I sat looking at the floor and at my once new and clean tennis shoes, wondering just what would happen to me and wishing for the umpteenth time that I had not gone with Stubby and Vern. But I had. And here I was, sitting in the police station, feeling horrible and miserable.

"We've called your parents, Charles," an officer said, striding easily across the floor and standing in front of me. "Your father's on his way here to
pick you up. Lucky for you that you didn't know anything about that stereo and those transistor radios. We'd have 'thrown the book' at you..."

His sentence trailed meaningfully in the room. Stubby and Vern shifted their gaze from the floor and looked at me. I felt sorry for them. They looked pale and frightened and I wished there were some way I could help them.

I looked down at my shoes again, knowing I was in trouble since the police had called my parents. Not real legal trouble like Stub and Vern--I hadn't known the merchandise was stolen, even Stubby and Vern testified I hadn't--but trouble anyway.

I waited anxiously, feeling my breath come out in tight little knots from deep inside and dreading my encounter with Dad.

Dad was pretty upset when he arrived. I couldn't blame him; I guess it was the fartherest thing from his mind, having to pick up his firstborn at a police station. You can imagine his bewilderment and frustration.

"It's not as bad as it looks, Mr. Hadley," the police sergeant explained. "We don't have anything to charge Charles with except hanging around with the wrong crowd, and that's not a crime. It's dangerous and can be highly 'contaminating,' though. And I'd think one brought up like Charles has been brought up would think better of his reputation than to mingle with a bunch of thieves and law-breakers."

"What happened?" Dad asked anxiously.

"A couple of boys stole a stereo set and a bunch of transistor radios from Brown's Radio Shop. Did it in broad daylight, while Mr. Brown was out to lunch, then came back to the drugstore and picked Charles up. Your son didn't know it was 'hot' merchandise--Vern said they weren't sure how he'd react. We're not charging Charles, but the other two are in serious trouble." He turned to face me. "And if you aren't careful, young man, you'll be going down the same road as these two are. Better choose your associates a bit more carefully," he warned. "If they hadn't backed you up when you said you didn't know the stuff was hot, well . . ." His voice trailed off again.

There wasn't anything I could say. I knew he was right, but still, they were my friends.
When I tried to tell that to Dad on the way home, he said, "Friends! Are you kidding, Charles! What kind of friends, to get you into trouble and have you arrested and held under suspicion!"

"Well, they didn't have to back me up when I told the police I had no idea the stuff was stolen."

"Well, well, well! Great, great friends, keeping you out of the trouble they were responsible for in the first place!" He paused. "Where were you headed for from the drugstore? And why did Vern say they weren't sure how you'd react? They ought to have been certain how you'd react--so certain that they'd never have taken you along. Don't you have a backbone, Charles? At seventeen you're old enough to know how to take a stand. If you'd have been living consistently for Christ around those fellows, the story might be different, radically different. Now, where were you going when they picked you up?"

"To some guy's house out in the country. That's all I know. Really it is, Dad."

Dad's face took on that I'm-beginning-to-see-the-light look. "Do the police officers know this, Charles?" he asked suddenly.

"I don't know. Why are you asking?"

"Simply because I think they need this information. It may lead to uncovering some of the evil and wicked happenings around here."

"Like what?"

"Well, the boys hadn't planned on keeping the stolen goods, I'm sure. Usually, 'hot' merchandise is sold; the kids need money."

"So?"

"Someone buys it from them and then re-sells it at a bigger, better price. It's a racket."

I sat still, mulling what Dad said over in my brain. Then suddenly we were home.
Mom met me at the door with tears and a wet handkerchief. "Oh, Charles. Charles!" she lamented. "Why do you go around with thieves? Where have your father and I failed? We've taught you right and . . ."

"Aw, Mom, it's not that bad! I'm not a thief, and you know I don't believe in stealing," I answered, feeling ashamed of myself.

"But your company, Charles! 'Evil communications corrupt good manners.' And 'a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.' You are judged by the company you keep."

Mom was over-reacting again, I was sure. "But, Mom, I had nothing to do with the theft. Nothing!" I exclaimed, feeling exasperated and even a bit guilty.

Dad looked stunned. Shocked. "We're not accusing you of stealing, Charles," he said, taking up where Mom had left off. "That's not the issue, thank God. The problem is the friends you're hanging around with. Your mother's right; evil communications do corrupt good manners. And it does take only a very little leaven to affect the whole. You reflect what you are by the company you keep:..., whom you pal around with."

"Look, Dad, Stubby and Vern aren't all that bad. Honest they're not."

Dad gasped. "I guess stealing's no longer a sin then, Charles!" he remarked, wearing a stunned look like I had never before seen on his face.

"Im not saying that."

"In essence you are, Charles. What's wrong with the young folks at church; why don't you pal around with them anymore?"

"You can't plan your friendships, Dad!" I defended. "They just happen. And since I work with Stubby and Vern every day, I've got to be friendly. Besides, the kids at church aren't interesting and . . . and exciting like Stubby and Vern. I get bored stiff being around the church kids."

That did it. I knew I said the wrong thing. By the time Dad got through with me, I felt like a worm of the dust. Talk about feeling little, I did. Dad
seemed to read me like a book. He called attention to every weakness I'd ever had, finishing with, "Something's happened inside, Charles, in your heart. A true child of God hates sin and all its accompanying results. You are trying to justify wrong and wrong-doers. This should be an eye-opener to you."

Dad and Mom had prayer with me then, and when I went to my bedroom, I felt wretched.

The big eye-opener came a few days later, however. I was busy as a bee at work, wrapping and serving hamburgers, ham sandwiches and chicken fillets when I looked up into a pair of the bluest blue eyes I'd ever seen. They could belong to only one person . . . Marilyn Woodcock. She was the one girl responsible for all the funny, happy, little flip-flops my heart experienced when she was near.

"How'd you get out here?" I asked quickly, knowing Marilyn had no car.

She waved her hand regally to a group of girls standing outside the door, laughing hilariously.

My mouth flew open in disgust and utter disbelief. "You can't be serious!" I exclaimed, feeling sort of numb all over from shock.

"But I am," she replied sweetly. "Now give me a chicken fillet and a small size of french fries, please. I told the gang I'd get us a table together."

I felt the blood drain from my head and face. Something deep within began to boil. "Look," I said sternly, "you're not going home with those . . . those high steppers! You're staying right here until I can take you home."

"And who says so?"

"I do!"

"You have a lot of room to talk, Chuck." "What do you mean by that?" I shot back.

"Well-l-1..."
Marilyn's eyes spoke volumes. "You're staying here till I get off work," I said again, trying hard to calm my voice and still the beating in my heart.

"What difference does it make to you that I'm with Fran and Arlea and Ginny and..."

"A lot. They have a bad reputation."

"So do some other people I know," Marilyn replied honestly.

I swallowed. The light was finally beginning to dawn in on me. "Look, Marilyn," I said humbly, "don't be a fool like I was. I need to talk to you. Please wait here till I'm off work. It won't be long anymore."

"You're serious, aren't you, Chuck?" she asked earnestly.

"Never been more serious in all of my life," I confessed truthfully.

"O.K. I'll stay. But first, I'd better call my folks and let them know you're bringing me home."

"By all means, do."

The girls weren't the least bit happy when I told them I'd be taking Marilyn home. But little matter there. I had to talk to her. Positively and absolutely, I did.

She spoke little all the way home, and when we got to her house and I let her mother and dad know we were there, I sat beside her on the porch swing. "Now," I said, "how come you started going around with girls whose reps are anything but good?"

Facing me squarely, she said, "Do you really want to know, Chuck? Really?"

"I do, or I wouldn't be asking you."

"Then don't feel badly toward me when I tell you. Simply stated, I thought if you could have boyfriends like Stubby and Vern..."
"Wait a minute; we worked together."

"True. But you didn't need to pal around with them when you were finished working, Chuck. And I, who have always looked up to you and admired you, well, I felt that if you couldn't live the Christian life and be a victorious overcomer, neither would I."

I gulped. How many others had I influenced wrongly? I wondered, feeling guilty and almost condemned. "Are . . . are you saying that... that..."

"That if you could pal around with fellows who have question marks after their names, so could I," Marilyn stated flatly.

I felt a shiver race up and down my spine. "I'm sorry, Marilyn," I confessed humbly. "I beg your forgiveness. By the grace of God, I'll never again be seen palling around with the wrong crowd. Dad's right: The safest friends are those in our church. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to the church to pray. It may be a long way back to God, but I mean to stay on my knees until heaven's light breaks through on my soul once more. Call my folks and tell them, will you please? I was to be home before 11 tonight. And Marilyn, promise you'll follow my example this time, too, and find a place of prayer. Evil communications do corrupt good manners; but, by the same token, righteous and holy communications uplift and beget good manners. I'll see you tomorrow sometime, God willing. Goodnight."

Marilyn watched till his old jalopy was swallowed up in the darkness; then she made her way inside... to pray.