Colin awoke with a start, his heart pumping like a sledge hammer inside his chest. He sat bolt upright in bed and looked over where Marilyn always slept. She was not there; her side of the bed presented nothing more to his eye than the empty, flat covers. Where was his wife? he wondered.
And what was the meaning of the dream which had so rudely awakened him?

He jumped out of bed and walked to the window, looking out over the skyline of the city. Lights blinked and winked at him from high-rise apartments, offices and places of business. This was his parish; this city with its thousands of living but dying souls. Restlessly and nervously, he paced the floor . . . back and forth, back and forth. Where was Marilyn? What time was it?

As if in answer to his question, the clock on the city's square pealed out three deep, almost sonorous, tones. Three o'clock! he thought, making a complete search of the exclusive apartment for his wife. "Marilyn," he called, "Marilyn..."

The stillness of the late hours seemed to mock his voice. He was frightened. Frightened! That Voice; what did it mean? "... And as long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper . . . But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction: for he transgressed against the Lord his God..."

He walked again to the window and looked out. Ah, he liked the city. How he liked it! He had it "made," he thought; a large church, and that right in the heart of the city, a luxurious apartment . . . no mere parsonage where busybodies could come prying and spying and bring their tales of woe. None of it--the apartment was his alone . . . his and Marilyn's, that is.

"But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction: for he transgressed against the Lord his God..."

That Voice; those words; that dream! He covered his face with his hands, the way he used to do as a child when he was afraid someone . . . or something . . . was going to get him. Then he hurried into the super-spacious kitchen. A glass of milk; ah, that was it: It would take his mind off that horrid dream; those frighteningly-confusing words, that accusing voice.

He sipped the milk slowly, deliberately, looking for a bit of information as to where Marilyn could have gone, to the lobby downstairs, perhaps? Possibly. There was all kinds of reading material down there.
Having pacified his conscience somewhat as to the possibility of where his wife had gone, he crossed the kitchen and went back to the living room, being careful to keep the light on in the beautiful kitchen. It might help to allay and assuage his fear. Nothing seemed quite as fearful when lights were burning, he thought.

But the dream refused to leave--the words, too, and the Voice. Ever, it was before him and with him. It rode him like a monkey on his back. Only he knew this was no monkey,... no "monkey business" either. This was serious business. He, Colin Robertson, pastor of First Church, was being brought before the Judge of all the earth. He was asked for an accounting of his business; for a reckoning of his stewardship; for a record of his faithfulness to God's heritage . . . His sheep.

Like one demented, Colin fled from the window into the bedroom. How he wished he could hide. Hide! Somewhere. Anywhere. But there was no hiding place. None. None at all; God was everywhere: He searched the caves of the wood, the den of the fox, the lair of the lion. He was everywhere . . . seeing . . . knowing. And now, He was demanding an accounting.

"Don't torment me!" he cried aloud, pressing his hands over his ears like he used to do when he didn't want to hear, as a child. "Don't!" he begged.

"But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction: for he transgressed against the Lord his God." That Voice! Again!

"Please. Please God! Don't torment me this way!" he cried.

But the accounting time had come.

He slumped weakly into a chair, burying his face in the sweaty palms of his enormous hands. His body shook and trembled like cottonwood leaves in a late fall breeze. He couldn't escape it. No, he couldn't. He would have to reckon with God. There was no getting away from it.

He remembered the struggling churches he and Marilyn had pastored. They had had little of this world's goods then, but they were rich in God's mercy and grace. They had waited upon God and prayed and fasted and wept and called, and God had marvelously prospered and blest them and given them the increase. Those were glorious days, Colin had to admit. In all
their struggles, they were never alone: God's presence was always with them, helping them, strengthening them, encouraging them, and supplying their every need by His beneficent hand.

"... And as long as he sought the Lord," the Voice intoned, "God made him to prosper."

Perspiration broke out on his face and his body. He couldn't get away from it. The Voice was right. God made him to prosper. God gave the increase . . . as long as he sought the Lord.

Colin recalled his rapid rise to fame and popularity on the ecclesiastical ladder. He became a man in his own rights; needed, wanted, and sought after. It did something to him. Yes, it did. The place of prayer was no longer precious to him--he was too busy: Too many commitments, meetings, get togethers. Going. Going. Always, it seemed, he was going. Doing, too. He loved the rapid-paced life of running, going, doing, being. But the prayer closet was rarely ever visited any more. A hasty minute or two; no more, there wasn't time, none at all. Truth of the matter was, God was rarely ever thought about. In a vague sort of way, perhaps, but never seriously anymore. There wasn't time: Too many commitments, meetings, get-togethers, committees. Going. Going. Rushing here; now there. Oh, it was wonderful. Things just couldn't function without him and his clever ideas; his keen, shrewd mind. He had to keep going, didn't he? They needed him.

"But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction: for he transgressed against the Lord, his God."

"Please God! Please!" Colin begged, trembling violently..., fearfully.

"I've come to ask for an accounting, Colin. An accounting of your care, your concern, over My sheep. What have you done to My flock? Where are you leading them?"

His night clothes were wet with perspiration. A dreadful fear seized him. "I... I..." he stuttered. He had no answer. The truth was blinding. Blinding! Piercing, too. Like a two-edged sword.

"You are not a shepherd, Colin; you are a hireling. Your heart no longer burns, weeps over, prays for and longs after the souls for whom I died; for
whom I suffered untold agony and pain. Money, Colin, money; fame, prestige
and power, are now your gods. I stand by in a distant corner, as it were, just
in case you may need me. You've put me there (you thought). But you forgot
that I am God!I will have no 'corners,' no 'back seat.' I am God!I behold the
good and the evil; the just cause and the unrighteous case. I judge not
according to man's judging: I judge with righteousness. I hate hirelings. They
make merchandise of My sheep. They take no time to hear from Me what
words to give My sheep . . . of warning or encouragement; of good or of evil.

"Coming from your round of busy-ness, you have not bathed your
sermons in tears and prayers for My blessing and help. You have rushed into
your study, pulled out a book of outlines and chosen the one most suited to
your feelings and liking and gone into your pulpit unarmed. Unanointed! And
dead! Answer for yourself, Colin Robertson, if you can."

"I . . . I . . ." Nothing more would come. He realized he stood as one
stripped and naked before the Judge of the Universe.

"I sent you here to make you a blessing," the Voice continued. "I have
many souls in this city..."

The words hung meaningfully in the room, hauntingly少女,, provocatively.

"Instead of being a blessing to My sheep, you have become a curse.
Instead of winning them for Me, you have driven them farther away. Slowly
but surely, you are leading them to hell!"

"But Lord," he protested solemnly, "the congregation is bigger and
larger than ever."

"And more dead!" came the immediate and frightening response.
"When thou wast little in thine own eyes..." The Voice quoted Colin groaned.

"You started well; walking in all My ways. I helped you marvelously, till
you were strong. Here came the sad turn in your life..., when he was strong,
his heart was lifted up to his destruction... You collapsed not in a time of
failure but at a peak of success. 'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed
lest he fall.' When you were weak and struggling and needing help, you
turned to Me with all your heart, humbling yourself mightily in My Presence.
Now..."
The inference was all that he needed. Colin groaned.

"Another was strong when he was weak," the Voice continued, alluding and referring to the Apostle Paul. "You have been weak when you thought you were strong. A reckoning, Colin Robertson! I've come for a reckoning. Today. This night! 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of an angry God!' A fearful thing to bleed My sheep instead of feeding and leading them. A fearful thing to pacify instead of warn, to play instead of preach. You are an hireling, and not a true shepherd. The blood of these souls will I require at your hand!"

The Voice ceased. The man stared into space. His heart was like stone... cold and hard. Slowly, he stood to his feet and walked to the window. He would continue preaching. The people would never know... or would they?