Kandi Kahne put the books carefully and neatly inside her desk, then stacked those with homework to be done on one side of her and waited for the buzzer of dismissal to sound, a gnawing feeling and sensation inside her heart. What was there to go home to, she wondered. Really, what? Her
mother worked and wouldn't be home for another hour and a half, and her father, well, only God knew when he'd get home.

The buzzer sounded and Kandi, deep in the slough of despond with her thoughts, jumped. It started her back to the reality of the classroom in which she was sitting. Mindy looked over at her and giggled. So did Hal Peters. Kandi blushed furiously. She had been told by an aged aunt that blushing was a rare thing anymore and she, Kandi, should rejoice that she was still able to blush. "It's sort of a virtue, Kandi," the wise old saint had said in a complimentary way. "In the Book of Jeremiah, Chapter 6, verse 16, we read that the people were so vile and wicked that they couldn't blush. Nothing shamed them. So you really should rejoice."

Right now, Kandi felt like doing anything but rejoicing. She wished the floor would silently open up around her and her desk only and do a gently-disappearing act for her. It would be a kindness to her, she was sure.

"Hey, we're dismissed, Kandi."

She scooted out of her desk and looked up into the serious eyes of Keith Morgan. She felt like crying.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked. "You're not 'with it,' as the kids say. Is it your dad again? Something happen to your mom?"

Kandi sucked her breath in quick-like in a loud gasp. "How . . . how'd you know about . . . Dad?" She asked falteringly, a slight tremor registering in her voice.

"The sort of thing he's doing leaks out pretty fast in a town the size of ours," Keith said with gentleness. "Here, give me your books. I'm walking home with you. I want to know why you've dropped out of Young People's Meeting at church. We've been having some great meetings, Kandi. Our Bible studies, under the direction of our pastor, have been literal spiritual feasts. I needed them. So do a lot of others. So do you."

Kandi felt tears sprint to her eyes and roll down her cheeks. For a while, they walked in silence -- peaceful silence. The warm, afternoon sun felt like soothing, healing fingers gently massaging her shoulders and upper back. She had been so tense lately, so frustrated, and so shy. Her natural
shyness, coupled with her father's problem, had made her slink into a little shell. She felt worthless -- useless, really.

    The leaves above her made dappled shadows on the sidewalk and from nearby houses came the heady fragrance of blooming Baby Clematis vines and the spicy-rich redolence of old-fashioned roses. In spite of her slough-of-despond attitude, she paused and inhaled deeply.

    "What was that for?" Keith asked gently.

    "Don't you smell the flowers?" she asked simply in awe. "Every time I pass the Tibbet house and the Fahr and Midchell, I just sort of swoon. Oh, Keith, those dear, old ladies plant the most beautiful, most fragrant flowers in the world. I sometimes get the impression that they're lonely, like I am. They're all widows, you know."

    "No, I didn't know. Have you ever visited them and prayed with them? I'm sure they'd appreciate a visit. And I know you'd be a blessing to them. You have a way with the elderly and with children. That speaks volumes to me, Kandi."

    She felt the flush come into her cheeks again. She gulped. "Thanks, Keith. And I really haven't visited them. Not ever. I'm so . . . so . . ."

    "Don't say it, Kandi. Please, don't say you're shy. I know you are. But with God, you can overcome this -- to a degree, at least. I'm going to pray with you, and for you, too. God wants to use you and you're scared to make the first move, scared to take the first step in the direction of being used. You're afraid you'll be hurt, is that it?" Keith's serious eyes probed the petite blonde's blue eyes for an answer.

    "Maybe so. I've never stopped to analyze the why of it, Keith. Especially since Daddy's been . . . Oh, it hurts too much to talk about it even."

    "But talk you're going to!" the Young People's President exclaimed gently. "You've kept your grief and hurt bottled up too long," he stated flatly. "It's time now to unburden this thing that's all but gotten you down."

    "Oh, I'm not 'down' spiritually, Keith. It's, well . . ."
"But you will be down spiritually . . . soon . . . unless you can rise above this. The devil's weapons are many and varied. He's quite adept at selecting just the right one for each individual. Right now, yours is the weapon of discouragement. A most effective one with most people, I hate to admit. But it's true. We quench all the fiery darts of the wicked by using the shield of faith effectively and constantly (Ephesians 6:16). You've listened too long to what the enemy of your soul is saying, Kandi. Your dad's not hopeless. So long as he's alive and hasn't crossed the deadline, there's hope."

They reached the house. Keith put the armload of books on the porch and motioned for her to sit beside him on the swing.

"I'm going to 'level' with you," he said gently. "This is from my heart. It's going to be candid, frank and open. Okay? And if you're sanctified wholly, like I believe you are, you'll thank me for it and go into action for God, Kandi."

She lifted shy, sky-blue eyes to meet his serious hazel ones. "Go ahead, Keith. Level."

"First of all, say this after me, 'My dad is a gambler.' "

"O Keith, must I? It's horrible just to know it. Don't make it worse, and harder on me. You can't begin to imagine what trauma Mother and I have gone through since learning what he does till all hours of the morning. Look at this house: the paint's peeling, the porch is rotting in places, and inside, there must be dozens of things screaming for repair and attention. But Daddy can't resist the demon of gambling."

"Say what I just asked you to say. Please, Kandi. It will help to heal you if you will not be so secretive about it. Oh, this doesn't mean that one goes around spreading the sins and the evils within his household. Not at all. But for right now, you must be willing to recognize the shocking fact of your father's obsession for gambling and . . ."

"My father is a gambler," Kandi cried as tears ran freely down her cheeks. It was easy to talk to Keith now. "You can't imagine what this is doing to Mother!" she sobbed unashamedly. "She's had to get work to pay bills and keep food on the table. And yet, Daddy makes good money where he works. If only he hadn't begun to gamble. Everything's changed since then. He has the feeling that he'll 'strike it rich,' I guess."
"They all do, from what I've heard."

"Mother is chronically tired and worn with worry when she comes dragging home from work every night. It's tearing me apart inside, to see how this is aging her."

"And you haven't been too much support or help, have you, Kandi. You've felt there was, or is, no hope for your gambler father."

She lifted her tear-wet eyes to his. "I guess you're right," she admitted, as if she had realized this for the first time -- which she had.

"Now, of all times, your mother needs the supportive faith and love and courage of her daughter, the only other member of her household who knows and loves the same Lord and Master as she. Together, you and your mother, with God, can love your father into God's kingdom of saints. You've been hiding in a little, tight shell, Kandi, afraid of being hurt. Afraid to mingle and be a part of things lest you get hurt again. In a different way, perhaps, but fearful of becoming hurt in any way. Yet, you're not the only young person going through a traumatic experience. There are quite a few others who are hurting, badly so. One, because of a split between the parents and their upcoming divorce. Another, an alcoholic mother. Still another, a drunken, woman-chasing father and . . ."

"Really, Keith?"

"Yes, really. Yet not a single one of these has 'dropped out of society,' so speaking, and stopped coming to the youth meetings. Their faith is steadfastly unmovable and strong. Sure, they've shed tears, many tears. Yes, they're crushed; hurting, too. Hurting bad! But they're leaning upon their God and they're learning how to live for God in spite of it. They're becoming 'tall firs' spiritually. And you can be one too, Kandi. In spite of your hurt and your pain and shock, you can grow and glow for Jesus. He makes us 'more than conquerors' -- in the face of every onslaught of the enemy of our soul. Basically, it's a matter of whom we're leaning upon and what we're trusting in. If it's an arm of flesh, we'll fail. And fall. If it's the Lord our God, our Invincible Heavenly Captain, we'll triumph."
"Everything you're saying is true, Keith. I realize this. And by God's help and His grace, I will triumph over this. I guess I felt like Daddy's was a hopeless case, knowing the addiction of a gambler from articles which I've read. But I forgot about the almighty power of God and how He can deliver even a compulsive gambler. Mother and I have been in a zombie-lie state of shock since Father admitted this to us one night, late-late, as we sat up waiting for him to come home. She called the place of his employment when he hadn't gotten home two hours after work, and the man who answered the phone inadvertently told her where he could be found. Since Mother knew it was a place of gambling, she waited up and asked him when he got home. He admitted it immediately. That's when we went into this horrible state of shock."

"It's time you tightened the whole armor of God about you and got back into working for Jesus, Kandi. Start with those widows whose flowers you admire. That will give you a perfect opening . . . the flowers."

"I'll do it, Keith. It's a promise. Thanks for your candor. I needed this."

He got to his feet to leave. "I want to do one last thing, Kandi -- have prayer with you," he said. "God's going to help my very favorite person. I just know He is . . ."

Long after Keith was gone and while she was cleaning the house and preparing the evening meal Kandi wondered if Keith's parents were those who were getting the divorce. In study hall one day, she had overhead one of the boys say something to his friend to this effect, but she hadn't given it another thought. Now, however, many things raced back to her memory: the minister's urgent prayer request on Sunday for Keith's unsaved father and mother; Keith's red, swollen eyes time and time again; his rapid loss of weight, a thing he wasn't in need of. Suddenly, she knew.

It shook Kandi. Keith, the strong rock, the one whom she thought never had a problem because of his constant, victorious testimony and manner of God-like living!

She dropped to her knees beside a kitchen chair and wept. He was "more than a conqueror through Christ," not because of his heartache and hurt, but in spite of it. And by God's grace she would be, too. She lifted her broken heart upward, as it were, turning it all over to Jesus; and the blessing
of the Lord, which maketh rich and addeth no sorrow, came flowing like a healing balm from Heaven into her heart.