

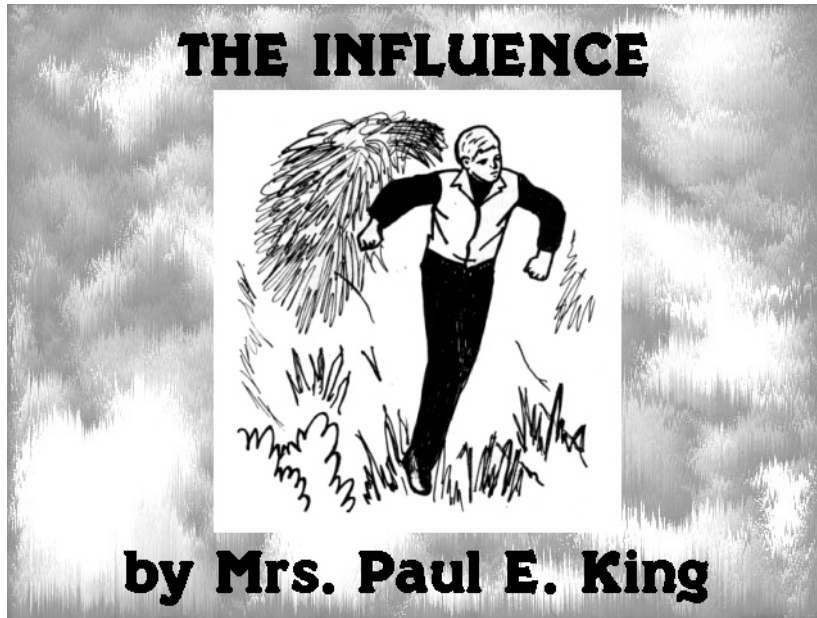
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**THE INFLUENCE**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

(Chapter One)

He ran with a swiftness born of fear -- with the agility of a young hind or roe -- with the sure-footedness of a mountain goat. His muscles, sinewy, strong, powerful and forceful, propelled his feet and legs at an ever-increasing rate of speed deeper and deeper into the midnight-blackness of

the dense forest. How far had he come? he wondered, feeling the sense of urgency wash over him with incredible force.

He had raced a time or two . . . serious racing . . . when he was a boy living in the town where she was his grade school teacher as well as his spiritual mentor. He remembered those races now. They flashed back to him like the disk of a film in vivid, dramatic play-back. He had always been scrawny those days -- a cast-out from his family, a "tossed-about" 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 year-old, foster home 'runt.'

Despised for the most part by those who kept him, he felt himself shriveling and shrinking on the inside. Then in the third grade, she came into his life. And into his heart! She smiled at him. Actually smiled! Often. Genuinely. Lovingly. Patted his head of unruly wheat-colored hair, too. And whispered important sounding things into his well-scrubbed ears. (A sincere thanks to Mrs. Grumpett, he thought as he ran fiercely on, for teaching him the value of proper hygiene and cleanliness of body).

He hadn't intended to run in that grade-school footrace. He was "too stunted; too scrawny," the Grumpett boys derided. And his shriveled, wilted heart felt no need for trying, even though his young legs, lithe and springy and sinewy as willow withes in early spring, were urging him to try. Then she came up beside him. "You can do it, Charles!" she had exclaimed softly into one of his ears. "Yes, you can do it. In fact, I'll be disappointed if you don't try. Running's good for a boy -- any boy."

That was all he needed. Truth of the matter was, his legs had jumped up and down much like he was on a pogo stick doing a set of boyish calisthenics. She patted his head then and smiled at him. Said one of her important sounding sentences in his ear, too . . . . "I love you, Charles; never forget this. And I am praying for you. Every single day of my life, I pray for you. Someday a lot of people are going to be proud of you. Yes, someday the name Charles Garfield Breckenbane will be spoken reverently on many a tongue."

He remembered those words now. Remembered how her words had given impetus to his poor, crippled self-image. Gradually, he felt the shriveled, wilted part of him slink off into some obscure corner of his being as her words flowed over the crushed, down-trodden spirit and revived that which was slowly dying and drying up. He felt something new slip into his

heart. It came in with her words. With her smile. He could do it; she had said so. And suddenly, the new thing within him told him that not only could he do it but that he would do it.

He had entered that school race. His knees didn't knock nor did his courage (the new, strong thing) wane or fail. With his eyes looking neither to the left nor to the right, nor behind, he completed and finished the run far ahead of any of the others. His one reward was her smile. Her gentle pat on his head. Her happy face and tear-filled eyes. Her words of commendation, "I knew you'd make it, Charles! I knew it!"

Tears stung his eyes now as he ran, remembering. Oh, if only he could get to her house. How far had he come? How many miles? She was an angel. An angel in humanity's flesh and blood.

He stopped for a brief while, listening. His lungs felt like they were almost at the explosive point, like they were ready to burst. His throat felt dry and hot; his every muscle was tense; his sense of hearing acute, listening for the sound he most dreaded . . . the sound of Brill, Mr. Warsinger's well-trained bloodhound. In no time at all she would track him down, he knew, unless he could find a fast-flowing mountain stream and wade it for miles and throw her off course.

When he had signed on to work for Mr. Warsinger on his beautiful but isolated ranch, in answer to an ad he'd read in one of the newspapers, he had no idea that he'd be a common slave. The man was ruthless in his dealings, uncouth in his manner, fierce when crossed, and paid only a minimum wage. Nothing, except the fact that he had signed a two-year contract with the man could have kept him there. But she . . . that unforgettable, God-like teacher . . . had taught him to be honest. She had instilled the principles of uprightness and integrity deep inside his being. For this reason, and this alone, he had stayed.

The contract had been up months ago. But Mr. Warsinger had threatened him if he left -- declared he'd hunt him down if it was the last thing he did. He was frightened of the man. Terribly so. He had seen him strike more than one ranch hand down in a fit of anger. And one by one the men had left, some meeting the ranch owner on his "terms." With up-raised fists they declared they were through, then walked out on him in broad daylight.

Several others, intimidated like himself, stole away in the canopy of darkness. Like Jeff and . . . .

Charles felt his pulses quicken at the thought of Jeff. He liked Jeff. Liked him greatly. But he never would have believed Jeff could do such a dastardly thing as he did a few hours ago. No, he would never have thought such a thing possible coming from Jeff. But he had done it; even bragged to him about having taken the box of money. Then he had fled, knowing full well that Mr. Warsinger would punish him to the hilt when he made the discovery and found out who had taken the box.

"But it's not right, Jeff!" Charles had protested when the hired hand had revealed what he had done. "Just because Mr. Warsinger hasn't been paying us enough doesn't give you any right to steal."

"Don't worry about me," Jeff answered. "I'm only getting back a portion of what he didn't pay me. The mean old tight wad! I'm leaving now, and if you know what's good for you, you'll do the same. Just as soon as the old tyrant learns of his loss you'll be having it harder than Pharaoh ever made it on those Israelite slaves. You may even be accused of taking the money, you know. Wouldn't surprise me one bit."

"But I didn't steal it, Jeff. I wouldn't think of doing such a thing."

"True. True. But will Mr. Warsinger believe you?"

Long after Jeff had gone, Charles had lain awake staring into the darkness. Then, silently and cautiously, he had gathered his few personal belongings together and made his way out of the bunk house, taking nothing that was not his and leaving all of Mr. Warsinger's scant furnishings intact.

He headed straight for the mountains, breaking into an easy gait when he was a safe distance away from the ranch buildings, with not a single thought of stopping to rest. He wanted to put as much distance as possible between Mr. Warsinger and himself before the sun came up and the time for getting up on the ranch arrived. The man would be furious, he knew, when he discovered two of his workhands gone.

A new thought hit Charles now: the missing money. Without a doubt, Mr. Warsinger would put Brill on their trail. Yes, he would. He would get that

money box back. And, with both Jeff and him gone, which scent would Brill pick up and track down? It may well be his.

The thought hammered inside his brain and his chest with almost deafening force. Getting his "second wind," he raced away into the night, the twinkling stars his only lanterns, the droning cicadas and chanting katydids his only known company. But tonight he was thankful for them and their cacophony. He didn't feel quite so all alone with the debating going on in the trees around him as to whether Katy did or didn't. What she did or didn't do mattered nothing to him, he decided; it was comfort enough to know they were his companions of the night.

He raced on and on, thankful that his muscles and his entire body had been inured by hard work and strenuous labor. It aided him greatly now, he realized.

He thought of Brill again, and wondered what she would do when there was no response to her early morning whine from inside the bunkhouse where he slept. Every morning for almost two years the long-eared dog had come around for the "love offering" of food which he had kept over from the previous night's supper for her. She had taken a liking to him and he to her. But maybe there was a reason for this, too, he temporized . . . Mr. Warsinger could be equally as ruthless and merciless on Brill as he was on his help. Maybe Brill, like himself, responded to kindness and felt more at ease in the presence of love and gentleness than she did around her churlish master-owner. He felt sudden sympathy for the beautiful dog and wondered what would happen to her. A feeling of deep sadness engulfed him for Brill. If she were put on his trail and tracked him down, it would not be that she meant him harm, he knew. Her search for him would be out of duty, to be sure, but he was positive it would be a joyous find for the dog.

The bundle of rolled-together clothes, tied to his back to expedite his escape and make travel faster and easier, began to slip. He stopped to secure it more tightly. Then he heard a sound that made him prick up his ears. Something was trailing him! But a stream was right before him. He had heard its soft purling murmur. He listened only long enough to get directional bearings; then he raced ahead, his one desire now to get to that stream.

(Chapter 2)

With his heart pounding like a sledge hammer inside his chest, Charles raced toward the stream. As sure as he knew his name, so sure and certain was he that he was being trailed and followed. Icy chills played chop sticks up and down his spine: his mouth felt dry and burning. His saliva what was left of it seemed to have turned to cotton and was almost as dry. Could it be a wild animal that was stalking him? he wondered with a new spurt of fear.

"Oh, God," he cried out in utter desperation; "Phoebe Amanda's God! I don't know how to pray, only as I saw and heard it demonstrated and practiced in her life. But please, if You really are concerned . . . if You really do care about me . . . please help me. I need You. Oh, how I need You! Come into my heart and life and give me the same kind of peace and calm that she possessed. Please God . . . ."

Like a vesper song at twilight without the slightest hint of a dissonant chord or note, so sweetly, so comfortingly and peacefully the Unseen but very-real Presence of the Son of God came into his heart. He felt like laughing and crying and shouting at the same time. And he was sure that lights were turned on around him. But no, an upward glance revealed the heavens still as deep-purple in nocturnal slumber as before he prayed. And the tiny, twinkly star lanterns danced and shimmered and glimmered on the bosom of the sky just as they did an hour ago. Only brighter and more luminous, he thought.

He tripped, stumbled and fell over a dead limb. It had fallen from its once-lofty position high among myriad other branches and lay rotting on the forest floor. His soul was too transported . . . too happy . . . to notice any physical pain. He had made a marvelous discovery, one that sent a fresh shower of tears to his eyes: The Light, this new, brighter, happy, joyous something was inside him. In his heart! He was seeing the world through new eyes -- through a new and radically changed, transformed heart.

For the first time in his life he was happy. Truly happy. His heart felt full of sunshine and light and joy. It flowed through him like a never-ending river. Now he knew what it was that had kept the teacher of his young boyhood days so constantly joyous and serenely-happy. Now he understood why she had a shining face, a kind word for everybody, and a prayer on her lips. Even for those who disliked her.

He thought back to the days when he had had to stay with the Pridleys after Mrs. Grumpett decided she was through keeping a foster child. Taken out of the school and away from Phoebe Amanda Brackbill's teaching, he was thrown into an environment totally different from that which he had had. Not that the Grumpetts were religious people; they weren't. But she was there, in the classroom, teaching him and guiding him instilling in his heart principles of righteous living. She taught by word of mouth, to be sure, but more by example.

The Pridleys lived far away from the Grumpetts. Neither family knew the other. He remembered how utterly alone and forsaken he had felt when he had taken the long ride away from where he had hoped would have been home. He wept silent tears in the car, feeling as desolate and cast-off as when his parents had deposited him on the doorstep of a distant relative, driven away and never returned. From then on he had been shifted from "pillar to post," as the proverbial saying goes, feeling for all the world like he was being "traded off" much the same way he had seen the Grumpetts do with some of their livestock. And it hurt. Oh, how it hurt.

The Pridley boys were fighters, fighting with anything and anybody who would be fool enough to fight them. Consequently, he had been picked on, cuffed about and challenged. Always he refused to fight.

"You're a coward!" Hal Pridley had hurled at him one day. Hal was the oldest of the three boys. He was big and brawny and broad-shouldered and he had a frightfully ugly-looking face. Not the face itself, but the hateful look he seemed to wear whenever Charles was around. He got the impression that Hal resented his presence in their home. The feeling came across loud and clear and unmistakably real.

"So you won't fight, eh?" Hal had taunted. "One of those goody-goody softies! Well, we'll see about that. So long as you live with the Pridleys, you do as the Pridleys do. Do you hear?"

Charles remembered having trembled. Then her face came before him. It was there in as clear outline form as if she had been standing bodily before him: "I'm praying for you Charles. Every day of my life, I pray for you . . . . Someday a lot of people are going to be proud of you . . . . I love you, Charles . . . . I'm praying for you."

He felt the feeling of "no worth" slink away and that marvelous little "giant" called courage pop up in his heart and prop his "back-bone" up straight, unyielding and unbending. "I won't fight, Hal!" he declared unflinchingly. "You can beat me to a pulp, but I'll not fight."

"You coward! You sissy!"

He made no reply. He stood, waiting to be cuffed about. Nothing happened. Nothing more than the verbal onslaughts, the hateful looks and the demeaning remarks. But little matter. He felt good and right on the inside. He seemed to see her face, her smile of approval. This was all that mattered. She had given something to him that no man could take away. Not even Hal Pridley and his two less abusive but always ready to fight brothers.

Courage was needed for things other than to fight and to be a bully like Hal he realized. And, in his way of tallying up the greater forms of courage, he was sure that the kind which his teacher had instilled in him by both principle and word was by far the greatest and best. It took far greater courage to not fight than to fight, back there with the Pridleys.

Thinking of the Pridleys now, and how utterly miserable and wretched they had helped to make his life, Charles felt something new in his heart for them. He felt a sudden overflow of love and compassion for the family who had treated him little better than the animals they owned.

Tears sprang to his eyes and a prayer fashioned itself in his heart then formed on his lips. It was a prayer for God to have mercy on their wicked souls and to bring the same kind of peace to their heart that his now had.

He saw Mrs. Pridley's face especially . . . her too-thin, always-tired-looking, pinched face. He prayed for her. It was no eloquent prayer, perhaps, but it came from his heart for the woman who had tried to give him small doses of kindness when her husband and sons were not around. Several times she had slipped him fruit or a cold biscuit with a cheese wedge hidden between, always sure that none of the family was around when she did it. It was as though she was as frightened of them as he was, he remembered having thought.

The day when he left the Pridleys to take up residence with the Wallers, Mrs. Pridley had pressed a fifty-cent piece into his hand. Tears stood in her

eyes, he remembered. Impulsively, he had thrown his arms around her neck and cried. She cried too. Even hugged him close to her thin body and kissed him on his cheek. "You're a good boy, Charles. I'll miss you," she said in almost a whispered breath before releasing him and rushing into the house.

She had loved him, he knew now. Really loved him; only she would not have dared to reveal or display it in front of her churlish husband and sons. She was almost as much a slave in her own home as he had been on Mr. Warsinger's ranch, he realized as he struggled to his feet.

The bundle of clothing on his back had shifted slightly with his fall; so he took it off completely and re-rolled it then tied it securely once more to his back and pushed forward. The thought of Mr. Warsinger and his stay at the ranch gave urgency to his feet and to his steps.

He was almost to the edge of the gurgling mountain stream when he heard a twig snap behind him. Without a doubt, he knew he was being followed. If it was some wild beast of the mountains and he waded the stream he'd be every bit as much a dead man as if he were on dry ground, he realized, knowing full well that an animal could follow him as easily in a shallow stream as on the ground.

He reached in his pocket for his flashlight, hoping the fall hadn't broken the bulb nor ruined the trusty, much-used light. He knew that wild animals feared lights and shied away from such.

He touched the button with his finger, sliding it forward quickly. Nothing happened. The bulb must have been broken or jarred loose, he decided, praying earnestly now as he walked.

And then he heard something tear through the brush behind him. Turning, he lifted his hands heavenward and asked for help. If he died, he would die courageously -- facing, not running from, the animal, or whatever it was.

(Chapter 3)

He waited, not knowing what to expect, but thankful that he knew, should death claim him now, he was ready to go. He had made his peace with God. This was all that mattered.

He peered into the darkness and then he felt it jump up toward his face. He felt the wagging tail, heard a joyful, happy little half-bark. In an instant, he stooped down and gathered the bundle of fur in his arms. "Brill!" he exclaimed, almost overcome with emotion. "Brill!" he cried again.

The dog wiggled happily inside the circle of his arms.

"Now I really have a problem," he said as he stroked her silken head and equally-silk long ears. "You belong to Mr. Warsinger, not to me. I must see that you get back to him. Yes, somehow, I must try to get you back to him, Brill. I know you're not happy with his kind of treatment, but he owns you. I'm a Christian now, Brill. I know you don't understand this but I felt I had to tell someone -- or something."

Brill nuzzled the palm that stroked her. She licked his hand. Then she lay down at his feet, contented.

Charles continued to stroke her head. He knew she was tired. He was too. He longed for sleep and rest, but he knew he must keep traveling. He wanted to get as far away as possible from the ranch between now and daylight which, according to his watch, was only two hours and a-half away. He knew the ranch owner was not following Brill and this gave him great peace of mind. Jeff had told him that Mr. Warsinger had gone away to buy cattle and would not be returning till early morning sometime. He had overheard the phone conversation when passing the office window early that morning, he said. But oh, what fury and anger when Mr. Warsinger became aware of the fact that Jeff and he were gone. And now Brill, too.

He stroked the dog companionably, suddenly realizing how good it was to have her with him. He would allow her to travel with him until he was settled somewhere; then he would contact Mr. Warsinger and tell him where he could pick her up -- at the train depot or airport nearest to the ranch. If he wanted her back.

Tears formed in his eyes with the thought of shipping her back. He knew the beating Brill would get. It may even take her life. Mr. Warsinger was like that -- notable for his brutality and his desire to "get even." Yes, Charles thought sadly now, his way of "getting even" may well be the death of the beautiful dog.

She lay at his feet in utter contentment, the muzzle of her mouth and nose resting on her forepaws in a pose of innocent and willing servitude. Charles, sitting on leafy forest floor now, wondered if perhaps she had made many nocturnal visits to the bunkhouse door, unknown to him heretofore. She had to have come by to have picked up his fresh scent and followed, this he knew. A warm feeling of love for the dog engulfed him. He stroked her gently. Leaning back against a tree, he closed his tired eyes.

He must have slept, for when he next opened his eyes birds were twittering in the trees above him and the sun was slanting its slivers of light through the windows of the trees.

He stretched his legs and Brill winked one eye open lazily, tiredly. Then, seeing him get to his feet, wagging her tail fiercely in a good morning welcome.

"We'll have to get moving, grill," he said patting her gently on her head. "Not a moment's time to waste. Mr. Warsinger may hire another bloodhound to track us both down and we don't want that, do we? We'll wade the stream for several miles or more then cross and move on."

Brill moved ahead of him, nose to the ground, and drank deeply of the cold, clear water when she came to it. Charles removed his boots and socks, rolled his pant legs up to his knees then stepped into the water, the icy-coldness getting him unmistakably wide awake. Brill followed beside him, stopping every now and then to lap at the flowing water.

"You're hungry," Charles said. "I know you are. I am too. After we're far enough down stream we'll stop and have breakfast. Nothing like they'll have at the ranch for no one would dare to say that Mr. Warsinger doesn't feed well. He does. Plenty of it and always the best, too. He never spared on food. Guess he knows a fellow just can't keep up with the strenuous work he makes him do unless his stomach is well taken care of. I have jerky and some cold biscuits. Always took a few of the left-over biscuits to the bunkhouse with me. At Mr. Marr's insistence. Great cook, Mr. Marr. The best biscuits I've ever eaten. I'll miss him, Brill. He was always sensible and quiet. Kinda' believe he was as lonely as I was. But I don't feel this way any longer, not with Jesus living in my heart. Oh, it's wonderful! I only wish I'd have known Him back at the ranch so I could have told Mr. Marr about Him."

Brill paused and looked up into Charles' face as if saying she understood; then she dashed playfully ahead of him, kicking up spray as she went. Charles hastened his footsteps, wanting to get out of the icy-cold water as quickly as possible.

They waded far down stream, and by the time they emerged on the opposite side of the bank Charles was ready for the jerky which he always carried with him while he worked, both for a quick bit of energy and in case a sudden storm arose and isolated him from the ranch for a long period of time.

The mosses felt unbelievably warm to his feet as he stepped out of the water and sat on a rock to let his feet and legs dry before putting on his socks and shoes. While he was drying off, and to conserve time, he took the ample supply of jerky from his back roll and got out two pieces, one for Brill and one for himself. With his pocket knife he cut the jerky into biscuit-size pieces then inserted them between the severed biscuit.

"Time for breakfast, Brill," he said, holding the biscuit out before her.

She came to him, her tail wagging, her long ears almost touching the ground.

"Wait a minute!" he said quickly as he held the biscuit above him, out of her reach. "I'm a Christian now. I want to say thanks to my wonderful Heavenly Father for giving me this day's bread. Be patient, Brill, until I've prayed."

With bowed head and closed eyes, Charles offered his first mealtime prayer of thanks. He thought he saw her smile of approval, the same way she smiled whenever he had done something good and noble and worthwhile and upright. He knew he had His smile of approval. Yes, this he knew.

Brill was still wagging her tail furiously when he opened his eyes. She had an appealing look on her alert dog face.

"You can't gulp this down," he admonished softly. "We'll both have to eat slowly; this must last us for hours. Nothing more to eat until tonight. Berries, yes, if we find them. But no more jerky-biscuits till this evening, God willing. So take it easy, Brill, and enjoy every single bite."

He divided her biscuit into fourths then set it down in separate places for her to find and pick up, all the while taking small bites out of his own biscuit sandwich. Never had anything tasted better, and he wondered now if anything had ever tasted as good to him. The combination was a perfectly delicious and satisfying one, and when he had put his socks and shoes on and rolled his pant legs down for the journey ahead, he felt strengthened by the simple fare.

Brill looked at him with a questioning look on her face, a look that seemed to say, is there any more?

He rubbed her head playfully with the palms of his hands and said quietly, "No more, Brill. Not for now. We'll have to dole it out carefully until I can find a town somewhere and buy us some food. That's one thing I have: money. Saved it from my work at the ranch for the day when my lease-contract would be fulfilled and I could leave. Only Mr. Warsinger wouldn't allow me to leave. But come, we must be moving along. He's home now and must surely have learned that we're gone. Work began on the ranch two hours ago."

Charles broke into a brisk walk, taking long easy strides. Brill nosed ahead, stopping every now and again to look back and make sure that he was coming. Mile after mile was traversed. The timber was getting sparser now; the air not as cool. He knew he was coming near to a plateau or some such thing. Instinct told him so -- instinct and his familiarity with this particular type of terrain and geography.

The sun was well over its meridian point when he emerged from the forest onto a plateau of sorts. He had no idea where he was, only his compass told him that he was traveling due east. This suited him fine and made him feel happy. Her home lay somewhere across more mountains; over steep hills, through deep valleys, due east.

She would welcome him, he knew without a doubt. She would want him and she would protect him from cruel men like Mr. Warsinger. Not that he couldn't protect himself now that he was a young man; he could. But sometimes men were cruel to other men, and he had long ago determined that he would not fight by way of retaliation nor out of hatred. He had been taken advantage of, to be sure. On more than one occasion too. But he had

never had a scar left on his sensitive conscience over having tried to get even or to be retaliatory. No indeed. Her teaching was deeply ingrained and embedded in the fertile soil of his heart and only last night the seed sown so many years ago had sprung up into everlasting life in Christ through salvation.

They moved across the lush green pasture type land, he and Brill, two lone companionable-looking creatures. The grasses swished around his pant legs. Gophers darted away for their dens. Brill had a heyday, chasing after the fat little creatures in sheer ecstasy and playfulness.

Charles, noticing the sun no longer shining, stopped and scanned the heavens. A storm was approaching. And fast. There was no place for shelter. No place at all. Unless he wanted to go back to the mountains. And this was not safe in an electrical storm, he knew. So he headed onward. Due east. Always due east.

(Chapter 4)

Thunder rumbled and rolled to the west of him and in back of him. The clouds churned and tumbled in a great gray-black mass above him and jagged flashes of lightning zig-zagged across the once-blue heavens. Brill, sensing the approaching storm, left the chubby-fat gophers to their own fate . . . or security . . . and trotted back to Charles, whining every now and then.

"Take it easy, Girl," Charles soothed. "I belong to the God Who makes the rain and the thunder and lightning. He sees us. He'll take care of us. We'll get drenched. Sure as I'm talking to you, we will. But we'll dry out when the sun comes through those clouds again. And know something, Brill, we'll feel refreshed and clean all over. This could well be God's way of washing away our scent too. He's looking out for me. I'm as sure of this as I am that I'm Charles Breckenbane."

Brill rubbed up close to his leg, staying by his side so close and near that it impeded his traveling gait. Up ahead a lake came into view. Its color reminded him of a green-blue gem set down in the midst of an arid land. It was beautiful. On its surface a pair of wild ducks glided across the water, heading quickly for the shallows, where they stood alert, expectant.

The light dimmed even more and the lake turned grey-purple. Lightning ran down the mountainside; thunder rumbled and roared overhead. Charles stood watching the play of lightning on lake and land, feeling small and insignificant in the drama of the storm.

He felt his spine tingle as a fork of brilliant lightning zipped across the water. Torrential rain soaked him in seconds.

The lake, previously so calm and beautifully gem-like, whipped itself into a boiling cauldron of fury. Fascinated, he watched the ducks face the angry water, rising proudly on the crest of the inky waves. Rising and falling; rising and falling, and all with apparent enjoyment and immense pleasure.

The storm abated as suddenly and as quickly as it had begun. Charles was sorry that the drama had played itself out so soon. God had shared a spectacular display of His power, and it left him deeply moved.

There was he, so frail and small, but the God of the storm . . . His own God . . . had chosen to reveal a part of His power and His might to him. This was the very same God Who would help him to find his way back to Phoebe Amanda Brackbill, he knew. He would not limit Him by equating His power with human ability and make Him a thousand thunderstorms too small. It took only this one drama-display to show him how really great a God he was serving.

The clouds moved to the slopes at the end of the lake where they hung like black curtains. And then the sun came out. Like a blazing ball of fire, it burst through the clouds. It turned the raindrops into glittering diamonds. And then Charles saw the rainbow! He gazed spellbound and fascinated as a half-remembered verse came floating to his mind from out of the distend past; scripture which she had read to the class that morning before starting her teaching: "I have set my rainbow in the clouds . . . ." His heart overflowed with awe and wonder and reverential fear.

Brill shook herself fiercely then rolled over and over in the grass. Charles walked to the lake, which had settled itself down much like a naughty child after a severe punishment, and sat down. A light, gentle breeze played through his rain-drenched, rain-washed hair, drying it quickly and rendering it silky-soft, much like an infant's. The ducks rippled the water, gliding over its now smooth blue-green surface with grace, in no apparent hurry.

He bowed his head and offered a prayer of thanksgiving to the One Who had once more kept His eye upon him and protected him in the storm -- he and Brill, lone travelers and highly vulnerable to the effects of the lightning. He sat for some time beside the lake, trying to formulate a plan whereby he could make it back east in record time. But the fact that he had not only himself to think of but Brill, too, seemed to bring him to a dead end street down which every avenue his brain had taken him.

Again he bowed his head and prayed, turning the problem over completely to God and asking Him to help him find a way to get back to Phoebe Amanda's town, in His way and by His method.

The water proved to be a wonderful tranquilizer his apparent dilemma, and he spent many moments drinking in the serenity and gaining inspiration from the grandeur of the mountains towering up behind him and to the west of him.

As he gazed at their majestic peaks and purple sides, more words from his teacher's daily Bible reading sessions came quickly to mind: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.

"My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.

He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: He that keepeth thee will not slumber. " Psalms 121:1-3

He marveled at the remembrance of her readings. Things, and verses particularly, . . . especially verses -- Bible verses . . . which he had thought to be long since forgotten, now came vividly and marvelously to mind. It was as though his brain had had a vast storehouse of previously hidden valuables which now had been suddenly unlocked and was being tapped by Divine hands, bringing out each priceless, precious treasure just as he needed it. The thought was almost overwhelming, and Charles wondered just what was yet stored away, ready to be revealed when he needed it most. It brought sudden tears to his eyes and he cited a single exclamation from his lips: "What a area' and wonderful God!"

The little breeze that followed on the heels of the' now-past storm fanned across and around his once soaked clothing. Aided by higher altitude

and lower humidity, the breeze quickly dried his clothes, leaving them fresh and clean smelling though a bit stiff. Brill too, was dry and shiny looking.

"Ready to go now?" Charles asked as he stood to his feet. "we made good time today so far. How about putting some more miles behind us before we get too tired and have to rest tonight?"

Brill wagged her tail, gave one of her happy little barks, then started ahead; and Charles with sudden realization, thanked God that she had followed him. She was an excellent traveling companion in addition to being good company for him.

He watched her now as she looked both bewildered and amused at the many gophers popping up out of their holes around her. She darted first after one then another, chasing them quickly back to their under ground homes. Charles smiled and hastened ahead quickening his pace as if to make up for the time spent sitting beside the beautiful lake. He had hoped he could reach a town before nightfall, but he hadn't the remotest idea where he was nor even if there were any towns nearby. All that he saw were the purple-blue mountain ranges and the plateau over which he was now making good time in traveling.

He thought about Jeff now and wondered where he was. Knowing Jeff, though, Charles was sure that he had laid his plans carefully and well, even to the day, when he would be taking his leave from the ranch. Jeff was one of the newer workhands and like Charles was also one of the youngest. But not unlike all of the working crew, he too had signed the two-year lease, the promise to stay on for the two-year period and to work for Mr. Warsinger. Jeff had been there less than a year. Could Mr. Warsinger bring legal charges against him were he found? Charles wondered. And could he force him to return to finish out the contract?

He sighed, happy and thankful that her influence had sustained him during the past better than two year period and, for the sake of keeping his word and not violating his conscience, had kept him working diligently. It was not a mere matter of "staying on" til the contract expired and/or was fulfilled. Ah, no. It was a matter of conscience, a matter of giving a full day's work as per the agreement. As for the paying of the matter, Mr. Warsinger had written, "I'll pay you well," in the letter he had sent him in answer to the ad.

Well, Charles thought now, perhaps the man deemed a minimum wage as good pay. He didn't want to think evil of his former employer. He was sure such a thing was evil, for Mrs. Brackbill had said one time that the Bible said vengeance belonged to God; that He would mete out justice and judgment when the proper time arrived and came. No, he must think no evil about the man even though he wasn't fair in his paying.

A shiver traced itself up and down his spine at the thought of Jeff stealing the money box. Why Mr. Warsinger kept the metal box on the shelf inside the granary was more than Charles could understand. He knew, with town and the bank so far away, that the man couldn't possibly bank his earnings daily. But why keep it in a granary? The thought always brought him to a dead end street, it seemed.

He remembered hearing someone say that Mr. Warsinger had a purpose in not banking, or reporting, all his earnings -- that it was his way of "getting around" paying so much out to the government. Still others declared the box held the winnings from his gambling. But why the high ledge in the granary and not in his house? Could it be, like rumor had it that it was his way of keeping Mrs. Warsinger from learning about his "side interest" . . . his "knee deep" involvement with and obsession for gambling?

Charles groaned within himself as he recalled how some of the ranch hands had lost all their earnings to the wily, cunning man. Mr. Warsinger usually managed to get his paid-out money back from most of the help. All except from him. Charles remained adamant and firm in his decision not to gamble. Nor drink either; nor smoke. Phoebe Amanda's influence enfolded and sustained him -- even in the most trying circumstances. Then, especially. He'd hear her soft-spoken words . . . . "I'm praying for you, Charles" . . . and it gave him the courage needed -- the courage to say no and to mean it and stick to it. While the men were gambling with the boss, and generally losing, he was in bed sleeping, building up body strength for the next day's labor.

He moved steadily onward, thankful beyond measure to be gone. He was the "odd" one on the ranch . . . no gossiping, no smoking, no drinking, no gambling. It infuriated Mr. Warsinger, he knew, and he wondered now if this was not a part of the reason why the big, burly boss was so cruel to him, so ruthless and unkind. He had encountered one "twig" that refused to be bent and warped and ruined -- one life, though young and pliable, that stood firmly unyielding and said no.

Suddenly Charles realized the enormity and the wonder of his freedom and he raised his head toward the sky, praising God for working things around so he could get away. He was twice free, he thought, as the greater freedom in his heart emitted a shout from his lips. Whatever he did from now on, he knew he would be doing for the glory of God.

He broke into a relaxed, easy run, anxious to get to her town, heading east. Always due east.

(Chapter 5)

The sun nestled its shiny head in the cradle of the west, burning its final rays out in a blaze of crimson-rose-orange glory before it hid its light behind the tallest mountain peaks, and Charles, feeling the pangs of hunger and of thirst, called Brill to him. "Supper time, old Girl," he said, settling himself on a clump of grass near a small stream. "Same thing as we had for breakfast, but it's going to taste great. See if it doesn't"

He prepared the jerky, biscuit sandwiches, two for each, the way he had done in the morning. Then he raised his head and gave thanks before putting Brill's divided eight sections on the ground for her to find and eat. The food was delicious and, while not great in quantity, it was satisfying indeed. It would tide them over until they reached a town and could buy more, he thought thankfully and gratefully. Biscuits and meat, who needed more!

He rested for a brief moment after eating; then he got to his feet and started walking once more. Darkness fell almost like a curtain and one by one, Charles watched the distant star lanterns being turned on by the hand of his own God. Barely visible at first, their clear, silver-white glitter became shimmering, distinct jewels as night draped her dark cloak about her and they became center focus.

"Think we'd better turn in for the night, Brill?" he asked the dog who usually ran a bit ahead of him. Brill came back and stopped beside him, wagging her tail as usual.

Charles stooped and patted her silken head; then he straightened and walked onward, searching for a proper place to lie down. He must be careful because of snakes, he knew. But how to find something suitable was quite a

problem at night, and especially so without a light. He must remember to look for a new flashlight bulb when he came to a town, he told himself silently. Or maybe it wasn't the little bulb; maybe he had ruined the flashlight some other way when he had stumbled and fallen. In that case, he would have to buy a new flashlight. Either way, he wanted a flashlight, one that would work and give him light when he needed it. A man without a good flashlight was almost as unheard of as a man without a really good pocket knife, he thought, recalling how every man who he had ever known all had at least one of each.

He had hoped to find a sheltered cove somewhere, for the nights could get really chilly. But the thought of being near rocks and stones made him change his plans . . . snakes loved lying near those daytime sun-heated inanimate pieces of granite and stone. He didn't relish the thought of awaking during the night and finding a snake sharing his part of earth's floor. Or, worse still and more horrifying, of finding one curled up on his chest, like he had read about in one man's camping experience nightmare, where the giant rattler, in finding heat and warmth for his icy-cold body, had slithered silently up over the sleeping man and curled up cozily for his night-time rest -- on the chest of the innocent, unknowing man.

Charles recalled the true story now. He remembered how the man, upon awaking and seeing that he was only inches away from death, knew that his very life-breath was dependent upon remaining totally and completely still and motionless until the reptile decided to leave and go away in search of food, or for some other reason. He recalled the man's testimony, how each agonizing second seemed a minute, how a minute seemed like an hour and an hour like an eternity until he thought he'd go mad with the suspense of waiting and the uncertainty of how the coiled "companion" would act, and when.

With the recollection of the true account came a decision to keep walking until he found some suitable, more satisfactory place to bed down for a few hours sleep and rest, at least. Better to be safe than sorry. Or dead. Then he remembered that wonderful Scripture verse again from the Psalms; remembering it as Mrs. Phoebe Amanda Brackbill had read it to her class of fifth-graders that beautiful winter morning before beginning class: "He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: He that keepeth thee will not slumber." (Psalms 121:3).

Never in his life could he remember feeling so secure and so cared for and protected. It was as if God in person had spoken the comforting words to his heart; as if He were letting him know that, wherever he journeyed, He was journeying with him, beside him and in him.

The beautiful thought . . . the supportive, protecting help of his God, ever-present, ever-near . . . sent a fountain of joyous tears from his eyes and down his cheeks. Did anyone who knew God in a personal, intimate way need fear! he thought, blest and happy in his soul. Phoebe Amanda had once told her class of boys and girls that those who knew God had a hedge around them, a wall of protection. She said, "The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him."

Never before had he known what this meant. But now, since his heart was new in Christ and his spiritual senses were attuned to spiritual things, he knew. Yes, he knew. And it was all so very, very real: God's eyes beholding him, yea, watching him -- the way Phoebe Amanda's eyes watched him that day when the Grumpett boys told him there was no way he'd ever win that foot race.

Her eyes didn't miss a single glance that passed from those boys to him. She saw. She knew what was going on. She came forward . . . showing herself strong in the behalf of him, a shriveled-on-the-inside, down trodden-by-society, homeless, foster-home waif. Cowardice skulked away; courage marched in; faith triumphed. Like it would triumph again, in this new situation; his different circumstance of getting back to her. Yes, faith would make a way . . . God's way. His eyes were "beholding" his every step, guiding, helping, looking out for him.

With the knowledge and the thought, a new spurt of energy shot through Charles' body and his veins. He no longer felt tired and weary. It was as though some beautiful unseen force was helping him onward. East. Always due east.

He walked with quickened pace and renewed strength and energy. Even Brill seemed frisky and alert. Could it be that God . . . his own God . . . had renewed his strength so that he would continue on through the night, walking instead of sleeping and resting? he wondered, knowing full well that he had been touched with quickening, Divine touch. And for what purpose?

This he need not know; his it was to go so long as God gave him this unusual, strengthening touch.

In the distance a night bird called. On a mound far to his right he heard the mournful cry of a screeching owl and all around him, it seemed, nighttime insects hummed and droned their monotonous, muted sounds. It was wonderful, Charles thought, being a part of the night, alone and far removed from the noise and hum and bustle of overcrowded towns and cities. Or even a noisy ranch.

Mr. Warsinger's ranch, though totally isolated, could get pretty noisy at night when the ranch hands and the boss got to drinking, gambling and playing cards in one of the bunk houses. More than one night Charles had had to cover his ears with something to muffle and mute the raucous laughter, ribald conversation and the terrifying oaths and cursings coming from the mouths of the losers. And more than one time he had lain in bed, shaking with fear lest there be a murder or, at the least, a fight between the men and the ranch owner.

Looking back now, he marveled that Mr. Warsinger was still alive. Anger could prove to be a deadly thing, especially when it was accompanied by its equally terrifying companion, hate. Yes, coupling anger and hatred . . . toward Mr. Warsinger . . . with losing one's weekly earnings to the wily manipulator, it was little short of a miracle that he was still among the living, Charles realized.

Oh, he was glad to be gone; glad to be away from the much evil that stalked every inch of the ranch, it seemed, and surrounded all the buildings and everything pertaining to the place. Not that the evil and sin and wickedness was in the land or on the land; it wasn't. It was in the hearts of those who inhabited the buildings, those who worked the land, rounded up the cattle and branded them. That's where the sin and evil thrived and flourished. Oh, how it flourished! And its presence was a keenly sensed thing. If not to those others, it was to him. He had had an angel for a teacher. Years ago, it was. But her influence had left its mark upon him. In his heart. It had been like a great guiding light, leading him away from those evil things; guiding him toward nobler, higher, better things until, ultimately, he had found the secret of her happiness, her joy, in Christ. Yes, her influence had led him to her Christ, now his own personal Lord and Saviour.

He walked on and on, mile after mile, thankful for each one he put between the ranch far over on the other side of the mountain and him. He watched the stars, pale, liquid gold, grow less and less in the growing light, and the moon, cool and aloof, gracefully prepare to leave her glory on the curtain of night.

Suddenly, in the distance, he saw faint, twinkly lights and he knew he was coming near to a bit of civilization. A truck stop, he was sure, judging by the tall brightly-lighted neon sign.

His heart seemed to do a flip flop of happiness. He was grateful for a truck stop. People weren't as prone to ask a lot of questions there, he temporized, and it would be a lot easier to get something hot and stable to eat than in a small town where everyone recognized a stranger and wondered where he came from, what he was doing there, and where he was going.

He pushed onward, feeling suddenly unusually hungry and more convinced than ever that God was leading him and that He had guided him to the welcome lights ahead.

(Chapter 6)

Before he reached the truck stop Charles smelled the delicious, tantalizing odor of frying bacon and sausages. His stomach growled its rightful complaint and his salivary glands began working fiercely, if a bit prematurely. Brill must have had a similar reaction, for she darted ahead much like when she was hot on the trail of one whose scent she had picked up and was expected to follow to the finish line.

"Here Brill," Charles called. "Come back, Girl. I don't want you being killed by one of those semi's."

Obedient to the smallest and least command, Brill hurried back to Charles. He stooped down and patted her head, complimenting her profusely; then he said softly, "I know you're hungry. And tired, too. I'll feed you well, Girl; then maybe we can find some place to get a couple of hours sleep before we move on. Now you stay by my side. You're not accustomed to all the motor noises you're going to be hearing, and you're not used to

darting between and around 18-wheelers. They'll crush you, Brill. Stick by my side. Okay?"

For answer, the dog wagged her tail and trotted obediently beside him.

Charles pushed the door to the restaurant open and, finding a booth, he told Brill to lie down at his feet. Without another word the dog obeyed, resting the muzzle of her nose and mouth on his boots. He knew that, in most areas, dogs were not allowed inside an eating establishment. But he couldn't let Brill outside, alone. Then too, in an isolated area such as he had discovered this truck stop, he felt sure the waitresses would understand and allow her inside so long as she remained lying on the floor at his feet.

An older woman with a tired-looking face approached his table and set a glass of water and a menu before him. She smiled when she spotted Brill but said nothing.

Charles glanced over the menu then placed his order. The woman said nothing when he ordered a breakfast "to go," a duplicate of his: hash browns, two eggs, sausage, pancakes and bacon.

True to fashion for the truck stop, his orders arrived in record time -- one, set before him steaming-hot and smelling almost ambrosial; the other, hidden securely beneath a large styrofoam container.

"Here's something for the dog," the woman said kindly, slipping a sausage patty on a piece of foil to Brill.

"Thank you kindly," Charles said, overwhelmed at the kind gesture.

"I like dogs," came the quick reply. "This one looks like a gentle lady."

"Oh, she is," Charles replied quickly. "She's very gentle. And obedient, too."

"It shows in her eyes," the woman said, hurrying away.

Charles bowed his head and gave thanks to God for his super breakfast. Then he ate hungrily slitting two of the hot biscuits open and

sliding bacon between them for future eating. It would make a delightful variation from the jerky, he decided.

As soon as he was through eating and had paid his bill, he bought a new flashlight and a road map then hurried outside, carrying Brill's breakfast with him. A safe distance away from the incoming-out-going trucks, he set the styrofoam container on the ground, opened it, took out the bacon, put it between two of the three biscuits, then told Brill to enjoy her breakfast.

The words were unnecessary and needless. He watched as the faithful dog ate with as much delight and enjoyment as he had done. When she was finished, having licked every bit of the food from even the corners of the container, she rolled over in a satisfied way, being careful to clean her muzzle by wiping her mouth on the grass. Then, in a playful sort of manner, she laid down, mouth and nose resting on her fore-paws, and looked up at him roguishly. Charles ruffled her ears.

Suddenly all the grayness of the sky flushed and blushed with a rosy light. The morning clouds were tipped and etched in rose and deepest gold. The sky was of opal and turquoise and azure. The east blossomed with ever-deepening hues; the little breeze awoke shook and bestirred herself and became a soft and holy benediction. The scene was beautiful and breathtaking and Charles stood as one mesmerized. Then he shook himself.

"Better be moving," he said to Brill. "We've made good time, but the boss man's pickup can make in minutes what it takes me hours to make on foot. I want to stay far enough away from the highway so that if he should be traveling this way he won't see us. Ready to go?"

In a flash, Brill was on her feet.

Charles headed away from the highway, far enough away so as not to be seen by the travelers but not to far that he couldn't follow the road pattern . . . it was an east-west highway. He was heading east. Due east.

Several hours later he came to a stream, crystal-clear and cold. Brill drank thirstily from the fast-moving water. So did Charles. Then, tired and sleepy, he stretched out on its bank beneath some trees and fell asleep with Brill beside him.

It was late afternoon when he awoke, refreshed and revived. Kneeling, he thanked God for the sleep and rest; then he got to his feet and once again began the long journey east, keeping well away from the highway but not too far so he lost sight of it. Even though he was on the opposite side of the tall mountain from the Warsinger Ranch and many, many miles removed from the mountain itself, that was no guarantee that the ruthless man would not search both his side of the mountain and that opposite, along the highways and roads.

Until he was much farther away, Charles decided to use every precaution possible. Not that Mr. Warsinger could force him back to the ranch; no. He couldn't. Charles had more than fulfilled his contract, . . . his part of the bargain. And he was no longer a juvenile either. So there could be no coercion there. But the man could threaten. How he could threaten! And who knew but what, in a fit of anger, he may not carry out his frightening threats. This was the thing that always made Charles shudder and steer clear of him and give him a wide berth whenever he was on a rampage, which was a frequent occurrence.

Charles wondered about his former employer now; wondered if it was pressure from business deals, or Satan, that made him become almost like an insane man at times. Perhaps it was both, he mused silently wondering what answer Phoebe Amanda Brackbill would have given him.

Phoebe Amanda was a woman of few words where condemnation and judgmental pronouncement was concerned, he realized. She had learned the art of mastering her tongue. That was a for-sure, certain thing. Or could it be that it was something greater than a personal accomplishment and achievement? he wondered. Could it be a Person . . . . . a Divine Being . . . Who because of His indwelling Spirit, kept her mouth like a well guarded door from wrong words . . . unkind, cutting, judgmental, critical words? He was sure it was the latter.

He recalled an instance in the classroom one day in his fourth grade of schooling. Tears floated to his eyes with the poignant recollection. One of the students, a Melissa somebody or other, (he couldn't recall her last name) had told a lie on Phoebe Amanda; said the teacher had paddled her till she was black and blue because she was whispering.

The irate, over-wrought parents had come to the classroom and, in front of the entire class, had castigated and ranted, raved and accused, the shocked but silent teacher, who knew nothing of the incident until that day. She had reprimanded Melissa in her stern but soft-spoken way for whispering, it was true; but she had never lain a hand on her in physical punishment although it was within her power and her rights to do so when and if she deemed such necessary to keep order in the school classroom.

"You'll pay for this!" Melissa's father had threatened with an up-raised fist. "See if you don't. Dearly, too. I'll see that you do. We'll have you fired -- expelled -- driven away."

In her sweet, unruffled manner, Phoebe Amanda said softly, "Melissa's bruises came from a fall she had while on the maypole yesterday. I didn't paddle her. But I did reprimand her for whispering and distracting the students around her from getting their lessons yesterday."

The parents had marched out of the room in high fever, proclaiming with an oath that they would get rid of the God-like teacher if it was the last thing they did. And Melissa had sat with a look of triumph and a glint of satisfaction in her enormous blue eyes.

Charles remembered how, after school, some of the girls and boys had crowded around Melissa, telling her that she lied and she knew she had, and that they knew she had. They looked like they were ready to fight her when Mrs. Brackbill came on the scene.

"Don't harm Melissa," the teacher said kindly.

"But she lied!" someone exclaimed in defense of the teacher.

"I know she did," Phoebe Amanda said quietly.

"And she knows she did. So does God know. But our kind . . . and good Shepherd said that vengeance belongs to Him; . . . He will take care of Melissa and her parents. We dare . . . not. We must not. We are told to love Melissa and to pray . . . for Melissa. She has sinned greatly by lying. We know . . . the Bible says that all liars shall be cast into the lake of . . . fire, to burn forever and ever world without end. I don't . . . want Melissa to be cast

into the lake of fire. I love her. . . . Jesus loves her so much that he died for her. Now, let us . . . all pray . . . ."

Charles recalled that prayer, that tender moment . . . when, with tears of pity and love and compassion . . . streaming down her cheeks, Mrs. Brackbill, one arm . . . encircling the frightened girl, prayed for her salvation -- . . . her forgiveness. It was love personified, love in action -- . . . a case of the accused wrapping chords of love and . . . compassion around the accuser and, by faith and . . . gentleness, drawing that one to God. A case of love from . . . the heart: God's kind of love.

Trembling and sobbing after the Spirit-filled prayer, . . . Melissa begged forgiveness of the teacher and went . . . home immediately to rectify the matter with her parents . . . who, Charles remembered hearing Melissa tell the next . . . day, gave her the spanking of her life. But Melissa . . . declared that she didn't care at all that she had gotten the . . . spanking because, she said, she deserved it, and the best . . . thing of all was that she wasn't carrying the load of her . . . guilty conscience around anymore.

After the incident, a closeness developed between . . . Melissa and Mrs. Brackbill such as had not existed . . . before. And the once-haughty, proud Melissa became a . . . subdued, humble and diligent girl-student in that order.

Looking back across the years now to those days so . . . treasured and so priceless to him, he marveled again at . . . the deep inner calm and peace of his teacher. She had . . . seemed to have a river of never-ending joy and . . . unfathomable tranquility. Until he found Christ, this used . . . to baffle him, used to render him speechless and dumb . . . with awe and wonder and amazement. But with his deep . . . inner heart-change . . . his passing from death unto life . . . . . the secret of his teacher's ever-victorious and . . . more-than-a-conqueror kind of life unfolded beautifully . . . and marvelously before him. He too was experiencing . . . that which she had. It was glorious. And gloriously real . . . too.

He moved on at a faster pace now, anxious to find a . . . proper place to bed down. He wasn't keen on the idea of . . . sleeping in the daytime and traveling at night, because of . . . the fact that he could see where he was going during the . . . light hours and could, therefore, make more progress and . . . better time than when it was dark. Already the sun was a . . . far-

removed object in the western sky, sinking, almost . . . dropping, over the mountainous horizon.

He paused and unwrapped the biscuits. A good . . . breakfast lasted only so long. Already many hours had . . . passed since the early morning feast.

Brill, sensing and knowing what was coming, sat on . . . her haunches and wagged her tail, her eyes alight with . . . joy.

(Chapter 7)

The night was almost half gone when Charles pillowed his head on his bundle of rolled-up clothing and fell asleep, the faithful Brill beside him. He slept from sheer exhaustion -strength-giving, body-building sleep. And when he awakened many hours later and sat up, he saw the first gray-blue streaks of an early dawn as they crept noiselessly and silently over the eastern horizon and into the now moonless sky. The sky was palely gray with the coming of the dawn, but the air moved sluggishly and Charles felt sluggishly thick-headed too, much like his sinuses were clogged up or blocked.

The pre-dawn was a mysteriously beautiful thing, if a bit eerie, he thought, getting to his feet and flexing his muscles, all the while breathing deeply so as to clean the clogged-up feeling from his head. The pre-dawn was neither morning or night yet it was a combination of each. It was colorless, silent, and almost sinister, he thought, if one allowed it to be the latter, which should never be. Hadn't his teacher read somewhere in the Bible that "the morning stars sang together!" How could anything be sinister with music coming from the sky! and the Scriptural passage had read . . . or said . . . morning stars; so it must have had reference to the early part of pre-dawn, he was sure.

A song sprang up in his heart. It rose to his mouth then fell from his lips like a benediction on the still morning air. It was something she had taught her class of boys and girls to sing:

"I will praise Him; I will praise Him: Praise the Lamb for sinners slain.  
Give Him glory all ye people For His blood can wash away each stain."

Again Charles amazed himself with the song. The song, and the thought that all these years it had remained hidden . . . not buried . . . away in that storehouse-closet of his mind, ready for use when the proper time arrived, which was now. Now that he was a new man in Christ.

He dropped to his knees and had a good season of prayer, talking to God the way he had always dreamed he'd talk to his earthly father if he had one to communicate with and talk to . . . openly and freely. He turned the circumstances of his life over into His hands, asked His blessing and protection upon him during the hours ahead, then stood to his feet, feeling refreshed and revived within.

"Now for more biscuits and jerky, Brill," he said, unwrapping the last of the biscuits, hard and dry but still food, nonetheless. "Except for what jerky is left after our breakfast, this is the end of the chow line, biscuit wise, old girl. But we'll not worry; He is looking out for us."

Eating was a bit slower that morning, what with biscuits almost as hard as sun-baked clay. But Charles had to admit that he enjoyed the combination of dried jerky and dried-out biscuits enormously. Even Brill seemed to relish the things. Perhaps it reminded her of a bone, Charles thought with a smile. Not a juicy bone, to be sure, but a bone -- a porous, dried-out bone that crumbled and crunched with every bite she took.

He stroked her silken head, picked stickers from her long, floppy ears, then said, "OK Brill, let's be off."

The words were electrifying to the dog. She darted ahead with a happy little bark and Charles realized anew just how much her company meant to him. He wondered how many miles they had walked, how far away from Mr. Warsinger's ranch they were. And he wondered about Jeff too, and where he was, wishing with all his heart that Jeff would not have stolen from the ranch owner. How Charles wished he had known God so he could have told Jeff about Him and how He made one more than a conqueror and an overcomer over all evil. But he hadn't known God personally on the ranch. Oh, if only he had! Perhaps Jeff's life would have been changed.

Charles came to what must have once been a ranch. The house was gone, with not a sign of whether it was a green or gray or white house, but the foundation was there as a memento of the past-a reminder of good,

happy, sun-drenched days of yesteryear. The foundation stood staunchly intact and solidly secure, much like its ghost was trying to shout to the world that it was not dead, at least not totally; that, with love and concern and care, it could revive and once again house the secrets of laughing, playing children and the dreams of a man and a woman with determination and courage and a will to do and make do.

Charles stood looking down into its depths, much like he had followed the bier of one of the school's classmates to its final resting place and looked down into the grave as the coffin was lowered. Sadness washed over his heart. Someone had dreamed great and noble dreams in this place, no doubt, he was sure. And now he was viewing the last, final remains, the "corpse" of the place. Not far away stood a rusted, sunbaked, weather-worn pump drooping like an old man with a badly hunched back and a God-forsaken look on his countenance.

Going to the pump, Charles lifted the drooping handle, wondering what would happen if he pumped. Rust, caked and decayed from many years, fell into the palm of his hand as he lifted the handle. It scratched and cut him. Still he tried; up and down, up and down. Nothing happened. Then he wondered if, perhaps that may not be the answer to the house: drought and lack of water.

He walked away silently and almost reverently, much like he did that day at the grave side of the classmate. Then he saw something else that may well have figured into the disappearance of the house: the soil, rather the top soil. It was gone. Her skin was stripped: she was washing down the huge gullies and into the creek. The hard rains were melting away what precious little top soil there was and exposing her rock ribs and clay soil for all to see. It was a shameful thing. And frightening too, he thought, realizing the worth of good top soil.

Sadly, he walked away from the haunting memory of a had-been place and its once rich top soil land, feeling helpless and little and insignificant and wishing he could do something to help restore the land back to its original worth and quality.

The sun beat down upon him mercilessly. It was one of the hottest days of the year. What was even worse, and more tormenting, was the fact that he was thirsty -- extremely thirsty. The combination of jerky and hot sun made

his whole being cry out for water. If only there had been a creek back near the house's foundation, he thought. But all that he had seen was where the creek had been and would be in the wet season. Now there was nothing remaining but a dry bed, a dry creek bed.

He heard the roar of the semis rolling along the highway and for a moment he was tempted to head back to the road and try to get a ride east. But something compelled him onward. He obeyed. Cresting a hill, he saw a valley spread out for miles before him. The scene was so panoramic, so breath-takingly beautiful, that Charles gasped in awe and amazement. It was almost like coming out of the desert and viewing some paradise land; almost like peeking over a fence and seeing desolation on one side and indescribable beauty and prosperity on the other.

The contrast was almost unbelievable. But he knew that water made the difference between the dry, arid land over which he had just passed and the lush, green fertile valley spreading out below him where irrigation systems were in full swing.

"Come, Brill," he said to the faithful dog. "We'll find water and we'll get us something substantial to eat, too. See that building below?" he asked, pointing. "That's a restaurant. We may even be able to find a juicy bone for you to enjoy. I'm ordering a steak when I get there, God willing. Let's go."

Together they hurried down hill toward the tiny town snuggling in the valley like it was planted there, clean and proud and friendly.

Before he entered the town, he saw it: an old but well-kept pickup truck standing in someone's front yard with a sign as "big as day," as the saying goes, reading, "Betsy runs well and is faithful. She'll get you where you're going and back. It's a guarantee. If interested contact me - I'm inside the house."

Charles stared at the truck. Something inside turned over. Betsy was his. She was. He knew it as surely as he knew now why the Lord had compelled him on instead of turning toward the highway. Taking a few quick steps, he was standing in front of the door.

"Hello there," a voice called through the screen door from the inside of the house. "Come right in, young man; the door's open."

Obediently Charles stepped inside. Brill followed.

"I'm interested in the truck," he stated softly, smiling down at the man in the wheelchair. "I'm Charles Breckenbane, by the way."

"And I'm Willis Odom. Glad to meet you, Charles."

"Thank you, Sir. It is my pleasure to meet you, too. Now, about the truck. How much are you asking for Betsy?"

Willis Odom milked his long, slender chin several times; then he smiled kindly into Charles' face. "I was asking \$500.00, but seeing as you're so young and probably don't have much money, I'll let you have her for \$250.00. How does that sound? She's a dandy, old Betsy is. The only reason I'm selling her is that I got a new model. Soon as I'm out of this wheelchair I'll be using the new one that I bought. You see, I'm getting married again in a couple of months, and I figured my new bride would feel a whole lot more dignified riding in a new pickup than to be seen in old Betsy. Old Betsy was fine for the first Mrs. Odom and me, and I'd have kept her no doubt if Mrs. Odom was still living. A lot of sentiment in that truck," he said, brushing a tear from his cheek.

"I'm sorry," Charles said sympathetically.

"We had a good life together, Harriett and I. Yes, a good life. Forty-two years we lived together. You get pretty well attached in that many years. I've lived alone for three years. But that's going to change; Pearl and I are getting married. I had an accident -- that's why I'm in this wheelchair. Doc says I'll soon not need it anymore. What a day that will be! And now, here are the keys to old Betsy. Go out and take her around town. See what you think of her. Then come back and let me know and then we'll talk business."

Charles looked at the man incredulous.

"Go on," Willis Odom insisted kindly. "You're an honest young man, I can tell. And take the dog with you. She may enjoy the ride."

"Thanks, Mr. Odom," Charles answered with tears shimmering in his eyes. "Thanks much. Yes, I am honest; I am a child of God, a born again Christian. "

"I knew you were different," the man said hoarsely. "Now run along and try Betsy out. You do have a driver's license?"

Charles opened his billfold and pulled out his license.

"Run along," the man said, smiling. "You're OK."

Charles felt like he was walking on air as he slid behind the wheel of the well-taken-care-of faded-blue pickup. And as he drove it around the town, he realized that everything Mr. Odom had said was true. Something about the man let Charles know that he wouldn't lie to him. Slowly he drove back into the yard.

"Like her?" Mr. Odom asked before Charles was inside the door even.

"Oh, I do, Mr. Odom, and I'll take her. I hate to drive away with so many of your memories, but God had old Betsy waiting for me."

Mr. Odom was silent for awhile. Then he said, "Tell you what, Charles, I'll sell Betsy to you for \$200.00. You'll take good care of her, I know, and you're a sensible young man. Yes, I feel I can transfer my Betsy over into your hands and you'll make good use of her and take care of her."

"Thank you most kindly, Mr. Odom," Charles replied, extracting two-hundred dollars from his billfold and handing it to the man. "Yes, I will take care of Betsy. Always. And I'll never forget your kindness to me. I'll have to have the title and . . . ."

"Drive me over to the courthouse and we'll take care of everything, Charles," Willis said, not allowing Charles to finish his sentence.

It was en route back from the business transaction that Charles said, "Mr. Odom, do you know the Lord Jesus Christ? I mean, is He living in your heart?"

"Well, I'm a good church member, Charles. Been faithful to my church for many years, and I guess you could say I know the Lord. I can't say that I know exactly what you mean."

Charles explained what happened to him and took place in his heart, and when he had finished, Mr. Odom said, "Can't say I ever experienced anything like that, Charles. But it sounds good, and I'll think about it. It's a promise."

Charles helped the man off the truck and inside the house. Then he said, "Like I told you, this wonderful born again, made new in Christ experience is something that happened to me . . . in my heart . . . only very recently, Mr. Odom, and I'm not eloquent in anything I do. But I'd like to have prayer with you before I leave, if I may please."

"I'd feel honored, young man. Yes, highly honored. No one has ever done this for me. Go ahead."

Charles prayed in simple, child-like phrases and faith and when he finished he saw that Mr. Odom's face was bathed in tears.

"I feel something inside," the man confessed with brokenness. "Something I've never experienced before. All light and happy and wonderful, Charles. While you were praying, I did what you told me to do while sitting beside you in Betsy; I asked the Lord to come into my heart and to forgive me of all my sins. And then I got this wonderful feeling. Why, Charles," he exclaimed with sudden illumination, "I'm new in Christ, too. Yes, that's what happened. Oh, thank God! I can't explain how happy I feel." And new, fresh tears cascaded down Mr. Odom's cheeks.

Too happy to speak or reply, Charles wept unashamedly. He had won his first soul for the Lord Jesus Christ. Him, a nobody, being used of God to lead a man into a saving knowledge of Christ and a heartfelt experience of full salvation! It was gloriously wonderful. He could hardly contain his well of springing-up joy.

(Chapter 8)

Sitting inside the neat little restaurant now waiting on his dinner order, Charles marveled at the strangely-wonderful ways and leadings of God.

Truly, they were past finding out. Oh, he was so happy that he was learning to lean and to trust, to follow where his Shepherd-Guide led him without stopping to ask or question why. Already, God had given him so very many blessings and surprises. Like the pickup truck.

He thought of Brill then. Faithful, devoted Brill sitting contentedly in the truck waiting for him. And for her food. She had gotten her fill of water at Mr. Odom's home -- drank from a bucket full of water beneath the rain spout. My, how she drank!

Charles walked to the door and looked out at the truck -- his truck now. A gift from God. Brill's face was framed inside the partially-opened window. Her tail was wagging. Her eyes were bright and happy looking over seeing him.

He walked back to the table and the sumptuous food which was set on it. Then he offered thanks and ate. Everything had the flavor of true gourmet food, he thought, thankful that he had saved his earnings on the Warsinger Ranch instead of squandering his money and gambling it away.

When he was finished, he took Brill's food out to her, laying a piece of thick newspaper on the floor of the truck before setting the food down, his steak bone included. Then he drove to a nearby grocery store and bought some fruit for himself and a box of dog biscuits for Brill before heading the truck, Betsy, toward the highway.

It was almost more than he could take in, the thought that God had provided a mode of transportation for him to get back east. Overwhelmed, he wept for joy, patting the steering wheel like a child patting and caressing a brand new, much loved and long-desired toy. For the first time in his life, he owned something. He and God. Since his recent conversion, he purposed within his heart that he would include God in all his plans and dreams, his ambitions and wishes and all business deals. He and God had a "firm," and God was the Head. He established this the hour he was converted. It was a sacred trust, so sacred and real and meaningful to him that he would have been afraid to take one step or do one single thing without first making sure that he had full approval of Heavenly Partner-Head, God.

There was something akin to awe in having God as one's overseer, Charles mused silently. It afforded sound security; He made no mistakes, no

wrong moves. Everything was done perfectly and right. And always on time, too.

He drove out onto the highway and soon became a part of the mainstream of traffic. Brill lay on the floor, asleep. Seeing her thus, Charles realized how utterly exhausted the faithful dog must have been. A warmth surged through him for her. She had been God's special gift of encouragement to him, he felt, as he traveled over terrain totally new and unfamiliar to him.

Many hours later, looking at the mileage gauge, Charles saw that he had put almost three hundred miles behind him since he left Betsy's old hometown. He smiled; then he offered thanks and praise to God. Every mile was bringing him closer to the one whose influence and Godly life had helped to mold and shape his own. And it had kept him from committing the many evils of his generation too; kept him from sinful practices and habits of evil and caused him to be selectively-careful in choosing whom he palled around with.

She had read one time that, "Evil communications corrupt good manners." That was all he had needed to hear. Since it fell from her lips and was taken from the Bible, which he had come to respect as God's Word, it had fallen on his ears and landed in his heart as a warning -- a warning to him, from God! Choose your companions and pals with care, it seemed to thunder to him. And he had heeded the warning too. Even though he had had to work among, and with, exceeding sinful and wicked men, he had never chosen such as his companions: rather, when his full day's work was finished and he had eaten his supper, he retired to some obscure place to read.

He had been laughed at and made fun of for not participating in what the others called fun, but it didn't bother him. Always her words from the Bible, her influence, gave him an even keel and kept him steadfastly determined not to keep company with gamblers, gossipers, boozers, cursers, and men of low morals. Repeatedly, she had told her class of young boys and girls that God had a better life than that of a sinner . . . the wicked man . . . for them. And now he had found this better life. Oh, it was gloriously wonderful and real. And he knew the meaning of inner peace, too.

He leaned his back hard against the padded seat, feeling that God had been better to him than he deserved. First, he had become the joyful

recipient of God's pardoning grace . . . His salvation . . . and then He had led him to Mr. Odom and his Betsy . . . the truck. And now he was on his way back east. He and Brill.

Mile after mile he drove, the excitement and joy of seeing his former teacher and God-like example taking sleep from his eyes and banishing fatigue. Brill awakened and got on the seat beside him, watching the passing scenery like a curious child. Every now and then she nuzzled his arm or his hand and, always, Charles patted the head of the gentle-mannered dog. After a long while she curled up on the seat, put her head on his knee and fell asleep again. Aside from Mrs. Phoebe Brackbill, Charles felt that Brill loved him best of all. It gave him a good, warm feeling -- the devotion of the dog. With Brill, it mattered not that he hadn't come from a wealthy, prestigious family, nor even that he hadn't been able to go to college. She loved him for himself, loved him simply because he was Charles Garfield Breckenbane. It was wonderful to be loved and respected simply because of this, he mused silently.

He was getting into corn land now. Everywhere he looked, to the left, to the right, he saw beautiful tall, green corn stalks, acres and acres of rolling, fertile land, and so far as his eyes could see, it was all in corn. The soft, warm breezes wafted the sweetly-fragrant scent of the tasseling corn through his open truck windows. It was delightful. He breathed deeply of the delicious, delicate scent. He loved to see growing things, loved farming-ranching. The earth was good, much like a gracious lady, he thought, always giving back more than one had invested in her.

The four-lane highway was now an almost straight line ribboning its way down the center of a vast gold mine of lush agriculture. It was a beautiful thing to see and to behold and Charles, while keeping his eyes largely on the road, couldn't help but notice the thick stand of the corn and the healthy looking ears that were on the stalks.

The sun took its time in going to bed, not seeming to be in any great hurry, and when she finally did make her last bow it was in a great ball of fiery orange-red which tinted the heavens a gorgeous rosy-pink and gilded the clouds in gold. Charles noticed it and bowed his head in reverence. Truly, the heavens did declare the glory of God and the firmament did show forth His handiwork, as his teacher had read in school one morning.

He saw a neon sign flashing off in the distance and recognized it as a truck stop. Coming up to the exit for the place, he took it and filled up with gas, amazed at the good mileage his Betsy was giving him. Then he hurried inside and ordered for both Brill and himself, keeping her take-out order beside him until he was finished eating. Seeing picture post cards on a rack, he bought one, addressed it to Mr. Warsinger, telling him how Brill had followed him long after he had left the ranch, and stating that she was fine and in good shape and could be his dog again by contacting him % Gen. Delivery in the little town back east and by paying for her shipping charges back to the ranch. He gave him the state and the name of the town then bought a stamp from a stamp machine and dropped the card into a nearby mailbox, set up for the truckers' convenience.

His heart went with the card, his heart and a fervent prayer. He loved Brill. How he loved her! It would tear him to pieces to see her go, but he had to do it. She belonged to Mr. Warsinger. Yes, rightfully, she belonged to the ruthless, austere man. But the thought of Brill being brutally beaten was almost overwhelming. She was an obedient dog, ever. She didn't deserve such treatment. Phoebe Amanda had read once that the tender mercies of the wicked were cruel, meaning that even their most tender mercy was still nothing short of cruelty. In sharp contrast, the teacher had read that "the righteous regardeth the life of his beast."

The contrast "struck home" with Charles, made especially sharp-focused in his comparisons between the holy Mrs. Brackbill and the wicked, wily Mr. Warsinger. At thought of the latter, and of some of his treatment to both the dog and his hired help, Charles shuddered.

He would have to pray about the matter, he decided. Yes, he would pray and leave Brill's future with God. He worked in wondrously strange but delightful ways, didn't He! He had helped David to kill not only a bear and a lion, Mrs. Brackbill had told her class those many years ago, but a giant as well -- a giant whose stature was alarmingly frightful and fierce, and a giant whose deportment and characteristics and treatment was comparable to and synonymous with that of his former, latter employer. God would work this thing out properly for both Brill and himself, he thought, going to the pickup truck and letting Brill out to run on the nearby grass-covered-field for exercise and to eat the food which he had brought for her, before they resumed the journey eastward. Always, due east.

He drove another hundred miles after he had eaten; then finding a lighted rest stop with plumbing, he pulled into a parking space. He went into the restroom, Brill at his heels, washed, shaved and freshened up, and came out feeling for all the world like he was a new person. He never could stand to feel the stubble of a beard form on his face nor could he tolerate dirt for long on his person. Phoebe Amanda had always taught her scholars that cleanliness and Christianity were like identical twins in some ways. She said the two "belonged together."

Charles viewed with pleased satisfaction the clean-shaven face that stared back at him from the surface of the mirror; then he hurried out side, his soiled clothing bundled neatly together, ready for the laundry, and his clean, fresh clothes covering his physical man. He felt renewed both in body and in spirit. Mind, too.

"Think I'll drive on a while yet, Brill," he told the reddish brown dog as he removed the paper from the floor where he had spread it out for her dinner tablecloth, and now deposited it in one of the many waste cans in the rest area. Brill was not a messy eater, he noted, smiling, and finding a few if any leftover food particles on the floor from her noon meal.

She curled up on the seat beside him, her muzzle resting on her forepaws, and gave him one of her appealing, roguish looks before sighing with joyous contentment and slowly closing her eyes.

Stroking her head ever so gently, Charles pulled away from the rest area and headed east, his heart beating with the excitement of the reunion with his teacher, his beloved God-sent example.

(Chapter 9)

Feeling refreshed and renewed by the body-building food which he had eaten and the wash-up, shave combination in the rest stop area, Charles drove on into the night, singing softly to himself while Brill slept and the landscape made repeated changes as he crossed state lines and topped hills or emerged through tunnels. He was sorry that he was missing the beautiful scenery, as seen and viewed by the light of day, but his eagerness to reach Mrs. Brackbill's place caused him to forfeit some of these pleasures.

Hours later he pulled the truck into a rest area and slept for awhile. Then he got out and, with Brill, walked over the beautiful park-like grounds before once more sliding behind the wheel and driving east. How very far away Mr. Warsinger and his ranch seemed, and how long, long ago seemed the horrible nightmare happenings and cruelties that went on at the ranch. Not just occasionally but almost daily.

Light was dawning in the east and he was running into fog, Charles noticed, climbing a hill. He dimmed his lights, which helped him find the white line somewhat better along the side of the road. Driving was anything but pleasant, he mused, slowing Betsy down to a mere 10 miles per hour as the fog rolled in around him like smoke from a hundred fires. Charles lifted his heart in prayer to God.

Halfway up the hill, a miracle happened. The fog lifted like someone had taken his hand and wiped it away with a single swish. Above him was a sky as robin-egg-blue as he had ever seen, set in a setting of almost blinding golden sunshine. Arriving at the top, he had a panoramic view of unfolding beauty and scenery. Below, the villages dotting the landscape were covered in soft white cottony looking blankets of fog and the tops of the gently-rolling hills, showing just above the whiteness, looked like chocolate drops floating on milky-white waves.

Charles caught his breath inward in a loudly accentuated gasp of awe and purest delight. Never, in all the years that he had lived, had he seen anything so dramatic and beautiful. Driving slowly lest he miss something of the beauty below and around him, he let his eyes roam the broad, long, lush valley and feast to their fullest on the handiwork of God. His very own God!

He followed the road down, deep in praiseful thought and meditation, drove slowly past the village and across the valley, his heart extremely light and happy. Soon he would be in her state.

He accelerated more heavily now, never stopping to eat until near the noon hour. But little matter; he had a bit of fruit left over from where he bought it in Betsy's town and Brill seemed to moderately enjoy the boxed dog biscuits he fed her. What's more, his appetite had been well appeased by the nutritious food he had gotten at the truck stop restaurants yesterday. And eating too heavily when one was traveling tended toward sluggishness, he realized.

The brief stopover at the near-noon hour, for both a hasty bit of food and water as well as for leg-stretching and muscle-exercising, was nothing lengthy nor prolonged. Charles was eager to move on. Barring trouble of any kind and with God's good help, he should reach Phoebe Amanda's house well before nightfall, he realized with a tingle of excitement and a thrill of joy.

"OK, Girl," he called to Brill. "Let's get going. We're almost home."

He caught himself and sighed. Home! He had no home. Not really. But the thought of Mrs. Brackbill as mother and of her home as belonging somehow to him, as his home, seemed to come quite naturally and realistically.

He noticed the fields of golden waving grain and the thick stands of alfalfa and clover and suddenly he felt right at home. These things were all symbols of his boyhood; all were reminders of the rich, fertile valley in which the small village school had stood, its American flag waving freely, fully unfurled, in the breezes of early spring and fall as an emblem of freedom of religion, freedom of speech and freedom of the press. And freedom to learn, too. He was excited. Greatly so.

Late afternoon he drove into the little village town. Tears stung his eyes as he recognized places and things from his boyhood days. He drove slowly down the only main street of the town, noticing the modernization of the once-quaint and magic-seeming store buildings, many of which he had never seen inside even but which he had had beautiful visions of and conjured up images about, of every conceivable good and wonderful thing that he had ever heard they held on their enormous counters and shelves.

And then he saw her house. At the far end of the street it sat, like the woman herself . . . gracious, beautiful, well-tended and well-kept.

Almost reverently, he approached it. It stood warm in the sunshine, the soft old brick merging with and blending into the landscape like a rosy haze in the glory of the summer garden, and the long-since, carefully-laid, moderately-high stone wall around the yard, covered thickly and densely with ivy of deepest, darkest green.

Inside the wall, peeking over its top, hollyhocks nodded and trembled in the breeze. Creamy white-yellow rambler roses, intertwined with the crimson ramblers, wove a pattern-design of perfumed loveliness in a riot of beauty and color. Somewhere in the back of the lawn-garden, Charles heard the gentle chop, chop, chop of a hoe and he knew that either Mr. or Mrs. Brackbill was working in the soil. It was a good feeling.

He parked the truck, stepped onto the cobblestone walk leading to the house, and was almost at the front door when he heard Phoebe Amanda's sweet voice. "Come right in, Charles," she said, throwing the screen door wide open and rushing out to him. Drawing him into her mother-arms, she said tearfully-happy, "You're right on schedule. Yes, right on schedule."

Tears poured from Charles' blue eyes. He was all choked up. He laid his head on her shoulder, much like a son or daughter returning home after a long separation, and spent his happy tears in the curve of her neck.

"You're home now, Son!" Phoebe Amanda exclaimed, patting his head much the same way he had patted Brill's. Then she held him at arm's length, remarking, "My, how you have grown! What a fine young man God has made of you, Charles! But I knew He was doing it. Yes, I knew it all the time."

"I have prayed for you every single day of my life. Prayed that God would give you courage when you needed it; courage and strength and grace, to say no to all evil and to temptation of all kinds. And He has done it, Charles; I'm seeing the noble, fine, untarnished and pure young man whom my God allowed me to see returning back to Mr. Brackbill and me. Yes, he's standing bodily before my very eyes. Come," she said, leading the way into the kitchen. "You must be hungry. I've prepared a big supper for you -- for the three of us. The Lord let me know that you'd be home today. That's why I said you were right on schedule."

Charles stood and wept, exclaiming softly, "I can't believe it! I can't believe it! It's so wonderful. So very wonderful. I feel I'm really home."

"You are home, Charles. Believe me, you are. This is now your very own home. Around every corner of our life and down each avenue of sorrow, heartache or care, hidden surprises await us. He has placed them there in love for our spiritual growth and encouragement. This is one of His gifts to you -- from us."

"I owe so much to you, Mrs. Brackbill!" Charles exclaimed almost reverently.

"You may call us Father and Mother, Charles. Mr. Brackbill and I would be most pleased and delighted. Being deprived of children all our life, we considered you the son we always longed for and wanted but never had. When they moved you away without giving us any information as to your whereabouts, it was a crushing blow. You see, we were looking into the possibilities of adopting you for our very own."

Charles could scarcely believe his ears. "I'm a new person, Mother," he said quickly. "All new in Christ. I discovered your secret of perpetual joy and happiness when I found Jesus."

"I know when it happened, Charles," the woman said teary-eyed. "I had had a heavy burden for you that day . . . ." She named the very day in which Charles had gotten converted. "There is a deeper, cleansing work of grace for you yet, Son. It's the wonderful experience of holiness of heart . . . entire sanctification, we call it. It's the infilling of the Holy Ghost and fire and it destroys, takes out, the thing that made you do evil; the thing that will try to draw you back, away from God."

"Then as surely as my name is Charles, I will seek until I too have my personal cleansing, my infilling. I want everything the Lord gave to you."

"God bless you, my Son!" Phoebe Amanda exclaimed just as the back door opened and Mr. Brackbill stepped into the kitchen.

"Charles, my boy!" the man exclaimed kindly in a fatherly manner. "Oh, but it's good to have you home where you belong! And whose is this beautiful dog? Yours?"

Charles, in his excitement and joy, had forgotten all about Brill, who never left his side. Reaching down, he wrapped an arm around her neck. "She belongs to the man I last worked for," he said, before explaining what had happened on the ranch and how Brill had picked up his scent and followed him. When he finished telling how they had traveled day and night together on foot until God led him to Willis Odom and Betsy, the Brackbills were in tears.

"She's not my dog," Charles said, "but I'd sure be happy if Mr. Warsinger would let me buy her. I dropped him a card after getting to a truckstop, and told him I could be reached in care of General Delivery at the post office here, if he was interested in having her shipped back and would pay the shipping charges. But he's so mean and brutal to her that I hope he'll never ask to have her sent back."

"We'll pray that he'll either give her to you or allow you to buy her, Charles," the man said, stooping and stroking her silken head. "And we have just the place for her on the back porch, too," he added, leading Charles and Brill to the porch where an old rug lay folded up in one corner. "Our dog died last week from old age. The rug was her bed. It's yours now, girl," he said softly to Brill who looked up at Charles then curled up on the rug as if she had always had it for her bed.

"Well, it looks like Brill's come home, too," Charles said.

"Our family's complete now, thanks be to God!" the kind man exclaimed tearfully. "Let us go and eat, Son."

Looking tenderly and lovingly into the man's face, Charles answered, "Thanks, Dad. I'm hungry."

Walking side by side they came through the kitchen door, and Phoebe Amanda Brackbill, looking up just then from putting the food into serving dishes, started singing the doxology in a quivering, quavery voice.

Looking at the saintly woman . . . his boyhood school teacher, now retired and gray-headed . . . Charles said softly, "Thank You, Lord for giving me a pattern of what You must be like; thank You for the influence of Mrs. Brackbill. Of . . . of Mother!"

Tears flowed freely from his eyes. They were joyful, happy tears and somehow, in that instant, he knew within himself that God was going to give him Brill, too. Yes, he knew it.

"Supper's ready," the gentle woman called to her two men. And Charles, seating himself where he was told to, felt just how much at home he was. It was a wonderful feeling, especially when grace was said and the

Brackbills grasped his hands lovingly, one on each side. He was really home. The loving handclasps told him so.