Ellen unlocked the door to Mrs. Carpenter's small cottage and let herself inside. The woman had told her she'd be home by late afternoon of that day and Ellen wanted everything to be in tip-top shape when she returned from her speaking engagement.

Mrs. Carpenter was a most unusual woman. At least, Ellen thought so. From the time when Ellen was three or four years of age, Mrs. Carpenter and she had been the closest, dearest kind of friends. Living next door to each
other was a real benefit and a blessing, Ellen and her parents thought. In fact, Mrs. Carpenter was someone very, very special to the entire Woodley family: It was she who had led the entire "bunch" to Christ.

Throwing the windows open, a rush of warm summer air played a game of tag with the curtains, sending them billowing away from the windows to flutter about in the breeze. The scent of mignonette, lilies and gardenias drifted in with the breeze, perfuming the rooms deliciously. Ellen, on an impulse, rushed outside and cut several stems of the waxen-looking gardenia flowers and brought them inside, being sure to put one of the stems in a vase beside Mrs. Carpenter's bed.

She dusted the furniture . . . fine old pieces of walnut, mahagoniy, oak and cherry . . . caressing the satin-smooth surfaces lovingly and appreciatively and wondering why furniture no longer had the durability and the beauty of Mrs. Carpenter's. But then, she told herself, perhaps if she looked in the more expensive furniture stores, she'd find pieces of equal quality to those she was dusting. The price would be considerably higher, she knew. But anything good and worthwhile just naturally cost more than something junky and of less value.

While cleaning the windows, she listened to the many and varied bird songs coming from the large lawn surrounding the house. Each bird had his particular song with no two varieties sounding just exactly alike. There may have been similarities with some, but each species and kind remained distinctly its own, trilling out the song God had given it, singing its own song in its own beautiful way.

How like people, she thought, cleaning the windows till the glass panes shone and sparkled: Each person had at least one talent, and if each were to use his talent for God... to sing his own song... in the way intended for it to be used, the world would have been revolutionized and evangelized long ago, she was convinced.

The thought of talents and callings triggered a chain reaction in her mind. About Mrs. Carpenter particularly. The dear, sweet soul told her once, long ago, that she wanted to tell her something some day. What could it be? Ellen wondered again, as she had done for so many, many other times. Mrs. Carpenter didn't seem secretive about anything of true importance. But she did have a sad, far-away look in her beautiful, violet-blue eyes at times; a sort
of wistful, yearning, longing look. Was it something connected with her beloved husband who died so painfully with cancer? the blonde-haired girl wondered. Or was it something else; something totally and completely unrelated to the death of the kind man. Well, she would just have to wait till such a time when her neighbor chose to tell her, Ellen told her wondering mind and heart.

By mid-afternoon, the house was sparkling clean and sweetly-fragrant of gardenias. Ellen hurried into the kitchen and slipped a small roast into the oven. The roast, tiny pieces of garlic buttons tucked into its sides, was flanked by snowy-white potatoes, golden carrot fingers and pearly onions, a favorite meal of Mrs. Carpenter's.

Putting the freshly-baked, delicious-smelling rhubarb pie on the countertop where it was sure to be seen, Ellen was ready to leave when she heard a car door slam shut.

"Well, well, well!" Mrs. Carpenter exclaimed, coming quickly through the kitchen doorway and hugging Ellen soundly. "You are the dearest!" she added. "When I asked you to air the house out for my coming, I didn't expect to make you my servant," she teased.

Ellen laughed. "I wanted to do it. Mother and I thought it would be a pleasant surprise for you. How did things go in your meeting? Any souls saved or sanctified wholly?"

Putting her shawl across the back of a chair, the woman said humbly, "Yes, souls were saved, many of them--sanctified wholly, too. But I've been greatly troubled about a certain young person; afraid she never fully yielded her all to Christ. And she seemed so very talented. She reminded me of another young woman of yesteryear..."

Sighing, Mrs., Carpenter buried her face in her hands. Looking quickly at Ellen, she said, "You remember I wanted to tell you something sometime . . . '

Ellen nodded, feeling almost like she was an intruder. But then, was it an intrusion when and if one didn't ask nor pry about a thing? No, she was sure it was not. She listened as the woman began.
"Many years ago, Ellen, (Oh, many, many years ago), God spoke to a certain young woman about going to the mission field and helping to convert the heathen. The woman was deeply in love with a wonderful, young man. The battle was on, raging for all it was worth; should she go and obey God's voice and lose the man or should she stay, disobey God's command and win her man?

She chose the latter. Notice, I said chose. They were married. Their life seemed to be a literal and veritable heaven on earth. They were supremely happy. Then one day, tragedy hit. The man whom she had married became ill. Yes, he who had seemed to be so healthy and was the very picture and embodiment of health itself, became ill. For a long time, nothing showed up on the x-rays nor in the many tests. Then one day, the awful truth was revealed--one of the tests confirmed it--the man had cancer.

Through years of pain and slow dying, she watched her man. The awful truth of what she had done and of the price she was paying dawned suddenly upon her. He whom she had wanted and loved more than Christ and the lost sheep to which she was called, was slowly, agonizingly dying before her very eyes, breath by slow breath.

She laid her beloved beneath the sod in a lovely cemetery, if indeed one dare call a cemetery lovely, and heaped mounds of flowers on his grave then went back to the now-empty, still, and lonely house, broken by a sense of the awful wrong she had committed by deliberately going out of the will of God.

For months, there was blank despair. Despair and an impending doom and judgment unless she did something about it. Finding an altar at the side of her bed one day, she prayed and prayed until she was forgiven and peace once more filled her soul. But what could she do? She was too far along in years now for overseas missionary work. Praying earnestly and fervently about it, she told the Lord she would give Him every ounce of strength for the rest of her life if He would but lead her and use her for His glory.

Doors of opportunities began opening; first this church wanted her to speak, then another and another. She recognized in each invitation an alternative avenue of service..., a sort of second-best thing. But still, souls were souls no matter where their station, and since it was too late to fulfill
God's original plan for her life, she determined to give Him her very best in what was left for her to do; and God, who ever gives the increase, gave many, many souls."

Ellen was filled with awe. How closely this woman's life, whomever she was, paralleled that of Mrs. Carpenter's. "It... it... I mean, she sounds almost like your life," she finally said. "And isn't it wonderful that God chose to use her in spite of her willful transgression?"

"I was, and am, that woman, Ellen. Everything I have told you is true. And yes, it is wonderful that God has allowed and permitted me to be used and to win souls for Him here. But you'll never begin to imagine, nor know, what bitter anguish and remorse I've gone through all these years for choosing my will instead of His. Then when I think of the souls over there... " Her voice trailed. "And now, seeing this beautiful young woman in this recent gathering," she continued, "and noticing the struggle she is encountering in breaking off with her male friend. Well, I couldn't help but relive the past and remember my own stubborn will, saying, 'I will have Anthony Carpenter; I choose him, regardless!'

It's a dangerous thing to do, Ellen dear. Remember this always. God's ways are always best. I see it now, and could I undo the past, I would say one eternal, unquestioning 'yes' to the whole will of God for my life. And now I must get my luggage unpacked."

Helping to unload the neighbor's car, Ellen thought about all that was said. Then, bowing her head, she prayed silently, "Oh, God, help me always to obey you and to fulfill Your wish, . . . Your choice . . . for my life. May there never be need for a 'second best'; no 'other avenue' or alternative. I'm nothing really great, but all I am belongs to You. Use me in any way You see fit..."

The mocking bird in a nearby crape myrtle, raising his head on high, seemed to be singing happy "Amens" to the whispered prayer. •