Holly blew on her hands, trying to warm her fingers and ward off some of the numbness and cold; then she continued singing "Faith of our fathers, living still, in spite of dungeon, fire and sword. Oh how our hearts beat high with joy . . ."
"How can you sing!" Mark exclaimed bitterly. "Look at those gloves; more holes than anything left in them! I hate it out here. Away from everything and everybody, that's what we are. And who cares about us? Us, a bunch of preacher's kids whose mother works her fingers to the bone and whose father doesn't make enough money to even feed his family properly, let alone clothe them sensibly and warmly."

"We have each other, Mark, and most of us have Christ as our very personal Saviour and Friend. What more could we ask for?"

"Decent clothes and something to eat besides mush and milk or fried mush and the abominable, nightly potato soup. I hate it, Holly. Hate the stuff! Do you hear?"

"Yes, I hear you, Mark. I have perfectly good hearing. You don't have to shout at me. But I do wish you would know how to be thankful for what you have. Suppose our mother were dead, like Karma and Kelley's mother is? And what if we never knew when our father would be home; and then, when he finally did get home, he'd be drunk? I'm most thankful for our home, poverty and all. At least, we're not starving. We always have plenty of mush and potato soup. And it must be good for us, too; we all seem to be pretty healthy."

Mark gave his sister a withering look. "You must enjoy gathering wood and making do with hand-me-downs more than I do," he retorted hotly. "I feel like running away."

Holly, piling up the dead branches near the edge of the woods, said calmly, "Where would you go, Mark? I've always heard that things look greener on the other side of the fence. But once there, well . . ."

"How would you know anything about it?" Mark cut in, dragging the remains of a fallen, dead tree near the clearing for cutting it into fire wood.

"I don't, of course. Not by actual experience, that is. But I'm sure it must be somewhat like a mirage, appearing to be something that it isn't. And, frankly, I know of no safer or better place to be than under the roof of our own home. We have love and . . ."
"Don't go into any lengthy elaboration of our benefits, Holly. I know what we have and what we don't have. It's what we don't have that's eating me. Why must our father be a preacher? Why couldn't he have been a . . . a common laborer? At least, we'd have meat."

"Mark, I'm ashamed of you. And frightened for you, too. God is listening to everything we say!" Holly exclaimed in astonished shock.

"No preaching, Sis. I hear enough of this on Sundays and Wednesday nights. I'm just sick and tired of skimping and scraping and 'making do' with everybody's castoffs. I feel like a salvage kid when I walk into school . . . Mrs. Bangel's son's cast-off trousers, Mr. Pellet's too-tight cast-off shoes, Jon Skellett's almost worn-out, cast-off jacket, a shirt from Mrs. Casker, 'There's still a lot of good wear left in this,' she tells mother. Oh, I hate those things! And that shirt with 'still a lot of good wear left in it' is the most despicable of all -- gaudy, and not matching a single thing I wear, and nearly threadbare, too! Why can't we have at least one new thing?"

Holly laughed, blew on her cold hands again, then said, "Well, you can be thankful that the shirt's nearly worn out, Mark. At least, you'll be through with it forever when that happens."

"You beat anything I've ever heard!" Mark exclaimed. "But maybe you have a point there. Yes, I promise, I'll be truly thankful when the last thread in that loud, 'banner-shouting' shirt rots and Mother can't find the slightest corner to latch a thread onto anymore. But then, it'll wind up in one of her hooked or braided rugs and I'll still have to see it. Ugh!"

"It won't make it into Mom's 'Cadillac-Lincoln' line, I promise, Mark! Only the strongest and very best of the scrap rags go into those hooked beauties. I know; I help her occasionally. Nothing inferior makes it into the top of her line. When that old shirt has been buttoned around you for the last time, it'll wind up as a scrub rag, or some such thing. So you see, you have something for which to be thankful. Always, there is something to be thankful for. And I'm especially thankful right now for the Thanksgiving service we'll be having tonight. Father always gives us something so rich and good to carry home with us, something to meditate upon until the next service."
"More power to the scrub rags!" Mark said, making no further comment and Holly was glad; they could work faster if they didn't stop to hear what the other was saying.

She looked over at her brother's worn jacket and felt a wave of pity and sisterly love wash over her for him. Mark was a year-and-a-half older than she. He was darkly handsome, broad-shouldered, and generally good-humored and amiable. His recent bitter attitude troubled her greatly. He liked RoseAn Weatherby and she guessed that fact would account for his desire to have somewhat better clothes. But whatever clothing they had were clean hand-me-downs or the nearly-new ones which their father managed to get at a thrift store before moving into the country parsonage to pastor the rural church there. Holly prayed silently for her brother and his bitter attitude.

More snow fell, and Mark's disposition became as gloomy as the gray clouds which were dropping white flakes. "Great!" he exploded angrily. "I haven't even had time to cut this timber up. That means I'll be working in the snow again. I tell you, Holly, I'm leaving here just as soon as I can. I hate it here!"

"It's good for all of us, Mark. We have unlimited space around us -- so many lovely places to see when we go out walking. And ever so many acres for our little brothers and sisters to play in, too. I think everyone is happy here except you. And I dare say that you would like it a whole lot better if you would look for all the beautiful and good things there are and then begin to make yourself appreciate them. I love the tranquility and the silence of the majestic mountains and the hills, and I really love the little, babbling brook below the house. Oh, Mark, it's so beautiful out here! Look for the beauty."

"You're a girl, and . . . and you're a romantic dreamer; I'm facing reality, and when I say reality I mean reality. Stark reality. We can starve, for all these people care. And freeze to death, too."

Holly straightened her slender, petite shoulders. "You're like those complaining Israelites," she remarked fervently. "Has God ever allowed us to starve? Or to go hungry, even? Shame on you! We will not starve! On the authority of Philippians 4:19, we will not! Neither will we freeze to death! Again, on the authority of Philippians 4:19, we will not freeze to death. You seem to have forgotten that these dear people are every bit as poor as we.
No, they're more so. Out of their want and their scarcity, they give us all that we need of cornmeal and potatoes. These are good staples."

"O forget it! I might have known you wouldn't understand."

"I do understand, Mark -- all too clearly. And it's quite a frightening thing, what I see and how well I understand. God is not a man, that He should have to come down and tell us why He sends poverty, or whatever of ill circumstances; nor is He obligated to explain His reason or reasons for anything He does or allows to happen to us. He is Sovereign; we are finite."

"As though I haven't known that!" came the instant rejoinder and retort.

"I didn't mean it that way," Holly answered sweetly and softly. "It's just that it frightens me terribly when I hear anyone sound off in an accusative way toward God and the things pertaining to God and His holiness and righteousness. The old Proverb says, 'When fate throws a knife at you, you can always catch it in one of two ways -- by the blade, or by the handle.' You and I, not God, choose whether we rebel or rejoice, whether we become sweet or bitter, by these shocking, hurtful and painful things that come to us. You have chosen to grab the 'knife' by the blade instead of taking it by the handle. Instead of allowing God to make you better by this 'knife' of our mild form of poverty, you have become bitter and pushed the only source of our help out of your heart and life. Does Father correct us out of love or hate, Mark? And why must Mother sometimes punish? Is it because they love us or because they hate us? Why, Mark?"

Mark's sullen face bent itself to ward the dragged-together, damply-wet wood and, without replying, he swung the axe, plunging the razor-sharp blade into the very heart of the wood and splitting it asunder.

Holly's hot tears over her brother's bitterness fell on the wood she was gathering and piling up. Her father would soon be returning from his daily round of calling upon and praying with his church members and friends. Then he would hitch Damsel to the sleigh and the wood would be hauled into an old shed some distance from the house where it would have time to dry out.

At thought of Damsel and Prince, Holly's gratefulness soared. Never had they had horses before. Never. Damsel and Prince were a gift from one of the farmers in the church. "They're yours to have for so long as you pasto
here," Joe Haley had told their father and mother. "They're a gentle breed. Take good care of them; treat them kindly, like the righteous man in the Book of Proverbs who regardeth the life of his beast. They'll come in handy for plowing and working your garden, for bringing your supply of winter wood into the shed and for the children to ride on."

That was like Joe Haley! Holly thought. He and Mrs. Haley were full and overflowing with the fruit of righteousness and kindness. "God, please bless the Haleys," she prayed out loud. "Thank You for giving us such wonderful people."

The sound of Mark's steady axe-fall was beautiful, Holly mused, listening as the rhythmic, clear-cut sound reverberated along the mountainside while the little hills, picking up the precise tone, flung it musically back to her ears. Did Mark hear the beautiful tones? she wondered. Or was he too deeply plunged in bitterness and resentment to notice? The heart must be tuned to hear beauty, she knew, and poor Mark's seemed so all-un-tuned. By turning away from God and His multiplied goodness and kindnesses, he had had the musical notes of beauty and harmony turned off in his heart and life. Now, everything seemed out of tune and wrong; nothing possessed beauty and a challenge for him. What a sad state to be in! Holly thought sadly as she watched her brother swing the axe for another clean cut.

"Oh, God, bring him back!" she cried in agony of soul. "Restore his joy and peace and, once again, make him thankful!"

(Part 2)

Holly walked briskly across the snow-covered remains of what had been their garden in the summer. Mark walked sullenly and silently behind, the axe swung over his shoulder in true woodsman fashion. Holly wanted to make comment about it but knew her brother was in no mood to say much of anything. This troubled her. She always felt ill at ease in the presence of people around whom one had to choose their words as carefully as walking on the proverbial eggs . . . very carefully. And Mark was not like this whenever His relationship was right with God, she knew.

She looked across the valley and saw one of the Filey's barns covered with heavy snow. The old building was going down a little at a time: the ridge
was beginning to sag, like the back of an aging horse, and the eaves were leaning out and a main post was buckling, pushing the barn down on its knees. It was sad, she soliloquized; sort of like seeing a very dear friend deteriorate inch by slow inch and finally expire. The heavy snows were death to these ancient barns, she knew, lying on their roofs with a weight of such proportion as to crush them in.

She reached the house, cold and numb, but extremely joyful in her soul. The air had flushed her face into a rosey-red and she felt invigorated and very much alive. The supper of potato soup and cornbread never tasted better and from her heart, she could truly say she was thankful Mark ate, but a frown creased his forehead all the while he was eating.

The church, located a quarter of a mile from the house, invited Holly with its warm lights coming through the windows to walk rather than ride with her parents. The frosty mystery of the dark-blue sky, the twinkling blinking stars and the half-moon overhead, sparked a holiday excitement in her. The walk prepared her heart for worship and she was quickly warmed by the spirit in the sanctuary as she gathered together with the others to ask the Lord's blessing.

Her father, as usual, praised God for blessing everyone with riches beyond measure; and her mother, while testifying, quietly thanked God for giving the family everything that we needed Mark looked disgusted. Holly saw the look. He looked like he wanted to shout, "Thankful for potato soup and cornmeal! " to the whole wide world. And he didn't join in when their father asked that everyone sing the Doxology at the conclusion of the service either.

The walk home gave Holly time to count her many blessings, a thing she had begun to do to combat the enemy's accusations that God wasn't taking very good care of them. "I have Jesus," she said out loud. "What more could I want? And I have a good Christian home, a loving family, good food and adequate clothing . . ."

She felt happy and blest inside. It was good, and profitable, too, to count one's blessings, she knew; to dwell on the "haves" and not the "have note."
Mother gave every member of the household a generous wedge of the left-over cornbread. "As a special treat," she said softly while happy tears coursed down her cheeks, "we have real butter to spread on it. The Carlsons gave us several pounds at church tonight. Fresh churned. Now, let us thank God and then enjoy this bountiful blessing from God."

Holly's eyes bubbled happy tears, too. Thankful tears. And even Mark's features softened considerably at the mention of the fresh butter, the young woman noticed.

"Will we have turkey tomorrow for dinner?" eight-year-old Prudence asked, her enormous blue eyes searching her father's face with all the eager anticipation of one so young.

Mr. Goldman smiled down into the expectant face and the blue eyes. "Why don't we wait and see what surprises the Lord has sent in to us, honey?" he answered kindly.

Mark's eyes left the piece of cornbread which he was eating and rested on his father's face. "Do you mean . . . ? Oh no, it's too much to expect."

"Nothing is 'too much to expect' where God is concerned and involved, Mark," Mr. Goldman replied kindly. "That's a fine lot of wood you and Holly supplied us with today. You're a great worker, son. I only wish you'd work on your soul's need as diligently." He sighed heavily. "I'm praying for you."

Mark bit into the wedge of buttered cornbread. "Why must we be deprived?" he asked quickly. "If we had meat only once in a while, I'd . . . well . . . I'd believe more in God and His care of us. I get so tired of mush and cornbread and potato soup."

"God didn't promise us all of what we want or what we'd like, Mark. He did promise us all our needs. And He's done a wonderful job at keeping that promise. If you can't trust God, or believe in God, as you phrased it, when the going appears a bit rough and hard and is contrary to you, I doubt that your faith in Him will be much stronger when everything seems to be going well. One must believe in God and trust Him simply because He is God and cannot lie. This is real faith. Like I said, I am praying for you, asking God to turn you about-face and bring you back to Him again."
"If we had decent things to wear and . . . and a better variety of food, I'd be different, Dad. What do we really have to be thankful for?"

"Everything," came the quick reply. "We have everything, Mark. Thankfulness is a state of the heart. The heart that is tuned in to God and to Heaven is a thankful heart. Never forget this. You are out of tune and out of touch with God and your heart has lost its thankfulness. It's that simple. And that sad, too."

Long after family devotions were over and Holly was in bed, she prayed for Mark, and when she finally fell asleep, it was with sweet assurance in her heart that God was working upon her brother.

She awoke much earlier than usual the following morning and felt an urge to spend the time in prayer. Frost decorated the windows in glittering-white, fern-like plumes and tiny, star-like, frost flowers. Her breath came out all smoky-white and the room was frigid; so she rolled over on her knees in the bed and drew the covers over her head and began to pray, her soul-burden centering on her backslidden brother. She prayed until she received the assurance that Mark was going to repent and do his first works over; then she pillowed her head and was soon sleeping soundly again.

Snow was falling when she got out of bed and dressed. It came down in a soft, heavy blanket of white, adding still more depth to that which was already on the ground. What a beautiful Thanksgiving Day! she thought joyously, thankful that, unlike those early Pilgrims of the Plymouth Colony, they had a house whose downstairs would be toasty-warm once she got to the bottom of the stairs and closed the door behind her. Except for the two bedrooms, through which the stovepipes from the kitchen and living room respectively, went through on their poker-straight way to the attic and the tall outside chimney, the other upstairs rooms had no source of heat whatever. Her room was of the latter. How very thankful she was for her beautiful room! In the springtime, when she could open the windows wide, the soft, clean-smelling breezes wafted the first breath of opening apple and peach blossoms into her room. At night, she could listen and thrill to the laughing babbling brook as it meandered through the meadow a short distance away from the house and wound its merry, serpentine way to parts still unexplored by her. Oh, they were truly, truly blest by coming here! God was so good to them, to lead her father to a rural church!
Tears of pure happiness and joy and gratitude gushed from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks as she made the bed, combed and brushed her beautiful, long, auburn hair and went downstairs.

A rush of aromatic, mouth-watering odors greeted her nostrils as she opened the door. "Mother!" she exclaimed in awe. "Pies! Where . . . I mean . . ."

"Isn't our God wonderful, Holly!" Mrs. Goldman said, folding her sixteen-year-old tightly to her mother-heart. "He sent so much in to us. I never cease to be amazed over His provision and care for His children. Us especially! And there's another surprise, honey, a spiritual surprise: Mark and your father are down at the church having a prayer meeting."

"I . . . I knew he was going to get saved, Mother! I knew it! God gave me the assurance early, early this morning when He awakened me and got me on my knees in prayer for my brother."

"Until the little ones get up, and your father and Mark return, how would you like to stir up one of those luscious chocolate cakes you used to make when we pastored at the city church? Can you remember how to do it?" Mrs. Goldman asked teasingly.

"Oh, Mother, do you mean it? Do we have cocoa and eggs and shortening and . . . and . . ."

"We have everything, honey. Everything! Look inside these cupboards . . ." Holly gasped as she opened one cupboard after another. "Who could afford to . . . to do this? Why, Mother, this cost hundreds of dollars!"

"All your father and I know is that a perfect stranger came to our door before daybreak, tapped lightly on the door and began unloading box after box and bag after bag of foodstuffs. We asked his name and wanted to know whom we should thank. All he replied was a simple sentence . . . "God sent it. Thank Him.' "

Holly burst into tears. "And God did send it, Mother!" she cried happily. "No matter how you look at it, He sent it. Maybe it was a mortal man or . . . or
maybe it was really an angel. Oh Mother, Mother, I love Him more than I have ever loved Him! He takes such good care of us. How could my brother ever have doubted God, after all the miracles He has performed for us? Why, if it hadn't been for His intervention and miraculous help, Phoebe would have been lying in that cold city cemetery for two years already."

"The Almighty is working on Mark, Holly, and I have a feeling that when he comes through this morning, your brother will become a spiritual giant. He cried like a baby when he saw how abundantly God filled every cupboard and cabinet. And the pantry, too, honey. Go take a look. I haven't had anything like this in all my life . . . everything full! I feel like shouting it to all the world, that God takes care of His own."

"He really does, Mother dear. And now, if you will show me where to find those baking needs, I'll begin the makings of a chocolate cake fit for any Thanksgiving table. I hope you know where to locate everything. Our shelves look like a miniature grocery store and I am so thankful. So very thankful!"

"It's a good thing this stove has a big oven with racks, Holly; that turkey's the biggest I've ever seen. Doesn't it smell delicious! The top rack will bake your cake beautifully, honey. Don't you just love all these wonderful aromas?"

"Do I ever!" Holly exclaimed, laughing softly. Mother would provide a meal fit for a king, she knew. Fit for a king, indeed! But many things would be taken to those very poor families in their church, she knew. She knew her parents; they would share their God-sent blessings with those of less fortune. Or maybe Mother had invited many from the church into the parsonage to share not only the food but the spiritual blessings as well.

A quick glance into the quaint, old, dining room gave her the answer: the dining room table was elongated to its bursting extremity. So was the kitchen table.

Holly began singing a song of praise. Her parents' hearts were attuned to thanksgiving and praise in, through, during, and under all circumstances, and the God who "inhabiteth the praise of Israel" had merely begun His gracious gift of bestowment in return.

She would remember this. Forever!
(The End)