift too, not a once-a-year sort of thing. No indeed.

The boy was coming down the aisle toward her now. Moving over, she made room for him, smiling into his upturned face as he took his seat beside her. It all seemed so natural.

"We'll have to move farther up toward the front next time," he whispered in her ear, "It seems better up there."

"We will, Travis," she replied taking his hand in hers, "tonight."

* * * * * * * *

THE END