The sun went down over the rim of the mountain in a blaze of flaming red-orange glory, setting the western sky afire and etching the few stray gray clouds..., which had settled on the topmost mountain peak . . . in a dazzling light of shimmering gold. It had been such a lovely day--one of those clear, sparkling days of spring when every bud and tiny flower and translucent blossom seemed to be full of its own light and radiance. Jo Eastwood, save for the crushing burden and the unutterable loneliness over the loss of her
only child, had actually revelled in the day's ineffable beauty. For a time, at least.

She leaned over the porch railing and scanned the road and the rolling hills for Josh's car. Where could he be? she wondered, the worry lines creasing her brow as she checked her watch for the correct time. Twenty minutes late! This was not an ordinary happening with her husband. Always, he was punctual and on time for everything, his supper included.

She looked again toward the western sky and wished the day would not end--that night would never come. But wishing was of no avail, she realized. Day was closing; she was gathering her glorious robes about her and was slipping, quite routinely, over the horizon. Only the afterglow of soft roselavender light remained now before night stole noiselessly over the darkening landscape. Already the limpid silver-gold light of the evening star was showing its shining face in the pure violet of the sky.

Jo sighed. Leaning hard on the porch railing, she scanned the road. No sign of Josh's car. Feeling agitated, she hurried inside. The potatoes would be watery, she knew, not fit for mashing, and the roast would soon be dried out with waiting.

Forgetting the beauty which she had just beheld, and feeling angry and agitated, she dished some of the carefully prepared food onto her plate and sat down to eat. She was tired of waiting, she decided--let her husband eat reheated food if he couldn't call and let her know that he'd be late. It wasn't fair to her not to know, especially not after she went to all the trouble of preparing his favorite meal and dessert.

The phone rang and Jo hurried up from the table to answer it. But it was only Mrs. Carpenter; she wanted to know if Jo would give her that "delicious German cabbage recipe?"

What a time to call for a recipe, Jo thought, thumbing through her myriad recipes to give it to her neighbor via the telephone.

"Nothing like cold potatoes!" she muttered aloud as she sat down to her meal a half hour later. Now where was her husband? she wondered, feeling more irritated by the moment.
She finished her supper without fully realizing that she had eaten or even tasting its goodness, so full of anger and agitation was she. Then she washed the few dirty dishes quickly, stored the food in containers inside the refrigerator and hurried to the living room.

She sat down in her favorite chair and, picking up the crochet hook from a nearby basket, she began working on the off-white afghan which she had begun before tiny Ruth's untimely and sudden exit out of her life. Tears stung her eyes as she worked in a mechanical sort of way on the beautiful pattern. She remembered her enjoyment, eager enthusiasm and delight in crocheting baby blankets, bibs, and even a spread for the little one whom Josh and she had waited so eagerly for. Prayed for, really! And now..., now...

Jo tossed the partially completed afghan and hook on the floor. Tears ran down her cheeks like small gushers from a fountainhead. She fled from the room to the porch outside and stood leaning against a post, sobbing bitterly. "Why did You do it, God?" she asked bitterly. "Why? You know how very much we loved her. Why did you give her to us long enough to hold and to love until we knew we couldn't do without her, then grasp her away from us so suddenly? So brutally?"

At last, it was out; she had vented her anger over her feelings. The adverb aptly described how she felt.

Feeling totally spent and exhausted, Jo leaned against the post for support, her heart as cold as the hand of death which had snatched their tiny jewel away from them forever.

Forever? Was it forever? Really? If so, she had made it that way; not God. Death was not the end of life; it was the beginning.

She looked skyward. The evening star was now a brightly-burning lamp of clearest silver flanked by myriad other stars, each one a shimmering, twinkling thing of beauty. The moon, too, though only a fourth of its full-orbed beauty this night, sailed majestically over a cloudless sky.

Jo became acutely aware of a presence. Was it Ruth's? she wondered, rec~dving the night she died. "Angels, Mama!" the child had exclaimed, reaching upward..., outward..., as though waiting for them to enfold her. "Oh, hear the singing, Daddy!" she had cried joyously. "Such beautiful, be-au-ti-ful
singing! And, oh, look at all the happy children! They're calling to me, Morea... Daddy. Goodbye, Goodbye, I must go."

Jo heard the voice again, as clearly as if the three-year-old were beside her . . "Hear the singing! Angels; happy children..."

"Ruth! Ruth!" she cried into the deep purple of night. "O Ruth!"

She dragged her emotion-packed body over to the porch swing and sat down, sobbing until she could sob no more. Bitterness was such a dreadful thing, she mused silently. It was a thief and a robber, robbing one not only of joy and peace and inner contentment but of physical strength and mental calmness as well. How she wished she could be like Josh. He was as stable and settled as the biblical house that was built upon a rock. Ruth's homegoing had served only to draw Josh closer to God and to heaven. And her? All too well, she knew the answer to that question, the deep resentment and bitterness toward God testifying against her.

At thought of Josh and his inner calm and tranquil peace and rest, Jo jumped to her feet with a start. Josh was long overdue getting home; suppose the rapture had taken place! Her husband would most certainly have been taken Home. She hadn't the least shadow of doubt about this. Josh had the wedding garment on; he was clothed in the robe of righteousness and of true holiness . . . saved from all his sins and sanctified wholly. Yes, Josh was ready to go. Anytime and all the time, ready.

Weak from the thought and trembling violently, Jo hurried inside and dialed the office number, a thing she did only in extreme emergencies. Someone would be there, she knew, since the plant operated 'round the clock.

Hadley Bilbrey answered her ring. "You mean he's not home?" Hadley asked in reply to Jo's question if Josh was working overtime. "He left here at 5:30 promptly," the night boss replied. "You've got me worried now, Mrs. Eastwood..."

Jo hung up without waiting to hear more. Josh was gone; she was sure of it. Gone! And she was left behind--alone. Her bitterness had robbed her of yet another thing..., the rapture.
Humbled, melted and broken, Jo dropped to her knees beside the telephone bench. Was there hope for one such as she? Was there? Suppose the heavens were brass and there was no getting through to God for her? It had happened, she knew. Hadn't an old acquaintance of hers gone beyond the point of no return when she told God to leave her alone until she had fulfilled her dreams, and her plans were complete. "When I'm older, God," she had said, "I'll call for you."

But Donnetta never lived to be old, Jo remembered. She contracted a strange disease when in her early twenties and died without hope, screaming that she was lost and God wouldn't hear her when she prayed. In one horrible, final scream, she fell back on her pillow and was gone.

Jo shuddered now with remembering. Donnetta had never been bitter, like she was. She had done nothing other than ask God to leave her alone until her plans were realized.

Nothing other! Jo thought with a sudden shudder. The Holy Spirit... Who did the wooing and speaking to the heart..., was easily grieved. Paul the Apostle stated it clearly when he wrote in Ephesians, "And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption."

"Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, . . . be put away from you, with all malice: "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted . . . even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

The Scripture, so like a two-edged sword, pierced through Jo's very soul. Why had she never before seen the correlation of the verses... "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God... Let all bitterness, and wrath... be put away from you..."? she wondered brokenly, knowing full well that it was her bitterness which had helped to grieve the tender Holy Spirit from her once-joyful life. Had He taken His sweet, gentle departure forever? she wondered, weeping unashamedly and uncontrollably.

Fearful lest she, too, like her friend, had grieved the tender Holy Spirit forever from her heart, Jo broke out in fervent prayer, pleading, begging to once again be restored and know the wonderful peace of a forgiven heart. She forgot all about Josh and his failure to return home at the usual hour; forgot, too, about the food which she had prepared so carefully and lovingly then shoved so bitterly into the refrigerator. Her heart was centered and fixed
upon one thing; Jesus Christ and His forgiveness . . . His smile upon her heart and fife again.

The clock in the hallway ticked its way to the midnight hour, and when it gonged twelve deeply-mellow gongs, she never even heard, so intent was she upon touching God. The mantel clock neither. The loud jangling of the phone, however, brought her sharply back to her earthly surroundings.

With eyes red from weeping and feeling limp and drained of strength, she dragged her body to the telephone.

"Mrs. Eastwood?" an impersonal sounding voice asked into the phone.

"Yes . . ."

"Come to the hospital immediately, please."

"Josh? Is it Josh? What has happened?" she asked, feeling dumb and numb with shock, her voice louder and higher pitched than usual, she realized. "Tell me!" she demanded, feeling like she would lose her mind unless she knew.

"Come to the hospital, Mrs. Eastwood," the impersonal sounding voice said calmly. "Or shall I send someone after you? You do drive, don't you?"

"Yes. Yes!" Jo exclaimed impatiently. "What's wrong? Please!" she begged.

"Come to the hospital."

With that, the nurse hung up.

Trembling like leaves on the cottonwood tree in late autumn, Jo staggered down the hallway for her purse and a shawl.

Outside, the stars winked and blinked in a deerpurple sky and a hoot owl called from one of the many black walnut trees in the meadow, but Jo was oblivious of it all. Josh! She must get to him.
The car shot down the ribbon of moonlit highway with unusual speed and Jo was thankful that for once, it was deserted. Totally and completely deserted. It seemed to belong to her alone.

She exited at the proper exit and parked the car in the hospital parking lot, all but slamming the door behind her and running through the self-opening doors to the emergency room. "My husband!" she cried, almost collapsing in the arms of a nurse.

"Mrs. Eastwood?" the woman asked, steadying Jo with an arm around her slender shoulders.

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Eastwood. Please, what has happened to Josh? My husband? Take me to him . . . ."

"Sit down, Mrs. Eastwood."

"Tell me, please. Please!"

Leading Jo to a chair, the nurse said, "Your husband is in critical condition. Mrs. Eastwood; he had an accident. A serious accident."

"Why wasn't I notified? When did it happen? Where is he?"

Questions, questions. Jo thought she'd die unless she had them answered.

"He's up in surgery now," the nurse explained calmly and patiently. "He was brought in only a short while ago. Apparently his car had a flat tire and careened off the highway into a ditch where he remained unseen until an observant traveler noticed the car and reported it."

"Will he be all right?" Jo asked quickly, wringing her hands nervously.

"He's in critical condition, Mrs. Eastwood. We'll know more later on."

"Th... thank you," Jo said courteously, following the nurse to a chair where she literally fell into its softness and let her tears fall unashamedly.
The wait was long and nerve-wracking; the surgery seemed endless. Sitting in the chair, her face buried in the palms of her hands, Jo wept and prayed, troubled and relieved. Troubled, over the graveness of her husband's condition; relieved, to know she hadn't missed the rapture.

"You may go up to see your husband."

The soft voice of the nurse startled her. Opening her eyes, she noticed that three hours had passed since she made her entrance into the hospital.

Walking along the corridor, she saw the first rosy streaks of dawn emerging in the eastern sky. She felt old and drained, dreading to see Josh; yet wanting to see him with all of her heart.

"Doctor Satterfield wishes to speak to you."

It was the nurse again.

Jo brushed a trembling hand across her eyes, feeling like a giant mechanical toy, wound up and ready to be turned loose to walk, robot-like, across the floor. She heard, but seemed incapable of perceiving fully what was happening and going on around her. From head to toe, she was in shock.

Doctor Satterfield, gray-haired, kind and softspoken, explained Josh's condition to her; but the only thing she could remember were the words that Josh would get well; Josh would live. It would take time for the healing, he added, but he would recover "by the mercy of a kind God," the doctor had added.

It was all Jo wanted to hear, all she cared about. Following the nurse to the room, she looked down into Josh's pale face and wept.

Jo was thankful when the nurse left the room and she was alone with her husband. Taking his big hand in her small one, she brought it gently to her lips. "Josh," she cried, "I love you. Love you. Forgive me for my bitterness; for the complaining I did and for my attitude toward you."

"J . . . Jo."
Jo gasped with joy. "Josh! Josh, please forgive me...

For answer, Josh squeezed her band. Suddenly, Jo knew she was ready to pray again. She had cleared the obstacle that had hindered her prayers from getting through--restitution . . . asking her husband's forgiveness was the bridge by which she could cross over and find a forgiving Saviour waiting to restore salvation to her heart. Looking up through tear-filled eyes, she cried, "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation..."

Instantly, she knew the work was done. Peace flowed through her heart. She was resurrected, as it were--resurrected from the dungeon of sin and bitterness into newness of life in Christ. Her husband, too .... resurrected from near-death.

She kissed Josh's hand and looked upward, hearing Ruth' s voice, "Angels, Mama. Angels!"

Bending over her husband, she understood . . . angels; music; joy in Heaven over one soul that repented more than over ninety and nine just persons.

Pulling a chair over to the bed, she lay her head next to Josh's hand. Easter would have new meaning for her.

At peace with God and herself, she closed her tired eyes.