We had just started around the south corner of the barn, Papa and I, when a shiny black car drove into our driveway and stopped.

"Hey, Charlie! You goin’ somewhere?" Harley Wilkins hurried out to Papa. As usual, he was dressed like he was going into the city for a big dinner engagement.

"Going to help the boys finish cutting corn in the big forty," Papa said, setting his chopper against the trunk of the great poplar tree.

"I'll only be a minute," Harley said. Leaning his two hundred forty-five pound body against the sturdy tree, he got straight to the point. "You heard about all the new farm machinery I bought?" Papa nodded.

"Well, I'll be needing storage space for the winter. I wonder if you'd rent me that empty space you have overhead."

Papa dropped his head and chewed methodically and mechanically on the end of a piece of dried timothy hay he had picked up off the ground. "I... I don't know what to say," he said thoughtfully.

"I'll pay you rent each month," and Harley named the amount. "Come spring, I'll move it out and sell it."
Papa thought hard for awhile. I knew he and mama could certainly use the money. Times were hard for everybody just then, especially so where the families numbered from ten to twelve, as was the case with us.

"I . . . I," Papa hesitated. "Give me a couple days to think about it, Harley."

"Fine. Fine!" Harley exclaimed, walking to the car and sliding rather unceremoniously beneath the steering wheel and starting the motor. "I'll see you in a couple days," he called as the car glided smoothly away.

Two days later Harley was back. "What's your answer?" he asked Papa.

"I'll rent to you, Harley," Papa said with no enthusiasm whatever.

"Good. I'll be moving the machinery in by November then."

I had a funny little feeling way down inside of me that made me sort of cringe when I thought of Harley Wilkins. Maybe it was because I had overheard Mama tell Papa she'd rather not have the machinery in the barn . . . overhead the herd of milk cows, especially! "I . . . I don't trust that man," Mama had warned Papa; "I have a peculiar uneasiness about it all."

"But the rent money! We sure can use it, Hazel," Papa had answered. "And it's just for the winter months."

"I wish you wouldn't do it." Mama's voice was almost a plea, but the subject was dropped and never again opened.

I stood watching Harley as he drove down the dusty lane now. Mama's words came full and fresh to my mind. Momentarily, I shuddered. I knew Mama's sixth-sense, or whatever you may call it. This is what frightened me!

October's rare and exquisite days, so lavish and extravagant in colors of every shade and hue, came and went. The heaps of husked corn were hauled to the crib and stored safely away for the winter months ahead. On exactly the second day in November, Harley had all the new machinery stored safely away in the big empty space up overhead the dairy herd. How pretty and new it looked! With pride, I slid onto the seat of a brand new binder, then up to a shiny red manure spreader and so on until I had tried out each piece of new machinery. How I wished Papa could afford just one piece so shiny and new!

The next day the first heavy snowfall of the year came, followed each week thereafter with new and increasing blizzards. December was no exception. It was only too evident to all of us that this was going to be a hard winter.
Along with my older brothers, I chopped wood and more wood, and carted it into the shed not far from the kitchen. Mama's evenings were spent knitting socks, sweaters and mufflers for her ten children and for Papa.

December thirtieth brought with it another raging blizzard. At the height of the storm, I was awakened by a baby's cry. Quickly I tossed the warm, woolen covers off me. Ignoring the frost vapors my breath made in the room, I ran downstairs.

"Mama! Papa!" I exclaimed. "A baby's crying! Somewhere in this storm there's a baby! It'll freeze! It..."

"Peter," Papa said proudly, leading the way into the bedroom, "you've got a new brother." He led my trembling body over to where Mama cradled the tiniest, tiniest, red-faced baby ever in her arms.

"A... a... baby? For us?" I asked in utter disbelief. Looking at his tiny features, I asked suddenly, "Will he ever walk, Papa? Ever? He looks all weakness.''

"Oh, he'll walk all right..., when he's old enough," Papa said, laughing into my eyes.

"A brother! For us!" I exclaimed dreamily, beaming adoringly into the crying, screaming red face my mama held.

The blizzard blew itself out, leaving nothing behind but a thick blanket of white, shimmering ermine-looking stuff twelve inches deep with drifts up to seven feet high. One bitter cold night in January when the temperature had dropped to a record twenty-seven below, Mama was awakened with the strange feeling that all was not well. She slipped quietly out of bed and hurried to our new baby's little bed to see that he was warm and not needing attention. Tiny Donald was sleeping soundly and felt cozy-warm to the touch. She stepped into the dining room. An eerie red glow painted the walls of the room.

"The barn! It's on fire!" she shouted, rushing back into the bedroom where Papa already was busy pulling trousers and shirt on.

"Albert! Albert!" Papa called, running up the stairs to my oldest brother. "The barn's on fire! Hurry over to Mr. Muller's and have him call the fire department."

Albert, an efficient, obedient boy, was gone before Papa or Mama realized it. When he returned with Mr. Muller and two of his sons, Papa, along with several more of my brothers, was working feverishly at leading the milk cows and horses out of the blazing inferno.

In spite of the efforts, one beloved but dazed and badly frightened work horse broke away from Mr. Muller's tight grasp and rushed wildly back into the midst of the
flames. The last thing heard was his blood-curdling scream ere he succumbed to the
flames and the smoke.

That was one night I shall never forget. It was a night of horror and dreadful fright.
I thought what Hell would be like, with the shrieks and wails of the damned never
silenced.

Besides the faithful and beautiful horse, Papa lost ten choice milk cows from his
dairy herd and thirty-four hogs, all of them ready for the market., and not a dime of
insurance coverage on his losses.

Three days after the fire, with the smoldering ashes still very active, Mr. Muller
entered our front yard gate.

"Charlie," he began, shuffling his feet noisily, "Alvin Wickersham saw Harley
Wilkins running across your south meadow the night of the fire."

The south meadow! That was right below the barn, I thought, glancing at Mama
and remembering all too vividly her words again.

"He did?" Papa was shocked.

"He sure did! Alvin was coming home from seeing Amanda Schultz . . . they're
engaged, you know," Mr. Muller said by way of explanation.

"Alvin said he watched him. Couldn't figure out what he was doing out on a night
like that. The moon was full, if you'll remember, and Alvin said he watched till he got into
his car . . . he had the car parked along the road. He sat in the car for a long while.
Then, seeming to be satisfied over something, he left."

"Are you trying to tell me that . . . ?" Papa's mouth was open wide. He was
suddenly speechless.

"Exactly!" Mr. Muller exclaimed emphatically, smashing his hands together loudly.
"Harley Wilkins set your barn on fire. The crook! He'll collect the fat insurance premium,
deposit it in the bank, wait a spell, make another investment and collect at the expense
of another poor man. I'd press charges, Charlie ! I would!"

Papa was silent for a long while. His head was bowed. He looked suddenly old
and tired. Mama was in tears.

"Press charges!" Mr. Muller exclaimed again.

"Alvin'll testify against him in your favor. That man's a crook. My Hannah always
did say he couldn't be trusted, and this is the proof we've been waiting for. He sure did
Alvin's father dirty. The neighbors will all testify in your favor, Charlie. We could all be driving fancy cars and dressing like millionaires, too, if we were as dishonest and crooked as he."

"WELL?" Mr. Muller said, waiting a bit impatiently for Papa's answer. "Are you ready to go into town and file charges?"

Papa's voice was soft and full of pity as he spoke. "No, Mr. Muller, I'll not file charges. The Lord can do a far more efficient job than I can of handling Harley Wilkins. I'll let Him take over."

"You... you mean you're going to let that man get away with all this?" and Mr. Muller came close to Papa now. "You can't do it, Charlie! You can't! He'll go right on swindling people and burning down barns and..."

"Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord of hosts.' Let's permit God to take care of Harley Wilkins."

"Are you crazy, Charlie? You mean you'd rather see a crooked man like he go on living in his own dirty ways?"

"I'd rather turn him over completely to God," Papa said, facing our neighbor squarely. "God's clock is always on time. Someday, He'll bring Harley Wilkins around... in His way. Let's wait and watch God's dealing and His timing."

Mr. Muller stroked his beard thoughtfully for a long time. Suddenly his big, hard-working hands fell upon Papa's shoulders. "You're a good man, Charlie," he said. "Although I'm not a Christian and can't see things like you do, your life has convinced me that God is a just God and He will work this out. Someday He will bring Harley Wilkins around." Giving Papa a long look of deepest admiration, he bade us all "good-day" and strode hastily out the door.

During the many months and four and one-half years that followed the fire, Mr. Muller never again mentioned Harley Wilkins. But I had a sneaking feeling that, like myself, Mr. Muller was watching to see what God would do about the man's sins.

If we thought we had endured hard days before the fire, our frugal living after the fire made those earlier days seem like days of extravagance. But Papa and Mama never once uttered one note of complaint or bitterness. God was for us; who could be against us! Always, we were thankful and grateful to God for a roof over our head and for a sufficient amount of potatoes, beans and cabbages. Those years of extreme poverty and testing served only to knit us more closely together as a family unit. We prayed together, played together, laughed together and cried together. Most of all, we worked together and the God who notes a lowly sparrow's fall, kept a constant vigil over us. Over and over again and again He showered us with spiritual blessing which we could not contain. I
learned that I could trust Him implicitly and with no reservation. Our love for Him and for each other grew strong.

One beautiful night in October, we had all gone to the cornfield to husk corn by moonlight, a very special yearly occasion for us. The night was perfect. A full, round, golden-yellow harvest moon, surrounded by myriads of bright twinkly stars, rode carelessly and serenely across the heavens while the katydids and cicadas kept up one continuous and incessant droning or argument that either "katy did" or "katy didn't." On the gnarled, aging Baldwin apple tree in the wheat field adjoining the cornfield, a hoot owl began his loud deep hooting, with the screech owl's high-pitched, blood-curdling cries responding in sharp contrast from the woods.

Mama began singing jubilantly, "His yoke is easy, His burden is light. I've found it so; I've found it so.' Soon we were all singing. Our songs filled the crisp, cool night air and were wafted across the valley to the keen ears of the farmers' dogs who set up loud discordant barking.

We had nearly finished husking the third round of shocks when an excited voice reached our ears.

"Charlie! Charlie! Come quick! Harley Wilkins is dying. His wife called and said to fetch you quick. Harley's calling for you," and by now the breathless Mr. Muller stood before us in the moonlight.

Papa was on his feet. He slipped the husking pin from his hand, dropped it carefully into his much-patched denim work jacket and walked to Mama's side, "Maybe you'd better stop and go to bed, Hazel. The children are tired, too, I'm sure," he said tenderly.

"I'm enjoying this," Mama laughed. She always seemed so young and beautiful when she laughed that way, I thought. "The children are having a wonderful time, too. This is one of our 'special' times. Remember? I'm really not tired," she added sweetly.

"All right then, stick at it," Papa said brightly. "If I get back in time, I'll join you."

"It's a good thing I heard you singing," Mr. Muller said. "When no one answered at the house, I was petrified with fear. I thought for sure the rapture you've been telling me about had taken place and I was left behind."

"It's going to happen just like that someday," Papa said, walking rapidly down the hillside to Mr. Muller's waiting car.

"And I'm going to do something about my soul before that, Charlie."
At quarter to twelve papa joined us again. On our "special" night, we often husked and sang until two o'clock.

"What happened to Mr. Wilkins?" Mama asked. "He . . . he's dead!" Papa's voice seemed tired and full of pity. His flame shook and trembled. "Oh! How hard it is for the sinner to die! Harley died while confessing."

"Didn't he get right with God?" Allen's voice was eager.

"I'm afraid not," Papa said sadly, taking the husking pin from his pocket and settling himself between Susan and me. "He confessed that he set the barn on fire for the insurance money he could collect on that new machinery. He screamed and writhed in agony; said the money was like hot liquid flames burning and tormenting his poor body and torturing his damned soul."

"You mean he never got saved?" I asked, weeping hard. "Didn't he die knowing that Jesus' blood covered all his sins?"

"No, he didn't, Peter. He said it was too late! Oh! He made some horrible confessions!" Papa shuddered, remembering. "He was telling us that it was he who had stolen the money from Katie Sundholt's parlor when he screamed, 'I'm Lost!' and sank back on his pillow a corpse.

"Why, he told the judge that Katie was old and senile and had only imagined she had that much money, didn't he, Papa?" Miriam's voice was full of shock.

"Yes, he said that; and he convinced the judge," Papa answered. "But God keeps the records of men's lives. His records are always accurate and never lie."

"And to think that Katie was a widow!" Lillian exclaimed.

"God doesn't always pay each day or week," Papa said emphatically, "but they come, sure enough. How dreadful is the payday for the sinner!"

"There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed; nor hidden that shall not be made manifest," "Mama quoted.

"This has been the turning point for Mr. Muller," Papa said, brightening suddenly. "While Harley was screaming and shrieking that he was tormented in the flames of hell, Mr. Muller fell on his knees and prayed to God for mercy. He prayed clear through and got saved. He shouted all the way home."

Needless to say, we had an old-fashioned praise meeting right there in the cornfield beneath the stars, the moon and the deep-purple sky. As we joined our hands and our hearts in a volume of praise to the Lamb slain for sinners, it seemed as though
the heavens opened and a carload of glory was dumped into each of our hearts. That October night was a special night. In more ways than one! We were on our way to Heaven! This was enough to make us shout for joy.

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THE END