I glanced down the road toward the house, hot tears blinding and blurring my vision. I blinked hard, trying to blink the tears away and trying to convince myself that the news which we had just heard wasn't real, that it was false and untrue. But it didn't change things one bit: The facts were all there in neatly-written form in the State Highway Patrol's office . . . Fred
Gilcrist, dead. Speeding and reckless driving. Age: 18 years, 2 months, 10 days.

I looked at the house again. A shiver traced my spine. Poor Mrs. Gilcrist, I thought, moaning silently into my tear-wet hands. Fred, gone! Fred, my closest buddy and best friend. It didn't seem real. It didn't. Again I blinked my eyes, hoping to drive the nightmare away. Always the facts came back to haunt me, looming before me like some terrible thing. The radio didn't give out names and ages of accident victims until those nearest of kin were notified and contacted, I rationalized realistically. After that the news spread.

I hurried inside to the phone and dialed the Gilcrist's number again, hoping that this time someone would be there to answer. There was no reply.

"Stephen, " Mother said, sliding a pan of freshly-baked cinnamon rolls out of the oven, "you'll have to cast this over onto the Lord. There isn't one thing you can do. Fred's gone. All this sorrowing and crying will make you sick."

"Oh, Mom!" I almost moaned my exclamation, sure she couldn't possibly know the mental agony I was suffering and enduring. For almost so long as I could remember, Fred and I had been friends -- close friends. In the early part of spring we flew kites together in the fields, as children. In the summer we waded the icy-cold mountain stream that snaked its way out of the mountain's side into our joining fields. We fished together as boys in that fish-laden stream, excited beyond describing over the beautiful mountain trout we usually managed to catch. We hiked the mountain's side clear to the top, played ball and horseshoes together and even helped each other out in the haying season if our fathers could spare us.

In school Fred and I remained bosom buddies. We had many other friends' to be sure. But none came any way near to being the kind of friend Fred was to me and I to him. Maybe it was because we grew up together on side by side farms. Maybe it was just that we understood each other and were so much alike. Or maybe it was simply because neither of us had a brother -- plenty of sisters for both of us, but no brothers. Little matter. We were friends. And now, suddenly and unbelievably, he was gone.

I thought of something I had told him only hours ago about his motorcycle and once again I felt that shiver race up and down my vertebrae.
"Something's wrong with The Racehorse, Fred," I'd said. (The Racehorse was the name Fred had given to the vehicle). "I wish you'd have it checked by someone who knows the 'ins and outs' of the thing before you take it out again." Fred had laughed in his good humored way, declaring there was nothing wrong with it that he couldn't fix. So I dropped the subject. How I wished now that I'd been more emphatic. I dialed their number again, making sure to let it ring longer than any previous time. Still no reply; no answer.

Restlessly, I paced the hallway. Then I walked out to the porch again and looked toward the house. Their enormous farm house was much like our own: three stories high . . . four if you considered the cellar a story, which I guess it was; a porch that extended across the front of the house and along one side m an L shape; yellow shuttered windows . . .

I groaned inwardly as I looked at the windows. If, like someone said, the eye was the window to the soul, then I was sure those windows were the eyes of the house. And now, as I sat on our top porch step, they seemed to be reproaching me, Fred's bedroom window especially.

Again I groaned. Deep from inside it came, that groan. I had lost my opportunity, I realized. It could never be recalled and it would never come again. I had waited too long, procrastinated once too often. And now Fred was gone . . . forever and forever beyond my reach . . . and I had failed to talk to him about his soul. I had meant to, even planned to. Always when I thought the right time had come to broach the subject about spiritual things . . . eternal matters . . . I had gotten "cold feet" and couldn't seem to get my mouth open even.

I had asked him once, after my conversion a year ago, about going to the revival meeting with me. He looked shocked and had laughed it off as a joke, telling me how funny he thought it was that I had gotten suddenly religious. "It'll wear off with time, Steve." he asserted stoutly. "Then we'll both enjoy a good laugh over it. You've done it to please your folks, like a good boy."

But it hadn't worn off. I didn't want it to, not ever. When I went to the altar that night, I went determined to go all the way through with God. And I didn't go merely to please Dad and Mom either. I marched down that aisle because the Holy Ghost had sent a shaft of old time conviction clear through my being. I saw myself as God saw me: lost and undone, defiled and dirty
and on my road to hell unless I did a complete and total about-face and repented of my sins and got saved.

I'll never forget that night; how could I! The devil made an all-out effort to hold me. I bellowed and cried for mercy and forgiveness; God heard, cared, delivered. In an instant of time I was freed. Saved. Forgiven. Sin's shackles dropped off; its chains were rent. The glory fell and I shouted. Released! I was released, like a slave from his master.

I had told Fred about my glorious change the following day, thinking he'd be only too eager and happy to take the same route I was now taking. And that's when I had asked him about going with me to the revival meeting too. But after his almost belittling refusal, I just sort of left him alone -- where spiritual things were concerned, that is. He gave me the impression that we'd still be the same good friends as always but that I shouldn't mention anything more to him about my new-found Friend, Jesus Christ, nor about the change which He brought into my life.

I prayed for Fred. Every single day, as regularly as I had my private devotions, I prayed for his salvation. But my lips seemed to be sealed when it came to talking to him about his soul. And I really wanted to talk to him about this most important of all things. Oh, I did. But always, there was that fear.

Something our preacher had said in one of his messages came to me just then; something about carnality making one fearful of a face of clay -- mankind. "It makes you afraid to witness, afraid to testify, afraid to pray in public," he had said.

I winced with the vivid recollection. Carnal? I must still be carnal, I thought, shocked with the revealing truth and the bright light of God's finger laid at the root of my trouble.

This was a new aspect of carnality to me, a manifestation which, until this very instant, I hadn't known was a manifestation. But I saw it plainly and clearly now. The reason for my inability to talk freely to Fred about his soul was because I had not been wholly sanctified, as I had thought I was. Hadn't God's Word said, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you."
I left the porch and headed for the barn, as determined to do business with God over my unsanctified heart condition as I was determined to get saved that night when I hurried down the aisle of the church and fell, all broken and humbled and crushed in spirit, over the altar. I would go to my grave with the weight of this lost opportunity ever on my heart and in my mind but it would never happen again. By God's grace, if wouldn't. This day I would stay out in the barn on my knees in prayer until I knew God had dealt the death blow to the "Old man" of sin in my heart. He needed soldiers in His army, not cowards. Soldiers who were willing and ready to march in His army, under His banner and His standard. Soldiers who were willing to fight . . . against the world, the flesh, and the devil. Soldiers who would do their very best to "recruit" men and women and boys and girls into His army. Soldiers who would not be intimidated.

It was quiet as I stepped into the shady-coolness of the barn. The cattle were outside, grazing in the meadow. Save for a busy little mouse that scurried away and our oldest, almost deaf, gray, sleepy-eyed cat that sat hunched over in typical feline posture when napping, I was alone.

Seeing my heart as I knew God saw it made me weep brokenly as I knelt on the fresh, clean smelling hay that lay directly beneath the hay chute which connected the upper part of the barn to the lower level. I prayed. Oh, how I prayed! I wanted deliverance from this cowardice which rendered me almost useless for God.

I'll never be able to tell you how long I prayed, for I don't know. But I know that the Holy Spirit came in purging, purifying, cleansing flame and burned out the "Old man" of sin and carnality. I was sanctified wholly.

It was Mom's voice that brought me down from the heavenlies into the stark reality of the present. She was calling my name from the porch.

Leaving the sacred spot as quietly as possible, I made my way outside, being careful to close the bottom half of the double barn door as I left.

"Mr. Gilcrist wants to talk to you," Mom said when I got near the porch. "He wants you to be a pall bearer."
"Sure thing," I said, marveling at the courage I felt inside me. Courage and strength, too. "Fred would have wanted it this way," I added, going inside and down the hallway to the phone.

I may have the blood of one soul on my hands, I thought, (hoping I wouldn't) but from this moment on, by God's grace, I would never again lose another golden opportunity and fail to talk to people about their soul and its eternal destiny. And what better time and place to begin than by being faithful to the Gilcrist's now, in this time of crushing sorrow!

"Hello, Steve here." I said into the mouthpiece. "I'll be over right away, Mr. Gilcrist," I promised. "I have an important matter to discuss with you . . ."