The air was redolent with the heady fragrance of night blooming jasmine, wild honeysuckle and roses; and the soft night breezes, wafted in from the gulf, fanned the sweet gum trees in the Thacker yard until their leafy
arms trembled and shook like banners waving, free and unfurled. A half moon, palely-yellow and clear, sailed majestically across the cloudless, velvet-purple sky, its soft light making shadows on the ground beneath the waving tree branches. Arla Thacker, her shoes held tightly in her hand, opened the screen door quietly and, setting a stockinged foot carefully on to the porch, "tested" the board for squeaks or noise. Gram's bedroom was above the porch; she had ears like no one else whom Arla knew. Gram seemed to hear almost everything.

Arla tip-toed across the porch, standing dead still whenever the slightest squeak came from one of the boards. Then, hardly breathing, she advanced toward the steps, disappearing into the shadows of the big sweet gum trees as soon as her feet were on the ground. Not until she was a safe distance from the house did she slip the shoes on her feet.

She crossed the velvet-soft lawn with a light step, feeling free and liberated, a word she had been hearing frequently lately. From the bayou came the raucous, almost ear-shattering, noise of the bull frogs while in a nearby crape myrtle a mocking bird's melodic, lilting and beautiful night song gave a delightful contrast to the off-key notes coming from the bayou.

She smiled at the success of her little secret. What Gram didn't know wouldn't matter. At least there would be no lecturing at the supper table the next day regarding the wrongness of what she was doing. Lecturing seemed to be Gram's forte anymore.

Arla rounded a bend in the road and hastened her pace, a smug smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. Gram would see the rolled-up blanket form, giving an almost life-like appearance beneath the sheet and, in the darkness, she would never know the difference--if she looked into her room, that is.

She walked beneath a densely-foliaged live oak tree and drew her breath in quick-like. The moon had patterned and carpeted the earth floor in strips and patches of silver moon beams. The world was transformed; the night was magic; she was Cinderella going to meet her Prince Charming. She had neither a fine coach-carriage nor glass slippers, but little matter. In her heart she was every bit as delighted and happy as the fictitious character was supposed to have been. And she would have no twelve o'clock curfew either. Lucky for her, Gram retired shortly after the chickens did.
The frogs continued their noise making, and from the swamp she heard the call of a bull alligator. She was familiar with the sounds; they were as much a part of her world as she was. They added yet another dimension of beauty and intrigue to the magic of the night.

Feeling almost transported, she stepped out of the moonbeamed tree, shadows and buried down the lane past the field of pecan trees, all of which looked like silver-crowned sentinels standing at silent attention to Her Majesty.

Her Majesty! Arla laughed softly. She could pretend, couldn't she? And without a doubt, she felt like a queen tonight. Queen Arla. It sounded kind of fitting. if nothing else. Always, Brad made her feel, well, sort of like a queen.

She was getting nearer to the bayou now, nearer to the place of rendezvous. The noise of the bullfrogs was almost deafening. But then, her heart was hammering almost as loudly as the frogs. Or so it seemed. She passed beneath a sweet gum tree and was turning to go to the boat landing when a voice near her shoulder said, "Stop! Turn around. Now!"

Arla's legs felt weak and rubbery; her body went limp. She tried to run but a strong arm grabbed hold of her slender shoulders and spun her about-face. "You're going home!" the voice exclaimed in a no-nonsense note and tone.

"John! Why, you . . . you. . . ."

"Surprised to see me here, aren't you?"

Arla hung her head. Then she straightened her shoulders and stretched her petite frame to its full four-feet-eleven inches and said, "So you're spying on me! I suppose you're getting paid by Gram, huh John?"

John's hand held her shoulder in a vise-like grip. "What's happening to you, Arla?" he asked quickly. "And why the John? It's always been Johnny. Frankly, I like Johnny a whole lot more than your cold John."

"Let me go," Arla demanded. "What right do you have to meddle into my affairs?"
"I have every right in the world; not the least of which is because you are my sister. And you are never to see Brad again. Never! Do you hear?"

"You're not my boss, John Thacker, remember this! If I want to see Brad I will. Do you hear? I'm almost old enough to do as I please. Now take your hands off me and. . . ."

"March! Homeward, Arla." John demanded, his hands digging firmly but kindly into her shoulders. "I've had a nagging suspicion that something was going on. And when I heard you get up and leave the house two nights ago, I decided to 'spy,' as you so accurately accused me.

You've seen Brad twice, huh? Tonight would have been the third time. But there'll not be a third time, Arla. I beat you here and sent Brad on his way."

"You . . . you didn't! Oh, you brute! You . . . you meddler! Suppose I meddled in Trisha's and your affairs. . . .

"You would have no need to meddle; Trish and I are not ashamed of anything we do together. And neither one of us has ever sneaked out of the house for a secret rendezvous. Truth of the matter is, I'd have had nothing to do with Trish if she were like this. This cheapens you, Arla."

"By whose standards? Yours, John Thacker? And right now I could care less what you think. Now let me go. Brad will be along any minute."

"He's gone, Arla. Believe me. I sent him on his way. He's a rascal, and you will not see him again. My orders. He's into drugs and. . . ."

"That's a lie."

"It's the truth Sis. That, and a great many other evils and vices. He's not good enough for you."

"Who says?"

"I do."
"Well, if I want to see Brad, you won't stop me."

"We'll see about that. Now get moving; you're going home to where you belong."

"Home! Oh, don't be ridiculous, John. We haven't had a home since Father and Mother died in that horrible accident."

"Stop talking like that, Arla. Gram's given us a good home. We have every comfort in the world, and some love besides."

"Love? Please! Don't sicken me. What love? It's all law, law, law: don't do this; you can't do that. I'm so fed up with law and lectures until I'm ready to do anything to get away from it. If God's anything like Gram is, I don't ever want anything to do with. . . ."

"Stop it I Stop it, Arla," John ordered, breaking into her sentence. "You foolish little girl. It's dangerous to speak about God in that manner. God is good and gracious and wonderful and. . . ."

"How do you know? Gram's not religious, and neither were our parents. So how do you know anything about Him?"

"I know a great deal more than I can tell you about Him. Trish and I've been searching for something to fill the void within our heart, and recently . . . last night, to be a bit more explicit . . . I called Uncle John, whom I am named after. I asked him what he and Aunt Alice have that makes them so different and sets them apart from the average individual whom I know."

"And what did he say?" Arla asked, calming down and relaxing her body a bit.

"He told me it was because they loved the Lord and belonged to Him."

Arla listened intently. Then she laughed out loud. "Isn't that ridiculous?" she asked. "How can anyone 'belong' to God? Why, no one has ever seen Him. Oh, Johnny, you didn't fall for that line; surely not."

"It's not a 'line.' Arla; it's truth. Uncle John told me how the Holy Spirit convicted him of his sins and how he repented and confessed and forsook
those sins. Then he asked God, for Christ's sake, to forgive him for all his committed sins and to come into his heart. And Jesus did; He came into his heart. He called it being born again, converted.

"Well, after I finished talking to him, I told Trish what he had said. And, since Uncle John had told me where I could find certain verses in the Bible, Trish got the big family Bible down from the top shelf in her dad's library and we searched until we found every one of those scripture verses."

Arla gasped. "You mean you . . . believe that!" she exclaimed.

"And why not, may I ask? It is the Word of God. Trish and I felt strangely moved upon as we read. It had a compelling, overwhelming, overpowering force upon us. I felt a horrible fear come over me for my sins. I wanted to get rid of them. So I did exactly what our uncle said he did. And while I was repenting and confessing and forsaking, the Lord Jesus came into my heart. The same thing happened to Trish. Our void is now filled. My heart is blest and happy and I have peace. Oh, such peace and joy!"

Arla gulped; her brother talking religiously? Her brother! It was almost unreal. For lack of anything better to say, she said, "Perhaps if Mother and Father had been religiously inclined I might think seriously about this; but since they weren't, I won't give it another thought. They managed very well without God and a church. So has Gram. For all her law and austerity, I must say she's a genius at making and managing money."

"But money isn't everything, Arla. In fact, money will be useless when one dies. It will never be able to pay death off, to allow for an extension of time and breath. Neither does it buy peace and happiness and joy. It is merely a necessary medium of exchange. And as to our parents being irreligious, Uncle John told me that just before each died, the hospital chaplain prayed with them. They were really calling on God, he said, begging for mercy and forgiveness."

"I can't believe that."

"What you believe doesn't change the fact that Mother and Dad became very religious prior to their death. Uncle John said they died with God's peace and His joy of forgiveness in their heart. He learned this recently from a friend of the chaplain's."
Arla felt her cheeks flush in embarrassment. Her dignified, socially prominent parents religious! That was almost more than she could absorb or fathom. But she had heard that people did strange things when they were dying -- or thought that they were dying. So why should it be an incredulous thing with her parents. The very word . . . death . . . conveyed the connotation of fear. And of mystery, even. "Let's go home, Arla."

Johnny's words sliced into her deep thoughts, bringing her rudely back to where she was and what she had planned to do . . . her rendezvous with Brad and how her plans were foiled. Again anger boiled up within her. "I'm not going home," she said stubbornly. "I don't have a home since Mother and Father died. Gram's estate is a dwelling place but not a home. At least not by my standards."

John's grip tightened on her arm and shoulder. "You're going to go home, little sis. whether you want to or not; whether you think it's a home or not. Now move or I'll be forced to pick you up and carry you home. And that wouldn't be the most gentlemanly thing to do. Nor be completely lady-like for you either. Some day you'll thank me for what I've done."

"Never! You're a meddler in other people's affairs-namely, mine. And I resent it. Oh, how I do resent it."

"I'm sure you do. I expected as much. But you will be thanking me some day; see if you don't. A decent girl deserves a decent fellow, not some rascally dude who makes a hobby out of defiling them and getting them on the same downward road that he's traveling on. Unless Brad changes and makes a radical turn around, he's going to find himself in serious trouble one of these days."

"That's no affair of yours. It's none of your business. What Brad does or doesn't do with his life is his affair. And for all your castigating of him, I must say that he makes me feel queenly. He's treated me graciously and kindly."

"Naturally. One always baits before ensnaring or trapping. I just happen to know Brad's tactics and his approach. Why do you suppose Linda Fract dropped out of business school and left our fair surroundings? Know what happened?"
Arla had often wondered about Linda.

"Know where she is?" her brother prodded, looking down upon his sister, the moonglow revealing a look of pain and anguish on his face and in his eyes.

Arla shivered beneath the penetrating gaze. Johnny had really cared for Linda. Once upon a time. She remembered it all now. "Wh . . . what happened?" she asked tremulously, wanting to know but fearful at hearing it.

"The handsome Brad charmed her the same way he was charming you. Secretly they rendezvoused. After he convinced her that he loved her, the rest was easy. Linda fell for his bait like a silly thing and found herself hooked on drugs. She became another payer-supporter for his mounting drug bills. Only, Linda wasn't as fortunate as some of his other payees; Linda died in a private home from an overdose. Her aunt sent her away to a drug rehabilitation center somewhere up east but Linda ran away. She went to live with friends of like habits as hers, and during one of their parties she overdosed and died. Now, are you convinced, Arla, and are you ready to go home? You must never see Brad again. Never. He's not going to flatter and woo you and finally see you dead and buried. Not if I can help it."

Arla trembled. Then she said, "Let go of my shoulders, Johnny. Let's go home. I . . . I'm ready."

(Chapter 2)

Long after she was in bed Arla shook and trembled. The night, which only a short time ago was aburst with star sprinkles and moonglow and pure magic, now seemed suddenly desolate, dull and void of any of its former beauty and glory. True, the soft melodic trills of the mocking bird still echoed in bell-like tones on the soft, late-summer breezes of darkness and the mammoth bull frogs croaked and harrumphed ceaselessly and endlessly by the bayou; but the original beauty and magic was gone. With Johnny's exposure of the real Brad, Arla felt like her little world of golden dreams and love had crumbled to dust and ashes at her feet. She felt devastated. Empty.

The moon peeked through the curtained sheers at the window, gently caressing a silver tear on the young woman's cheek. So Linda was dead, Arla thought silently, forlornly, feeling in a state of total shock over What
Johnny had told her. Dead. The beautiful Linda with such a bright, promising future and with her myriad talents. Dead because of an overdose of some of Brad's "wares." Anger boiled up from somewhere deep inside her. Anger over Brad and his ruthless, uncaring doings and ways.

Without thinking what she was doing, Arla picked up one of the shoes from the floor beside the bed and flung it viciously and fiercely across the room. It hit the door with a loud crash and a bang. In an instant, Gram stood in the doorway. "Arla, Arla, what are you doing?" she stammered, half asleep, half awake. "Arla? What happened?" Gram sounded angry.

Arla lay deathly still. No need explaining to Gram; she wouldn't understand. Furthermore, right now she couldn't possibly tolerate a lecture from her grandparent.

Gram hurried across the carpeted floor. Her bare feet made a soft, padded sound as they approached the bed. Arla never moved. Gram's hand came down upon her head in a quick brush or sweep; then, supposing Arla to be asleep, she tiptoed back across the room, pausing momentarily in the open doorway as though trying to decide just where the noise had come from. She looked almost ethereal in her long, flowing white nightgown, Arla decided, watching from the bed. Almost like an apparition, really, she temporized. Gram, in spite of her years, was still very attractive. She was almost as slender as a willow withe and every bit as agile and persuasive too.

Not until Gram was finished making a thorough inspection of the entire house and was once more safely in her bed did Arla move. Then, in a torrential tide of agony and inward sorrow over Linda, she buried her face in the folds of the pillow and sobbed. It was as though a great dam had burst inside her being. "Linda! Linda!" she cried. "I never knew! I didn't suspect such a tragedy. Not ever. Oh Linda, Linda, why? Why? Why'd you do it? Johnny could have made you so happy. He cared for you; Brad didn't. . . ."

In a sudden outburst of loathing passion, Arla felt she couldn't stand the very name of Brad even. He was a beast. What else dare he be called? A vulture even, seeking and searching his prey among the innocent, the unsuspecting, the vulnerable. Vulnerable and innocent, like herself. Like Linda. Linda, who had never dabbled in drugs nor any such thing until, like Johnny said, Brad set his sights upon her then wooed her, courted her,
flattered her and finally convinced her. And, Arla's thoughts added bitterly, killed her.

Again Arla trembled. What a silly little nit-wit she was, believing Brad's lies, "swallowing" his lines of prose and poetry and flattery until she felt transported.

She buried her face deeper into the pillow. How poor Johnny must have ached and hurt as he saw Brad slowly but surely destroying the girl whom he had cared so deeply for at one time. It all seemed so unreal; so nightmarishly frightening; more like something one read or heard about but just knew could never, never happen to them. But it had happened. And she, Arla, could well have been another of Brad's victims . . . but for Johnny.

Shame and remorse over her horrible treatment and verbal abuse on her brother now overwhelmed Arla. Johnny had wanted only the very best for her, this she knew. This she had always known. And why she could have been so blind and then so hateful to Johnny when he tried to reveal her blindness to her was most embarrassing indeed. And frightening too. It was indicative of the fact of her own immaturity and instability and yes, of her self-will, too. "Strong headed," Gram had declared on more than one occasion. Maybe Gram was right. But could she help it that she wanted to be free like one of Gram's high-spirited fillies roaming the vast, lush, green pastureland? She was an individual, a one-of-her-kind species. At least she wanted to think that she was. And Gram was too unfeeling, too selfish and uncaring, where Johnny and she came into the picture. There was a very decided and definite generation gap between Gram and the two of them, especially between Gram and her. No amount of trying to please Gram worked. In fact, Arla felt that they were light years apart, not just in one way but in every way. Gram resented Johnny's and her presence in the house.

She tumbled and rolled and tossed, her thoughts racing like lightning from one thing to another, her emotions too tense and keyed up for sleep. It was almost like everything around her was one great big nightmare of unreality and heartache -- first her parents' death, now the news about Linda and Brad. Arla felt like she was on a merry-go-round that was gaining in fierce momentum and speed, and she wanted off but found no way or place to get off. Or out. She had thought Brad was her answer for getting out. But with Johnny's heartbreaking news and revelation that washed down the drain
like water being sucked through an enormous drain pipe after a torrential rain -- gone almost as suddenly as it had appeared or happened and arrived.

The moon rode leisurely across the cloudless star-spangled sky, poking its silvery-yellow shafts of light into the mocking bird's nest and through the branches of the sweet gum and pecan trees and splattering light on the grasses and earth floor; still Arla tossed. Her mind was in a turmoil. Everything was happening too fast for her to grasp and to comprehend. How she could have been so completely and entirely happy and light-hearted and gay just such a very short while ago then be thrown into the dungeon of despair and gloom and hopelessness the next moment was more than she could grasp. But it was reality. Stark reality. And it had happened to her.

The moon was tucking his shiny head into the pocket of the west and the gray-pink clouds of dawn were touching the eastern sky when Arla finally drifted off into a troubled sleep. It was Gram's voice that finally stirred her from her drowsiness into a state of half-wakefulness. Gram was calling to the hens in the chicken yard to come get their breakfast of cracked grain and coarsely-crushed oyster shells. Arla heard the clucking of the satisfied hens and listened to the whirring sound of their wings as they scurried from wherever they were to where Gram was spreading a generous covering of food on the ground. Then she closed her eyes and let sleep once more enfold and embrace her.

It was late when she finally got up and tidied the room then went downstairs. Johnny was nowhere around when she went into the kitchen and made a cup of tea. Neither was Gram, for that matter. It was just as well, Arla decided. She never did like being plied with questions, especially not early in the morning.

She washed the dirty breakfast dishes that were in the sink and cleaned the kitchen till it sparkled and shone. Then she busied herself with dinner preparations, all the while trying to block and blot out the happenings of the night just past. In the back of her mind, however, they fingered, stealing in and out of her thoughts like ghosts to haunt and torment her.

Gram came in from the herb garden, her arms laden with the fragrant plants ready for hanging upside down to dry. She greeted Arla with a curt good morning then went about her rounds of busy-ness in her usual, brisk
customary manner. No mention was made about the crash in the night, no inference even. Arla was grateful for this.

At the dinner table, set with Gram's blue iron stoneware, Johnny praised her for her herb-fried shrimp and the pot of fluffy white rice with its accompanying spicy, thick, brown gravy and the enormous bowl of freshly-tossed greens, gifts from Gram's well tended garden. She smiled wanly, feeling dead and lifeless inside. Once when she looked up from her plate she caught Johnny eyeing her sympathetically. She turned her eyes quickly back to her plate, feeling the sting of sudden tears. Then she excused herself from the table to check on the blackberry cobbler, baking to a bubbly-brown crispy-tenderness inside the oven. Gram must not see her cry. Never. Never!

"The pecan retailer should be here this week," Gram said, breaking the silence. "Looks like I'll be getting a bumper crop. Biggest ever." Her eyes were fixed on Johnny. "The same retailer's coming to let me know how much he'll pay me for them as soon as they're ready."

"God's been good to you, Gram," Johnny ventured fearlessly. "Never forget this."

"God? What's He have to do with this? Your grandfather and I set those trees out, not God. Together we cared for them for years and I aim to keep on caring for them so long as I live. God had nothing to do with those trees. The subject's closed, Johnny."

Gram's jaws clicked shut like the spring on a trap. Arla knew this meant that the subject about God was closed. For good. Johnny knew it, too. He dropped his head in a prayerful attitude and mood. Arla marveled at her brother's calmness, at his sweet spirit and his unruffled serenity. He was different, this she had to admit. Even his countenance attested to this fact.

Immediately after dinner was over, Gram excused herself. She wanted to make a thorough check of the trees, she said. Besides that, there were more herbs ready for gathering. "Johnny, you will check on the horses," she ordered, being suddenly every inch of her frame in full command of the affairs at the plantation state. "Pay special attention to Ha Penny. Call me if you need me. She's too valuable to lose."
With shoulders held erect and head high, Gram marched through the doorway to the dappled shade outside, her stride as steady and firm as that of most youths. Arla watched in awe and wonder and amazement. This proud woman, her grandmother . . . her father's mother . . . did she never think about God? Had she ever in her life . . . just even once, maybe . . . given God any thought? Had Johnny told her about their parents -- what each had done before passing away?

Arla's reasoning told her that Johnny had indeed told Gram. This accounted for her pronouncement at the table, Arla was sure. And when Gram said a thing was closed, well, it was closed. Tight.

Gram's heart was set on things. Materialism was her god. She worshipped faithfully and religiously at this shrine. Grandpa had left most of his vast estate to her and she had been an excellent and shrewd stewardess at handling, managing and manipulating what was entrusted into her keeping. She was the perfect bookkeeper and what-have-you, learning everything possible about each and every aspect of the plantation and its affairs. And she kept everything running smoothly and most efficiently, Arla had heard. "Better even than your grandfather," one of the hired men had confided to Johnny and to her one day shortly after their arrival to the estate.

Arla scraped the leftover rice into a covered bowl, intending to make a custardy rice-raisin pudding out of it. And what little gravy was left would taste good, she decided, reheated and spooned over the feather-light biscuits Gram served every morning for breakfast. She put the remains of the cobbler on the counter top. Gram or Johnny would finish it later in the day, drizzling thick, icy-cold cream over its mouth-watering rich top. Then she once more tidied the kitchen, leaving it spotlessly clean, neat and shiny.

Going along the garden path to Gram's herb and spice garden, a cheery voice greeted her from a fig tree. "Hello there," the voice called. "I've been wanting to meet you and at long last my luck's good."

Arla stopped and looked up into one of Gram's choice fig trees. "Hello," she replied without enthusiasm. "Who are you? Does my grandmother know you're up in one of her choice trees? And what does 'luck' have to do with this? I can't say that I believe in luck."
As agile as a cat, the blonde haired young man dropped to the ground. With laughing blue-gray eyes, he stood in front of Arla. "Now, one question at a time. First," he pointed at finger number one on his left hand, "I am Justin Joseph Jacobs and, number two, yes, your grandmother knows I'm . . . rather, correct . . . she knows I was up in her fig tree. Obviously, I'm not up there now; I'm standing with both feet on terra firma. But your grandmother ordered me to check certain things on her fig trees. This I was doing. This I will continue to do until I have discovered the cause, or causes, for what is happening to said trees. And, well, maybe luck didn't have anything to do with my meeting you today. But whatever, I'm glad we've met. You are Arla Thacker, by all standards of my scanty knowledge, and I am most honored to meet you."

Arla looked at the broad shoulder ed young man standing before her. Then with a brush of her hand and a toss of her head she said quickly, "If you will excuse me, please, I will be on my way after some of my grandmother's herbs and spices."

With head held high, she marched past him down the garden path. Justin Joseph Jacob smiled. Then in a half-audible tone he said, "Spirited little creature! But sometimes they tame the easiest. We shall see. Yes, we shall see!"

(Chapter 3)

On her knees among Gram's herbs and spices, breaking off only those ready-to-cure, drier stalks, Arla fumed. The boldness of some people, she thought, seeing again the laughing blue-gray eyes, the clean-cut face and the strong, well-built features of the young man who dropped so easily . . . so agilely . . . out of the fig tree. Then the re-enactment of it all struck her funnybone and she buried her face in her hands and laughed till her sides ached. In a way, it was, romantic, she told herself. A bit of unusual romanticism, to be sure, but romantic in a different sense and way nonetheless. But for the present, romanticism was the farthest thing from her mind. She had trusted Brad once. . . .

At thought of Brad, Arla straightened herself to her full petite height. "Strong headed" Gram had called her. Well, maybe for once in her short lifetime the negative sounding term could have a positive aspect to it. Yes, maybe it could be a plus factor instead of a minus just this once. It was worth
some effort on her part, she knew. And were it to succeed, every ounce of effort would have to come from her part of things. Her end. This she knew. And after the things Johnny had told her and revealed to her, she knew she would have to make a clean, once-for-all-time sweep of things.

With a look of firm resolve, Arla said very definitely, firmly and meaningfully, "From this moment on I clear my mind of every thought, idea, and/or dream regarding Brad. He is neither worthy nor deserving of the least of my thoughts. Ever! I do here and now erase him from my mind. Forever!"

She shuddered slightly with the utterance of the last word. Then she relaxed, fell to her knees and resumed her work. Brad was a closed chapter of her life. He would come to mind on occasion, she was sure, but her self-discipline would prevail. She had no doubt about this. Yes, this was one time when Gram's "strong headedness" would serve her well and be to her advantage.

While she worked, she turned her thoughts to Johnny's words of the night. It still seemed unbelievably incredulous that her brother should have become religious. His sincerity and deep piety touched her and grabbed at her somewhere deep inside her being. Whatever had "bent" him that way had bent him for all of time and of eternity, she was sure. She knew Johnny; what he believed in he embraced with his entire being. And with Trish as a sustaining, embracing accomplice-believer, or whatever one dare call it, well, Johnny's new something was a for-sure well-anchored, cemented and permanent thing.

A new thought struck Arla: Suppose this thing which Johnny had embraced and believed in and accepted were false. Then what? In that case his strong belief . . . the "cementability" of his very person and character . . . could be nothing but detrimental. But would their parents have found peace and comfort when they were dying in something false and error laden? she asked herself. Johnny told her the hospital chaplain said they had died having made peace with God. What did that mean? Had she ever "made peace with God?" How did one go about it? What did one do? Furthermore, did she want to "make peace with God?" Was it necessary?

Questions, like avalanches, slid over her brain, and Arla, never before having thought such deep and profoundly-religious questions, felt thoroughly startled and in a sense, alarmed. She was afraid that perhaps her sense of
reasoning was taking leave of her and that she was losing her mind. But after
the sudden, bizarre, and frightening turn of events concerning Linda and her
downfall and ultimate death, Arla marveled that she was able to function as
well as she had throughout the day. She felt like she had aged considerably
overnight. And in a sense she had, in mind if not in years. Always she had
been the carefree and happy-go-lucky type. Not any more; something
happened inside her being last night. She felt very much grownup and
mature beyond her young years. Maybe this was also a part and a process of
life, she reasoned silently, fearful of what further tragedy and heartache and
heartbreak might lay ahead for her.

With great care she stacked the herbs and spices, being as gentle with
them as a caring mother was with her child. Gram valued her taste-
enhancing "treasures," priding herself in the fact that she always had a great
abundance of anything and everything she needed right from her garden.
And it really did make it nice and convenient, having the usual store-bought
variety at one's finger tips, all fresh and savory and unharmed by age and
overstorage. Gram went light on the use of salt but she made up for it with
her use of the herbs and spices. Needless to say, her cooking was extremely
tasty and delicious and savory. Her herb baked swiss steak especially. It
would have been a gourmet's delight and a swiss steak fancier's top choice,
the young woman was sure. At least all of Gram's guests rated it top choice,
as did Johnny and she.

Carrying the fragrant armload lightly, Arla took another garden path
back to the house. No need having a second encounter with the blonde
haired young man named Justin something or other, she decided.

She was just rounding the curve that led to the house when the same
voice called musically to her, saying, "Here, let me carry that for you, please.
It would be my pleasure." And, as at the first meeting, he dropped from the
thick foliage of a fig tree to the ground, as nimble and as fleet-footed as a
hart on the mountain, she decided.

"Thank you," she blurted in embarrassment. "I'll carry them. Gram's
quite fussy with the handling of her herbs and spices." And without so much
as looking up, Arla brushed past him quickly, holding the armload like a thing"most fragile and treasured.
When she reached the house and had deposited her fragrant armload inside the clean drying-out house, her humor again came to the fore. What a strange person this Justin must think her to be. Fragile the herbs and spices were, indeed, but treasures, never. Yet she had acted as though they were. In reality, she was reflecting Gram and her attitude. Again she laughed.

Once inside the house, Arla washed her face and hands then set about preparing the evening meal. She had no idea when Gram would get in from what she was inspecting and overseeing. One thing was sure, however, and that was that Gram would see whatever she was doing through to the finish. Business of any and all kinds took priority over all else.

Arla enjoyed having the house to herself at times like these. She could cook and bake whatever she pleased with no over-the-shoulder constant-looking from Gram. Arla guessed this bothered her as much as anything. Gram wanted everything done the way she did it. Period. To the exact dotting of the proverbial I and crossing of the T. She failed to realize and accept the fact even that two people . . . or many people . . . could make the same thing by using a slightly different approach and manner or technique. Always, it was, "This is the way you must do it, Arla. No, no! Not that way . . . This way!"

Arla tried to thrust the "thorny" thought from her mind. She had grown up a lot over night. Her "strong headedness" must now begin to work for good to her. She would try to think only the best possible thoughts of Gram. Perhaps Gram's upbringing was such that she couldn't help it that she was the way she was. Arla had been taught that a person's background did have a great bearing on one. She remembered her mother saying as much.

She heard a light foot fall outside and looked up in time to see Johnny hurry past the house. His face had a worried look upon it. She started for the kitchen door but knew she was too late to catch up with him. He was in a big hurry, wherever he was going. Then she remembered Gram telling him to check on the horses. Ha Penny especially.

Instinctively, Arla knew there was trouble in the stables. She felt cold fear grip her heart. She loved the horses. For reasons totally different from Gram. To Gram, they represented money, more greenbacks in her already bulging and large bank account. To herself, they were the epitome of grace and beauty. From her infancy she had loved animals, dogs and horses especially. And when she arrived as a permanent resident at Bayou Acres
Estate and saw the beautiful horses which Gram had acquired, and which were being grown and raised on the estate, her heart was happy. More than once she had ridden on one of the sleek, shiny backs and wept the grief of her parental loss out to the horse. They had seemed to understand her. At least they never rebuked her or chided her for her tears and her sadness; nor did they ever tell her, like Gram had done on numerous occasions, that the past could never be recalled and that what had happened must be forgotten. Rather, as she laid her head on their soft, shiny neck and sobbed her grief out, they seemed to empathize and to understand her deep sorrow. Always, she had left them having felt comforted and consoled.

She felt especially close to Ha Penny, who was gentleness and obedience through and through.

Fear churned inside Arla as she worked. Johnny's expression spoke much to her. What if something had happened to Ha Penny? She was going to be a wonderful young mother; but if anything happened to her, well....

Tears formed in Arla's eyes. In a rush of over-whelming concern for the young mother-to-be, she ran out the door, down the cobblestone walk to the stables and in to where the beautiful horse was stabled. Ha Penny neighed sadly when she saw Arla. Her gentle brown eyes reflected her sorrow. They were great, deep pools of heartache. In a gush of love and pity, Arla was on her knees beside the mare. Her arms encircled the sleek chestnut brown neck while her eyes poured forth their sorrow on the lifeless colt nearby.

She was still on her knees, sobbing, when Johnny's voice sliced into her misery and grief. "Come Arla," he said gently, placing a loving hand upon her head "There's nothing any of us can do. Ha Penny will grieve for a while but she'll get over it. The vet's on his way here to check her and make sure that she'll be all right"

"Oh Johnny! Johnny! Life's cruel! It's cruel! Why should this have happened to Ha Penny? She's a beautiful horse Such a good horse. Why must all these horribly bad and dreadful things happen to the good? To the innocent? Ha Penny didn't deserve for this to happen to her. Sometimes I wish I had never been born. Life is nothing but sorrow and heartache for the innocent and the good and the undeserving. It's cruel, Johnny. Cruel! I . . . I hate it! Why didn't something bad happen to Brad, and . . . and stop him from killing Linda? Why? He deserves to be punished. . . ."
"Arla," Johnny was now on his knees beside his sister. "You ask too many questions. Some of them I can't answer. But I know one thing, that the more I read the Bible, and since giving my heart to Jesus, I know that God doesn't do anything without knowing what He's doing. He allows the rain to fall on the wicked and on the righteous, both, doesn't He? So why should He not allow some adverse things to come to the righteous? He's too wise and too loving to allow anything to happen to us that isn't going to serve us for our betterment. Truth of the matter is, I believe the adverse circumstances help to make God's children even better and . . . and more like Him."

"Oh, Johnny, how can you believe this?"

Johnny sighed. "Sis," he said, speaking in an emotion-packed voice, "I wish you'd know Jesus the way I know Him. The things I don't understand I leave in the safe-keeping of His hands and to His wisdom. I'm glad that God hasn't allowed something dreadful to happen to Brad; he's not ready to die. He'd go to hell, were he to die in his sins and . . . and in his wickedness. Sure, he's done wrong. Oh, so very wrong. And he better never try to see you again. But while I loathe Brad's sins and his sinfulness, I pity Brad himself. He needs Jesus. Everything would change in his life if he met the Savior whom I met and whom I know and love."

"You . . . you mean you don't hate him for . . . for . . . ?"

"Hatred will never enter Heaven, my little sister. No, I don't hate Brad for what he caused Linda to do; I pity him. And I even pray for him."

"You . . . you do? Oh Johnny, how can you? He doesn't deserve your prayers. He isn't worthy of them."

"I don't know a lot of things, Arla, and you know this new and wonderful Christian way of life and of living is in its extremely initial stages for me; but the sweet presence of the Lord within me has given me compassion for Brad. Now, of all times, he needs someone to pray for him."

"I'm sure he wouldn't thank you if he knew you were praying for him."

"He knows; I told him so last night. And, no, he didn't thank me. In fact he cursed me. But that doesn't matter. He can't stop me from praying for him."
Someday he'll have to answer to God for what he does or doesn't do with these prayers. From something I read in the Bible, I believe our prayers and tears are all being reserved in Heaven. At least I'm sure that's what those scripture verses mean."

"You talk strangely, Johnny. Why would God want to save something like tears and prayers?"

"Like I said, this way is all new to me. But if I understood those verses rightly, well, I believe the prayers and the tears of God's children will someday serve as a witness or a testimony against the sinner. At any rate, I mean to keep praying; the rest is with God. Now come, the vet should be here any minute. Ha Penny's going to be all right; so stop worrying."

Wrapping her arms tightly around the grief-stricken mother, Arla shed her tears. Then, with a kiss and a gentle pat for the lifeless newborn, she got to her feet and hurried back to the kitchen, a mixture of thoughts and emotions racing through her mind and her body.

(Chapter 4)

Gram came in to supper in a foul mood. Arla detested and despised these moods. Something had gone awry with the retailer, she was sure. Gram's money bargains were true barometers of her personality: a good sale and Gram was congenial and amiable; a bad one and she was curt and foul and verbally abusive. It was things and happenings of this latter nature that helped to make Arla feel like an outsider-intruder rather than a granddaughter. An only granddaughter, to be more precise, just like Johnny was an only grandson.

Ha Penny was never mentioned, not once even, during the course of the evening meal. But Arla knew that Johnny had told Gram what had happened. Gram knew everything that was happening on the plantation; not a single thing escaped her sharp eyes and her equally sharp business perception. The loss of the colt was also a contributor to her mood. Always there must be a gain, never a loss, where she was concerned. Whatever failed to produce or bring in money was either sold, cut down or destroyed -- be it animals, groves, trees, or what have you.
Arla shuddered with the thought. She was thankful that neither Johnny nor she was obsessed with materialism. It not only made a slave out of its possessor and became their god, but it was a thief and a robber as well, driving them with a whip of uncontrollable power and force until it robbed them of the ability to see anything beside.

Immediately after supper Gram took Johnny into the office room off the kitchen and shut the door. Ha Penny's misfortune was sure to be discussed, Arla knew. In detail! Besides that, she had doubts that Gram would discuss anything whatever with Johnny about the pecans, or any other, big business matters. Gram knew how to seal her lips when she wanted to and nothing nor anyone could pry it out of her.

There was only one thing to do under these circumstances and that was to clear out and give her a wide berth until the circumstances changed or she changed them.

Arla cleaned up the supper dishes and put the kitchen in order, then she left the house. Already the late afternoon sun made great, long shadows of the trees on the lawn and the breezes had cooled down considerably. It was a favorite time of the day for her.

She walked into the garden and watched several hummingbirds feed on the sweet nectar from Madonna lilies before making her way into the rose garden. Then she sat down on one of the benches in the garden and tried to blot out everything that was of a negative and oppressive nature. She would relax and enjoy this evening and not think about anything depressing, she decided. Life had too many beautiful and lovely things in it to dwell constantly on its painful and bitter side, she temporized, sighing contentedly as she inhaled deeply of the beautiful rose-scented garden.

A mockingbird darted across the garden, tossing a song into the air before settling himself in a nearby magnolia tree and giving a concert of beautiful songs, warbling, trilling and mimicking in a way that never ceased to amaze Arla. Surely, of all birds, the mockingbird must be one of the sweetest singers. And, very definitely, she was sure they had the greatest repertoire of songs and of music in all birdland.

The early evening was beautiful. Since she had disciplined her mind against any and all thoughts about Brad, she felt the sweetness and the
beauty of her surroundings settle in around her like a gentle and soothing melody or balm. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the tree behind the bench, listening, feeling, and drinking in the serenity and the peaceful quietness. It calmed her, this "away-ness" from Gram. Sooner or later Gram would turn her feelings loose on Johnny and her -- mostly on her. She tolerated Johnny more -- because he could be of better help and use to her than she was. Johnny was a man and did man-sized outside jobs; she was a "mere snip of a girl" (Gram's words) and did what Gram herself was perfectly capable of doing.

In the distance a night bird called loudly to its mate and from every tree, it seemed, bird songs floated on the gentle night air. It sounded like one great, explosive symphony of song, each singing or warbling and trilling his own music and each a glorious and integral part of the whole. When had she ever heard anything so inspiring, she wondered. Anything so uplifting!

A soft breeze wafted the sweetness of the night blooming jasmine and the gardenias her way. Oh, how she did love their fragrance. More than once she had lain her lips on the cool, waxy-satin gardenia blossoms, leaving a kiss on their creamy-white petals and carrying away on her person their tell-tale perfume. It was her grandfather who had planted (or had had his hired help to do the planting) the myriad ornamental trees and bushes and shrubs and flowers. The year prior to his death he had planted half a dozen more gardenia bushes. "For you, kitten," he had told Arla, "because you like them so well."

"Oh, but don't you like them too, Grandfather?" she had asked, touching his strong arm ever so gently with her small hand.

"Now what do you think?" he teased, kissing her lightly on her nose.

"Oh, Grandfather, then they're for you as much as they're for me!" she had exclaimed. "We'll share them, you and I, when I come to visit."

Sobering, her grandfather had said seriously, "I like them, of course I do. But I planted them for you, Arla, especially. Someday you will enjoy them immensely. Remember me, and think of me then, will you? Promise?"

"Oh, Grandfather, I'll never forget you. Never. she had cried. "Not if I live to be a hundred. Or . . . or two hundred, even. But why do you talk so . . ."
so strangely? You'll always be here for me to love and to remember. We'll enjoy the gardenias together."

"Just knowing I have made you happy makes me feel good all over," he replied. "Someday you will have a garden of gardenias to remember me by. And Johnny will have his fig and nut trees. Growing things last for years if one takes proper care of them. I like growing things, Arla, acres and acres of growing things."

"Does Grandma like growing things?" she had queried in typical twelve-year old fashioned ignorance and innocence.

"If they can be put to use on the table or traded for money, yes. I guess we're all different, kitten. Me, I like growing things for beauty and fragrance and . . . and . . . well, just because they do something for me."

"Like what?"

"Well, like calming me down when I'm through with my work. And rewarding me with their un tarnished beauty. And just look at all the birds around here now! Know what brought most of them here?"

"What, Grandfather?"

"These growing things -- like the trees and the ornamental shrubs and bushes. Birds like cover, Arla, and places to build their nests in and raise their families. And places to hide from their predators too. Then they always need limbs to flit in and out of and from which to sing. Someday, when you are married and have a home of your own, you shall have a garden. A first-rate garden. In it will be all kinds of beautiful growing things. Johnny, too. He shall have acres and acres of land, and fig and nut trees galore. I shall see that you get these things. And when you see them growing and blooming and producing, think of me,"

"There you go again, Grandpa. Don't talk this way; you make me afraid. You scare me. Why shouldn't you be here to see them growing and blooming and bearing with your very own two blue eyes?"

Grandfather had changed the subject almost abruptly then. He stood, leaning hard on the shovel, looking off into the distance.
Arla squeezed her eyes shut tight now, recalling that long-ago conversation. And many another. Did Grandfather know that his heart was wearing out faster than the rest of his body? she wondered. And had he been trying to prepare her for that day?

A shudder traced the vertebrae up and down her back as she recalled the night when her parents came to Johnny's bedroom and hers and awakened them, relating to them the shocking and startling news of their grandfather's sudden and untimely death. She had cried until she felt spent of tears, feeling like she had lost the one closest on earth to her.

From infancy, Grandfather had been close to her. He understood her from the top of her head to the tips of her tiny toes and dainty feet. He knew how to get the very best out of her and how to make her be her very, very best. He neither coddled nor cajoled her, nor did he fail to chastise her when necessary. But her grandfather knew how to use love and kindness. In fact, he was love and kindness. This was Grandfather.

Gram, on more than one occasion, had told him he was too kind -- too soft-hearted.

Sitting in the cool twilight, Arla wondered how the two total and distinct opposites had ever gotten together to form a marriage contract. But they had, that was obvious. And thirty-eight years of marriage proved it. She had heard that opposites did attract each other in many cases, and her grandparents were proof of the statement. Grandfather had gone away to study law, he told her once, and came home a married man. He had met Gram, fell head over heels in love with her, proposed to her and married her. They came back to his hometown and settled down in one of the durable old houses. He went to the town's college and there studied business administration while Gram worked in the town's main department store, where she soon became its vice-president.

Gram was business and money from the top of her crown of golden hair to the very bottoms of her feet. Grandfather was business-minded enough to excel in his world of business, but once home his world of business affairs was locked securely up inside the office uptown and never even so much as mentioned or alluded to. If there were problems, one never knew it; or losses, one never heard about it. Home was the place where he
left such things outside the door. He ran the business; it never ran him. With Gram it was the opposite. She stayed with the store until Arla's father was born -- their only child. Then Gram stayed home to raise and care for the boy. She believed that a mother had no right to be working away from home unless under the direst circumstances. A mother had a full-time vocation, she felt. And she practiced it faithfully all the while her son lived at home, which was until he went away to college and finally, upon graduation, married Arla's beautiful mother.

Tears trickled out from beneath the long eyelashes at thought of her parents. They were such an outstanding couple and oh, how she had loved them. How very different her life would be today if they were all still together and intact as a family, she thought sadly. She would not have considered dating Brad. No. No! Not ever. She was happy and content at home, happy in the love of her parents and her brother and content just to remain family oriented. But her world of happiness and solidarity crumbled and crashed beneath her with the passing away of her lovely mother and strong, kind father. So like Grandfather was her father!

Stars twinkled and danced in the sky above her and the bull frogs harrumphed their loudest by the bayou, but Arla was too deep in nostalgic remembrance to pay either much mind. With her head against the tree trunk, she allowed herself the freedom of weeping. No one was there to chide or rebuke her and the stars wouldn't tell. Furthermore, if necessary and to avoid Gram's careful scrutiny, she could always sneak up the back stairs to her bedroom. Once she was in bed, Gram wouldn't see her red, tear-stained eyes.

The breezes fanned her softly. Then, as if in a tired, final stir, they brushed gently through her hair and put themselves to bed. All was peaceful and calm. Arla was sure she could feel the night breathing around her. It was a good feeling and she was not afraid of the dark. From childhood's earliest days she had loved the night. The dark. Her grandfather had taught her to enjoy its beauty and to never fear its seeming mystery. "It breathes with soothing sound if one will listen," he had often told her. "Now take that brightest star, for instance. . . ." And then while holding her small hand tightly in his, he had told her much about the stars, adding, "And aren't they beautiful, honey? Why, the whole world seems transformed and rearranged when night falls and the stars and moon come dancing and sailing across the sky."
Had her beloved grandfather "made his peace with God" before dying? she wondered suddenly now. If it took such a thing to get her parents into Heaven . . . at their very last even . . . would it not have been required of Grandfather also? Had Grandfather known what "peace with God" meant? Had he heard about it? Ever? Oh, she hoped with all her heart that if it actually was as necessary as Johnny believed it was, that her dear grandfather had made his peace with God, like her parents were said to have done.

An owl, in search of food, landed in a nearby tree. His wings made a soft whirring sound. Arla didn't move. She was a part of this all . . . the night, the sounds, the darkness. It enfolded her in peace and quiet relaxation. For the moment, she had forgotten about Gram and her foul, dark mood. The night had its special way of healing her hurt and soothing her pain. And of making her forget, too.

She must have dozed, for when she opened her eyes she wondered what it was that had disturbed her peace and tranquillity. In the darkness, and slicing into her subconscious, something had aroused her from her lovely little nap. But what?

She sat suddenly very straight now and stared into the darkness. Someone was coming along the garden path; she heard the footsteps. Quickly, she pressed her back against the stout tree trunk. Maybe, if she remained deathly still and didn't move, whoever it was would go by without noticing her. Oh, let it be so, her heart cried as the steps drew nearer.

(Chapter 5)

Arla scarcely breathed. She was fearful of being seen. The footsteps came toward her then veered sharply to the right. Whoever it was had detected her and decided to come up behind her, she decided.

Beads of perspiration broke out on her forehead. She felt her body go rigid then shake with fear. She wanted to scream but couldn't. She seemed glued to the spot and her lungs felt hot and paralyzed. What should she do? What could she do?
She waited with bated breath. Every moment seemed an eternity. Why the silence? Where were the muffled footsteps? Sneaking up behind her, no doubt.

In the bayou the frogs croaked and harrumphed with deafening fury. Her screams . . . could she manage them even . . . would be drowned out by the noise of the giant frogs. They reminded her of a herd of wild hogs, so noisy and disturbing was the sound to her ears now. Always before she had enjoyed their raucous nocturnal harrumphing. Now she longed for them to stop long enough so she could tell what was happening behind her, where her pursuer was.

From a clump of bushes some distance behind where she had pressed her body like a shadow against the tree, she heard a faint sound like sobbing. It was muffled, sounding for the world like the face was pressed against the earth.

She eased her shoulders slightly and turned her head at an angle so she could hear better. Again she caught the muffled sound of sobbing. Now what would she do? If she got up to leave, her footsteps would give her away. But she couldn't stay; she would be found out eventually if she did.

A loud groan and an agonizing, "O God!" brought her suddenly up on her feet. Johnny! Johnny was in the garden, and he was praying.

In a way, this complicated matters even more: if she left, he would hear her and this would disturb him as he talked to God. But if she didn't leave, she would feel like an intruder into something too sacred for her ears to hear. After all, she hadn't made her "peace with God" yet, like Johnny said he and Trish had. And she had no right whatever to listen to what Johnny wanted to talk over with God. She imagined it would be pretty wonderful to be so intimate with God that one could actually talk to Him, like Johnny declared he did. But, did one cry . . . and groan . . . when he talked to God? Why was her brother sobbing so?

Arla felt sweat break out on her body. She was greatly relieved to know the footsteps had been Johnny's, but why such anguish of soul? And how could she ever get out of the garden without him finding out that she was there?
Noiselessly, she sat down on the white-painted bench to think. Perhaps, if the moon scudded behind a dark cloud for a moment, she could make a quick dash down the path toward the house and Johnny would think it was all just a wild animal trying to get away from both the sound and the smell of a human being.

She lifted her eyes heavenward and saw that the sky was a magnificent deep purple-blue with not the slightest hint of a cloud even. The moon, which had sneaked noiselessly into the sky while she dozed and rode placidly, nonchalantly and lazily above her now, seemed to have bathed the entire garden in an ethereal mantle of shimmering silver. Wherever it could do so, it poked its diffused light through the tree branches and dense bushes and spread its silver patterned carpet on the earth floor. It was so magnificent, so beautiful, Arla thought. And the only reason Johnny hadn't spotted her was because of the dense shade of the tree beneath which she was sitting.

Again, she leaned her head back against the tree's stout and sturdy trunk and closed her eyes, at a loss to know what to do or how to solve the problem of getting away without being heard and detected. She never could stand an eavesdropper, nor a tattletale. She was thankful that, for all her many and varied faults, she was neither a tattletale nor an eavesdropper.

Her mind hurried to one of the girls in school and she felt an involuntary cringe starting somewhere deep within her being. Elena was a pretty enough girl to be really popular, and she had a sweet disposition when and if she wanted to be sweet. But her besetting school sins, if there was such a thing, were eavesdropping then tattling. She was petite and tiny, weighing only slightly more than she, Arla, did. But she could manage to sneak up behind any who were talking without their knowledge that she was anywhere near. It was almost uncanny; kind of another will-o-wisp sort of thing. No matter who was talking, trying to confide in a friend or even planning a surprise for someone, Elena managed to station herself, many times out of sight but never out of earshot, so she could hear what was being said, confided or planned. It became a sore spot to many; a joke to others who, just to watch her carefully-maneuvered positions for hearing to the best advantage, staged many an impromptu mock confidential gathering.

It was bad enough that Elena couldn't resist the temptation to eavesdrop, but her even greater evil of tattling and talebearing was worse. Her industriousness at spreading what she had heard was something else.
And if she had used this bit of industriousness at being helpful and in spreading kindness and good will, she would have been lauded and praised and honored. Quite the opposite was the case, however, and whenever her dainty person came into view the students scattered like a hen with her chicks fleeing a hawk.

Once the poor girl had created quite a furor and turmoil in the school by eavesdropping (as usual) upon the school principal and one of the teachers. For a while, it looked like Elena might be barred from coming to school. Then, in total repentance she apologized to all concerned and, in mercy and kindness, they let her remain in the school. However, she became a much ostracized, little-sought-after individual. Many times, Arla had seen her sitting alone, eating by herself and studying alone. On more than one occasion she had made herself friendly and available to Elena. But she had seemed not to appreciate Arla's gestures of friendliness and kindness. Arla often wondered if it was only a cover up or if Elena was different and actually did enjoy what she was doing and the role she was portraying and acting out so naturally. It was either a matter of poor home training and little or no discipline or downright "nosiness," she decided, sitting in the shadows. Or maybe it was a combination of all three things. Plus more. Who knew? But still, she couldn't help feeling sorry for the girl.

An owl screeched from a distant tree and the frogs kept up their steady staccato of harrumph, harrumphing. Night birds called and sang from thickets and bushes, crooning soft lullabies to mates and infants in nests. From the bushes behind her, Johnny's agonizing groans and sobs continued. It sounded like he was crushed to the very depth of his being. What had done it? she wondered. Why was her brother so broken? She had never heard anything like it. Not ever. Now she became suddenly fearful and scared. Was Johnny losing his senses over this . . . this which he had said was so wonderful?

She sat rigid, trying not to eavesdrop. Never, never would she be guilty of this if she could help it. And she could, by thinking upon something other than Johnny's groaning and sobbing out to God. She would fill her mind with the beautiful sounds and the mysterious sights of moon and stars and sky. Once again, Gram's so-called "strong headedness" could serve her well. She would use this as a positive tool of self-discipline; her mind would not eavesdrop on Johnny as he talked to God; she would concentrate on her planetary "light-friends."
Fireflies flitted in and out of the garden, turning their luminescent lanterns on and off at will, and Arla for a long while watched them in profoundest fascination and intrigue. She recalled how, as a very small child, she and her grandfather had walked into the lush green pastureland on nights like this night and together they had watched as the pastureland became a fairyland of blinking, winking lights, every one of them a lantern in the body of the small firefly. Unknown to them, the tiny creature-insects had made a wonderful world of pure magic for her by their beautiful little lights.

Her grandfather had helped her to catch several of the fascinating light-making lightning bugs, as she called them. Being very careful not to hurt or injure them, and treating them with utmost kindness and gentleness, she held them on her hand or finger and observed firsthand and close-up how quickly and automatically they turned their clear little lights on and off.

She had fallen in love with them as a child and considered them one of the smartest, most intelligent of all tiny creeping, flying things. Never one to catch them and seal them up in a jar, where they died either from suffocation or neglect, or both, Arla always gave them their freedom when they were ready to leave the flat surface of her hand or the knuckle of her finger. She knew how well she loved her freedom than to do less for her little light-makers and night-brighteners. Furthermore, her grandfather had always been kind and good to all his animals and she felt that anything so gentle and harmless and lovely as the fireflies deserved treatment of the same kind as Grandfather's horses and steers. She had seen their lighting power up close; she need not imprison nor confine them in a jar or box or can to observe them more. The memory of what her eyes had beheld and witnessed would stay with her forever. It had seemed a miracle to her then; it remained the same today.

A gentle little breeze, one of the gentlest ever, whispered through the pines above her in a soft swish, swish, swish. Arla felt her body relax. She filled her lungs with great, deep draughts of the fragrant night air laden with the scent-mixture of gardenias, pine, heliotrope, jasmine, honeysuckle, roses and mignonette. Everything was perfect, she thought, except for Johnny's soul-wrenching sobbing. It tore her to pieces inside whenever one of his sobs and groans penetrated her myriad and varied thoughts. She felt like crying too. Johnny was a really great brother, too good to have to cry the way he was.
Arla got up to leave. She decided to make a quick dash for the house regardless of the outcome. Never, never should Johnny know that she was in the garden when he was there talking to God. This was strictly a very private thing between her brother and God, and one which her ears had no right to hear nor listen to. Had she known that Johnny was coming here she never would have come. But she hadn't known. And it was quite obvious that he had not known she was in the garden. She was sure, had he known, that he would have found a different place to talk things over with his new-found Friend.

A twig cracked beneath her feet and for an instant Johnny's sobs seemed to subside. Arla held her breath. Had he heard? she wondered. She was sure he had, for it was some time before the praying and crying resumed. If only she could run and stay in the cover of the dense night shadows. But as soon as she got out from beneath the trees and their dense leaf-laden branches, Johnny would see her as she flew down the flower-bordered garden path. And then he would know that she had heard him. Whatever could she do? she wondered. And if Johnny saw her as she ran along the garden path would he think she was spying on him like he had spied on her when she had slipped away into the night to meet Brad?

Weak with both embarrassment and fear, she sat on the bench again and buried her face in her hands, feeling at a total loss to know what to do. Shame washed over her at the remembrance of her sneaky little rendezvous with the unworthy Brad. And then, in a greater measure, it seemed to flood her entire being over unkind words and harsh, unladylike treatment and deportment toward her kind brother, whose motives were only for her good and whose grave concern was for her safety and protection. It had been almost a case of her defending the criminal, or the crook, and despising the protector.

Tears of remorse washed down her cheeks. Johnny had been so kind to her. So good and patient with her, too. From their earliest years as brother and sister, he had been this way. Always the defender-protector, he had looked out for her at school, or wherever they had gone together. Their kind father and mother had taught him that a real gentleman always treated a lady with utmost respect and courtesy, imprinting on his young mind that while Arla was away from their care and their watchful eye at school, or wherever, he, Johnny, was to look after her and to protect her.
She realized now with sudden clarity that what she had so cruelly charged him with... spying on her... was, in reality, his kind, brotherly protection asserting and exerting itself for her good. So long as Johnny lived she would have nothing to fear she realized quickly, feeling great waves of love and sisterly pride wash over her for him, and shame for herself.

Tears came freely and unashamedly as the realization dawned bright and clear and for the time being she forgot completely that Johnny was in the garden. She was crying hard.

She must have sniffled or cleared her throat, for she suddenly became aware of the fact that Johnny was silent again. Then in a soft, gentle voice she heard,

"Arla, is that you?"

Without wondering what to say or do, or where to go, she blurted out tearfully, "Oh Johnny, yes. Yes! And I wasn't eavesdropping. Honest! I'm sorry I spoke so nastily to you, and that I accused you of spying on me. Forgive me, Johnny! Please. I... I'm terribly sorry. I was so hateful and..."

"Hey. Stop it, Sis." Johnny's voice cut softly into her ear. Settling himself beside her on the bench, he said, "You know you're forgiven, Arla; now stop worrying. But why aren't you up in your room, or in the house? When did you come down here?"

"Right after I finished the supper dishes. But what's wrong, Johnny. Why do you sob so? You... you break my heart to tiny slivers. I don't want you to cry. I don't. What happened? Tell me. Please." Her voice was almost a plea. A sob.

Johnny sighed. Then, in a steady, unbroken voice, he said, "I must leave Bayou Acres."

"You... what?" Arla was on her feet.

"By tomorrow evening. My things must all be out of the house and me well on my way to..."
"To . . . to where, Johnny? What happened? Who said so?"

"To where, I'm not sure just yet. That was one reason I was praying; I . . . . ."

"O Johnny, let's don't bring God into this. Where is He now if He's all you say He is? Why didn't He stop Gram? . . . I know it was she, Johnny; you don't have to tell me. That's why I came to the garden; I knew I'd be getting some of her bitter tongue unless I left. And I . . . I . . . oh Johnny. Johnny! I'm weary of this kind of thing. Why did God take our parents? Why? And why must we put up with . . . with Gram's treatment? Where is God? Oh-h John-n-ny! I . . . want to die. I do!"

"No, you don't, Arla Jean Thacker. You're not ready to die; you'd go straight to hell if God were to cut you off in your sins. Now calm down, dear little sister. God knows where we are. He isn't going to forsake us. I belong to Him and I love Him.

"Johnny! Johnny!" was all Arla could cry as she fell limply on to the earthen garden floor.

(Chapter 6)

For a moment Johnny stood in shock, not knowing what to do. He had never seen anyone faint before and it terrified him momentarily. Then, realizing that he could call upon God anytime and anywhere, he dropped to his knees beside Arla and, laying a gentle hand on her head, he said, "Heavenly Father, we're in a dilemma and a crisis; please heal my sister and show me where to go and what to do. I need you. Oh, how I need you. Help us both, for Jesus' sake. I thank Thee now."

Scarcely had he finished when Arla stirred. "I feel all . . . weak," she said, sitting up. "What happened to me? Where am I? Oh, now I remember. Johnny, help me to the garden bench, please. I guess the shock was more than I could take."

Seating her gently on the bench he pushed her head back against the tree trunk, saying kindly, "Shut your eyes for a while, Arla, and breathe deeply. They say that helps when one feels feint. It's from shock. I'm sure
that is what happened. Brad, and then what happened to Linda, and now this."

"Johnny," Arla said in a weak voice, "Brad's a sealed case with me. Forever. You won't have to worry anymore about me where he is concerned. Trust me. You will, won't you? For once Gram's 'strong headedness' is working good for me."

"Of course I will, Sis. You're a sensible girl. I was sure that if you knew about Linda you'd turn in the right direction. But oh, how you did have me worried for a while -- until I found the Lord; then I turned a lot of things over to Him."

"Johnny, what happened to me?" And Arla was weeping now. "I didn't used to be so . . . so hateful and belligerent. I despise myself. Something happened to me since God took our father and mother. I . . . hate almost everybody anymore. And I don't want to be this way. I don't!"

"Don't blame God, Arla. Please. Even the righteous die and get in accidents sometimes. Our parents are in Heaven. This we know. Maybe it was the only way they'd ever have gotten there. God is all-wise. Who knows but what He allowed them to go the way they did to get you and me to Heaven. I know this, that if our parents had continued on the broad way on which they were traveling, they'd never have gotten to Heaven. Kind and good as they were to us, they were set upon worldly matters and earthly affairs with no thought of God, ever. They were too occupied and preoccupied with earthly things and baubles God may have realized this was their only hope of getting to Heaven; so He allowed what happened to happen. It's not His will that any should parish, but that all should be saved and come to the knowledge of His truth. I read this in the Bible. And I'd rather have Father and Mother in Heaven than for them to have gone on like they were going and then spend eternity in Hell."

"But our once secure world of peace and love has been turned all topsy-turvy and upside-down since they died" Arla cried softly and mournfully. "Nothing's the same anymore. And now, this, with you leaving. What's wrong with Gram, Johnny? I'm sure she doesn't love us. Love doesn't treat one so unkindly and so . . . so . . . well, so harshly. Why must you leave Bayou Acres? Please tell me."
"Because I have become a Christian. And because I told Gram that I loved her and that I was praying for her and wanted to see her converted and ready to meet God."

Arla lifted her head away from the stout trunk of the tree. "You . . . you mean Gram's putting you out because you . . . you got saved, or whatever you call it?" she asked incredulously.

"That's right. She said she'd have no religion whatever in her home. I told her kindly that I didn't have religion but that I had salvation through Jesus' shed blood. She stormed and stomped and fumed like someone possessed."

"Is that why she called you into her office and closed the door?" Arla asked, feeling limp and weak from shock.

"That was at the root of it, I feel; but she wanted to talk things over with me about Ha Penny, too."

"What about Ha Penny?" Arla asked quickly. "She's one of the most gentle horses Gram owns."

"True. But Gram blames Ha Penny herself for losing the colt. I think she may sell her, Arla, or trade her off for another mare. I hate to tell you this; I know how much you love her."

"Oh Johnny, she can't do that. She can't! You and I must redeem Ha Penny -- buy her for ourselves. Please, Johnny. And you can't go away and leave me. I won't stay here, Johnny. I won't. I know you don't want me talking this way, and I know it isn't nice nor proper for me to say this about Gram, but Johnny, I must: Gram has never liked me. Us," she added.

"But she is our grandmother, Arla, and we must respect her and love her. Maybe it's all just your imagination, what you just said about her not liking you. Nor us. Sometimes she's gentle with you."

"When she wants to 'use' me," Arla countered quickly, feeling so wobbly-weak that she wished she could be back in her own bed in her parents' home and sleep for days. "I never could stand seeing anybody having to be bribed or coddled to get them to do something. And I've been
obedient. Except for those few sneaky times, which you know about. But honestly Johnny, I . . . I can't stand it here. That's why I did what I did. I wanted to go away from here and never return. Gram makes life miserable for me. You're outside most of the time and don't know what goes on inside. I was willing and ready to marry anybody who'd have me, just to get away."

"Oh, Arla, you poor kid!" Johnny exclaimed with a shudder. "I didn't realize. But Sis, drag that wicked thought from your mind and don't you ever allow it to have freedom again. You'd have been in a far worse state of mind had you run away with. . . . Well, we'll not mention him again since you said the case is closed. But promise me that no matter what you may have to endure here, you will never, never run away and foolishly marry just anybody who warts you, just to get away from Gram. Somewhere out ahead, God has a wonderful husband for you. So promise me, here and now, that you will wait for that special man and not just up and marry any old Tom, Dick or Harry, as the saying goes, just to get away from Bayou Acres and Gram. Promise?"

"I love Bayou Acres, Johnny: the land, the growing things, the cattle, the serenity of the outdoors. I love it all, Johnny. But Gram . . . !" she buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

"Know why Gram doesn't like me?" she asked quickly.

"Maybe she does like you in her way, Sis."

"No, she doesn't, Johnny. She never has. She was jealous 'cause Grandfather always loved me and was good and kind to both of us. And when Grandfather told me that he had part of the estate made out in your name and mine, and Grandma knew it, well, she seemed to resent me even more than ever."

"She's treated me rather civilly, Arla."

"I think, until you turned your life over to Christ, that Gram viewed you as someone who could and would be greatly beneficial to her on the plantation. You are a man, Johnny, a very capable and efficient young man, strong both in body and mind. To Gram, you were an asset. Me? I was, and am, a liability. Oh, I do a great deal of the housework and the cooking, to be sure. But all of this Gram can do, and prefers to do. At times I feel so sorry for
her that I could cry; I know our coming to live with her made her change her lifestyle and habits to some great degree. But we didn't ask for this change in our lives; it was thrown at us overnight. Literally. Gram took us in out of duty, Johnny, not for love's sake."

"Don't say that, Arla. Please. I love Gram, even though she slapped my face and ordered her 'dirty grandson' -- her words -- out of her house, bags, baggage and all."

"She . . . she slapped your face!" Again Arla felt weak and limp. "Johnny, what I have said has been neither my imagination nor any fabrication of my mind or heart. I heard Gram tell one of the hired help one day, with my very own two ears, that she hadn't wanted to take us in, but out of duty and concern for her reputation, she had to do it. 'So they're here,' she had added, 'and I'll have to make the best of the situation.' Those are her exact words. I've kept them buried deep inside my heart all this time, wishing Grandfather were here so I could talk things over with him, the way we used to do. And Johnny, I . . . I've tried to be good to Gram. And kind, too. But she resents me. One of these days I'll be receiving my marching orders, same as you; see if I don't. Oh Johnny, where will you go? Please, let's go away together somewhere. I can cook and keep house, and soon you will be twenty-one and can get your inheritance from Grandfather's will. He said when we were twenty-one each of us would be able to start out with land and 'growing things.'"

"Yes, I know; he told me the same, Arla. Said he wanted us to know this while he was still living and could see the smile on our face and the light in our eyes. He figured when we were twenty-one years old that we'd not squander what he'd left us so readily as if we were eighteen, he said. I'll find an apartment, God willing, and get work as soon as possible. Trish and I had planned to be married in the spring, the Lord willing. Maybe we'll set it for Thanksgiving or Christmas instead. She had suggested a Thanksgiving wedding -- a sort of thankfulness to God for leading us together and then saving our souls. A Thanksgiving and wedding combined. I figured Gram would need me to help in the groves and orchards then, so mentioned spring time to Trish. And she was agreeable. But things have taken a sudden drastic and radical change. And I believe Trish will want her Thanksgiving candlelight wedding now. Well, it will be perfectly agreeable with me, now that things are working out the way they are. Maybe you can come and live
with us, Arla. After we're married, I mean. Trish is such a good, kindhearted and gentle soul that she'd love having you."

"No, Johnny," Arla said decidedly but kindly. "I'll not come in on you and Trish. You will be starting a new life together. And I believe that two people in love and just starting on their married life together should have privacy, with as little interference from outsiders as possible. Grandfather called marriage an 'institution.' Isn't that kind of a pretty word for it?" she asked, adding quickly, "It makes it sound very stable and firm and solid. At least to me it does."

"And that's just what God intended for a marriage to be," Johnny said with deep conviction. "I almost shudder to think what my life was without Christ. And then, to try to begin a marriage without God as the central and Supreme Being in that marriage. Well, I can't imagine how anyone can make it. I know a great majority of people do, but it's a risky thing."

"Johnny, do you suppose Grandfather knew anything about God? Ever? And do you think he was ever sorry that he married Gram so hastily? It was a 'whirlwind' courtship, he told me once."

"You ask so many questions that I don't know how to answer them, Arla. Like you, I do wish I knew the answer to some of them though. As to Grandfather and God, well, I can't give you any straight forward answer. But from certain little things he used to drop, or say, in our course of conversation together, I often wondered if he had a better knowledge of God than we knew. Or thought, even."

"Once, when we were sitting on the little hill together, overlooking the cotton fields and watching the heat lightning in the sky," Arla said, "Grandfather squeezed my hand and said, 'Child, you're still very small and young, but I want you to remember what I am going to tell you.'"

"I told him I would never forget anything he told me, because I loved him so dearly and knew that he would tell me only the truth about everything. He squeezed my hand again then said, 'When you are old enough to go out with boys, make sure they are honorable young men, honey. And never marry the wrong man, kitten. It's a dreadful thing to have to live with a wrong mate; one who is good looking but lacks the many graces and qualities that make up a happy home. Not all that glitters is gold. It is far better to live with
a kind and loving husband or wife than a handsome, proud, cruel, nagging mate. Store this bit of information and advice in a safe place of your mind for now; then when you need it pull it out, like a file in a drawer, and review it carefully. Make sure that you obey it, Arla, if you want a happy marriage. If you don't heed it, the years ahead will be filled with sorrow and regret and will be haunted with the ghosts of might-have been.' That's what he told me, Johnny. Do you suppose Grandfather was unhappy? Could it be that he had those ghosts of what he called 'might-have-been?"

Johnny was silent for a while. Then he said, "I can't honestly say, Arla. But I remember hearing his oldest brother, our Uncle Raymond, say one time . . . in front of Grandfather . . . that he saw Jannine somebody or other, and that she was still just as sweet and devout and deeply religious as when he, meaning Grandfather, had been dating her. Other than that, I know nothing except that Uncle Raymond said she was a truly wonderful woman, full of piety and inner beauty and strength. Grandfather didn't say anything, but he excused himself and left the room. However, we must not begin to imagine wrong thoughts or we'll come to sin. And we don't need to know about Grandfather's past. That is all history; whatever has been done is done. It cannot be undone, none of it. I was reading today in the Bible that we are to think only upon those things that are lovely and pure and true and of a good report. I am trying to obey this beautiful injunction, Sis. Oh Arla, I do wish you loved my Lord. You'd have Someone to go to when your burdens got heavy; Someone to whom you could bring each and every trouble and sorrow or heartache. And He never turns you away nor breaks a confidence."

"I wish I had someone, Johnny, for I don't know what I shall do if you leave. You're all I have left," she cried. "And I know Gram will forbid us seeing each other. I know it! Oh Johnny, life is cruel. Cruel!"

"Only when you don't know Jesus, Arla dear."

"Look what that has cost you," she cried softly. Pathetically.

"Nothing, Arla. Nothing. Jesus gave His very life for me. Think of it. He died for me; for my sins. Yours, too. That we might be saved and go to Heaven and live with Him forever. At times I can scarcely take this all in, it is so wonderful."
"Please keep praying for me, Johnny. I'll need it more than ever now. But I can't possibly live here if you don't. And Johnny, suddenly I'm scared. Terribly scared and frightened. Where can I go? And please . . . please . . . don't ever forget that you have a sister who loves you very much."

"This tears me up every bit as much as it does you," Johnny confessed. "Not because I have to go out on my own, but because of you. But I'll see you, Arla. Believe me, I'll see you. Each and every week, too."

"I'm old enough to decide where I want to live," Arla stated suddenly, drying the tears from her eyes and sitting up straight and tall. "So maybe I'll leave by myself tomorrow and look for a room in town. I have some money saved up. Enough to keep me for a few weeks. I can get a job and . . . ."

"No, Arla, you mustn't do it. You're a girl, and you're too young to be out on your own. Now promise me you'll stay right here for the present and that you won't go running away and marrying just anybody. Promise me, will you?"

"Oh Johnny, must I? I know what will happen here after you are gone. I promise that I won't marry 'just anybody.' But must I promise to stay here?"

"You'll be safe, living here with Gram, dear Sis.

And that will set my mind at ease. Knowing that, I mean. Meanwhile, I'll keep praying. God knows how to work things out and to solve problems better than we do. Now please promise me that you'll stay right here and let God work things out."

Arla sobbed. Then, raising her eyes toward the sky, she said in a trembling voice, "I promise, Johnny. And . . . and please don't forget to pray for me."

"I won't. Now go. Gram's been looking for you. I want to pray again."

Arla trembled. "Johnny," she said, weeping softly, "I love you. And I'm . . . proud of you. I'll miss you dreadfully." Turning, she ran down the garden path, the moonbeams lighting her way to the house.

(Chapter 7)
The house was dark when Arla tiptoed in through the kitchen door and started for the stairs leading up to her bedroom. She felt like she was having a nightmare of such propensity as to shatter even the strongest of constitutions. Only, she knew, hers was not a nightmare; what was happening to her and Johnny was stark reality. And it hurt. Badly. In fact, it was crushing.

She held her shoes in her hand and, on stockinged-feet, crossed the dining room when Gram's voice cut through the darkness of the hallway, causing Arla to tremble and drop her shoes. She turned quickly and saw, through a crack of the partially-opened door, that Gram was still in her office. The desk fight burned soft-yellow and Gram's voice came out brisk and curt and brittle: "You will come and get her tomorrow then? Yes, that is what I said, didn't I? I don't keep anything unproductive on the place, Bork, you know that. So I shall trust you to. . . ."

Arla fled up the stairs. Gram was getting rid of Ha Penny. She knew it as surely as she knew her name. "Oh Ha Penny! Ha Penny!" she cried, throwing herself across the bed and sobbing into the thick coverlet. How could Gram be so heartless and cruel? she wondered. First Johnny, now the gentle natured, chestnut-brown mare with the softest eyes ever. She hadn't even given Ha Penny a chance to prove herself. No, she hadn't. And Ha Penny still in deep grief over the loss of her firstborn, too.

Thoughts spun around in Arla's head like summer clouds being chased by a strong breeze. Bork! Gram had talked to Mr. Bork. For all his callous appearance and fierce looking countenance, Mr. Bork had a gentle and sympathetic heart. Maybe if she talked to him . . . just maybe . . .

A plan was formulating inside Arla's pretty, young head. It would be worth the risk to rescue her beloved Ha Penny, she decided resolutely and quickly. Yes, it would be worth it all. She must put action to her plan and to her decision, she reasoned sensibly. Some things never would happen unless one helped them to happen. Dreaming was of little worth until one put action to his or her dreams and helped to make them become reality -- helped make them come to pass.

An errant night breeze rustled the curtains at the window, parting them long enough to allow a bright moonbeam to enter and kiss Arla's tear-stained
cheek. It was like a gentle omen to the girl and when the breeze skipped out through the window into the garden and the curtains fell back into place, her spirit felt calm and quiet.

She let her thoughts go to Johnny in the garden and she wondered how she would ever manage without her brother. The thought of him being forced to leave sent a fear through her entire body until she felt sick, sick in body and in heart and soul. Never would she have imagined anyone could be so cruel. To a grandchild especially. And to a gentle horse with eyes as peaceable as a dove's. Oh, if only Grandfather were living! He would set everything in order and calm Gram down until there would be peace. For a while, at least.

The weary girl must have dozed, for it was the door being slammed shut to Gram's bedroom that awakened her. Gram was in "high fever," she knew, and greatly agitated and upset else she wouldn't have slammed the door so loudly. Always, Johnny and she were ordered to close doors quietly and softly, a pattern set for them by their own dear parents and a habit which they two had acquired and made from their childhood days in their own happy home.

She heard Gram pulling dresser drawers out noisily and slamming them shut and, instinctively, she knew that Gram was not merely agitated, and upset but she was angry, as well. Really angry.

Arla waited till everything settled down to peace and quiet in Gram's spacious room. Then she eased her small frame off the bed and tiptoed across the room to the hall, listening intently until she heard the first snore come from inside the closed bedroom door.

Once downstairs, she slipped her shoes on then raced wildly down the lane, bathed in moonlight and stardust, until she came to the Bork's modest but well-kept house, dark except for the moon shining on it. Breathless from her hard run, she stumbled up the three steps to the porch and knocked on the door.

"Who be there?" Mr. Bork asked in his quaint way of talking.

"Open quickly, please," Arla exclaimed. "It's I, Arla. I must see you, Mr. Bork. I must!"
"Well, I'll be," Mr. Bork exclaimed, hustling around inside. "What be you a'doin' out by yourself so late? 'Tain't safe, I tell you. No 'tain't." His voice sounded gruff and upset.

"I'm all right, Mr. Bork. And I doubt that anybody could have caught me if they had tried -- I ran so fast."

The door flew open and a light came on inside the house. Mr. Bork, in bare feet, with a shock of graywhite hair dangling scraggly-like over his high fore head, said gruffly, "Now tell me why you be here."

"Because of Ha Penny," Arla blurted with a sob. "Gram's going to get rid of her, isn't she, Mr. Bork? And . . . and I love her. I love her! She's the most gentle horse on the place. Look at her eyes sometime, Mr. Bork. Have you ever seen them?" she asked, crying pitifully. "They're peaceable and gentle eyes. Great, deep pools of love shine in them. I've come to rescue Ha Penny and you must help me. You will, won't you? Please," she begged, clasping her hands together in tight little knots of anxiety.

"Let's sit us down on the porch," the man said softly. "The missus be tired. That Gram of yours, well, she be a real driver for my missus, makin' her do most nigh three days work in one. Now, let's see," he said, sitting down noisily in one of the chairs on the porch and motioning her to another, "you be inquirin' as to Ha Penny. She lost her colt," he added by way of information.

"I know. I saw it. And it was beautiful, Mr. Bork. Beautiful! Ha Penny's in deep grief and great sorrow. I saw it in her eyes and on her face. Why doesn't Gram give her another chance? Let her prove herself. She's a real lady, Mr. Bork, if there is such a thing among horses. What did Gram tell you to do with her? Is she going to sell her?"

Mr. Bork milked the stubble forming on his chin; then, without preamble or pretense, he said," She be in high fury over somethin' or other and she be almost a givin' Ha Penny away. She tell me to take her away come mornin' and get whatever I can fer her. Can ye imagine that a comin' from your Gram? Can ye?"
Arla's hands clasped and unclasped in an ecstasy of joy and hope. "Then, may I buy her from you? I have some money saved, Mr. Bork. And my money has just as much value to it as someone else's does. Please, will you let me buy her?"

Again the man milked his stubbled chin. "Where you a 'figurin' on stablin' her?" he asked thoughtfully and quickly.

"Here on your place," came the quick reply. "Gram would never notice that you had another horse. And I'd buy whatever feed you need for her. You're kind and good to your animals and I want Ha Penny to have a good home, Mr. Bork. Please, may I buy her? If you sell her to someone else they may abuse her and . . . and hurt her. I can't stand the thought even. And this way I'd be near Ha Penny and could see her the same as always."

"Well . . ." The man fell silent for a while. Then, with what sounded like a bit of laughter in his voice, he said, "We'll do it, Miss Arla. Yes'm! Ha Penny be yours! Sure as the sun come up, yours. Now, how much ye be willin' to pay; a hund-erd?"

"Ha Penny's worth much more than that!" Arla exclaimed.

"The angry woman say to get what I can. Fer a hund-erd she be yours."

Arla was silent for a while. "Mr. Bork, do you think God would be pleased with that?" she asked quickly, pensively.

"Pleased with what?"

"Me paying only one hundred dollars for the gentle Ha Penny?"

Mr. Bork really milked his stubbled chin now. "Well, I can't 'zactly say," he said truthfully. "But when did God come in your mind? Guess I never guessed you thought 'bout Him."

"Johnny knows God, Mr. Bork. Really well. He talks to Him like I'm talking to you. And, well, I wouldn't want to do anything to displease Him, even though I don't know Him yet. Johnny says he 'made his peace with God'. I haven't done that . . . yet. But I believe I shall one of these days. And then, when I do make my 'peace with God,' I don't want a lot of bad and
wrong things staring me in the face and hindering me from doing whatever I
must do to know God the way Johnny knows him. Do you understand what
I'm trying to say?" Arla asked seriously and soberly and innocently.

Mr. Bork cleared his throat and brushed a rough, work-worn and
calloused hand across his eyes. "I . . . I do," he answered in little more than a
hoarse whisper. "And Miss Arla, ye be right; we'll up Ha Penny's price. Not
too much; but a bit more. Now ye be a 'runnin' along . . . or had I best be a
'goin' with ye maybe?"

"Thank you, Mr. Bork, but no. You go back to bed now and rest well.
Thank you. Oh, thank you!" Arla exclaimed, flinging her arms upward then
burying her face in her hands and crying like her happy heart would break.
"You have helped me to rescue Ha Penny and I shall never forget your
kindness. Never," she cried. "Someday maybe Johnny and I can make life a
bit easier and kinder for you and Mrs. Bork. Thank you, again. Tell Mrs. Bork
in the morning, but please, let us keep this our own little secret, just you and
Mrs. Bork and Johnny and I. I will get the money to you in the morning, God
willing, as Johnny says anymore, and you can bring my dear Ha Penny here
then. Oh, I am so happy. My feet feel like they have wings."

"Fly away home then," Mr. Bork said, brushing tears off his cheeks and
away from his eyes. "Now ye be careful," he ordered in a stern voice as she
left the porch.

All the way home, Arla's heart felt feather-fight over her dear Ha Penny.
One great, heavy burden remained with her constantly, however; and that
was Johnny's leaving. Oh, if only she could "rescue" her brother as easily as
Mr. Bork and she had rescued the chestnut brown horse. She would be
willing to become a simple hired help to Gram if she would only allow Johnny
to remain on the plantation-estate. Didn't Gram realize that she was dividing
and breaking up a family? And why, the girl wondered, should Gram be so
incensed against Johnny simply because he had "made his peace with
God?"

It didn't make sense, she decided as she walked. No, not at all.
Perhaps she, Arla, had thought Johnny's radical heart-life change an
incredulous thing when he first told her about it, but it certainly never angered
her nor made her want to see him leave and be rid of him. Truth of the matter
was that the more she saw of that changed life and heard him tell about it, so
much more she stood in awe and admiration of him. Johnny was changed
indeed. Completely so. And no one could argue or dispute that all too-
obvious and visible fact. It was positively indisputable and undeniable.

Perhaps this was what angered Gram so, Arla thought. But then, who
could say what angered her grandmother? She was like a locked box. Such a
very little did anybody know about Gram's past, younger life. Yes, such a
very, very little. Even Arla's late father knew very little, she had heard. One
thing was certain: Gram had wanted it this way. She didn't want anybody
knowing. And, since Gram had come from a far-distant state, with no relation
nearby in all her years of marriage to Grandfather, Arla guessed things would
stay the way Gram had planned it or desired it, one. Or maybe both reasons
were correct. She certainly didn't know.

Arla remembered having heard Johnny ask Gram, once long, long ago,
about her mother and father, and Gram had cut him off instantly, setting her
lips in that tight little way which each grandchild came to know meant, "The
subject's closed. Don't ask another thing." Gram was a great mystery. Even
more so than the attic with its myriad locked chests and boxes, the young girl
decided. What, she wondered, would ever come out and be revealed if Gram
chose to unlock the sealed things inside her heart and mind? Did Johnny's
God perhaps know and see it all? She rather believed He did, from the things
Johnny said.

She let herself inside the big house and went noiselessly up the stairs
when Johnny's whispered "Sis," reached her ears. Turning, she saw him
standing in the living room, framed inside the big window with the moonlight
spilling over him in a silver mantle. His face shone with something she had
not seen before and for a while she was awe-smitten. His gentle, "Come
here. I'd like to talk with you again," made her hurry back down the stairs.

Without saying another word, Johnny led her away from the back
porch, down the cobblestone walk toward the stables. Finding a shaded
bench, he said, "We can talk here without our dear grandmother hearing.
Now listen to me, Arla, and do as I tell you or you'll not be able to live with
yourself. Shower Gram with kindness. I won't be allowed to see you alone
tomorrow, I'm sure, so I'll talk to you tonight. Please, please, don't let Gram
get you to do anything you'll be sorry for, either now or out there in the future.
Promise me."
"I promise, Johnny. But oh, she can be so trying at times. Oh Johnny, promise me that you won't forget me. I don't know how I'll stand it without you. I don't! We're all each has, you know. But oh, I'm so happy Ha Penny's rescued. I ran all the way down to Mr. Bork's house and asked him could I buy her."

"You did? How did you know what Gram was going to do with her?"

"I overheard her talking to Mr. Bork when I came in from the garden. And Johnny, Gram just called him 'Bork'; no respectful mister, nor any such thing. She must have been really angry. At any rate, Ha Penny's mine. God willing, as you say. 'Sure as the sun comes up,' Mr. Bork said. But this is only yours and the Borks' and my secret. No one else's; 'Cause I don't want more trouble from Gram. Ha Penny will be stabled and pastured with Mr. Bork's horses and I promised to buy her feed . . . grain and hay and such.

Johnny looked at Arla with great admiration. "Well, I see that I can trust my little sister to do what's right," he said proudly. "And I know I can trust the God I serve to keep her and take better care of her than I can. Ever. Somehow, we will devise a plan where I can see you and you me. So don't you worry about that."

"At the Borks, Johnny. They're not on Gram's property. And I can easily get down there and back in the evening after Gram's asleep."

"We'll work something out, God willing. And now, Arla, I want to ask a favor of you. . . ."

"Like what, Johnny?" she asked quickly.

"I want to pray with you before we must be separated."

"Oh Johnny, I'd love it! Even though it did make me feel all goose-bumpy prickly and strange as I heard you in the garden tonight."

Without another word Johnny's hands came down upon his sister's head in a light, gentle touch and his heart opened up like a great fountain of prayer. Beautiful sentences . . . Heavenly sentences, Heaven inspired . . . poured from his lips as he cried and talked to his God about the sister whom he had promised his parents that he would protect and take care of and from
whom now he was being forced to part and leave. "Keep Thy Hand upon her," he pled with God, "And bring her to Thyself," he added. Then as a final blessing, he praised God for giving them to each other as brother and sister, finishing with, "I place her in Thy Hands, here and now, my kind Heavenly Father. Guide her, shield her, protect her and, again, I ask, bring her to Thee. May she come to love and to trust Thee the way Thou hast done for me. In Jesus' name, with thanksgiving, I ask these things. Amen."

Arla felt like a benediction had been pronounced upon her. Johnny's hands felt like pure angel wings. She was weeping softly as they headed back to the house.

(Chapter 8)

All the way up the path the two were silent. At the kitchen door Arla turned and whispered a broken, "Good night, Johnny. I love you. And... and thank you for praying for me."

"I'll never stop praying for you, remember that. Nor stop loving my sister. Someday you will come to love my God and my Savior, Arla."

"You make it sound wonderful."

"You must experience the peace and love and joy to understand what I am trying to convey to you. Good night, Arla. And until we meet again, may God watch over us both."

Arla wept as she got ready for bed. She felt almost like she had experienced the death of another loved one and she had a queer and strange sensation of living in an unreal world. Everything seemed so very unreal and all-wrong to her.

It was late when she crawled between the silky feeling sheets. Instead of closing her eyes, she stared at the moon-bathed room in which she was lying, wondering what the new day would bring forth. Johnny had mentioned that Gram had been looking for her that evening. So she supposed she was in for a slice of Gram's hot tongue. Maybe more. What if Gram put her out too? Where would she go? She was almost eighteen; she could always find something to do in one of the restaurants in town. Or one of the fast food eating places, perhaps. Since she had bought Ha Penny and would be
paying Mr. Bork for her in the morning, she wouldn't have any really great amount of money left with which to rent an apartment that was really nice and decent.

A hoot owl settled on a limb of the sweet gum tree near her window and called out, "Who, who, who, who?" pausing every now and then in silence before taking up the questioning call again. Arla wondered if he could be asking her who would be next to get orders to leave.

She wondered if Johnny was asleep, wondered too if anybody could actually sleep knowing they were forced to leave within a few hours. But with Johnny knowing God the way he did she was sure that he had turned every detail of his life over to Him. At least he had told her as much in some of the things he said.

Fatigue and exhaustion took its toll and before long Arla’s eyes closed and she fell asleep. It was a troubled sleep, however. She dreamed of being separated from Johnny and never seeing him again; then of seeing him from a distance but being imprisoned by a wall. It was terrifying, and once she had wanted to scream for him to help her out, over the wall, but no sound came. Her voice seemed to have left her. She began to cry, and with a start she sat up in bed, wide awake and shaking like she was freezing. She was thankful that it was all only a horrid dream and a dreadful nightmare. Johnny had promised that he would get to see her every week. She must push her fears away and get some sleep.

She wiped perspiration from her forehead. Then, still trembling, she pulled the sheet up around her neck and closed her eyes, wondering what time Johnny would leave. Gram would see to it that she was nowhere near Johnny, she knew. Oh, how hard this must be on her brother -- their being separated.

The frogs called from the bayou and crickets chirped in the grasses beneath her window. Everything outside seemed peaceful and just as beautiful as ever. If only everything were as harmonious and peaceful inside the big plantation house, Arla thought. Oh, what elegant furnishings inside and gigantic columns outside, when strife and tension hung like a heavy shroud in its depth.
Tears squeezed out of her closed eyes, lying damply in her long lashes before rolling down her cheeks. She felt numb. And very much grown up. The recent experiences had matured her in an unbelievably fast process. She felt almost old. It was as though she had been catapulted from her carefree teen years into the problems and trials of full adulthood over night, literally and actually, with no buffer period between -- nothing to prepare her for it nor cushion the hurt and the pain that accompanied it.

She fell asleep with tears lingering on her cheeks and the moonbeams, reaching them through the curtains, transformed each one into a glittering diamond. But she never knew.

She thought she heard a commotion sometime during the night, but being heavy with sleep and her body far from having had its quota of rest, she decided it was all just another bad dream or a nightmare and she was soon once more totally oblivious to her surroundings, wrapped in the body-building, strength-affording benefits of sleep.

The mockingbird awakened her just as the sun was sending its rosy-gold streamers into another cloudless sky. Arla sat up and, parting the sheer curtains carefully, she spied the happy singer just outside the window. On a limb of the sweet gum tree with his head raised toward heaven, the songster serenaded her with such beauty that it caused tears to cascade down her cheeks. How she wished the atmosphere inside the big house were as jubilant and song-filled. How very different everything would be.

She remembered that this was the day when Gram had ordered Johnny to leave and shrugging quickly into her long robe, she threw her bedroom door open and ran quietly down the hallway to Johnny's room.

She gasped as she stood in the open doorway. Johnny's room was no longer there! The four walls were there, to be sure, and so was the century-old brick fireplace; but that was all that remained of the familiar things in the room. The furniture was all gone. In its place were the grand old antique pieces taken from another room of the house, all arranged beautifully, orderly and neatly inside the room. Johnny's room! It was uncanny.

Arla fled down the hallway to her own room and wept. It was as though Gram wanted to erase Johnny and his memory forever from the place. What did Gram do with the beautiful solid cherry bedroom suite in Johnny's room?
And who did the moving-changing-rearranging? And when? Johnny had till . . . well, till afternoon. Hadn't he said that to her? Or had she only thought that's what he had said? Where was her brother now? And when had he left?

Questions! Questions! If only she knew the answers -- to some, at least.

She felt dizzy and numb with shock. When would these unbelievable and dreadful happenings cease? she wondered as she made the bed, showered, dressed and combed her long hair. With Johnny gone and Gram's temper at the burning point, she had no incentive to go downstairs and begin work. But she must, she knew. For Johnny's dear sake. "Shower Gram with kindness," he had told her. How could she act civil, even, to Gram, knowing what she had done to Johnny!

She heard the soft clucking of the chickens in their fenced-in yard some distance behind the house and knew that Gram was feeding them. Gram was very definitely one of the "early to bed, early to rise" people. Only this morning she must have been an early-early riser, else how would the transformation have been completed in Johnny's room. And whom would Gram have gotten, at whatever early hour it had happened, to have cleaned the room and moved the furnishings? But knowing her grandmother and her set will, Arla knew she had paid someone well to do the job. And that commotion she thought she had heard, and which she felt was all just yet another bad dream, could it have been the moving of the furniture? She was sure, now, that it was. And suddenly a new set of questions popped into her mind: Had Johnny left sometime during the night, and Gram heard it? Or had Gram gotten awake and in her anger "evicted" Johnny during the night?

"Oh Johnny!" She cried into her hands. "Johnny! If only I knew where you were! If only I could talk to you and ask you what happened." A sudden wave of sisterly love washed over her and in that moment Arla knew that the bond between them was unshakable and unbreakable. Gram could separate them bodily and physically but never would she be able to divide them or break the love and loyalty each had for the other. That was a natural blood-bond, stronger than ever now. She felt it; she was sure her brother did also.

She opened the door and started down the hallway toward the stairs when she remembered Ha Penny. It was like a ray of sunshine after a fierce storm, the thought that the beautiful horse was hers. This day to be exact she
would pay for the gentle mare, get the papers stating as much from Mr. Bork, and then, whenever possible, she would visit Ha Penny and shower her with all the affection possible. The beautiful mare would not be deprived of the love she so deserved and which she had earned by her gentleness.

The thought put wings to her feet and she ran down the stairs into the kitchen.

"Your Gram, she said for you to take the day off," a woman said, standing in the middle of the kitchen with a dish towel in her hand. "I'm Birdie. Your Gram hired me last night."

"I . . . I . . . oh, good morning. I'm pleased to meet you, Birdie. I'm Arla. Where is Gram? Yesterday she told me I was to help in. . . ."

"She had a change of mind," Birdie said, laughing. "Or a change of heart. She said for you to take the day off. She's gone. Left as soon as the sun came up. On business, I take it. I just finished feeding the hens, and as soon as I wash my hands I'll get you some breakfast."

"Oh, thank you. But I'll get my own breakfast. A little orange juice and a bowl of oats and I'll be through."

"I make super Swedish pancakes. And crepes. Sure you don't want any?"

"Not now, Birdie, thanks. I'll try them one of these days, see if I don't. God willing, I mean."

"I'm sure God will be willing. Why the funny statement?"

"That's what Johnny says, now that he's become converted and has 'made his peace with God.' Johnny's my brother. And . . . and he lived here too until . . . until. . . ."

Arla couldn't finish. She turned and poured some orange juice, brushing tears off her face. Then she said, "Sorry, I don't believe I can eat any oats this morning." With that, she rushed upstairs, kicked off her house slippers and grabbed her loafers. She felt limp as a wet dish cloth. The day was hers,
to do what she wanted to do in it. This was good, in that she wouldn't need to rush with the transaction of buying Ha Penny.

She carefully lifted up her folded lingerie in one of the dresser drawers then she took out a silk covered hosiery box. From this she extracted the bills with which to pay for Ha Penny. Then, replacing the box neatly back in its place beneath the lingerie, she put the bills in the deep pocket of her denim skirt and closed the dresser drawer, locking it securely with the key made for the purpose.

She stood for a while inside the big east window, wondering what Gram's business trip consisted of this time, and knowing only too well that she would never know. And yet another mystery was the hiring of Birdie. Gram never liked having anyone in her kitchen, so why Birdie?

She slipped her feet into her loafers and discovered something stuck into the toe of the right foot. Turning the shoe upside down she tried dumping whatever it was out. But nothing came. Still, she knew something had blocked her foot from going in. Perhaps the inner sole lining had gotten loose and worked its way up into the toe area, she mused, reaching inside. In her hand was a piece of paper, crumpled now because she had tried to get her foot into the shoe. Immediately Arla knew from whom it was.

Smoothing out the wrinkled paper, she recognized Johnny's free-style penmanship and before she realized it, she was sobbing brokenly. She hugged the letter to her. Then, as soon as she could stop the tears from flowing, she read,

My Dear Arla,

It's late, late. Or should I say very early morning! Three o'clock, to be real exact and explicit. Gram just came into my room and in her most authoritative and militant tone, said, "Up! Be going! Now! You shall not remain here any longer. I give you two hours to have the room cleared and you be gone."

Turning every light on in the room, she marched out of the place and closed the door behind her. Naturally, I was wide awake by this time so jumped out of bed and began getting the rest of my things together. (I had done quite a bit of this before going to bed last night). Now I must leave. So I
felt I must write you this letter as a parting token of my love and deep concern for you.

Whatever you do, Arla, keep those promises you made to me, about not running away and marrying just any old scoundrel merely to be out from under the stress and strain you are now under. You could get into something far worse, my dear. I'm counting on you. And believe me, little sis, I will be praying for you! You can count on this. Every day!

Don't become bitter in your heart toward Gram. Please! She is to be pitied. Try to love her for my sake, will you?

And Arla, about Ha Penny -- I'm going to pay half of the price; this way she'll be our horse. And I'll feel like we're still a brother-sister team and like I have a little something left here. I know Mr. Bork well enough to know that he'll be happy over this arrangement.

Beneath the boudoir chair just inside your door, I have put my little New Testament. It's yours, with my love and my deepest and sincerest prayers. All I ask is for you to read it, Arla. Every day. Then be sure to hide it. If Gram ever discovers it she'll destroy it. So guard it. It is precious and wonderful!

I must leave now. But you shall be in my every prayer. And I will find a way to see you. By God's grace. I am forbidden to come here . . . ever. But God . . . Bless His dear name!

I entrust you into my God's keeping and protection. I'll be in touch . . . someway . . . and let you know where I am and what I am doing. I believe Mr. and Mrs. Bork would make super-good 'mailmen.' Don't you?

Until we see one another or hear from each other, may God watch over us. Love Gram and be kind to her. I know you have been. But please continue to do so now, more than ever. Your devoted brother-Johnny. Arla clutched the letter to her heart again. Then she slipped across the room and reached beneath the velvet, powder-blue bedroom chair. She found the treasure immediately and drew it to her heart, feeling in some small way that at least a part of Johnny was still remaining in the big house. And of course she would read it. For Johnny's sake. And for love of Johnny.
Taking the key, she unlocked the dresser drawer and slipped both the letter and the New Testament inside. Then she locked the drawer again. Tonight when she was lonesome for her brother, she would unlock the drawer and reread his letter; then she would read from the little Book, his parting gift to her. It was different looking from any other book she had ever had. But she would read it. For Johnny’s sake!

(Chapter 9)

Arla slipped out into the brilliant sunlight of the quiet morning. It was a beautiful day, but the events of the night made it a strange day too. Strange because Johnny was actually thrust out; strange, too, because of Gram's sudden, necessary business trip, and strange because of a "hired woman" in Gram's kitchen.

Arla took her time at getting to the Bork's house. No need for running, nor hurrying even. And since the house was not along any main road but was nestled snugly and cozily in a wooded area back some distance from a narrow black-top road which was seldom traveled, she walked slowly and leisurely, stopping every now and then to watch birds on wing and to pick wild flowers for Mrs. Bork. Wild roses grew in great abundance along the quiet little road. Their dainty little pink heads swayed with the breeze and nodded to the sun while their delicious and subtle fragrance seemed to have attracted the bees from miles around. The air was astir with them and their soft buzzing sound. Busy little creatures, Arla thought, as she watched their ceaseless activity and busyness. The world was a beautiful place to live in. It was people and their attitudes and actions that made it seem all wrong and horrible, she temporized as the Bork's house came into view.

She saw Mrs. Bork as she scattered grain for her chickens; saw her stoop down and stroke their backs, too. Mrs. Bork was a gentle woman with quiet graces, a sweet face and a kind heart. Humans, animals and fowl were all recipients of her graces and kindness'. Each was a part of the Bork's place and was treated kindly, not because of what they could give or produce but simply because they belonged to the Borks.

Arla thought how wonderful this must be and once more longed to be able to bring back her parents and have their home re-established. But, no, this would not be right. Johnny said they had made it to Heaven and that that was the most important thing of all. And she guessed he was right. Yes, she
knew he was right. And if Heaven was everything Johnny had told her it was she would be extremely selfish to wish them back. But she couldn't help remembering how happy the four of them used to be when they were together. What were her father and mother doing, now that they were in Heaven? There were no parties up there, she was sure. So whatever God did, if they were in Heaven like their uncle had told Johnny, well God must have changed them radically for Arla's heart told her that some of the things they did while living would certainly not have been pleasing to God and world definitely not be found inside a city so wonderful as Heaven.

A sudden, startling thought hammered inside her head. Or was it her heart? she wondered. Little matter which one; the thought was there, somewhere inside her being, and it startled her. Was she doing things that would not be tolerated in Heaven, things that would bar her entrance and keep her out? Johnny had said one had to be converted to get into this beautiful and holy place. Converted?

She stood in the sparse shade of a red bud tree and pondered the word Convert . . . to change; change over; to turn the other way around. Did her mother and father have their "turn around" before they died? Had they changed their way of living? Of course, they didn't have any more living to do. Not in this world, where she was still living and breathing in the delectable perfume of wild roses and honeysuckle. Their life was crushed out rapidly. So fast; so quickly. But if they were in Heaven, well, they would have had to change. So, if they were changed, that would mean that they had gotten converted. Johnny said only the converted ones got into that City. That meant that she wouldn't get in unless she became converted.

She swallowed. The thought left her almost breathless, Never in all her life had she given any thought to death and to dying. Oh, she knew that some young people died occasionally. But she thought this was a rare and unusual thing. Generally, it was the old and the infirmed whose obituary was seen in the newspaper, was it not? But now, for some strange and startling reason, she knew that wasn't so; death did claim young people. Often. And children, too. And just because one was healthy and strong was no sure guarantee that he or she would not cue. Car accidents were taking a great many lives. How well she knew this!

Deep in solemn thought, she walked toward the house.
Mrs. Bork saw her coming. Rather, several of her guinea hens alerted her of Arla's approach by the racket and the noise they made. "Regular watchdogs," Mrs. Bork had once said of the dark-gray and white spotted fowl. And it was true; they were a lot like a watchdog, with the racket and the noise they made. And both Mr. and Mrs. Bork seemed to know the meaning of the different sounds made by the livestock and the fowl which they kept. But Arla supposed that anyone could do the same if they took the time to study their animals and fowl and observed their behavioral patterns and actions.

"Come on. Come on, child," Mrs. Bork said warmly, opening her arms wide for Arla to enter into them.

Like one starved for love and affection, Arla ran into the wide-open arms and, feeling the love that emanated from deep within the heart of the gracious woman, the fountain of her emotions opened wide and she wept unashamedly on the ample shoulder, so comforting and so consoling.

Mrs. Bork wept too. Arla felt the tears as they trickled down her forehead.

"You poor, poor girl!" Mrs. Bork crooned motherly and ever so softly. "You've really had a hard time. You and Johnny. But the mister and I'll look after you all we can. I promise you, we will, Arla. 'Tis a bad day indeed when one gets driven out of the only house he had! Yes, a bad day indeed!"

Arla lifted her head off the loving shoulder "You . . . you know? About Johnny, I mean?"

"Course we know. And my mister's had just about all he can take of your Groin's carrying's on. I tell you, she can't be pleased. No matter how one tries, she can't be pleased! There! I've said what I oughtn't to have said but what I've wanted to say for ever so long as I've known Mrs. Thacker. And that's a long, long time. You'll have to forgive me," she implored, "but that woman's impossible to please. Now her husband, your grandfather, was as good a man as ever we knew. He was kind and good and easy to get along with and always wanting to do something good and nice for everybody, too. Well, when Johnny came by this morning at that unearthly early hour, Mr. Bork and I both knew something bad was wrong."
"What time was he here?" Arla asked quickly, as a fresh flow of tears started.

"Not quite four o'clock. Can you imagine it! Not even four o'clock! When, like I said, we knew something was wrong, the mister and I. And being wide awake from the knock on the door, and then hearing Johnny's voice, we got up and dressed and let the boy in."

"And did he tell you what happened at the big house, Mrs. Bork?"

"Johnny's not one for much talking, as you know. Said he stopped by to pay his half of Ha Penny, that he felt both of you should have part interest in her since you were brother and sister. Well, we knew there was something in the wind. Johnny would not have stopped at that hour if he could have paid his share later on in the day. So Mr. Bork just up and asked him if he had to leave Bayou Estates. And Johnny said yes, that your Gram had told him to leave and never again to set foot on the place. Well, I tell you, child, that just about did it for my mister. He wanted Johnny to stay right here with us. We'd be proud to keep him. But Johnny said he figured that under the circumstances it wouldn't be wise for him to do that. He felt that Mrs. Thacker would make it hard on us, Mr. Bork and me. And she would have too. But that wouldn't have mattered; we own our place and everything on it. And except for us working for her, well, she couldn't have hurt us too much. Only just told us she didn't need our help any more. And I'm not sure but what that would be the best thing in the world for Mr. Bork. It would save him a lot of hard work... long days and into the night too, at times. And we could live nicely off the land here, Arla. No need of him a 'killin' himself. Especially when it's not appreciated."

"Oh, I do wish Johnny had decided to stay with you, Mrs. Bork. Why we could have seen each other every day if he had. And he could have gotten work somewhere nearby and have paid you room and board for staying here. He'll have to pay that out to someone somewhere else."

"But Johnny knows what he's doing, I'm sure," Mrs. Bork replied. "And he'll find a good job somewhere, see if he doesn't."

"I'm sure he will. He's qualified for numerous trades. The only reason he didn't get work anywhere else was because Gram said she needed him and could use him all the time at the Estate."
"Did she pay him?" Mrs. Bork asked quickly. "Not that I mean to probe; I was just wondering. And hoping, too, that Johnny earned what he was worth."

"I don't know what arrangements were made between them," Arla said thoughtfully and truthfully. "Johnny never told me. And then, seeing that we are grandchildren and that Gram gave us room and board, well, I would imagine, knowing Johnny, that he wouldn't take very much pay from Gram, even if she wanted him to have it. Johnny's fair, Mrs. Bork."

"Don't we know this!" the woman exclaimed. "And now just look what I've done to your bouquet of flowers; kept you standing out here until they're wilting. Come, child, we'll go inside and have a scone and a glass of cold milk."

"The flowers are for you," Arla said. "I picked them especially for you because I know how well you love them. Let's get them in water and I'm sure they'll perk their pretty heads up again. This sun makes me feel kind of wilted, too. It's hot today. But I'm glad Johnny had a nice day instead of a rainy, cloudy day in which to leave. Maybe he'll remember the sunshine and the beauty and feel cheered up a bit by that."

"What sunshine, Arla? At four o'clock! Well, not even quite four o'clock, it was. If he remembers anything it will be one dreadful nightmare. And it coming from his grandmother, too! I can't imagine this. I can't. But here, sit and rest a while in the kitchen. It's cool in here," Mrs. Bork remarked as she opened the screen door and motioned Arla inside.

"It's hard for me to imagine, too," Arla declared. "But it's reality, nonetheless. And it shakes me with fear at times, Mrs. Bork. I feel just all, well..., sort of dead. That's kind of dumb for a living person to say, isn't it? But that's how I feel."

Mrs. Bork put the flowers in water; then she poured each of them a glass of icy-cold milk and sat in a chair near Arla. "It isn't dumb, dear child. No, not at all. I've felt the same way a number of times. It's the shock that does it. And that's what you're experiencing right now, shock. You'll get over it, you and Johnny, because you're both young. But the hurt and the pain of it, well, that may stay with you for a long time. And then, this kind of thing can
leave scars." She added the last statement with a note of extreme sorrow and compassion.

Arla trembled. Scars could be so ugly, she knew. Yes, so very ugly and unsightly. Tears rolled down her cheeks again. Lately, they seemed to hang right near the surface and start flowing at the least little thing. But she couldn't help it; she had never been through anything like what she was coming through.

"I wish my brother were here," she cried. "I don't believe Johnny will allow this to make deep scars on him, Mrs. Bork; He knows God now. Talks to Him just like you and I are talking. Did you know this? He's different. Really different. And I'm sure that, knowing Johnny the way I do, he'll keep talking to God until God will take every bad scar away and Johnny's heart will go right on loving Gram and forgiving her. But me, well. . . ."

"Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea for you to learn Johnny's secret, Arla."

"Oh it's not a secret; Johnny said he 'made his peace with God,' and now, since God forgave him of every sin, it's just natural and easy for him to love Gram. But this infuriates Gram. I feel Gram actually hates Johnny now. And all because he became converted -- as he called it, when he told me about what happened to him. You'd think Gram would at least respect him for what he did, wouldn't you?"

"Indeed so. But maybe your grandmother feels uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable? Why?"

"Well, Arla, people who have done wicked and evil things, and who are still practicing doing evil things, well . . . know what happens?" Mrs. Bork asked, looking Arla full in the face.

"No. What?"

"They feel guilty around someone who has become a Christian, someone who has gotten converted. It makes them feel the wrongness of their evil. The Bible says that Noah 'condemned the world' by his righteous living. Maybe your grandmother feels condemned."
"Oh, then you read the Bible, Mrs. Bork? And why would Gram feel condemned?"

"Indeed I do read the Bible. I wouldn't think of beginning my day without reading from its precious pages and then talking to God. It helps me go through the day with perfect calmness and a deep inner joy and peace."

Arla was silent for a long while. She ate the delicious scone in deep thought. "Johnny gave me his little New Testament," she confided in a soft voice, almost as if she were afraid the gentle breeze would carry her sentence on the wind and her Gram would hear it. "Please don't tell anyone," she warned. "Like Johnny said, Gram would destroy it if she knew I had it. So I locked it in the dresser drawer with Johnny's letter. He wrote me a letter and stuffed it in the toe part of my loafers. I found it when I went to put them on this morning."

"You will read the little Testament, Arla, won't you?"

"Oh, yes. For Johnny's sake. And for love of Johnny."

"For Jesus' sake, dear child. Read it for Jesus' sake. And for Arla's benefit. I promise, it will help you. Do wonders for you. And as to why your Gram should feel condemned, well, sin always finds one out, you know."

"No, I didn't know. What do you mean?"

"Back to God's Word again . . . the Bible: In the Book of Numbers, chapter 32, verse 23, God said, speaking through Moses, ' . . . and be sure your sin will find you out.' Sin always finds us out one way or another. The Bible says there is 'nothing covered that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known.' (Matthew 10:26). God's eyes see everything. And since we know that Heaven is a holy place and pure, and that no sin can ever enter into its beautiful gates, that's why one must be converted . . . changed . . . before he can get into that Celestial City. By repenting and confessing our sins and asking God for Christ's sake to have mercy upon us and to forgive us our sins, we become changed through Jesus' blood. We are converged. And unless one does repent, and is converted, he or she can never have entrance into Heaven. His sins will have to be dealt with, either by confessing and forsaking them down here on earth or meeting them at God's blazing Judgment Bar, where they will be proclaimed for all to hear and see and
know. And then there will be no way to change one's life and manner of living. It will be too late. The day of grace will have passed. Forever and ever."

"It sounds . . . fearful!" Arla exclaimed.

"It will be, if one fails to repent and get right with God," Mrs. Bork said. "And I think this is what is happening to your Gram; she refuses to turn about face and humble herself before the Almighty. But unless she does, there's a fearful day ahead for her. Sin has its pay day, dear child. Yes, a horrible pay day. 'Be not deceived; God is not mocked:' Galatians 6:7 tells us, 'for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' No one can sin and get by with it. No one!"

Arla shuddered. She had never heard such things before; not in all of her almost eighteen years. But they all came from the Bible, Mrs. Bork said; so that meant they were true. It was a sobering thought, this business of having one's heart changed or of not having it changed, by being converted.

"You've given me much to think about, Mrs. Bork," Arla said seriously. "And now, before I forget it, here's my money for Ha Penny. My half of the price, as per Johnny's request and suggestion that we buy her together."

"Thank you, Arla. I'll see that the mister gets it when he comes home tonight. Ha Penny's been here for hours; Mr. Bork went after her as soon as Johnny left. She's enjoying the freedom of the open pasture and the friendship of the other horses. Why not go and see her?"

"Oh, I will!" Arla cried, hurrying toward the door.

(Chapter 10)

It was a serious faced Arla who, after several hours with Mrs. Bork and Ha Penny, started back toward Bayou Estates Plantation. The visit with Mrs. Bork was refreshing and sweet She would cherish that good woman's kindness and love for ever. And even though she didn't understand everything she had heard, she knew it was true because Mrs. Bork was a person whose word could be counted on. She never said anything but the truth.
The sun was hot, hot, a typical late summer day, and Arla sought out every shade tree she could find along the road home. She liked the summer, even if it was hot. When her parents lived, her mother utilized the summer months to their fullest and best by surprising Johnny and her father and her with delicious meals served on the patio or in the rose garden. Impromptu picnics were also a part of her many surprises and the food, no matter how simple, tasted like it came from the finest of chefs in the country. The change of setting from eating inside to the outside, and the warm air and atmosphere of love and congeniality, whet everyone's appetite. Remembering those times now made a lump come up in Arla's throat. They were so happy together, her father and mother and Johnny and she.

She felt a bit hungry and decided to go straight to the kitchen and fix herself a salad and a sandwich. Then she remembered that Gram had a hired woman in the kitchen now. Would Birdie resent it if she got her own lunch? she wondered. Just what had Gram told her she was to do: cook, clean, dust, keep the entire house? Or were her duties delegated strictly to the business of the kitchen? Again there came that queer feeling of it not making sense, hiring a woman to cook and bake and clean, or whatever, for just two people . . . Gram and herself. Especially when she and Gram had kept the house beautifully clean by themselves and had done all of the cooking and baking, not to mention the canning and freezing as fruits and vegetables came in season.

She stood beneath a magnificent magnolia tree for a long time, debating what to do: to go in and get her own lunch or not to go in. She certainly didn't want any new friction and tension to spring up beneath the roof of the stately old plantation house, that was a for-sure thing. She never did like friction, nor the kind of tension that seemed ever-present in the big house since Johnny and she had come to live there. And maybe it was there even before that, she thought. Who knew? Her dear grandfather would never have said anything if it was. He was every inch of him a gentleman with equally gentle and gracious manners and courtesies. No, he would not have breathed his woes to anyone, not even to his two very much loved grandchildren. The carry over of love and respect was strong, not to mention the binding of the sacred marriage vow-contract.

Arla shuddered when she recalled the vows which she had heard repeated at numerous weddings where she had served either as an attendant or a spectator friend. Those vows were so totally binding, each to
the other. And for a lifetime too. Her thoughts traveled to Brad then, and to the foolishness of her heart and of her thinking. Again she shuddered. Then, more thankful than ever for Johnny and his gallantry at "rescuing" her, she remembered that Brad was a once-upon-a-time acquaintance and that that chapter of her life was forever closed.

She turned toward the house, deciding that sooner or later she would have to eat and it may just as well be "sooner" and have it over with.

Everything was silent and still when she walked into the kitchen. There wasn't a sign of Birdie. Arla prepared a salad and made a cold beef sandwich then took it out to the patio where she could enjoy the sights and the sounds of summer. She wondered where Johnny was and if he had found an apartment as yet. Mrs. Bork said he was there before four -- that meant that already he was gone eight hours. How lonesome it was without him!

She ate her salad and sandwich, washed and dried her few dishes, then made her way to the garden. She wanted to sit as she sat on the bench list night and try to re-live what she had heard . . . of her brother praying. Never had she heard anything like it. Never. And to think that she had heard it coming from Johnny. This was the most amazing thing of all. Johnny, who had never been religious. Not that he was irreligious, he wasn't. He was just, well, nothing. Like she was.

She was almost to the curve in the garden when a voice called to her. Startled, she looked up into the leafy branches of a fig tree and saw a pair of blue-gray eyes smiling down on her.

"It's your 'tormentor' again," Justin teased, dropping from the tree to the garden floor.

For a brief moment Arla was shocked. Then, recalling the first time she had encountered the young man, she threw her head back and laughed.

"And what's so funny?" Justin asked with a broad smile.

"You. Oh, pardon me, I didn't mean that like it sounds. It's just that, well . . . it seems like every time we meet, you're in a tree."
"Kind of romantic, I'd say. Or maybe it's the other way around," he quipped, laughing.

"It's funny," Arla said, still laughing. "It would make a rather good plot for a story."

"Hey, it would!" Justin exclaimed. "Girl comes down the garden path to gather herbs for drying; boy drops out of the tree in front of her, nearly frightening her to death. A great plot. Yes, a great plot." He laughed again. Then, seriously, he said, "I heard about a man and a woman who sewed fig leaves together to clothe themselves."

"Is that some kind of joke?" Arla asked.

"No. It's a for-real thing. It's in the Bible. Or so my cousin tells me it is."

Immediately Arla felt at ease. "Are . . . are you religious, Justin? I mean, well . . . what do I mean? I guess it is, are you religious?"

Justin scratched his head. "You ask rather deep and profound questions," he replied. "And by 'religious,' if you mean am I like my cousin, the answer is no. Someday, though, I believe I shall be like she is. She's not merely religious for religion's sake; she's different. Changed. Radically so. And I must admit that there's something real about this change in her."

Arla gasped. It sounded so much like what had happened to Johnny. "Tell me about it, will you please?" she asked eagerly.

"It's a rather detailed and lengthy story," Justin said, but if you really want to hear it I'll try to make it as brief as I can so my work here won't be hindered."

"I'm serious; I do want to hear about it."

Justin wiped the perspiration from his face. "That feels better," he said. "At least it got a bit of the dirt off my cheeks. Now, I hardly know where to begin or how. But there must always be a beginning somewhere so I shall just say that this cousin of mine has always been different from the other members of her family in that, while she never attended church..., but neither did any in her family..., she never had the worldly bent like the others had. It
seemed like there was almost always something or other going on at their house, or at some friends' houses--parties and that sort of thing. The others thought it was great and never missed a single thing unless, of course, they were ill or some such thing. This cousin of mine just never participated. Never! She stayed home and 'kept the home fires burning,' as the others always said about her. She loved to crochet and knit and embroider and do all kinds of beautiful womanly things."

"That sounds wonderful," Arla declared. "I like women to be women. I think that sort of thing is becoming to a woman. Don't you?"

"With all my heart, yes. And I am told that my own dear mother was just this type of woman. Quite old fashioned, they say. Oh, but I wish I could have known her."

"You . . . your . . . mother . . . is dead also?"

"For many years. I was three when she passed away."

"Oh, I'm sorry! I . . . I guess we know how to sympathize. My brother and I lost both our father and mother in an accident. A drunken driver veered in their path. He's still living; they're dead. It generally happens that way."

"You're so right on that, Arla. But back to my cousin: She stayed home and worked on her handwork, almost all of which are 'first prize' pieces, too. She has enough needlepoint pictures and throw pillows to decorate an entire house. Whenever those parties were held at their house, she shut herself in her room upstairs and worked on her afghans, needlepoint, embroidery pieces, or whatever, while her family partied and made fools of themselves. They called her unsociable and a square, but she simply smiled and said that her inner being told her that sort of thing was not right, that it was unwholesome and degrading and that, since she had to live with herself, she wanted no part of it.

"Not too long ago, she had a strange 'hunger,' as she phrased it, for something more satisfying than what she was doing. By a strangely-marvelous chain of events, she heard about God's satisfying power, about how He could give peace and soul-rest to one and thus fulfill their deepest desire and heart-hunger and inner need. She wondered if that, perhaps,
could be what she actually was hungering for, she said. So, along with another, she began her search.

"Where did she go searching for it, Justin?" Arla asked innocently, quickly.

"She said there's only one place..., the Bible. She must have made a most thorough search, believe me, for she's as changed as changed can be. She said that as she read the Bible, God revealed the sin and evil and wickedness of her heart to her in such a way that she actually felt sick with what she saw."

"It must have been dreadful -- to make her feel sick, I mean. I guess I never gave much, if any, thought to sin. It's not a word one hears very often. Right? It certainly mustn't be a popular word or we'd have heard it quite frequently."

Justin studied the well-mulched earth beneath his feet; then he said, "No, I guess 'sin' isn't one of the popular words of our day. In fact, until she was changed from her heart..., inside-out..., my cousin said she had rarely heard the word. But now that she's been converted, as she expressed this change within her, and has begun going to church, she said the preacher really preaches both about and against sin. I guess, from what she told me, he names sin. She said there's no generalizing of it with him, that he calls it by name and is most specific in denouncing it. The heart and the understanding must be opened by God, so she tells me, before a person can see just how terrible and frightening a thing sin really is. She said that not until God, through reading His Word . . . the Bible . . . showed her her own heart with all its attendant sins and evils, did she ever really and actually think or feel she was wrong, or doing wrong. She didn't break the moral law and neither did she go partying nor dancing, and she never knew the taste of either a cigarette nor any kind of alcoholic beverage."

"Sounds to me like she must have been a pretty great person, Justin. Even before her change."

"She was. That's just the point, though. She said that none of us will get to Heaven just simply because we are good and not doing the things that are wrong. And here we go to the Bible again. . . ."
"You have a super brain, to remember all she told you," Arla remarked seriously.

"I wouldn't say that," Justin replied, his face a study of seriousness. "It's simply that everything she says, which comes from the Bible, seems to have a strangely peculiar way of fastening itself upon me somewhere deep inside and sticking there. That's a fact. It's almost like it's been written on me with indelible ink. It keeps repeating itself over and over again and again I can't forget. Truth of the matter is, I'll never forget it. None of it. "Are you sorry?"

"Because of what; having heard all I heard or because I can't forget? Which?"

Arla looked up at Justin with great, large, dark eyes. "Because of both."

Again Justin's face became a study of seriousness. "You know," he admitted candidly, "I don't know what to say to that, because I never gave it any thought. But frankly, I guess I'm not sorry. No, I'm not sorry. Why should I be when it's something we'll all have to come to grips with sooner or later if we expect to go to Heaven? And I for one don't want to go where Trish tells me I'll go if I don't repent and become con. . . ."

"Trish!" Arla exclaimed, as the name rang myriad bells inside her head and her heart. "Did you say Trish?"

"Yes, I did. Why the excitement? Did I say something wrong? Justin asked quickly. "Trish is my cousin, and a short time ago she became converted. I saw her in the city recently and all she could talk about was her joy and peace since finding Christ and becoming converted."

"I feel weak, Justin. Mind if I sit on one of the garden benches?" she asked. "This is all too . . . too. . . ."

"I know how you feel," Justin remarked, walking beside her to the nearest bench. "It's all been so new and . . . and stirring to me, too. But my cousin's different, Arla. Believe me, she is. You'd have to see her to believe me."

"Justin, do you realize that . . . that . . . what you have just told me is. . . ."
"Incredulous? I would have thought that also if I had not seen and heard my cousin."

"That's not the point. It's just that.., well, I can scarcely take this in. It's almost unbelievable, more like fiction."

"Don't ever say the Bible's fiction if my cousin's around," Justin stated quickly. "She'll tell you that fiction doesn't search and probe the heart with a searchlight of glaring, revealing propensity; the Bible does!"

"It's not the Bible to which I'm referring, Justin; I'm convinced it's the Word of God. But your cousin . . . Trish . . ."

What about her?"

"She's engaged to my brother Johnny. Johnny and Trish were converted recently in the same night. Johnny's as different as daylight is from darkness since he became converted."

"You mean . . . ? Hey, what are you saying?" Justin asked in wonder, astonishment and awe.

"It's true," Arla declared. "Johnny . . . my brother . . . is engaged to your cousin, Trish."

Justin stared at Arla for a long time. Then, throwing his handkerchief into the air, he laughed. "This is great!" he exclaimed. "Great! Maybe luck is working for me, after all."

"Never say 'luck,' Justin; I believe Johnny's and Trish's God is looking after three motherless young people."

"You may be right," he said, sobering. "So right!"

(Chapter 11)

Justin looked at his watch. Then, turning to Arla, he said, "I must be getting back to work; I'm paid for working, not for visiting. But this has been the most enjoyable twenty minutes that I've had in years. I have so many
things I'd like to ask you but I dare not use the time in which I am to be working. Could I see you again this evening, Arla?"

"I hardly know what to say, Justin. I'm not sure about Gram. . . ." Arla's sentence trailed, unfinished. Meaningfully. "She's . . . strict? Is that it?"

Arla groped for words, not wanting to say more than she must. "It's just that Gram can be rather difficult at times. She's gone for the day. I don't know what frame of mind she'll be in when she returns."

"I'll tell you what, let's go ahead and plan to be together this evening when I'm through working for the day. I'll come by, and if you may go with me that will be great. If not, there'll be another time. I'll understand. I promise."

"God willing, as Johnny says, now that he's converted and has made his peace with God. We do have so very much to discuss. And I'd like to know more about Trish, now that she and Johnny are planning to be married. Where do you work, Justin? I mean, what do you do? Working in fig trees is no usual kind of work. At least I don't think it is. Am I right or wrong?"

"You're right. I'm an agronomist. Also a vocational-Ag graduate. When your grandmother called in for someone to come out and check on her fig trees, I was sent out. And I'm thankful I came."

"Is anything seriously wrong with the trees? Gram has always prided herself on her figs. And she really does have beautiful big, plump and delicious figs. They're sold as fast as they're picked. The demand for them exceeds the supply. She was talking about planting more trees. I do hope there is nothing seriously wrong with them."

"We should know more within the next few days. But, say, I must be getting back to what I was sent here for or my reputation for honesty on the job and for being diligent will 'go down the drain,' as the saying is. Will I see you this evening?"

"Again, as Johnny says, God willing, depending upon Gram and what mood or temperament she's in." Justin smiled. "You have made me a happy man today, Arla," he said. "Thank you. Until this evening then, have a good afternoon."
Arla watched until he rounded the curve in the garden's path; then she leaned her head back against the tree trunk and closed her eyes. Trish was Justin's cousin; Justin was Trish's cousin. What a small world. And what a coincidence. Or was it coincidence? she wondered suddenly. May Johnny's God, perhaps, not have His hand in it all? It was possible, she realized, and probable. After everything she had heard about God from Mrs. Bork, and now Justin telling her what things Trish had said, well, why shouldn't she believe that God had His hand upon humanity's affairs! Little by little, she was beginning to realize how great and powerful and mighty He was.

She remembered Johnny's gift to her then. What better time for reading the little New Testament than right now, when Gram was away, she thought with excitement tingling through her veins.

She got to her feet and took the other, round-about pathway homeward, pondering over what Mrs. Bork had told her earlier in the morning. Perhaps she would never understand everything she had heard but the least she could do, now that she was the possess or owner of a New Testament, was to find out for herself just what was in the little Book. This way she would know; not because someone else had told her but because she had read it for herself.

She crossed the patio then went into the kitchen with not a sign of Birdie. She wondered where the woman could be, but felt relief, too. Gram had given her her orders; she was fulfilling them, no doubt.

Aside from the loneliness of Johnny being gone, Arla relished the peace and the silence of the big house. It would never be the same again, she realized. Never! Not with Johnny gone. But knowing that Justin was Trish's cousin and that Johnny was planning to marry Trish, well, it gave her a feeling of closeness to all three of them, Justin, Johnny and Trish. She didn't feel quite so all alone since Justin had told her all he had. He would help her, she knew, if she ever needed his help.

She hurried up the stairs to her room, wondering just where the newly hired lady was when she heard loud snoring coming from Johnny's room. Tiptoeing down the hallway, she peeked through the open door into the room. Birdie was lying across the bed sound asleep. Smiling to herself, Arla hurried away. Birdie would get her "walking papers" if Gram ever came home and found her sleeping, she knew. But there wasn't anything that really
needed done; the house was spic and span clean from top to bottom and there was no one there to cook for.

Arla closed her bedroom door quietly; then she unlocked the dresser drawer and carefully removed Johnny's letter and the New Testament from their place of concealment beneath her lingerie. She looked with awe upon the little Book, feeling strangely moved upon before she opened it even. From what she had heard about its teachings, she was convinced that it must have something to say about any and all issues and problems. At least she had gotten that impression from the things Mrs. Bork had told her and by what Trish had told Justin. Whatever, she cherished it because it was a gift from her brother, a parting token of his love and concern for her. She read the letter first; then she re-read it two more times, crying as she did so and wondering where her brother was and if he was settled in an apartment. Or maybe only a sleeping room, she thought, realizing how cramped he would feel after having had so much room at Bayou Estates. How she wished she could help him. If only Gram would soften and bring him back. Oh, if only. . . .

She wiped her tears then opened the little Book. On the inside page, in Johnny's handwriting, were these words: "To Arla with my sincerest love and devotion. Jesus said, '... and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.' (Matthew 28:20). This wonderful promise can be yours if you will ask Him to be your Savior. He is my constant Friend, so don't worry about me; I am never alone since Jesus came into my heart. Read this every day. Open your heart to what you read and soon I shall hear that you, too, belong to my God. Again, I love you and I will be praying for you. Johnny."

A stream of fresh tears trickled down Arla's cheeks. She pulled the New Testament to her heart, whispering, "Johnny! Johnny! I'm only beginning to realize, and know, how much you are concerned about me and how much you care!"

Still weeping, she turned the pages until she came to The Gospel According to St. Matthew. This must be the beginning she decided, since it was the first full printed page in the Book.

Brushing tears aside, she read, "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham."
"Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren;

"And Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar; and Phares begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram; . . . "

Was this what Johnny found so interesting? she wondered; a bunch of begets and begats with the strangest sounding names she had ever heard. Surely, surely, that wasn't what appealed to him. Surely not!

She was tempted to lock the little Book up and just forget about trying to read any more for the day. Mrs. Bork would know where to tell her to begin reading when she saw her, she thought. But Johnny had asked her to read from it every day, hadn't he? For love of Johnny, she would fulfill that request. It was a very simple, easy-to-do request, wasn't it? Nothing complicated about it; simply, "Read this every day."

Again she looked at the names . . . Aminadab; Naason; Salmon; Booz; . . . Josaphat; Ozias; . . . Ezekias; . . . Eleazar. . . .

For one time in her young life, Arla wished she were a quitter. But she was not. Definitely not! So she waded right through the strange-sounding, tongue twisting names of some of the men deciding that, since she never began reading any other book any way besides starting at its very beginning, she would treat Johnny's little gift Book with the same courtesies and respect. Generally, the beginning of a book gave one a little peek . . . or would insight be a better word? . . . into its "heart." Perhaps something important would follow the genealogy. She would read and find out. And if it was all just a lot of names, at least she would be able to tell Johnny that she had read the Book. Whenever she would see him, that is.

The eighteenth verse caught her attention instantly: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise:

Suddenly she knew why the genealogy and she read with renewed interest. It was the first time that she had ever read the actual account of the birth of Christ and it filled her heart with awe and amazement. Like the multitudes of others who had celebrated Christmas without any serious or real thought as to its actual meaning and reason, she felt suddenly guilty. Christ was born; it was to be a time honoring Him and His birth, not a mere
commercialization-money racket thing. And she became a part of it all, to be sure.

She read on . . . The wise men directed to Christ; Herod's cruelty; John's preaching and teaching; Christ's fasting; His temptation by the devil; the diseased healed; Christ's sermon on the mount; the leper cleansed; Christ stilling the tempest.

She reread the stilling of the tempest and sat in awe at the power of Johnny's God. No wonder her brother could say all the marvelous things to her that he did: Johnny had read what she was reading for the first time ever. He, too, marveled, she was sure. But he believed. And he was anxious that she should know just how great and how powerful his God was. Well, she was fully convinced. Who, but God, could command the wind and the waves to be still and lie down and be calm. There was no one else.

The longer she read, the more interested she became and the greater she was absorbed in the truths. In the parable of the sower, Arla wondered which group she would fall under: the "wayside," the "stony ground," the "thorns" or the "good." But then, she had never attended church except for a wedding and, once when she was a very little girl, the funeral of some friend of her father's. So maybe God would exempt her from all four groups which were mentioned in the parable. She hadn't gone to church and therefore hadn't heard "the word of the kingdom," as Jesus had phrased it in the nineteenth verse of the thirteenth chapter. The parable was meant for those who had heard, she was sure.

While she pondered over her own rationalization and felt placated to a great degree, a new and startling thought entered her mind: Would she, perhaps, be guiltless, now that she had read the truths? She was "hearing," not from a preacher standing behind a pulpit, to be sure, but by the written Word of God, which was Its own preacher.

The truth, so startling and so revealing and, yes, so convincing, had, this very moment, been revealed to her heart. And Arla knew without the least shadow of a doubt that she would be judged by the way in which she had "heard" or received "the word of the kingdom."

It was such a shocking and sobering thought that for a while she sat like one stunned. Added to this new knowledge came all the things that Mrs.
Bork had talked to her about from the Bible. And what Trish had told Justin and Justin had told her, Arla. It tumbled over her being like waves and it startled her. Maybe this was God's way of trying to get to her soul. If it wasn't, she had no idea what else it might be.

For a while she wondered if she should continue reading. Then, being a non-quitter and curious and anxious to know what else God said in the little Book, she began again. The miracles she found to be extremely interesting, and in her heart she thought how great and wonderful it would have been to have sat on that hillside and eaten of those five loaves and two fishes which fed five thousand men plus women and children. And Jesus walking on the water! It was beautiful. Beautiful! How powerful and mighty He was.

She read into the fifteenth chapter; then the sixteenth, and when she came to the twenty-sixth verse and saw the words, "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" she was shaken visibly.

Arla looked at the verse. Then she read it again. And again. And again. "What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" Without a doubt, that was the most staggering and sobering question she had ever heard or read. What would she give in exchange for her soul? she asked her hushed and silent heart. She hadn't realized that she had a soul until Johnny's recent converted experience when he began talking to her about spiritual things. What did she think would happen to a person when he died? she wondered now since reading the stirring question.

In shame, she realized that she had not given the question any thought. She supposed, though, that in the back of her mind she had thought that when one died that was the finale, that he or she was just dead and that was the end. But the past few days were days of real revelation. She was hearing, and now reading, things which she had never known before. And her heart was being strangely moved upon.

She closed her eyes to think. Then Gram's face came before her. Was this the reason her grandmother had been so severe on Johnny; had she faced the Truth and resisted and rebelled instead of becoming changed, or converted, as Johnny called it? Something had made her bitter and antagonistic toward anything spiritual and religious, this was a certainty. But what? And why? Johnny had told her to "keep her heart open" to what she
read. And she had full intentions of doing this. Never . . . never . . . did she want to become sour and bitter like Gram.

She opened her eyes and began reading again, with her heart wide open to everything she read in chapters 17, 18, 19, 20, 21. She was almost finished with the 21st chapter when Birdie knocked on her door to tell her that Gram had called, saying she wouldn't be home for the night and possibly not for several days. "What do you want for your evening meal?" she asked.

Arla slipped the New Testament down into her skirt pocket then went to the door. "Why not each of us fix what we want?" she asked softly. "No need for you to cook, Birdie; there's a lot inside the refrigerator that should be eaten. I'll reheat whatever I want and save you the effort of slaving away in the kitchen. Is that all right with you?"

"It's fine with me," Birdie answered, "if it will sit fine with your Gram when she returns. She said I was to do all the cooking and baking and cleaning."

Arla felt smitten. So Gram had worked it around so she would not be in the kitchen. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know that. Well, in that case, maybe I'll just have you reheat some of those leftovers for me. But I do feel rather foolish, having you do what I can do for myself."

Birdie smiled in understanding, saying, "It was such a sudden thing, this job. And your grandmother was so insistent. And if you'll not say anything to her, I'll tell you what I told her. . . ."

"I promise," Arla said in a positive tone.

"Like I said, your Gram was insistent that I come. So I told her I'd stay for a couple of weeks, that's all. I have more purple hull and black eye peas coming on and I'll not let them go to waste. They'll be the last crop of the year. And I do declare, I can't see any need of me being here. Everything's in tip-top shape in this house. Well, come down when you're ready for something to eat. I may run into town after we're through eating and get some handwork of some kind to do."

"Oh, that will be fine," Arla said. "And to make it easier on you, and let you get an earlier start, I'll be downstairs right away. We can eat and then
you can go into town. The little craft shop on the west side of town stays open until seven tonight. I'll wash and dry the dishes. And if I'm not here when you get back, don't worry about me. A friend wants to see me tonight. I should be home before eleven, God willing, as my brother says."

Birdie left, smiling, and Arla, not having realized how long she had read, slipped the New Testament from her pocket and locked it away securely inside the dresser drawer.

(Chapter 12)

Arla's mind was in a muddle of confused thoughts while she showered and dressed. What was Gram up to now? she wondered. She had to be working on something of the greatest importance to her or she'd never have stayed in the city over night, much less for several days, especially since she could have driven home in a little over an hour! This is what really baffled Arla. Gram was greatly displeased and upset with whatever the retailer told her about her pecans, but surely she wouldn't spend several days in the city because of that. She knew the buyers for miles around, knew which ones paid the best prices, too. So she was sure it didn't have anything to do with the pecans. Gram could have done her business with them by phone, if there was anything more to be done. She had done it this way every other year.

So many things had happened the past few days until Arla felt as if she was living in an unreal world. Gram's leaving for the city after she had "evicted" her only grandson, was one of the strangest and most unreal seeming things of all. In her mind, Arla couldn't separate Gram's sudden departure as having something to do with Johnny. But what? Would Gram try to influence those whom she knew . . . businessmen . . . to not give Johnny work? Was that it? Instinctively, she knew that was not the reason. Gram wouldn't waste two (possibly more) days running from store to store and place to place for something like that. She considered her time of greater importance, making sure that everything in the end netted dollars for her.

She had just finished brushing her hair and was on her way down the stair steps when the "pieces" regarding Johnny and Gram took shape in her mind and fell into place. The thought was so startling that Arla paused mid-way down the steps. But she was sure now that she knew Gram's reason for making such haste in getting to the city and also for her staying over night. Or longer, if necessary. Yes, suddenly she was convinced that she knew!
Johnny would soon be twenty-one years old. In less than a month, to be exact. 21! "You and Arla will have land and growing things when you are 21," Grandfather had told her and Johnny. Twenty-one! Inheritance! Ah, that was the link that connected the two in the back of her mind, Arla realized with a sudden, startling revelation. And now, she felt certain, Gram was busy with attorneys, trying to "break" Grandfather's will where Johnny and she were in it.

Arla felt almost like she couldn't breathe from shock. But she knew this was the reason for Gram's hasty and early departure to the city. The thought left her weak and limp. When would this nightmare of happenings come to an end? she wondered. Certainly, from everything she had read in the New Testament, God saw all that had happened and was happening. How long would He tolerate Gram's tyranny? How, and when, would He put a halt and a stop to it? He hated wickedness. She had learned this much from reading in St. Matthew's Gospel. He denounced the hypocrites but loved the sinner and the down-trodden. This, too, she had read. Oh, how long, how long would this go on? she wondered.

She stumbled down the remainder of the steps in shock and sat in one of the early Victorian chairs in the expensively furnished living room, waiting for Justin to come. She looked around the room. Everything in it spoke its silent message of "class." Arla realized with a sickening sensation that things could not bring, or give, happiness. If they could, then Bayou Estates would be filled with happiness and ringing with laughter and merriment instead of the hurting, aching hearts and tear-stained eyes.

She heard a car drive up the curving driveway and went to the front door just as Justin came up the steps to the porch. He smiled when he saw her, saying, "I could scarcely wait for this hour to come. You look lovely, Arla. Green becomes you. I believe you'd call that a pale mint green. Right?"

"Are you sure you aren't something else besides an agronomist, Vocational-Ag specialist?" Arla teased. "An artist, knowing the colors of his oils, perhaps?"

"I'm sure I'm not," Justin replied with a smile as Arla joined him on the porch. "Now, where would you like to go? To town? Or into the city?"

"What did you have planned?"
"Nothing, until I know what you'd prefer. Have you eaten your evening meal?"

"Yes, I have. Have you?"

Justin laughed. "I felt starved when I was through working and I had to eat. But I'll be ready for something more in a little while. So you name where you'd like to go and we'll go. I take it that your grandmother has given you her blessing?"

Arla looked quickly at Justin. Was there a hint of irony in his tone? Speaking softly, she said, "Would it bore you if we stayed right here and just talked? We could walk to the bayou and take a boat ride. The oar kind, of course. No motor. But it's peaceful and restful. And I could fix sandwiches for us afterwards. Gram won't be home tonight, I learned."

Justin's eyes brightened. "That sounds great. And I mean great! I'd rather do that than anything I can think of. I'm really not much of a city fellow. I love the country--the land, trees, brooks and growing things. Here, let me help you down the steps," he said, taking her arm.

"Don't you live in town?" Arla asked as they took a leisurely walk toward the bayou.

"Oh, my no! I couldn't stand it. I feel too hemmed in. I like space. Room. Lots of it. And country-fresh air."

"Do you have some relatives with whom you live? You told me this afternoon that your mother is dead."

"That's right; my mother is dead. And I never see my father. He remarried shortly after I was four and my one aunt and uncle took me to raise. They're like a real father and mother to me. I get to see them anywhere from three to four times a year, depending on how busy I am with my work. I wanted them to come and live here with me, but Auntie said their roots had been down . . . where they live . . . for too long a time to be uprooted now. No, I don't live with relatives; I live alone. I bought the little farm when I came here to work."
Arla's eyes brightened. "Then you have horses and cows and sheep and. . . ."

"Not quite," Justin cut in, laughing. "I have a horse that a farmer gave me -- said he was too old to do much work but he'd keep me company. And I love that gentle old fellow. He nickers and neighs when I drive into the land and follows me all the way to the barn. I have him in the fenced-in pasture land, which goes from the barnyard to where my lane begins, off the black-top road. And I do declare, old Sam waits for me every evening at the end of the lane. There he stands, in the corner of the fence, watching the road for my car. As soon as he sees it, his nickering and neighing begins. Talk about a royal welcome. I get it every workday evening."

Arla laughed. "I love animals, Justin, horses especially. In fact, Johnny and I just bought us a beautiful, gentle mare together. Her name is Ha Penny. And she's the dearest, most gentle horse I think I've ever seen. Someday you must meet her."

"It will be love at first sight," Justin declared with a twinkle in his eyes. "I warn you, Arla, it will. Horses and I just naturally fall in love with each other."

Arla laughed softly, trying to push the nagging thought of Gram's hasty trip completely out of her thoughts and her mind. But in spite of her noble attempt and effort, it lingered annoyingly in the back of her mind. Then, determinedly, she reigned her troubled thoughts in to an abrupt halt and said, "I'm glad you love horses and that they like you; that means that you are kind and gentle with them. One can pretty much tell how an animal is treated, or mistreated, by the way they act and respond when their owner comes near them. I've seen dogs so mistreated and abused that every time their owners came near them they'd slink away with their tail between their legs and hide beneath a porch, or wherever they could manage to hide. I've often cried over the way some poor animals are treated."

"I can see that we both share the same feeling toward animals," Justin said. "But say, hadn't we better hurry a bit? Those mosquitoes will carry us away by the time the sun hides its face." Seriously, he said, "I just don't want you to get all chewed up by them, Arla. And I know how cantankerous and pesky they can get by nightfall. Around water especially."
They increased their pace and were soon at the bayou. The water looked peacefully placid and refreshingly cool. Every now and then Arla heard its gentle slap, slap, slap against the side of the boat and she felt her body begin to relax. She would do everything in her power to enjoy this night, she decided. Tomorrow would take care of itself.

Justin helped her into the boat. His touch was gentle and courteous and she realized that he was every inch of him a gentleman. She felt at ease. "Someday," he said when he was seated in the boat and manning the oars skillfully and adeptly, "I'd like to see this mare of yours and your brother's. Ha Penny, you said she was called? That's a pretty name. Do you have any other animals, Arla?"

"None. We used to have a cocker spaniel, Johnny and I, when we were smaller and when our father and mother were living. But Ha Penny's the extent of our animal world for now. Someday I'd like to have a lot of animals and chickens and ducks."

"What about a few pigeons? I have some."

"Oh, do you? They're rather untidy I hear." Justin smiled. "I suppose that's true to a great extent. But I've gone in for raising and training homing pigeons. It's been a hobby of mine for years. I built a house . . . or barn, whatever you want to call it . . . with nesting compartments and roosts inside, then have it connected to an outside gazebo type structure, wired in from top to bottom so they can't fly away, with perches for resting and sunning and just getting out into the air. A shade tree near by keeps the hot sun off both their inside nesting 'parlor' and their outside 'patio'."

Arla laughed at his inflections. "I guess I don't know much about pigeons," she conceded, "except that I've always heard they're rather untidy, like I just said a while ago."

"Pigeons have a succulent bit of meat on them, Arla. It's basically all white breast meat, nothing too much to their legs. But it's delicious when it's prepared properly. The homing pigeon is not one for the meat platter, however. Not that they can't be eaten; they can. But they serve a totally different purpose than making a tasty bit of food for the table; they carry messages. Important and secret messages, in some cases. They fly home though released thousands of miles away. Someday you will have to come
and see Sam, the horse, and the pigeons. Then there's Willow, the spotted dog, who either came to my door voluntarily or was dropped off intentionally. And, too, I have a flock of twenty barred rock chickens."

"You have a real good start for a farm, Justin."

"I enjoy caring for them all," Justin remarked. "But now tell me, how did your afternoon go? Weren't you lonesome with your grandmother gone? And you never did tell me where your brother works, nor even where he lives. Is it near here? After all, he'll be marrying my cousin, you told me this morning. Or was it afternoon?" he asked, teasing.

Arla felt trapped. What should she do; tell Justin what had happened and that she couldn't answer some of his questions? or what?

He dragged the oars in the water, bringing the boat to almost a standstill. Then he asked, "Why the woeful look? Did I ask the wrong thing, Arla? If so, I beg your forgiveness. I haven't meant to pry, if this is what it sounded like. It's just that I've been quite excited and thrilled over knowing that Trish is going to marry your brother. And when we did meet . . . in a store in the city, would you believe! . . . . she spoke of little else beside the Lord and what He had done for her and how God's Word had come alive since she was converted. So if I've said something I should not have said, I ask your . . . ."

"Oh Justin, please. No. No!" Arla exclaimed as tears stationed themselves at the exit of her eyes then rolled unceremoniously down her cheeks. "You didn't. And you haven't. Believe me! You have a right to know. But I . . . well, I'm not sure how to answer you. You see, so much has happened lately at the big house until I feel I'm living in an unreal world."

Justin sat in silence, not knowing what to say. After some time he said, "Look Arla, let's just forget that I asked you anything. I'm sorry that I've caused you pain. I didn't mean to open any wounds. Believe me, will you? And forgive me."

"Oh Justin, of course I believe you. And, like I said, you have a right to know since Johnny's going to become your cousin through his marriage to Trish. Justin! Justin! I don't know where my dear brother is. Gram made him leave because he got converted." Arla was sobbing now.
"Say that again, Arla. I can't imagine anyone doing such a thing."

"But it's true. Oh, I wish it weren't so! This morning . . . before four o'clock even . . . Johnny left. Gram made him leave."

"Where did he go?" came Justin's quick question.

"I wish I knew. Oh, I wish I did! But I don't. He told me not to worry that. . . ."

"You saw him then before he left?"

"Last night I walked down to the garden, to be alone. Gram had called Johnny into her office and closed the door. I didn't know what was coming next; so I went to the garden and sat on one of the benches. I was there for a long time and after some time I heard Johnny come down the path, only I didn't know it was he until I heard him praying and sobbing. At any rate, he told me last night that Gram had ordered him off the place by this afternoon. I thought that's what he had told me. But he told me not to feel wrongly toward Gram and to love her much, that she needed love and kindness more than ever, or something like that. He said God would take care of him and that he would get in touch with me and would see me every week, God willing. And Justin, he made me promise that I'd stay here and not run away. But it's so hard at times. I begged Johnny to let me go with him and keep house for him till he's married. But he felt I should stay here and let God work things out for both of us."

"No disrespect intended, but your grandmother's a difficult person to work for. So very hard to please. But why did Johnny have to leave at such an early hour? Did she change her mind as to the time element?"

"She did! In a note which he left behind for me . . . inside one of my shoes . . . he wrote that Gram had ousted him at three this morning, telling him to up and be gone. Oh, it seems unreal to me, Justin, more like a nightmare than anything else."

"You poor, dear girl!" Justin exclaimed, brushing a tear from his cheek.

(Chapter 13)
Water slapped the sides of the boat and an errant breeze skipped through the trees as Justin sat, at a loss to know what to say.

"I'm sure God is taking care of Johnny," Arla said quickly. "He trusts Him so."

"He didn't say where he'd be living?" Justin inquired. "He didn't know where," came Arla's tearful reply. "He had no idea he'd have to leave here, so naturally he hadn't had time to plan or prepare for an apartment. Or not even a room!"

"I wish I knew where he was; I have plenty of room. He could move in with me until Trish and he are married." Justin's face brightened as an idea struck him. "Shall we drive into the city and see if we can find him?" he asked with excitement. "Or do you think he's gone no farther than our little town near here?"

"I don't know. But it would be futile to try finding him in the city; it's too large, and we'd never know where to begin to look for him."

"It seems incredulous to me that anyone should have to leave because he or she had become converted, as Trish termed her change of heart. And, like I told you earlier today, she is changed. Completely. And I mean completely. She looks so different."

"That's what I can't understand, Justin. If Johnny had begun drinking or . . . or gotten on drugs and been making trouble, then I'd be able to understand maybe why Gram would find it necessary to make him leave. But Johnny's always been a good boy. He never ran around like most boys do and he was never once in trouble of any kind. He's been a hard worker and has done the work of two hired hands. He could have gotten work elsewhere but stayed on here to help Gram. Like Trish, Johnny's change has been for the better."

"I've been doing a lot of thinking since Trisha talked to me, Arla. And I've even been trying to pray. She said we were all born in sin and that we'd have to be born again, or converted, if we wanted to get into Heaven. And I most certainly do want to go there. I guess I just always thought that if one was morally good and kind and never did harm to anybody, but minded his
own affairs instead of those of other people, that this qualified him for Heaven."

Arla lowered her eyes. "I'm ashamed to say this, but I guess, to the best of my knowledge and recollection, I never thought about Heaven, for I never heard anybody talk about it. My parents never told us anything about such things. Neither did my grandparents. Not until Johnny told me of his change of heart and life and of his conversation with a far distant uncle and aunt of ours, who told him about our father and mother's conversion, did I think about Heaven."

"It's a for-real and a for-sure place," Justin affirmed as he pulled gently on the oars. "I began reading the Bible since my talk with Trish. She set my mind a-whirl. Like you just said about Johnny, I guess our manner of living and of careful behavior must have run a pretty close parallel. But Trish informed me that our good morals and good behavior just was not sufficient to get us into Heaven. She said it was a personal matter of being washed in Jesus' blood -- of knowing that our sins are forgiven."

"I suppose you and I are both doing the same thing," Arla said softly, "searching. I spent the greater part of this afternoon reading the little New Testament Johnny left for me, hidden beneath the boudoir chair inside my bedroom. He told me about it in the letter he wrote and slipped into the toe of one of my shoes. If Gram had found it I'd never have gotten it. Johnny knew this; so hid it. If my grandmother ever finds out that I have a New Testament in my possession she'll make me leave too, I'm sure. And I wouldn't mind the leaving part, but I did promise Johnny that I'd stay here until his God worked things out for me. Still, if Gram ever made me leave, I'd have to leave. That would be something I couldn't help."

"Where would you go?" Justin inquired anxiously, giving her a searching look.

"I don't know. Perhaps I'd get a small efficiency apartment in town. Or maybe I'd stay with the Borks. They wanted Johnny to stay with them. They're the kindest people ever. That's where we have Ha Penny."

Justin's great brows wrinkled in concern. "I don't like the thought of that, Arla. It frightens me. Not that you're a child anymore; I'd say you're maybe eighteen. . . ."
"I will be eighteen within the next twenty-eight days. Johnny and I share the same month of birth but he'll be 21 and I'll be 18. His birthday is only twenty-two days away. And what a sad remembrance for one just turning that very special age. I don't know how you feel about age, Justin, but for me sixteen was a purely magical age. In my imagination, I mean. It's sort of a threshold sort of thing. You know, an exit out of childhood and young girlhood . . . or boyhood, as the case may be . . . and an entrance into young adulthood. At sixteen, I felt like I was standing on the threshold of an open doorway, looking into I didn't know what, but unafraid of whatever was out there and anxious and excited to explore the years through that magical sixteenth doorway. I didn't want the door of past birthdays to close behind me, but to remain open for remembering. And smiling."

"You're quite a poet, Arla, in prose form; and I love your way of phrasing things."

"I wasn't vying for compliments, Justin; it's just the way I feel about things. And I'm most serious when I say that I think sixteen and twenty-one are extremely special birthdays to most of us. Thirteen was, too, but in a different way." Arla looked across the water, peaceful, calm and placid. "I do hope Johnny and I'll be able to be together on his special 21st!" she exclaimed sadly. "If we're not, it will be the first time in our natural lives that we haven't shared our birthdays together."

"I'm sure Trish will make it a very special day for him, Arla. And believe me, I'll do all I can to find out where he's living and working. Trish should be able to tell me. When Johnny lets her know, I mean."

"She's still working with handicapped children, from what Johnny said to me one time. So Johnny may not get to see her for a while."

"Love always makes a way, Arla. Always. Don't you know that?" Justin's face was wrinkled in a smile.

A small warm breeze sent little ripples across the water and here and there a fish, in bold venture after food above him, broke the water, hungrily snatching the tasty morsel then disappearing as swiftly as he had emerged,
leaving nothing but ever-widening circles behind him. In the trees along the
shore, birds sang and twittered jubilantly before settling down in their roosting
places for the now fast-approaching night. The gentle, almost soundless, dip, dip,
dip, dip, of Justin's oars breaking water and moving the boat smoothly and
rapidly upstream was healing and tranquilizing.

Downstream, the wild call of a bird broke the stillness and peacefulness
of the atmosphere. Arla, frightened out of the tranquillity and silence, jumped.

"It's only a bird," Justin said softly, kindly. "Shall we turn and go back?
I'm afraid the mosquitoes will soon be out after us."

"I'm sorry, Justin. I'm not scared. I'm used to the cry of the birds. It's just
that I was so completely and totally relaxed by the serenity of our
surroundings that I hadn't expected or anticipated the wild, sad cry. I had
forgotten about the troubles of this day, and also of last night's at the big
house, and the cry of the bird brought it all back to me. Instantly. It reminded
me of Gram."

"You're nervous, Arla, and this shouldn't be. You're too young. And
you're not responsible for whatever is causing your grandmother to be like
she is. When the boss sent me out here he told me what to expect; said I
shouldn't let her bother nor upset me, but go right ahead and do a thorough
job, report my findings to him, then try to erase any unpleasant memories she
may have made for me from my mind. I told him not to worry, that I wasn't
one of the easily offended kind, nor one who allowed anyone to upset him.
'But you don't know her!' he exclaimed quickly, referring to your grandparent,
I'm sorry to say."

"Is Gram . . . I mean, has she been hard on you, Justin?"

"Quite testy at times. It's her supercilious air and attitude that's quite
obnoxious and odious to me. And trying to tell you how to do a thing. Well, it
can become a bit of a trial, I do admit. But I'm almost finished and, aside from
not being able to get a glimpse of you . . . carrying an armload of herbs and
teas, I may add . . . I'll be glad to move on to some other farm or plantation or
home, or whatever. People, for the most part, are really very nice. Some are
super-nice. They're never 'underfoot,' watching and giving orders as to how
to go about your job. But occasionally we run into one of these other kind."
"Do you follow their instructions and their orders?"

Justin laughed. It was a soft, deep-from-inside laugh. "Oh my no!" he replied. "They wouldn't work. We were taught exactly what to do and how for each situation. To come up with the proper analysis or to arrive at a certain conclusive finding, there are laws for us to follow and correct methods to use and abide by. Deviate from them and you run into error and faulty reports. And trouble!" he added with emphasis and meaning.

Arla lapsed into silence and deep thought. In everything . . . or almost everything . . . there were laws to be obeyed and heeded; patterns, methods and/or guidelines to be followed, landmarks to be observed and revered for one to go through life happy and pure and peaceful. If one turned away from the moral law and became loose and careless and immoral, he was sure to get hurt. The pay of loose morals took its toll in the body many times in a loathsome and dreadful venereal disease and mental problems. Plus a guilty conscience. If one became negligent and heedless of the safety laws while driving on the highway, he was sure to pay for his carelessness sooner or later in either an accident or a speeding ticket. Or both.

How very right Justin was when he stated that so long as one followed the laws and the correct method for a given thing or circumstance, the right and proper analysis was derived and everything came out all right. She now understood the meaning of much of what she had read from the little New Testament. God, too, had laws by which mankind was to be governed; roadmarks for him to go by and follow; "thou shalt" and "thou shalt nots" to obey. If one heeded His laws, that soul was a blessed person; if one disregarded and spurned or rejected them, he paid dearly for the consequences. It was that simple -- nothing hard or complicated about it.

"A penny for your thoughts," Justin said, adding, "I'm going to start down stream before the mosquitoes swarm around you and begin sampling your blood."

"That's fine," Arla answered. "And as to my thoughts, I was thinking that God, too, has laws by which our lives are to be governed. Deviate from them and we are in trouble. I learned that from reading in the little New Testament this afternoon. I read some startling things, Justin."

"Like what?"
"Something about what is a man profited, if he gains the whole world but loses his soul? Then it ended by asking, '. . . what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' Truthfully, it shook me. Not just outwardly but somewhere deep within. I believe it was on the inside of my heart that I was shaken. It's with me; I can't shake it off. What will I give in exchange for my soul? That's the troubling thought. Johnny said I'll have to be the one to ask God to forgive me; no one else can do it for me."

"Johnny and Trish sound alike, Arla. That's what my cousin said to me also. And when I'm fully convinced that they're right, I'll do what Trish said for me to do."

The rest of the ride was made in silence as each was deep in thought over what had been discussed. Arla knew that should she take God's way and become converted, like Johnny, she, too, would be without a home. That didn't bother her; it was Gram's bitter attitude and hostile spirit that did.

Justin pulled the boat in smoothly at the landing and helped Arla out; then he anchored the small craft securely to the dock.

"Thanks for the ride," Arla said. "I enjoyed it."

"It was fun, wasn't it? Maybe we can do it another time."

"I hope so, Justin. But I'm not too sure about that, once Gram gets home."

"You mean you're a slave, too -- that you have no freedom? No privileges?"
"I'm sure Gram means well by restricting me and. . . ."

"But you're no longer a child, Arla. Do you never go away?"

To town occasionally. But only when Gram thinks it's necessary for me to go."

"This is ridiculous!" Justin looked incredulous. "Suppose you and I wanted to go to church, then what?"
"Church! Oh Justin, I know the answer even now! That would be a big NO! Gram's bitter, bitter over anything religious and spiritual. She's so hard. Believe me, it's true."

"Well, whether she likes it or not, we're going to church one of these days so we can learn about God and Heaven and hell and these really important things. I believe from all Trish has told me that we'll answer to God someday for not going. Especially since we have churches all around us. She said for me to come to the little church that she has found, where the Word of God is preached and taught. And since each of us is a searcher, we'll go to church. I'm sure we'll find help there."

"I want to go ever so much, but I dread Gram's frostiness and icy coldness when and if I do go. She creates an atmosphere in the home that's positively indescribable and is honestly unbelievable when things displease her or go conversely to her plans and her thinking."

"But will your grandmother be able to give God an answer for your soul, Arla? According to Trish, I'll be answerable to God for what I have or have not done. And so will you. It startles me because I'm not changed . . . like my cousin is. And . . . and Arla," Justin said seriously and soberly, "I think too much of you to . . . to not help you go get to Heaven too. I . . . I want us both to go there. So you will go to church with me, please? As soon as we can?"

Arla looked up into Justin's face. It was all seriousness and concern -- for himself; for her. "Will you promise?" he begged. "If I can, yes, Justin."

Fireflies were turning on their incandescent lights as they walked away from the bayou. In the distance Arla heard the deep bass of the bull frogs warming up for the crescendo of their symphonic nights music, and far down the bayou the loon laughed wildly.

As though he just thought about it, Justin asked anxiously, "Must you stay here alone tonight? It's not safe, if you must."

"Birdie will be here. She went into town for some kind of hand-craft to work on. Gram hired her to cook and clean and such like things."

A relieved look came into Justin's eyes. "I'm glad," he said quickly.
They walked in silence the rest of the way to the house.

(Chapter 14)

Birdie's car was nowhere to be seen as the driveway and the big house came into view. Justin was a bit uneasy. "The stores are all closed by now," he said. "She should have been here."
"The little hand-craft store stays open till eight. . . ."

"See what time it is?" Justin asked, exposing the watch beneath the shirt sleeve of his left wrist. "It's now eight-forty. Your Gram's new hired woman has taken off for good, I would venture to say. Her little ruse of going to town for something to work on was her good-bye to the job."

Arla was stunned. "Do you think so?" she asked innocently, her great dark eyes pools of sheer confusion.

"I honestly do believe it. Why not see if her clothing is still in her room?"

"I can't say that I know which room Gram gave to her," Arla admitted. "But she was sleeping on top of the bed in what was Johnny's room when I got in from the garden this afternoon, So maybe that was her room. I'll go and see." And Arla raced up the steps.

She checked the closet and the bureau drawers and found them empty. Then she checked in each of the other four bedrooms and found no trace of Birdie's belongings. No need of looking in Gram's and her rooms; she knew what was in there.

"I guess, by all conclusive evidence," she said as she came down the stairs to Justin, "that your statement is true. Gram's hired woman is gone! She told me that she had peas coming on." Arla stared into space. "And she did tell me that she couldn't understand why she was hired in the first place. She said there wasn't anything needing cleaned; that everything was in excellent shape, which is true."

Justin was silent for some time. Then he said, "You're not staying here alone tonight. The Borks; would they take you in?"
"I'm sure they would. But, Justin, I'll have to stay here in case Gram calls. She'll be furious when she learns about Birdie. Yes, I'll have to stay here."

"But it isn't safe; you, a beautiful young woman. And alone! Arla, you must go to Borks. I won't rest at all unless you do."

"I can't; Gram will call, no doubt. Somebody must be here to answer the phone and to stay in the house. No, I'll have to stay. And Justin," she said quickly, "I just remembered that Johnny said he'd be praying for God to protect me and to watch over me. So Johnny's God will be my protector."

"But you don't know Him, Arla."

"Not yet. True. But with Johnny praying for me like that I'm sure his God will answer his prayer and look out for his sister. So, if God is here to protect me, that means that I'm not alone, right?"

Justin furrowed his brow thoughtfully. "I guess you're right," he answered. "But won't you be afraid? This house is enormous. How many windows and doors are in it?"

Arla smiled. "I don't honestly know how many windows. I never ever thought about counting them. I do know how many doors there are. But why should I worry when someone so big and great and powerful as Johnny's God will be watching over me? He is very powerful, Justin. Only this afternoon I read where He commanded the waves to lie down and be still and they obeyed Him. Imagine that! The little Bible said the sea was turbulent, so bad in fact that Jesus' disciples thought they were going to die in it. Then He spoke and it became a great and wonderful calm. Instantly! And another time He healed two blind men and they could see. He fed five thousand men on five loaves and two fishes. This was just five thousand men--besides the women and the children, whose number wasn't given. Oh, He is powerful and mighty! I'm sure He'll take care of me."

"I know you're right, Arla. But I still can't help wishing you'd stay at the Borks, whom you mentioned earlier in the evening."

"I'm not easily frightened when I'm inside if I've locked the doors, Justin. And I'm quite familiar with the creakings and the noises of this house. One
kind of listens to the house 'breathe' at night, when everything's still and calm and quiet. I've listened to it many nights before drifting off to sleep. They're familiar and rather friendly sounds, really."

"The noises? Friendly? And in a house this size? Oh Arla, you are unusual. Like a gem. Or a jewel."

Arla laughed. "Not really; one just naturally becomes accustomed to the 'breathings' of the house in which they live and reside. Your house breathes at night, I'm sure. I've heard that all houses do. It's a matter of contraction and expansion, I guess. Or some such thing. And after a really hot day, when the evening breezes fan its hot roof and sides and it begins to cool off, one can really hear its 'breathing.' Kind of like a tired, wilted old lady breathing a sigh of blessed relief."

Justin threw his head back and laughed heartily. "That's the nicest compliment this house could have," he said kindly. "And one of these nights, if I can ever get to bed before I'm totally exhausted and drop off to sleep as soon as I'm beneath the sheets, I must listen long enough to hear my house 'breathe.' You're right, of course; each house has its own peculiar . . . pardon me, 'friendly,' you called it . . . sounds. It's time that I familiarized myself with the 'breathings' strictly belonging to my house."

"Let's go into the kitchen and have something to eat," Arla suggested.

"You sure you wouldn't prefer my taking you out to a restaurant, Arla? I'd be delighted to do so."

"I believe I'd better stay here, Justin. Thanks. I just don't know when Gram may call, or decide to come home even. She told Birdie she was staying overnight, and I believe she may. But she's quite changeable at times, too. No criticism meant; it's a simply stated fact. Do you like waffles?" she asked. "I can mix up a batch in a hurry, if you do. And there's some left over chicken and gravy in the refrigerator. Or, if you prefer it, there's raspberry and blueberry syrup as well as pure maple syrup."

"That sounds delicious, Arla. I love waffles."

"With what?"
"Everything you mentioned."

Arla laughed. "Then you shall have waffles with everything on them."

As she mixed the batter and poured it carefully into the hot waffle iron, Justin set the table and poured two glasses of milk. He felt a pang of painfully sweet nostalgia rush over him. It was so painfully sweet and reminiscent that it hurt. In memory, he was once more a boy in his aunt and uncle's rambling, meticulously kept house. He was standing on a stool beside the very dear aunt who had raised him and mothered him . . . helping to mix up a big batch of waffles. He would never forget his pride, and the joy he felt and experienced when Uncle Peter exclaimed that they were the best waffles he had ever tasted or eaten.

Tears flushed from his eyes. He brushed them away. But not before Arla had seen them. "Is something wrong?" she asked, as she stirred the gently simmering chicken and checked on the browning waffles.

"I was just thinking about my dear Aunt Anna and Uncle Peter, that's all. The waffles reminded me of the time when I helped her to mix up a big batch, enough for our evening meal and two meals after that. She refrigerated what we didn't use that night. She used real butter and cream in them. They're wonderful people, Arla. Someday you must meet them."

"I'm sure they are, Justin. And now, here's waffle number one. Syrup or chicken and gravy, which?"

"Chicken and gravy for this one, please."

"I'll have the same," she said, as she spooned the hot meat and gravy over the golden-brown waffles then poured more batter into the iron.

It was a pleasantly-sweet evening, one Arla would cherish forever. And when Justin took his leave an hour after they had washed and dried the dishes together, she felt the emptiness and the bigness of the house close in upon her.

She locked the doors securely, turned off the lights, then went upstairs to her room. Taking the little key from its hiding place, she unlocked the dresser drawer and once more brought the little New Testament out of its
place of hiding. Placing it carefully on the boudoir chair, she dressed for bed then sat in the chair and opened the Bible to where she had left off that afternoon.

It was as though there was another Presence in her room. She sensed it immediately upon opening the New Testament. Tears cascaded down her cheeks for no apparent reason. She felt strangely moved upon. She wept and wept. Not being able to stop the tears, and not able to see clearly to read, she turned the light out and went to bed clutching the New Testament to her heart.

She fell asleep, the Book resting on her bosom. It was the ringing of the telephone that awakened her sometime later.

She rushed to the phone on the night stand in Gram's room, trembling with fear. What would Gram say when she knew that Birdie hadn't stayed? Maybe she wouldn't ask, Arla decided, hoping sincerely that this would be the case.

"Hello. Mrs. Thacker's residence," she said, lifting the receiver and speaking into the mouth-piece.

"Arla! Are you all right?" It was Justin. His voice carried a note of concern.

Arla heaved a sigh of relief. "I'm so all right, Justin, that I was asleep already," she said softly. "Hadn't you ought to be sleeping also? You get up so early."

"I can't sleep knowing you are in that enormous house all by yourself. If I thought it wouldn't look bad I'd come back and just sleep in my car in front of the house."

"Oh no, Justin, don't do that. Please! People would talk. And it would look very wicked. They wouldn't know that you had spent the night in your car. No, you must not do this. I'll be fine. I know I will. Johnny's God is watching over me. I got my lovely New Testament out to read, but couldn't because of crying. I do want to learn more of what's in it."
"How about going to church with me on Wednesday night? Trish said they have a service called the Midweek Prayer Meeting then. I'm sure we'd enjoy it. And we'd learn a lot about what's in the Bible, too."

"Oh Justin, let's go. I feel so strange and . . . and broken up inside just to even look at this little New Testament that Johnny gave me. I . . . I wonder . . . does God speak to one in this way? Something's happening to me. I just want to cry and cry. And that's not like me. Believe me!"

Justin was silent for a long time. So long, in fact, that Arla asked suddenly, "Are you still on the line?"

"Yes. I'm right here. But what you just said expressed my feelings exactly. You're not a cry-baby; I know that. Neither am I. But ever since listening to Trish, and then reading in the Bible for myself, I've cried more than I can ever remember having cried. Inwardly, I'm troubled. I've never felt this way before -not for so long as I can remember anything. I'm sure it's the Spirit of God, Arla. Trisha told me that God deals with our hearts like this. She said if He ever spoke to me . . . and she was sure that He would because she was praying for me . . . well, she said I was to do what He was telling me to do. This is why I want to go to church; I'm sure I'll have clear leadings and directions when I get there and listen to what the minister has to say. It shames me to think that I've been so ignorant about God and spiritual things. And in an enlightened country at that. One rather expects this from heathens in irreligious and unchurched countries. But in America! There'll be no excuse, will there?"

"I guess you're right, Justin, although until just a few days ago I never gave God and spiritual things the slightest inclination of thought even. I guess I just presumed that young people's lives were all of them just one great and grand forward thrust of joyous living; that they didn't need to worry about illness and death and such like things. But Johnny helped me to see a lot of things. Oh, I do wish he were here to help to guide me, especially when I become converted and change. I know what I'm in for and what will happen when I get to know God the way Johnny does. But I'm ready for whatever I must do to have what Johnny has. He's calm and sweet and kind even in the heat of the battle, Justin! That's really something, especially when you go through one of Gram's battles or sieges. It's no light thing, believe me. And the house feels the after-shocks for days. This is the sad truth. I've often pretended that someone else's kind, sweet and loving grandmother was
Johnny's and mine. Whenever this other grandmother spoke kindly and tenderly to her grandchildren and wrapped her arms around them affectionately, I wondered how they felt. I was sure it must be almost heavenly to feel the support and love of those strong and wonderful arms. Then I'd turn away, and while tears spilled from my eyes, I'd pretend that she was my real grandmother; that this unkind, hard, belligerent Gram was like the wicked stepmother in the story of Hansel and Gretel. Isn't this horrible of me? I'm ashamed to think that I ever pretended this, now that Johnny tells me we must love Gram in spite of everything: all the bad times, the tears, the hurts, the unkindnesses, the cruelty . . . everything."

"I suppose that's the human in you, Arla."

"And the divine in Johnny," Arla added, breaking into Justin's sentence.

"I'm sure you're right about that. It would take God, and His righteousness and power, to make one feel like that."

"Johnny told me once that we must love Gram, not because of these painful and heart-rending happenings and circumstances but in spite of them. For Johnny, it seems to come natural since he found God; but it's quite another thing for me," Arla confessed, tearfully. "And I do so much want to be like my brother is toward Gram. Justin, my grandmother has a soul, too. This dawned on me this afternoon while reading God's Word. I wonder if she ever thinks about her soul and where she'll go after she dies. But we don't dare to mention anything about God to her. This is most distressing."

"Your grandmother is an adult, Arla; she's no longer a child. And I would venture to say that sometime in her earlier life she had a personal encounter with God and just brushed Him aside."

"Justin, do you realize what you've just said?" Arla was incredulous.

"Don't be surprised to find out some day that what I said is the truth. People as bitter and as hard and cruel as your grandmother is have a story of rebellion and resistance to tell generally. If they will, or do, that is. Well, I'd better let you get back to sleep. Take my phone number in case you need me. And do be careful, Arla. You're very precious to me."
Arla stumbled blindly toward her bedroom, Justin's words about Gram hammering her head and her ears. Gram have an encounter with God? It seemed like an utterly impossible thing. But was it? And might it not have been just as he said? Yes, it could have been.

Shivering, she slid between the sheets and closed her eyes with Justin's last sentence calming her.

(Chapter 15)

Arla awoke to the singing of birds and the glorious golden sunlight filtering softly through the sheer curtains at her windows. She sat up in bed and realized that the New Testament which she had gone to sleep with was still in her hand. For some unexplainable reason she lifted it to her lips and kissed it, saying softly as she did so, "Thank You, Johnny's God, for taking care of me through the night. Thank You . . . God."

A warm feeling enfolded her. She had..., prayed? Was that a prayer? She didn't exactly know. But at least she had recognized Who had watched over her all night long and it made her feel good and light on the inside It was a beginning if nothing else. A beginning toward the right.

She sang as she showered and dressed for the day, a thing she hadn't felt like doing for a long, long time. Singing, that is. If Johnny were only still living here everything would be perfect and wonderful and perfectly wonderful this beautiful morning. For once, there was no tension in the big house, Wouldn't Johnny have appreciated that! But then, she realized, if Gram had not driven Johnny out of the house, Gram, herself, would no doubt not have gone away in haste She would have been at home and, in that case, the tension would have been thick and heavy. And ugly-mean. She shuddered, remembering and recalling past unpleasant memories and happenings. But today was a new day, a new beginning. And in her heart Arla felt like it was only the beginning of a blessed continuation of beginnings.

She did her long naturally-curly hair up on her head then made the bed and settled down in a comfortable chair with the New Testament. She would give Johnny's God the very best time of the day by reading from His Word, she decided, feeling the rightness of what she was about to do.
Again she had that beautiful warm feeling enfold her. She began to cry. Then she was sobbing. In an agony of soul, and not realizing that this is what it was, she raised her tear-filled eyes upward and cried out simply but from her heart, "Oh God . . . Johnny's God! . . . I don't know what to say, nor even what's wrong with me, but You changed Johnny; can You change me too? Please? I want You. Justin said Trish told him that we must ask for You, or something like that. And here I am, asking. Wanting You! Convert me, God! I've been wicked, by what I read from Your Book yesterday. Now I want You to change me and to live in me. Just like You are living in my brother's. . . ."

Arla never finished her sentence: The room became a holy vestibule of Heaven's glory and God's presence as Jesus came into her heart. So overcome with holy joy and glory and peace was she that for a long time she forgot where she was. She laughed and cried and cried and laughed until she felt weak. But light as a feather too. When she finally opened her eyes and looked around the room, she thought everything was changed and made new, like her heart. Now she understood what Johnny was trying to tell her. And for the first time, too, she realized the full meaning of his words when he said there was no way he could fully and adequately describe what had happened to him; that it had to be experienced and felt to be understood. Johnny was so right about this, she thought, as she closed her eyes and began praying a prayer of from-the-heart thanksgiving and praise.

She was amazed how simple and easy it was to pray, now that she knew God. But then she realized that when one knew an individual and was familiar with him or her, conversation always came easy. It was just the same with God. One had to know Him to be intimately conversant with Him. The thought blest her soul in a fresh wave of glory and blessing. Oh how she wished Johnny could be told of her change.

She opened the little New Testament then and began reading: the final few remaining chapters of Matthew's Gospel; St. Mark; St. Luke; and, finally, St. John. She read and cried, cried and read, the Book becoming more and more precious to her as she finished each of the Gospels. She forgot about breakfast, forgot about Gram, too, and the ugly mission she was sure she had gone on. Christ was her all in all. Her eve'rything. Like Johnny had once said, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" God would fight her battles in His way and His time. Hadn't Johnny said something like this to her, too?
It was almost noon when Arla locked the now much-beloved New Testament safely inside her dresser drawer and went downstairs. She felt like she was walking on air, so light and wonderful was her heart now that its burden and load of sin was gone, She had left it at Jesus' cross when she plunged into that precious fountain filled with sacred and precious blood.

She ate a cold waffle, left from last night's lovely time with Justin, and thought it tasted delicious with its black raspberry syrup topping and a handful of finely chopped pecans. What made it especially delightful and special was the simple but now all-important fact that she had offered thanks to God for the first time ever for her food.

She unlocked and opened the doors, wanting to let all of the outdoor fragrances and breezes inside. And when she looked toward the driveway from the front doorway and saw Justin sitting on one of the many porch chairs, she was shocked. "I . . . I didn't know you were here," she exclaimed in surprise, asking quickly, "When did you come?"

"A long time ago," was the simple reply. "I couldn't wait to see you." He stood to his feet and walked toward her. "Arla, I had to tell somebody: I'm new in Christ."

"Justin! Justin! So am I! When did you get converted? I became new in Him this morning, and oh, it's wonderful. Wonderful! I feel light as a feather."

"I couldn't sleep. I felt wretched and miserable and . . . And so and one. Yes, that's the only word to describe how I felt, undone. Instead of going to bed, I began reading again in the Bible. The longer I read, the more i realized my sinfulness and wickedness. And Arla, I was sure I'd die and go to hell before I could repent of my sins. i fell to my knees like someone had hit me and begged God to have mercy on me and on my soul. I told Him I realized I was a wretched and miserable sinner but that I as coming to Him to be changed. And while I was praying and crying, Jesus came into my heart. I can't believe I'm me any more; I'm completely changed. Everything's new and bright, except sin, which now is exceedingly dark and sinful. I had to tell you."

"Won't Trish and Johnny be happy!" Arla exclaimed, brushing shining tears away. "Like you, I felt I had to tell somebody, too; so I planned on going down to the Borks and telling her as soon as I had washed my very few dishes. By the way, have you eaten?"
Justin smiled. "Would you believe it, but I haven't been hungry. I've just wanted to read and pray and praise. And last night's feast should be sufficient until I go home for supper this evening, God willing. Thanks for asking though. I'll have to go now and get to work. if everything goes well, I should finish here today."

"Take a sandwich or two and a couple peaches," Arla insisted kindly. "I think a workingman needs something in his stomach if he's going to do the best at his job." And Arla hurried into the kitchen.

"Any word from your grandmother?" Justin asked as she returned with the sack lunch and a jar of icy-cold mint tea. "Nothing."

"Do you think she'll be in today?"

"It's doubtful, especially since she told Birdie that she may not be home for several days."

Justin looked long at Arla. Then he said, "I'll be praying for you. We have nothing to fear, now that we know the Lord. And, Arla, this time you won't be suffering alone; I'll be near by to uphold you in prayer. And with my presence, too, if you want me and will allow me this honor."

"I want you to, Justin. I feel God sent you into my life,"

"We'll help each other toward Heaven, Arla. Yes, by God's grace, we will."

His statement, said with such emphasis and conviction, added strength to her new-found faith. Long after he was gone, she thought upon it, knowing that the day was coming when she would thank God for Justin's help and encouragement. They knew and loved the same God and spoke the same language now as Johnny and Trisha did.

Arla made a quick trip down the road to the Bork's house, telling Mrs. Bork what had happened to her that morning and how she felt everything was new, like her heart. "Even the trees and the flowers look new and fresher!" she exclaimed. "And the birds sound as if they are singing songs of praise to God," she added.
Hugging Arla close to her heart and wiping the happy tears away, Mrs. Bork declared that the change was all inside Arla's heart and that was the reason everything else looked new and wonderful. "You're seeing through eyes that have had a heart change, honey," she said simply. "This makes all the difference in the world. And now, knowing what happened to Johnny when he got converted, I'd advise you to get all your things together so that when you must leave you will be able to do so at a moment's notice. Your gram's going to be furious. I'll have the spare room ready for you, Arla."

"But if Johnny thought it would make things hard for you and Mr. Bork, hadn't I better find a room in town somewhere?"

"Absolutely not!" Mrs. Bork's exclamation was the most emphatic statement Arla had ever heard the gentle woman utter. "You are a girl," she explained softly; "Johnny is a young man. I never did believe in any young woman rooming alone unless it was an absolute necessity and nothing else could be arranged for. Young women should remain at home until they're married. Young men, too, for that matter. I'm still from the old school where children stayed under their parents' roof until they married and established a home of their own. These apartments only help to encourage the young in their sinfulness and their extreme independence and rebellion. So, if your gram makes you leave, you come here. Ha Penny will be happy to see you more often and Mr. Bork and I will feel young again, having a daughter to look after and to love. A home gets pretty empty when the children all leave the nest."

Tears shimmered in Arla's lovely eyes. "Thank you, Mrs. Bork," she said, "but I shall most certainly go out and find work, God willing, and pay you room and board."

"Does a daughter ever pay?" came the gentle question-rebuke.

For a brief moment Arla was speechless. Then she said, "Thank you, Mrs. Bork. You are most kind. We shall work something out, together, when that time comes. And now I want to see Ha Penny and tell her about my changed, new heart. Do you think animals understand such things?" she asked innocently but seriously.
A smile tugged at the corners of Mrs. Bork's mouth. "They may not understand the language nor the words relating to our born again... converted... heart change, honey; but they surely know the difference between the brutal, harshly-unkind and churlish man and the born again, kind, and considerate individual. The Bible says 'The righteous man regardeth the life of his beast.' And, on the other hand, it says that 'The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.' In this way, I believe the animals very definitely notice the difference. Now run along to Ha Penny, Arla. And don't forget what I said: You'll have a home here if you are evicted."

Arla kissed Mrs. Bork, saying tearfully, "You are most kind. Thank you. I love you." Then she hurried away to the pasture.

Ha Penny saw her before she reached the fence and, trotting majestically across the lush green pasture, she nickered and neighed happily. Arla climbed over the board fence and wrapped her slender arms around the beautiful mare's neck, whispering softly into her ear, "I'm so glad you're mine, Ha Penny! Johnny's and mine! And know something? You have two brand new owners: Johnny and I got converted. Jesus lives in our heart, Ha Penny. We're not like we used to be; we're changed, I'm so very happy, and I just wanted you to know about it."

Ha Penny neighed softly. Arla stroked her head and her face gently. She was thankful that the gentle mare belonged to Johnny and her. She almost shuddered when she thought about Gram's plan to get rid of her... to sell her... to just anybody. Oh, how Ha Penny could have been mistreated and abused. Hadn't Mrs. Bork said the Bible declared that the tender mercies of the wicked were cruel? Poor Ha Penny; she could have gotten a master who would have beaten her cruelly and brutally, Arla thought, tightening her arms around the soft neck.

She stroked the mare for a long time and Ha Penny's delight was obvious. If Arla stopped for any little period of time, the velvet-soft nose nudged her arm gently and lightly. "You are spoiled!" Arla chided playfully. "Johnny and I coddled you for so long as you have been here and now you just naturally expect it, don't you?" she asked softly.

Ha Penny gave a soft, playful nicker, turned on her heels and loped across the pasture to where the Borks' horses were grazing and swatting flies with their plume-like tails. She turned and looked toward the fence where Arla
stood watching, then neighed loudly and trotted gracefully up to the grazing horses.

Arla turned and headed for the road. Ha Penny was content, it was plain to see. This made her feel happy. The mare wouldn't get too lonely, not with the other horses around her.

The big house came into full view as she rounded a bend in the road and once again her mind went to Gram. How she longed to talk to her grandmother about her soul. It was now a burning desire within her, a holy flame ignited by God reaching out in love and pity and concerned for the relative who so ill-treated Johnny and her.

A wave of holy joy washed over her soul: she loved her naturally and spontaneously since she was converted. It was there, inside her. Just like Johnny had said.
She rejoiced. And wept.

(Chapter 16)

Gram remained in the city for the greater part of the week, and when she pulled into the driveway late Friday afternoon Arla saw thunder clouds written on every part of her face and traced in every inch of her body. Trouble was brewing, she knew; Gram's mood-barometer was an unfailing prediction. How beautiful and wonderful it would be if Gram were born again of God, she thought longingly and silently with a catch in her throat and in her heart. It was obvious that whatever Gram's plans were, and whatever her objective was in remaining in the city, something had failed and gone awry. Could it be, too, that Gram had found out perhaps that she, Arla, had gone to a prayer meeting service? And what a service it was; God was there! And Justin and she had given their first ever public testimony, telling how God had dealt with them and how they were converted. It was a service neither one would ever forget.

"Where's the woman I hired?" Gram's first words were edged like a razor blade, sharp. Her attitude and tone dripped ice.

"Birdie?"

"Whom else? You knew whom I meant!"
Arla felt smitten.

"Don't look so innocent," Gram all but shouted the tart exclamation. "Now get out of my way. I have work to do."

"I'll bring your luggage in, Gram," Arla offered kindly, reaching for one of the expensive leather cases.

Gram brushed her aside roughly. "Move, I said. Don't bother me. I'm perfectly capable and able to help myself. Where's the housekeeper? Why isn't she out here?"

"I don't know where she is, Gram; but I would suppose she's at her home."

"At her home! I hired her to work for me. What do you mean, at her home?" Gram's face turned scarlet with anger.

"Like I said, I don't know where she is. But I would imagine she's at her home. She left for town to get some handwork to work on, she told me, and she didn't come back."

Gram walked inside and tossed her luggage roughly across the floor. "When did she leave?" she asked quickly, venting her anger on the luggage.

"The same day, only in the evening."

"Why didn't you stop her? What made her leave?"

"I had no idea she was leaving, Gram. She just wanted some handcrafts to work on, she said. And really, I could not have stopped her from leaving if she was determined to leave."

"And you mean you've been alone here ever since?"

"Why, yes, of course. Only I wasn't really alone. . . ."

"What nonsense you talk. Now don't bother me, do you hear? Don't bother me. This is a command"
"Yes, ma'am. I'm glad to see you, Gram, and I love you."

The scarlet color crept along Gram's neck, then made its way into her cheeks and forehead. Her jaws set firmly and tightly. "I said, don't bother me. Now, out of my way. And don't touch my luggage. I'll take care of my things." Her eyes were cold orbs of glinting steel; unfeeling, calculating, evil.

A shiver traced itself up and down Arla's spine. Was Gram possessed? she wondered, recalling several of the Biblical accounts which she had read about recently.

She retreated to the kitchen, feeling crushed by the cutting, stinging words, but oh so thankful that within her heart the peace and joy remained stable and sweetly intact. How could one ever begin to try to describe this wonderful new birth experience! It was positively indescribable. In the midst of extremely crushing blows and the most adverse circumstances, the inner peace and joy and soul-rest remained like a holy heaven, constant, stable, and unshakeable. And gloriously real!

Arla busied herself in the kitchen preparing Gram's favorite foods for the evening meal and hoping that, in some measure at least, Gram would be a bit more sociable and less belligerent and hostile as they sat together at the table. She kept her mind stayed on things that were lovely and pure and true and good, and found that by doing so her heart was totally quiet and calm and undisturbed. It was one of God's Heaven-given formula-plans for keeping the soul calm in disaster, quiet in trouble, and at peace in the midst of tension and turmoil and strife.

She wondered about Johnny but felt calm in her soul, knowing that her prayers could reach into any room or apartment where he may be. Someday soon, she was sure, she would hear from him. Until then, she would continue praying and trusting God to work His plan and purpose out in both of their lives. He was such a great, all-powerful and Almighty God. He knew what was best for each of them.

She set the table for two, bringing freshly-cut flowers in from the garden and arranging them artistically and attractively in a crystal bowl before placing the arrangement on the table where their subtle and sweet fragrance added a delightful contrast to the cooking odors.
The shadows lengthened, and when Gram failed to come to the table at the usual time for the evening meal Arla ran up the stair steps to tell her she had everything ready. She tapped lightly on the closed door. Receiving no answer, she knocked harder. "The meal is ready, Gram," she said softly, kindly. "I prepared many of your favorite. . . ."

Before she could finish, the door swung ajar and Gram's steely-hard, cold eyes seemed to burn holes through her. For a moment Arla was frightened, but a quickly-whispered plea to God for courage and protection instantly removed the fear and filled her heart with comfort. "The meal is ready," she repeated softly.

Gram stared. And stared. And stared. Her eyes were wells of hate. "I told you not to bother me. I'll get my own meals, thank you. This is my home. Or have you forgotten?" Gram's icy tone was pure mockery. "I'm sorry, Gram. I. . . ."

"Do you know what the meaning of 'don't bother me' is?" Gram's tone was acid. Her glinting eyes never wavered.

"I'm sorry. . . ."

"Sorry! Sorry! What a play on words! Now, for the last time, don't bother me. I know where the food is. I'll take care of myself. Is this clear?"

Arla nodded. Oh how she longed to reach Gram for God. Slowly she turned and started down the stairs.

"This is my house!" Gram exclaimed meaningfully as she slammed the door shut upon Arla.


She washed and dried the dishes, putting the leftover food in containers in the refrigerator. Then she made her way down into the garden to pray, feeling a mutual kinship with Johnny and what he endured in the brief
period since his conversion because of Gram's hardness of heart and bitter attitude.

Darkness had long since fallen and the moon and stars turned on their "lesser lights" when Arla made her way along the fragrant-scented garden path toward the house. Save for the partially-opened office door with its sliver of light, the big house was total darkness when she let herself in through the kitchen door.

Hurrying up the stairway, Gram's voice penetrated the thick darkness. Whomever she was speaking to, or with, Arla felt sorry for. Gram's words cut like a two-edged sword. Pity the man or woman on the other end of the line, she thought. But then, she reasoned, the sting was never quite as painful when there were no blood-line ties; so maybe the individual who was now receiving the razor-sharp lecture-lashing would sluff it off like any other unfortunate situation whenever the receiver on Gram's end of the line would click into place.

Shame and pity washed over Arla for her grandparent. What made Gram the way she was? Didn't she realize there were everyday common courtesies that should be administered and followed after? And didn't she realize that hate and malice would, after awhile, consume and destroy a person? Gram was destroying herself with hatred. And for no reason at all. None whatever. She had allowed the bitter drug to seep into her soul sometime or other and now, in her older years, her entire being and personality was saturated with the wicked and evil trait. And none but Christ could liberate her from this horribly self-destructing thing, Arla realized. But the sad fact was that Gram would have nothing whatever to do with God.

Arla prepared herself for bed. Then, with the door shut tightly, she brought her most priceless earthly treasure from its hiding place inside her locked dresser drawer and read into the night. When she finally turned the light off and crawled between the sheets, her soul was fed and nourished and blest.

Gram was nowhere around when Arla made her way into the kitchen the following morning. Nor for the entire day. Once again, Arla was alone. But her day was a most pleasant and rewarding one. Mrs. Bork gave her a thick letter from Johnny and Justin came by to see her, meeting her half-way between the Bork's house and Gram's.
"I've missed you, Arla," Justin said quickly. "Is it safe for me to take you home? I mean, has your grandmother returned from the city?"

"She had. But she's been away all day so far."

"How's the 'atmosphere'?"

"Sad. But God's grace has been sufficient and wonderful. I don't know how Johnny and I ever made it before, without God and His wonderful peace and joy. I'm frightened and troubled for Gram. I try to pray for her, but it's hard. Almost like I'm praying against something impenetrable."

"Is she home now?"

"No. She's been gone since this morning."

"I don't want to add more to your already heavy burden by creating a scene with your grandmother. So, rather than going to the house and having her discover you in my company, where shall we go?"

"To the Bork's house. They'll be happy to have us. And their big swing in the back yard will be the ideal place for us to visit. Maybe you'd like to meet Ha Penny?" Arla asked, smiling.

Justin's face brightened. "The Borks are pretty wonderful people," he said. "And, yes, I think it's about time that I meet this gentle little mare of yours."

He helped her into the car and together they drove back to the Bork's where they were welcomed warmly and lovingly.

"Now you enjoy each other's company," Mrs. Bork said after Justin and Arla had visited a while with her. "I have work to do in the kitchen," she added, hurrying inside.

Justin and Arla walked to the pastureland. Ha Penny, seeing Arla, nickered and neighed excitedly then trotted gracefully up to the board fence. Almost immediately, Arla's arms were wrapped around the soft neck. "My dear little Ha Penny!" she said softly into the mare's ear.
"Meet Justin," she said laughingly.

Justin smiled and stroked the face of the mare.

"You are a beauty," he said. Ha Penny nickered.

"She likes you!" Arla exclaimed joyously. "But I was sure she would. I think she misses Johnny. I really do. Johnny took care of her. I guess it's only natural then that there should be an attachment between them, especially when someone's as kind and gentle mannered as my brother."

Justin looked at Arla. "This may explain the reason for Ha Penny's gentleness," he said. "Really?"

"I've heard it told that animals take on the disposition of their owners and their trainers. And I believe it's the truth."

"I know children do this," Arla admitted. "But I guess I never gave any thought to animals becoming like their master, even thought Johnny and Ha Penny each are gentle. It's a nice thought though -- a sort of kindness begetting kindness thing, I guess. I did know a man once who actually made his dog mean and vicious by his continual teasing and tormenting of the poor animal. I always felt sorry for the dog, whose name was Spur."

"Animals are far more intelligent than most people know, Arla. And they, like children, know who likes them and who doesn't like them. They feel kindness and react, or act, accordingly."

Ha Penny stayed by the fence until she tired of it. Then, with a loud nicker and neigh, she raced away to join the other horses, resting now in the shade of the trees. Justin and Arla turned and walked back to the Borks' house, content in being together.

It was toward evening when Justin took his departure, driving Arla three-fourths of the way home before turning around and driving away. Arla walked the remaining distance to the house. Again she was alone; Gram was not at home. Whatever she was bent upon doing she was pursuing with a passion and a determined mind and will. As before, Arla had the strange, unshakeable feeling that Gram's business somehow had something to do with Johnny and the will their grandfather had made out years before his
decease. The feeling remained with her; she couldn't shake it off nor get rid of it.

She let herself into the house, trying to thrust the thought out of her mind, but it remained glued to her brain with unshakeable persistence and immovability. A fear of such force and strength stole over her as to make her feel trembly and weak in her knees. She dropped down into the nearest chair and shook like she had a chill. This fear, this strange and sudden fear, had no connection whatever with her grandfather's will. Her terrifying fear was for Gram. She fell on her knees and tried to pray for her grandmother. The heavens felt shut . . . locked tight . . . against her prayers. "Oh God," she cried aloud, "what's wrong?"

(Chapter 17)

Arla got up from her knees and paced back and forth across the kitchen floor, clenching and unclenching her hands as she walked. Never before had she experienced anything like this fear. Why was it almost if not altogether, impossible to touch God for Gram? Anything else she had prayed about, or for, was easy to talk to her God over. And she knew that He was listening and paying special attention to her, too. But now, when she tried to pray for Gram, it was as though she was praying against a barred heaven.

Again the unspeakable fear shook her slender frame. She didn't know what to do. She had never experienced the feeling before. Perhaps if she went out to the garden and knelt where Johnny had had his rendezvous with God after he had gotten converted, she could contact God for Gram, she thought. It would never do for her to continue trying in the house; everything seemed blocked, like she was praying against brass.

Her fingers touched Johnny's unopened letter inside her jumper pocket. She longed to read it, to learn where he was and what he was doing. But she felt duty-bound and spiritually obligated to try again to pray for her grandparent. So she hurried from the house to the fragrant garden, laden with the delicious scent of blooming flowers and pine, to pray.

A small breeze teased the branches above her head and rustled the bushes; it nodded the faces of the pansies and set the nasturtiums to dancing. Arla found the spot nearest to where she knew Johnny had knelt and prayed so agonizingly that night when she had come to the garden to be
away from Gram's sharp tongue. Then she fell on her face toward the ground. "Oh God! God!" she pled. "Please help me to pray for my grandmother. She's lost. Lost! I love her, God. Oh, why do You seem so far removed from me when I pray for Gram? Please . . . ."

Arla raised her eyes heavenward. How could one pray when God seemed not to hear? How? It was the most difficult task she had ever undertaken.

Again she tried. No tears sprang from her eyes and her heart was unmoved in its depths. She was saying words, that was all. "Dear God . . . my God . . . What has happened? I know You're mine and that I am Yours. I love Thee, my God! Please let me know that You still love me. . . ."

Like the little refreshing breeze skipping in, through, and among, the bushes and flowers and trees, so God's gentle Spirit whispered that all was well with her soul, filling and reassuring her heart of His continued presence and peace. Her heaven was open wide when she prayed this prayer. Why couldn't it be the same when she prayed for Gram?

Baffled, troubled, and frightened beyond anything she had experienced before, she got to her feet. Oh, if only she knew more about God and His ways; if only she was wiser about His doings and His dealings with men and women. But she was ignorant, almost like a child. And why? Because, for almost eighteen years of her life she had known nothing about Him and His marvelous works and doing. She had never been taught and instructed in spiritual things. Worldly things, yes. Yes! To the point of being privately tutored and schooled. Gram had insisted that both Johnny and she should have private schooling. And her father and mother had finally consented to the insistent command and they were taken out of the public school. All their natural life, Johnny and she had been sheltered and were kept from mingling too much with people of the outside world. This, Arla realized now, was both good and bad. Good, in that they weren't thrown in with the wicked crowd; bad, because each was kept from being exposed to Christian young people, those truly born again.

Arla wondered suddenly what Gram's motive was for insisting upon having them privately tutored. Could it have been because of the probable spiritual aspect? she wondered. Or was it purely academic? Whatever the reason and/or the reasoning, they had received only the very best schooling
and training, she realized with a thankful heart. Oh, if only their adept teacher had known about God and had taught them the Bible in conjunction with their other textbooks. How wise Johnny and she could have been in spiritual wisdom and understanding, she thought. And what a wealth of Biblical learning could have been theirs, too.

She remained in the garden for a long time, meditating upon God and the many things she had read from her much-loved New Testament. She never ceased to be amazed at God's Word; it had the answer to all of life's problems, no matter how complex and complicated they were. It was a balm for the bruised and the battered, strength for the faint and weak, comfort for the sorrowing and hurting and help for the helpless and needy, with God's wonderful plan of redemption and salvation so clearly and explicitly revealed and made known that no one need err therein.

The moon hung its lantern light in the sky and the stars were twinkling merrily by the time she finally made her way down the garden path toward the house. The solitude and silence served as reinforcements for her already calm and peaceful heart. She marveled at the blessed inner calm and peace of her soul. And this in the thick of the hatred from her dear grandmother.

A light shone through the kitchen window and Arla knew by this that Gram was home.

She greeted her grandmother pleasantly when she stepped inside the door but received no reply, only a cold, hard, bitter stare. A glare would have described the look more properly, but Arla tried not to think upon the word even. She had learned that by thinking upon good things the wrong things took flight.

Arla tried making conversation but Gram refused to answer, doing nothing other than squaring her slender shoulders and setting her jaw in its customary firm, hard way and glaring at Arla.

Knowing that there was no point in remaining downstairs, Arla went upstairs to her bedroom and closed the door. In spite of all the grief and pain and hurt because of Gram's attitude, her heart felt happy and peaceful in her God and His sustaining grace and power. Then she remembered Johnny's letter. It was like an oasis in the desert, like a bright shining light in a pitch black night. Quickly she drew the letter from her pocket and began reading:
"My Dear Little Sister," Johnny began.

"I am settled into a nice efficiency apartment in the suburbs. You'd like my little place, Arla. It's new and has everything modern and convenient in it - - exactly what a novice-bachelor needs! But no matter how efficient or nice a place may be, without one's loved ones and family it lacks something. Needless to say, I miss you much. Someday, by God's grace and His help, this will change and we'll be able to have a normal family relationship again. I am praying to to this end.

"How are things going for you? Better, I hope. My earnest and fervent prayers are ascending heavenward almost continually for you. I pray that God will make Himself very real to you, Sis, the way He is real to me. And that you will surrender your heart and life to Him and find His peace and love and joy in the same measure that I have found Him and His boundless and unspeakable gifts. Believe me when I say that in the midst of my eviction (is this not the proper word?) I have peace and inner joy beyond any describing. This can come only from God. It's the most beautiful and amazing thing in the world and my heart-cry to God is for you to experience it. It must be experienced; there's no defining it. It's impossible. You'll tell me the same thing once you are converted and have met my wonderful Lord and Savior."

Arla was weeping now. Oh if only she had some way to let Johnny know that she was converted, that she knew God for herself. She wiped the tears away and continued reading:

"I am working for one of the banks in the city and just as soon as I have some free time I plan to run in to the Borks to see you, God willing. We'll make some kind of arrangements, Arla, and get together then. And like I told you before I left, I plan to get back to see you at least once every week, with God's help. This, after I am better oriented at the bank. Also, if I arranged for a telephone conversation between us at the Bork's house, do you suppose you could get away without Gram suspicioning that we were communicating? It would upset her dreadfully if she thought I was in touch with you or you with me. And I most certainly don't want to upset her nor make her angry. Oh, if only she knew God! And if only I could pray for her! I mean really pray, not merely say words. Sometimes I am most fearful for our dear grandmother."
Arla gasped. Johnny fearful, too? Was it purely a coincidence, or what? Her heart told her it was not coincidental; it went deeper than that. Yes, much deeper. She held the letter up and continued reading:

"I called Trish several times and we're discussing the possibility of an early wedding, now that I'm free from my responsibilities at Gram's house. Trish thought a late September or early October wedding would be beautiful. And, she said she would be every bit as happy and as thankful as if it were a Thanksgiving wedding. I will keep you informed as to the date and the final plans and preparations, God willing. It will be a very simple affair, Trish said. She wants you to be her attendant, and she suggested a cousin of hers to stand up with me, since it seems you nor I were blest with relatives whom we know. But, again, I'll keep you informed.

"Now for a bit of almost unbelievable but very real news. I saw Gram in the bank when I was being interviewed. She had no idea I was there nor that I saw her even. The interview took place up in a balcony room. I could look down on the main floor and watch the people coming and going, a thing I did quite a bit of since Mr. Anders, my interviewer, received a rather lengthy long distance telephone call midway through the interview. Gram looked extremely angry and like she was giving one of the girls down there a rough time. My heart ached for both Gram and the frustrated girl. For Gram, because of her lost condition and her heart full of hate and bitterness; for the innocent girl, because of Gram's sword-like tongue.

"She (Gram) stayed for a long time, going over and over something, until the frustrated girl finally called one of the male bankers to her rescue. Whatever he told our grandmother must have had an irritating effect upon her for she got to her feet, and whipping her index finger back and forth in front of him, she marched out.

"She is to be pitied, Arla. Certainly, no one can be happy who lives only for self with no thought or consideration for others. Sometimes I almost shudder when I think of her bitterness. What made her this way, I wonder. Something did it, Arla. And we may be shocked if we ever learn what it is.

"I must close now and try to get some much needed sleep. I 'pounded' the streets in search of available jobs until I went into this particular bank . . . by a gentle prodding from the blessed Lord . . . and, sure enough, they were
needing another man. The interview was scheduled and, thanks be to God, I am employed.

"Write me at the following address and let me know how you are and if things have changed in the big house since I had to leave. I love you, Arla. And believe me when I say that I am praying for you; for I am. Earnestly. Until later, God willing, goodnight, my little sister.

Affectionately, Johnny

Arla crushed the letter to her heart. In a whispered breath, she said, "Please, God, give Johnny the assurance that I am born again. He's been praying so fervently for me and I want him to know that his prayers are answered. I'll tell him what happened when I write him tonight. But You can send him an S.O.S. . . ."

Saved, oh saved . . . message. I read in Your Word that if we'd ask anything in Your name You'd do that thing. This is a little thing, Jesus, but it will mean so much to my brother. Thank You, because I believe You're doing it. I love Thee. . . ."

She read the letter through again then got stationery and a pen and began writing to her brother, telling him about Gram's sudden business trip on the very day that he was forced to leave, and of how many days and nights she was gone. But the biggest news of all, and the very best, was the privilege of writing her testimony to Johnny, telling him of her glorious heart change and how it came about. She thanked him for his much-loved gift of departure to her . . . the New Testament . . . and told him that already she had read through it once and was far advanced into her second reading of the Holy Word.

She thanked him, too, for his many prayers offered up to God for her salvation, declaring that without a doubt she knew God had used his prayers to bring about her born again, new birth experience. Then she brought Justin's name into the letter, relating how and where she had met him and under what circumstances. "I feel as if God sent him, Johnny," she wrote. "I needed someone when Gram made you leave, and I can't help but believe that he has been God's special gift to me. And, he is Trish's cousin! Talk about a beautiful surprise; that's it!
"Justin got converted the same night I was converted. And each of us was converted in our home. Alone! Well, I mean alone except for God," Arla wrote. "God's presence filled my room, Johnny, the night I was converted. Changed. And His presence has been my constant Companion. Now I understand how you could say all those wonderful things about God. And even then the half has not been told. He is my dearest Friend and, oh, I love Him so. . . ."

After her lengthy letter was completed, Arla took the New Testament from its hiding place and read much from its pages. Then she prayed, showered and went to bed, thanking God for His many blessings to her.

In one of the dresser drawers in the bedroom nearest to hers, she heard Gram rummaging around in the drawers like she was trying to find something. Again, Arla had the uneasy feeling that it was linked somehow to Johnny's fastly-approaching twenty-first birthday and to her grandfather's will. She pressed her ear into the pillow and, thrusting the thought from her mind, she was soon fast asleep.

(Chapter 18)

Things in the big house went on at their normal pace in the days that followed. Only Gram's attitude seemed more bitter than ever. Communication with her grandmother proved to be a dead thing, so Arla refrained from speaking, not wanting to cause confusion and trouble. Yet her heart longed to reach Gram, to tell her of the beautiful heart-change which she had experienced. But each time she had said, "Gram, I want to tell you something," her grandmother had given her that hate filled, steely-cold, horribly frightening look and brushed past her with a haughtiness that left Arla cold and numb feeling.

They lived together in the same house beneath the same roof, but in separate worlds. It pained Arla's sensitive and tender heart greatly. Since her conversion, especially, her heart was soft and tender like a child's. She longed to reach Gram for Christ. But the wall seemed impenetrable. Her grandparent seemed not to want Christ nor anything connected and related to Him.

Johnny and she had had several conversations on the telephone, via the Bork's, and she had gotten to see him once, too. He had driven in to the
Bork's on a Saturday and, as prearranged, she had met him there. It was refreshing and wonderful to see him and to be with him. They had visited for hours, and Mrs. Bork, out of her kindness and love and generosity, had prepared a meal fit for royalty. Justin, who had come to see Arla, got to meet Johnny. Immediately, the two were like brothers. The tie was especially strong because Justin was Trish's cousin. Before leaving to go back to the city, Johnny had had prayer with everyone. Then, taking Arla aside, he whispered his approval of Justin in her ear. The memory of it all lingered like a beautiful melody in her heart now.

More and more she resorted either to her room or to the garden for Bible reading and for prayer. The communion and fellowship with Christ was the only thing that kept her from going to pieces physically under the stress and tension caused by Gram's coldness and her bitterness and hatred.

It was the day of Johnny's twenty-first birthday when the real blow came. The storm, which had been brewing and seething and gaining momentum inside Gram's heart, broke in all its fury. Arla, after washing the breakfast dishes and tidying the house, hurried down the garden path, the little New Testament hidden securely inside her skirt pocket. She had thought she was alone. Save for the twittering of birds and the lazy droning of myriad insects the garden was peacefully-quiet. She brought her priceless Testament from her pocket, clasped it tenderly to her heart, closed her eyes and, as was her daily custom since her conversion, she asked God the Holy Spirit to give her an open mind and an understanding heart as she read, to make His Word come alive to her entire being. "Prepare my heart to receive Thy Truths," she prayed aloud. "And may everything I read be solidly planted inside my heart, blessed Jesus. I love Thee. Oh, I love Thee. Thank You, my wonderful Lord . . . my God . . . for saving my . . ."

"Out! Out! Out!" Gram's screaming, shouting voice sliced the peaceful tranquillity to shreds. Before Arla could turn and face her grandmother, she received resounding blows on her face. Getting to her feet, she stumbled forward. Her grandmother, like a mad person, screamed and slapped, slapped and screamed. "You will get off my property this minute! Now!" she shouted.

"Gram, please listen to me! I love you! Don't lose your soul and go to hell!" Arla pleaded, trying to put her arms around her grandparent.
The words only added fuel to Gram's seething-hot and unholy fire. Her face was livid with anger and hatred. Never had Arla seen anything equal to it. It was a fearful sight.

"Leave!" Gram shouted. "Now!"

"Yes, Gram," Arla replied softly as she hurried down the garden path toward the house after her belongings which were, for the most part, put in readiness for this event as per Mrs. Bork's advice and instructions some weeks earlier after Johnny's sad eviction.

She had carried two pieces of packed luggage out beneath one of the sweet gum trees and was on her way to the stairs after the other few belongings when they came flying down the steps. Gram was literally throwing her things at her!

She gasped in utter disbelief. It was almost as if she was having a horrible nightmare. In shock, she watched. Then Gram's shout reached her ears and penetrated her being, making her acutely aware to the reality of what was happening: "Out! This minute!" Gram screamed.

Arla, with pity-filled eyes, looked up to the top of the stairs at her grandmother. Then she hurried into the kitchen for bags and began gathering the scattered items together and putting them in the bags. When the last bag was standing by the door Arla called, "I'm leaving now, Gram. Remember that Johnny and I love you and if you ever need us we'll help you. Goodbye. I'll be praying for you. And, Gram, thanks for everything."

Carrying the pieces of luggage was no small task for Arla whose frame was both slender and petite. They were heavy, cumbersome and awkward, and she stumbled as she left the yard and started down the road toward the Borks' house, walking like someone in a daze. Strange, she mused silently, that she couldn't shed tears over what had happened to her now. But she didn't feel like crying. Rather, it was as though with every step she took she felt a new kind of feeling surging through her. Above all, she knew the Lord was going with her. He, too, had been persecuted, hated, rejected and despised by His own; was she any better? No. No, her heart told her. And in that moment she. . . . found herself rejoicing that she was counted worthy to suffer for His name and for His cause.
She set the luggage pieces down repeatedly to rest, but little by little she completed the walk. When she finally reached the big, shaded porch and set them down, she nearly collapsed in the swing.

"It's happened then!" Mrs. Bork exclaimed, hearing the noise on the porch and coming out to find Arla in a state of near collapse. "You've had to leave, I see," she said sadly. Arla nodded, her eyes closed.

Mrs. Bork grabbed the luggage up from the porch and with a piece in each hand, she hurried inside. Within a few minutes she was back, holding a cup of hot broth in one hand and a peeled, hard boiled egg in the other. "Here," she said kindly. "Drink the broth and eat the egg. You need nourishment, child. I don't see how you carried those heavy pieces of luggage all the way down here. Is there more to bring?"

Again Arla nodded, finding it an effort to talk. "I'll go after the other things when I feel a bit stronger," she whispered, sipping the broth and nibbling on the egg.

"You'll do nothing of the kind; I'll bring them here in our car."

Arla sprang to her feet. In a whispered voice she exclaimed, "No, Mrs. Bork. No! Gram's in a dreadfully agitated state of mind today; no telling what she'd do to you and your husband. I'll carry them away from the house and part way down the road, a few at a time, until everything's off Gram's property. Then, if you will, you may pick me and the last of my belongings up somewhere along the road... away from the big house and Gram's view of what's happening. I don't want to be guilty of making her more angry with me nor do I want you involved."

Mrs. Bork patted Arla's gold, silken hair. Bright tears shimmered in her loving eyes. "She knows, of your conversion then?" she asked softly.

"I tried numerous times to tell her what happened to me but she refused to listen to me. She must have followed me into the garden today, where I went to read the Bible and to pray. I thought I was alone. But when I pulled my New Testament from my pocket in preparation for reading, she screamed from behind me. It was horrifying, her screaming and shouting, I mean. She ordered me away. Out! A repeat performance of Johnny's experience."
"You rest a while, Arla. I've put the luggage in your room. Wouldn't you like to lie down for a few minutes?"

"Thank you, no. I feel I must get my other belongings off Gram's property as quickly as possible. Jesus said, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.' I want to be a peacemaker."

Tears shimmered in Mrs. Bork's eyes. She put her arms around Arla consolingly. "Bless you, child," she soothed. "The Word says, 'Like as a father pitieth his children so the Lord pitieth them that fear him.' You have neither father nor mother, yet all the time our Heavenly Father has had Mr. Bork and me here, ready to receive you, not only into our home but into our heart as well. Yes, He has been looking out for you all this time, and I feel honored that we are being His means of help to you."

The tension and pent-up emotion which had been ever present in Arla's young heart because of Gram suddenly gave way and, like a great dam breaking out of its restricted boundaries, her entire being shook convulsively in heart-rending sobs. Mrs. Bork held her close and let her sob, knowing the healing power of tears.

For a long time they stood thus, both weeping, and Mrs. Bork consoling in typical mother fashion. Then Arla released herself gently from the comfort of the woman's protective arms, saying quickly, "I must go and get my things off Gram's property before she destroys them." And away she hurried, off the porch and up the road.

Mrs. Bork shook her head sadly, mumbling softly to herself, "I can't believe it. I can't believe it! That woman must be possessed." Then she disappeared inside the kitchen.

For a long time she stood by the window, staring out over the land which was theirs. She remembered when she had heard the sad news of the younger Thackers' death and of the elder Mrs. Thacker's bitterness at having to make a home for the two young orphans-Johnny and Arla. Ever a selfish and self-willed woman, Gram's selfishness and self-will became even more pronounced and evident once the two grandchildren were established inside the big plantation home. More than one time Mrs. Bork's great, kind mother
heart had grieved over the two who for many weeks lived in total shock because of their parents' sudden and untimely death.

Mrs. Bork sighed with remembering. Had their beloved grandfather been living then things would have been a bit easier for them; he would have comforted and consoled them. His tenderness, gentleness, love, compassion and understanding had become ingrained in Johnny and Arla, who were ever so much like their grandfather. In his lifetime, he had loved them devotedly and they him. There was a strong bond of love between the three of them. Always. Had it not been for Johnny's and Arla's visits to the Estate, the kind man would have been devoid of any and all affection, for Mrs. Thacker's tongue was ever as sharp and incisive on him as it was on the grandchildren. Her attitude and deportment were as cold and severe, too.

Again Mrs. Bork sighed. Sad, sad, she mused silently. Too bad that Johnny and Arla had never been privileged to remember their other grandparents. Their mother's parents were gentle mannered, well-bred southern people, much like their grandfather Thacker. The Mertis grandparents were loving, kind and gracious people. Johnny was past three, Arla a mere babe in arms, when their mother's parents were killed in an accident, much like their own parents' tragic death had happened.

It seemed strange to Mrs. Bork, the Mertises and the young Thackers all being killed in an automobile accident. But these were things one could not question, some things to which there were no earthly answers. One thing made her aging heart rejoice, and that was Johnny's and Arla's good news that their parents had made their peace with God before dying. She only hoped the Mertises had been prepared to meet God, too.

Mrs. Bork tore herself away from the kitchen window and hurried outside to the tree-shaded car port. She must not forget to meet Arla along the road. Of all Gram's dealings with and unkindnesses toward her grandchildren, this eviction of them both was the most atrocious and unfeeling of all. It was almost unbelievable. She could only imagine the deep hurt and pain which the two were experiencing. But now, with their new-found and deep faith and love in Christ, Johnny and Arla would triumph. God would allow only what they were able to bear--no more nor less. His ways were past finding out. She couldn't erase the unpleasant memories of their years spent at Bayou Estates, perhaps, but she could help now to fill their life with beautiful, good, sweet and pleasant memories.
She drove out of the driveway onto the blacktop road, her mind in a state of sadness and grief as she thought of the years of carefree youth, now past for Johnny and Arla, all of which they had been deprived of because of their grandmother's severe and unkind treatment of them. They had been isolated from the outside world, having none but the plantation animals and themselves for friends and companions.

She had often wondered why Mrs. Thacker had been so seclusive with the pair, just why they were never permitted and allowed to become a part of the world beyond and outside of the Estate. In the back of her mind, however, she wondered if the main reason was not a religious one. Hadn't Gram Thacker made the statement to her one time that she wasn't going to expose her grandchildren to religion? Not ever! She, Mrs. Bork, had replied that the most valuable and priceless heritage any grandparent could leave to their grandchildren was a spiritual one, adding that it was sinful to deprive them of the knowledge of God and God's Word.

Chills of fear traced Mrs. Bork's spine now as she recalled Mrs. Thacker's tirade and her verbal outburst at the close of her sentence. The woman acted like one gone crazy. And she was utterly shameless and unrepentant when, finally, she ceased her wild tirade. It was like nothing she had ever heard before, Mrs. Bork recalled now with vivid recollection. She had been only too happy and glad to get away from the woman when her errand was completed, she remembered.

She rounded a bend in the road and saw Arla trudging wearily toward a tree, her arms loaded with bags. Mrs. Bork's heart broke within her. She wept for the sweet, pure girl who looked almost angelic now with her rosy-red cheeks, her fresh, clean, natural complexion and her crown of autumn-gold hair framing her face in a picture of total serenity and peace and utter resignation to her lot.

"I'll go after the rest of your things, Arla," she called from the open car window. "That's too heavy for you."

"Please, Mrs. Bork, don't!" Arla cried, hurrying to the welcome car with her heavy and awkward bags. "Gram's angry, really angry. She mustn't see you. It would only agitate her more. She's standing on the porch, watching as I carry my things away, wanting 'to make sure that I get everything and leave
nothing behind.' Then she shouted, 'I hate you, Arla. Hate you! Your brother, too. Finally, I'll be able to live again.' "

"What did you tell her, Arla child; anything at all?"

"Nothing, Mrs. Bork. Nothing at all. I wanted to tell her how very much I love her but knew she would only scream the more at me. So I said nothing. I have a deep pity for my grandmother. A deep pity and a horrible fear. Oh, Mrs. Bork, what do the wicked do when the Almighty takes them away in their sins? It . . . it must be horrifying and . . . and terrifying." And Arla wept.

(Chapter 19)

The room which Mrs. Bork gave Arla as her very own was both airy and cheerful, not to mention that it was more than adequate. It wasn't nearly so enormous and spacious as her bedroom was in Gram's house, however. But little matter about that; love pervaded the atmosphere of every room here, and of each nook and corner and cranny, too. This was the all-important thing. What was more was the fact that she felt truly wanted and welcome. It gave her heart a warm sensation and a "running-over" feeling.

She heaved a long, great, heavy sigh of relief. She was now out from beneath the crushing tension of the big house; out from its hatred, hate, and strife, too. Johnny had told her that God would indeed work something out for her in His time. She wondered now if this was His plan all along. Not that her God took pleasure in Gram's belligerence and her hate-filled evil ways. Never! He was a God of love and compassion and of great mercy and not a God of strife. But, since she was now His child and took delight in serving and pleasing Him, she was convinced that her kind Heavenly Father had shown her His kindness by having Gram evict her. For the first time in many years, she would know and experience the joy of residing in a home where love was not only shown and manifested but where it was felt, as well.

Overcome with joy, she rushed from the room and flung her arms around Mrs. Bork's neck, crying, "I love you! I love you! You don't mind me telling you, do you?"

"Indeed not, child!" came the instant reply. "You may tell me as often as you want to. Mothers thrive on hearing these words."
Unwrapping her arms from the woman's neck, Arla said softly, "I never dared tell Gram this. And oh, how I did long and yearn to hug her and tell her, like I used to do to Daddy and Mother when they were living. Gram never tolerated it, however, and told me I was entirely too sentimental and emotional for my own good. Johnny told me once though that he wanted us both to stay loving and kind, the way our parents were to each other and to us. He said he didn't think a family should be anything else but loving and sweet and kind to each other."

"And he was right, dear Arla. Unless love is the controlling motive and the predominant factor in a home, that home will fall. And fail. And speaking of Johnny, I baked a beautiful cake for his birthday early this morning. When you arranged to meet him here on this his special twenty-first birthday, Mr. Bork and I decided that a birthday cake and a special dinner was in order."

"So that's what that ambrosial odor is that I've been smelling ever since I set foot on your porch," Arla exclaimed, smiling and feeling completely relaxed. "Oh, won't Johnny be happy. And now, you must let me help you."

"That I'll do, dear girl. I always enjoyed having my girls help me when they were still home. It's a love cementing thing, Arla, always remember this."

"Working together, Mrs. Bork -- is this what you mean?"

"Yes. When a mother and her daughters work together side by side in the home it serves as a lovebond between them. They get to know each other better, too. And sometimes the mother is able to reach through and talk to her daughter about problems and circumstances which would be unapproachable under less favorable conditions. Many and many a problem was solved for my daughters right here in this kitchen, and many a burden was shared. Countless tears were shed also. But, like the soap suds in the dishpan, their problems just seemed to dissolve and disappear while we talked and worked together."

Arla felt tears sting her eyes. She realized anew just how much she had missed in life by having her mother taken away from her so suddenly. What good times they would have had together, she thought, times like Mrs. Bork and her daughters had had-times of sharing secrets and confidences and laughter. And sorrows too, she knew. But with a mother to talk things over
with, well, she was sure it would have buffered and cushioned all her problems and would have made them look small and seem insignificant. For although her mother (for so long as she had remembered her) had been worldly minded, she was a truly wonderful mother. And wonderfully kind and good to Johnny and her. They had been so closely-knit, her father and mother and Johnny and she. And she would treasure forever the memories she had of them as a family together.

She sighed as she shelled crowder peas, freshly picked from Mrs. Bork's garden -- the last and final crop, the good woman had informed Arla. Her mind wandered to Gram as her nimble fingers broke open the hulls and the peas rolled out into the pan before her. What was Gram doing? she wondered. Then she recalled the fact that this was Johnny's twenty-first birthday, and with the thought, Arla wondered who had won the case in their grandfather's will: Gram or Grandfather. Sure, Grandfather was no longer there to protect or contest Gram's indefatigable fight and her dogged determination to have things her way. Or else! But was Grandfather's will . . . against everything Gram may have tried to do to break it . . . able to stand just exactly as he had wanted it to be before he had passed away? "Poor Gram!" she exclaimed softly aloud.

"You say something, Arla child? Were you speaking to me?" Mrs. Bork asked as she covered the creamy-rich, deeply-filled chocolate pie with marshmallow mounds of fluffy-white meringue and put it in the hot oven to brown.

"I was talking to myself," Arla admitted. "Thinking out loud, I guess. About Gram. Oh, Mrs. Bork, what is wrong with my poor grandmother? To look at her, she's beautiful, her physical features, I mean. She doesn't look nearly so old as she is. Why can't her inside be just as beautiful? I guess I've phrased that wrongly; I mean, why can't Gram's personality and attitude be as beautiful as her physical features are?"

"Well, honey, the Bible says that 'out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh,' so the answer to that question of yours is simple: your dear Gram has heart trouble, spiritual heart trouble. She speaks and acts out of that which is in her heart . . . sin. And hatred and bitterness, too."

Arla fell silent again, thinking. Remembering. Always remembering. Such painful remembrances. Then she thought about Johnny and Justin and
her heart soared. God had given her a rainbow of promise . . . of better things . . . by sending Justin into her life. And by giving her a brother like Johnny. Tears of thankfulness and gratitude sprang to her eyes.

"You crying, dear child? Just put Gram in God's hands. For now and for all eternity. You can't change her."

"Oh Mrs. Bork, I'm crying for sheer joy and happiness. Over Johnny and Justin. God sent Justin into my life when I really needed him."

"You think a lot of him, don't you, Arla?" the woman asked softly.

"Very much. I believe I'm beginning to love him. Is this terribly wrong? I don't feel that it is when I pray and talk it over with God."

"It isn't wrong, child. Love is a God-given gift to mankind. Just keep praying. And do stay open to the voice of God, being careful to obey the checks of the Holy Spirit if He should so desire. And, too, don't rush; if Justin is meant for you he'll be willing to wait until you are sure of God's will. True and real love is always willing to wait."

"Oh, Mrs. Bork, thank you for that beautiful advice. Justin has been so kind and gentle with me. He's not the 'rushing' type, I'm sure. But if he does become this way, I'll remember what you just told me. Oh I love you so!" Arla exclaimed, rushing over and throwing her arms around the neck of the kind woman again. "There are so many things I need to know and now you will be the mother to me and enlighten me!" she exclaimed joyously. "God is so good to me."

Brushing tears away, Mrs. Bork declared emphatically, "He has blest us super-abundantly by sending you into our home. Already I feel like a different person. I'm back in time, when our daughters were your age, Arla. Eighteen years old! Youth. Ah, beautiful youth! And all of the years, from here on out, to be lived for Christ; ready to go, if He says to, or willing and happy to remain here if He so desires. Just think of it, honey, a life-time of serving and loving Jesus! It's the most beautiful and wonderful thing in all the world. And being content in doing whatever He bids you to do, well, this has its own special reward. The Bible says that 'Godliness with contentment is great gain.' I sense this rare and precious quality in you."
"I suppose the 'with contentment' part of that beautiful scripture verse implies satisfaction," Arla commented thoughtfully. "For I doubt that a dissatisfied person can be too contented."

"Or really happy!" Mrs. Bork exclaimed, as she opened the oven to check on the fragrant, browning roast.

Arla's mind wandered again to her grandmother and her hard-to-please, hard-to-get-along-with personality. How very sweet Gram would be if she were a born again, truly changed person, she mused, longing with all her being to help her grandparent.

Mrs. Bork broke into her thoughts with, "Johnny's due here most any time now, Arla. Why not go outside and watch for him?"

"And leave you alone to make the gravy, mash the potatoes, and do whatever else needs done to get the meal on the table! No, dear Mrs. Bork. No. If I am to be like one of your daughters, then I'll help you to the finish. Dishes and all."

"God bless you, dear girl," came Mrs. Bork's soft reply just as Johnny drove up and parked the car.

His cheery "hello" and his bright smile warmed Arla's heart. Oh, she was so thankful that God had given her a brother like Johnny. He seemed to have gotten thinner since she last saw him, but his smile and pleasant countenance remained the same.

"Oh Johnny, I'm so glad to see you!" Arla cried, rushing into his open arms. "Happy birthday!" she exclaimed softly. "Happy twenty-first. Do you feel the ecstasy of it?" she asked, laughing.

Johnny's deep laughter filled the late afternoon air. "You are such a little charmer, Arla," he teased. "And, no, until you asked me, I hadn't felt the ecstasy. But since you called my attention to it I must admit that I do feel a bit of excitement. Not a day older than I felt yesterday, mind you. But even if I did, that would not bother me. Today and all of my tomorrows belong to my dearest Friend, Jesus Christ. No year can bring more upon me than His grace will help me to bear. Joyfully, I might add. Oh Arla, I have obtained something most wonderful from God. Recently, I have had a personal
Pentecost within my heart. The Holy Spirit purged out every part of the carnal nature within me. He cleansed and purified my heart in its entirety, then He became King of my life."

Arla's eyes never left Johnny's face. She listened with rapt attention.

"I tell you, sis," Johnny continued, "I have a veritable Heaven on earth. I know the meaning and the depth now of Christ's words to His disciples when He said, 'Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.' St. John 16:7. His Word is truth, Arla; He has not left me comfortless, but He has filled my soul with the blessed Holy Spirit and I now have a continual feast of joy and peace and soul-rest. My heart has been cleansed from every bit of inbred sin and it is pure glory."

Arla was silent for a long while. She wondered how she could ever be happier or more at peace with both God and herself than she was now since Christ had forgiven her of all her committed sins and had made her His child. It didn't seem possible. But Johnny's words had a melody and a ring to them that sounded too real and true to doubt them.

"I know you're wondering about this wonderful experience of entire sanctification," Johnny remarked softly, seeming to read his sister's thought. "But believe me, Arla, it's real. Oh, so real! But say how's Gram doing? Any change in her? Has she softened at all?"

Arla sighed heavily. "I wish I could say she had, Johnny. But quite the opposite is true; she's hard.

Hard. Sometimes I have such a fear for our grandmother that I get all trembly and weak over her. Oh Johnny, whatever is it that's wrong with her? Can't she hear God's voice speaking? Or, maybe, doesn't God speak to her? Not ever?"

Johnny ran his fingers through his thick, dark hair. When he spoke, his voice sounded sad and choked up. "I talked this over with the minister whose church I'm attending, Sis. He told me that there are some people to whom God no longer speaks. They've grieved Him away forever, he said. . . ."
Johnny's sentence trailed mournfully above them. Then he asked quickly, "Has something new happened, Arla?"

"I can't see that it's 'new,' " she answered, "because it's a duplication of what happened to you. Or, I should say, with you: Gram gave me my 'eviction' notice this morning. I had gone to the garden to read the Bible and to pray, wanting to be where all was peacefully quiet and tranquil and thinking that none but the birds and the bees and butterflies and I were there. But I was wrong. Oh, so very wrong. Gram must have been waiting for me, Johnny; for before I had begun to read, even, she became infuriated with me for just speaking to the Lord and asking Him to make the Word come alive to me as I read. She screamed and shouted at me like one possessed; then she began hitting me and telling me to leave. I tried to put my arms around her to love her, but it only seemed to make her more angry. It was horrible. I feel like this is almost unreal and unbelievable, but I know it's not. The marks of Gram's hands are on my face and the sting of her forceful slapping is still smarting me. This will all go away and leave with time, however; but the memory of her hatefilled eyes and of her shouts and screams will be with me for a long, long while. It frightened me, I must confess. Not for myself; I felt God's marvelous protection and love through it all. But I . . . I'm dreadfully frightened for our grandmother. Oh Johnny! Johnny! What can we do to help her, to head her off from continuing on like she's going?"

Johnny's hands gripped Arla's shoulders gently. Looking down into her tear-filled eyes, he said kindly and sadly, "Occasionally, and in some people's lives nothing can be done to help. Nothing, my dear sister. This is a sad but all too obvious fact. And I fear this is the case with Gram. One can steel himself and harden his heart until there is no sensitive feeling left, and very little conscience, either. But hadn't we better be getting inside? I smell something wonderful coming through Mrs. Bork's kitchen door and her windows and, very frankly, I'm hungry. After supper, I want to take you for a ride. I have many things to tell you and much to talk over with you. You'll need a place to stay since Gram made you leave. We'll work something out so don't worry about this.

Arla lifted her head and smiled through her tears. "God has already taken care of this, Johnny. The Borks opened their home to me. I have moved in and am as cozy as a butterfly in its cocoon. Besides the lovely and very cheerful room, I am loved. And wanted! Oh, you can't imagine what this means to me. To be loved and wanted, I mean. I can see the love flowing
from Mrs. Bork. And I can feel it, too. And Johnny, it's not a superficial love; it's genuine. And real, too. It comes from the very heart of the dear woman. And she's not afraid to lavish it on me. Oh, God has blest me indeed."

Johnny's eyes filled with tears. "He takes care of His own, Arla," he remarked tenderly as he guided her toward the kitchen door.

(Chapter 20)

The birthday supper was barely finished when the Borks, with a parental feeling sort of kinship for Johnny and Arla, shooed them out of the kitchen with, "Go sit on the porch, or somewhere, so you can be alone and talk things over like a brother and sister should do. Especially so since Gram put Arla out of the house today. I know this is painful, but each of you will always have a home here so long as we are living."

Arla insisted upon helping with the dishes, but Mrs. Bork's persuasive manner won, and so she and Johnny obediently made their exit after Johnny told their kind host and hostess that he wanted to show his sister something and would be taking her away in his car.

"It's about time she gets away!" Mrs. Bork exclaimed softly and motherly. "I've been so thankful to Justin for managing to get her to church the few times she's been there."

"It may have been for the best," Johnny replied kindly. "At least each of us was sheltered from the vices and evils of over-exposure to the outside world. Not that one can't sin or doesn't sin when carefully shielded and protected from evil; he can. And he does, if he's unsaved. Sin is a heart condition. Get the heart washed in the blood of Jesus and the sinning ceases. Conversely, if one is not saved, or born again, he is a sinner and, therefore, he sins. But I agree with you, that it's time now for Arla to get away a bit more. To church especially. And since she will have no restrictions from Gram now, either Justin or I will see to it that she attends church on a regular and consistent basis, God willing."

Arla blew a kiss toward Mrs. Bork who stood on the porch, waving as Johnny pulled out of the driveway. Then she settled back against the car seat and heaved a great sigh.
"Tired already, Sis?" Johnny asked with a sideways glance at his pretty little sister.

"Full, Johnny. Full! I don't know when I ate so much nor when food tasted so delicious. Perhaps it was because of the warmth and the love that flows so freely and so unselfishly around the table in the Borks' home. Or maybe it was simply because I wasn't eating my 'morsel' alone for a change. Or a combination of both, maybe."

"What do you mean by that 'eating my morsel alone'?'" Johnny asked quickly.

"Just what I said; I have eaten alone ever since Gram returned from the city after she evicted you. She has never once come to the table to eat with me, although I prepared meals, as I always have done since I've been old enough to know how to cook."

"You mean it, Arla; Gram wouldn't eat with you?"

"She wouldn't, Johnny. But let's talk about more pleasant things, shall we? I'm trying to forget the almost unbelievable happenings of the past few weeks.

Is Trisha getting excited about her wedding?"

Johnny laughed softly. "That's a rather foolish question to ask, don't you agree?" he teased. "But, seriously, the answer is yes. In fact, we've set the wedding date up."

"You have! When?" Arla was elated. "Oh, Johnny, I'm so happy for you that I could cry."

"How about laughing instead? You've shed enough tears in these last weeks to. . . ."

"But if I cried now," Arla exclaimed, breaking into her brother's unfinished sentence, "I'd be crying for happiness. There's a difference, Johnny. A big difference. And right now I'll feel good if I cry. I'm so happy for you! God is giving you happiness for all the sadness and the heartaches you've come through. Oh, I'm so excited. Will you send Gram an announcement? I plan to, if I ever marry."
"If you ever marry! You will, believe me, the Lord willing. Justin would like to make this a double wedding ceremony."

"Johnny, I'm too young to marry. And besides, Justin has never mentioned anything so serious to me."

"He will one of these days; see if I'm not right. He's told me a good many things about you and how he feels toward you."

Arla felt color rise to her cheeks. "He's never said anything to me like that," she admitted shyly.

"But you knew, didn't you, Arla? The heart sometimes gives messages where words are needless and unnecessary."

"I thought he cared, yes. And a few times he said that I meant a lot to him," she admitted softly.

"He's a fine young man, Sis. Super fine! You will have my blessing and my full approval whenever the big day arrives."

"Oh, Johnny, you are super. Thanks. Justin is a fine young man. You have keen perception. I was just thinking of another instance, of that other time. Remember? Where might I have been had you not intervened and taken the 'father' role and made me obey your orders? It frightens me when I remember how self-willed I tried to be. But oh, I'm different now, so different since Jesus came into my heart."

"Put me in that category, too," Johnny said quickly. "Outside of Christ, the heart can be a real rebel; in Christ, it's as meek as a lamb. And as submissive, too, I may add, especially after one has been cleansed from that inbred sin nature -- carnality -- and is sanctified wholly. This now is my prayer for you, Arla; that you, too, will experience a personal heart-cleansing and be filled with the Holy Ghost and fire. It's glorious, knowing Christ has full and complete control of one's life and heart and soul."

"I've started for the City, Johnny, and I mean to do whatever I must do to reach its gates and have a triumphant entrance into its spotless and holy dwelling place. So, if my heart needs a cleansing, as you called it, I promise
you that I'll seek after this until the work is done. Heaven is my goal. I found in Christ what I found in no one else, nor in any of the things of the world. So please pray for me; I want everything God has for me, and everything His Word says I must have to make Heaven my eternal Home."

Tears shimmered in Johnny's kind eyes. He reached over and gave Arla's hand a gentle squeeze, quoting, "'This is the will of God, even your sanctification.' Yes, even Arla's sanctification. God wills it; I Thess. 4:3 tells us this. And I Thess. 5:23-24 goes a bit farther with its 'And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

"'Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it.'"

Tears formed in Arla's eyes. At last, she understood the meaning of those Scripture verses. God willed for her to be sanctified wholly. Yes, He did. And He also provided for the same.

They rode in silence for a long while. Then Johnny broke in with, "Today marks an epoch of a new beginning in my natural, physical life."

Arla, brought quickly out of her deep, inner, spiritual thoughts, turned and looked at her brother. "You're twenty-one, I know. . . ." Her sentence trailed.

"And, because of grandfather's kindness and love, now that I am twenty-one, I am owner-possessor of Live Oaks Farm."

Arla sat on the edge of her seat. She drew her breath in quicklike. "Incredulous!" she exclaimed in awe.

"Incredulous, but fact. And reality, my dear sister."

"Th . . . that joins Gram's estate to the east!" She gasped. "And I . . . I . . . well, I thought the Richards owned Live Oaks."

"So did I," Johnny admitted; "until this morning, when the attorney called and said for me to meet him at his office by 9:30."
"You . . . you mean. . . ?" Arla couldn't finish. In utter amazement, she leaned back against the seat. She felt like she was dreaming. Johnny, the owner of Live Oaks Farm! "I . . . I feel like I'm dreaming," she admitted after a while.

"Open your eyes and look at me," Johnny teased, "and then you'll know that you're not dreaming."

Arla laughed and obeyed her brother. "I guess what seems so incredulous to me is the fact that, here you are, just barely 21, and already you know what inheritance grandfather left you."

"It was in the will this way, Arla. That's why the attorney called me. He said grandfather had him detail it explicitly -- 'as soon as the office opens, on the morning of John Thacker's twenty-first birthday, John Thacker, grandson of Eli Thacker, shall be notified immediately of his inheritance.'"

"That sounds like dear grandfather," Arla admitted.

"And right here is where the beginning of my inheritance is, Arla."

"You . . . mean this . . . this stand of young pecan trees goes with the farm?" Again Arla gasped in amazement. "Why, Johnny, there are acres and acres of pecan trees! And all so healthy looking and strong, too. Grandpa must have bought this additional acreage when old Mister Toux passed away and his children sold everything so the money could be divided among them. Grandfather loved the good earth, didn't he?"

"Very much. He said I took after him in this respect," Johnny related. "And I guess both you and I are much like him, where growing things are concerned. Now here's the gravel road to the two houses, Arla. The Richards farmed the land for shares, keeping their part, with Grandfather's share going into the bank. They never lived in the houses.

"Then the houses are quite run down, I suppose," Arla said as she once more sat on the edge of the seat and looked intently down the long lane to where the larger of the two houses came suddenly into view. "Is no one living here?" she ventured.
"Not anymore," Johnny replied, driving slowly so his sister could get a good look at Live Oaks Farm.

He pulled up into a paved area near the front of the house and helped Arla out of the car, saying, "I want you to see how graciously God has provided."

"Then you've been here already, Johnny?"

"This morning, yes. The attorney gave me a tour of the place. Seems this, too, was a part of the will." And Johnny turned a key in the lock and swung the door open. "Live Oaks House," he said, smiling down at her as she looked on in wonder.

"It . . . it's beautiful, Johnny. Beautiful! And so solidly built. How old do you suppose it is?"

"Not quite so old as Gram's big house, I'm sure. But it's old enough to have quite a history to it. And fond memories for people, too, I'm certain."

Like an excited child, Arla went from room to room, opening doors and running her hands across the marble in two of the fireplaces. "It's ready for you and Trish to move into, Johnny," she exclaimed. "I suppose you'll be moving here just as soon as you're married, God willing. It's so clean and has been kept so nicely. Strange, too, since no one lived here."

Johnny smiled broadly. "Leave it up to Grandfather; he made plans for this, too, before his passing. Every so often, a cleaning and repair crew came into Live Oaks Farm. They inspected all the buildings for any kind of deterioration and, if any was discovered, it was repaired and taken care of immediately. Also, the entire place has had frequent and periodic cleanings. I plan to move in just as soon as I can. And, naturally, I'll be bringing Trish here as my bride, after we are married."

"I still feel almost like I'm having a beautiful dream," Arla replied happily. "Trish will just love it here. It's so peaceful. All this dear old house needs is some people living in it again. I can just imagine how utterly lonely it must be. What good is a house if no one lives in it? They were built to be inhabited."
"Well, by God's kind help, it will soon be inhabited, Arla. And now, come, you must see the smaller house. An aged couple lived in that cottage until their death less than a year ago, the attorney told me. They were like a caretaker here -- deterrents for vandalism and such. Neither was able to do much work physically, due to age and poor health. But they kept the grounds beautiful, I was told. It was another of Grandfather's kind and generous gifts bestowed upon a poor couple . . . a life-time place in which to live plus a monthly sum of money for living expenses."

Arla saw the cottage then, and she raced down the little path to its inviting looking door, crying out ecstatically, "It's beautiful, Johnny! Just simply beautiful! Oh, I'm so proud of Grandfather, for giving those poor people such a darling little cozy home to live in. Just look at the flowers around here! Everywhere you look, there are flowers and trees and bushes. And smell the pines!" she cried. "Why, the earth has a carpet of soft pine needles. Oh, I love this, Johnny!"

"It can be yours, Arla, if you want to live here. Unless you'd prefer living with Trish and me, once we are married. Which, incidentally, will be within the next three weeks, the Lord willing. I was hoping you'd help me to decorate our future house. I'm a poor excuse for such things. . . ."

"Oh, Johnny, no. Trish should have the privilege and the right to decorate the house. She will be living in it, and my 'taste' and/or likes and dislikes may be totally opposite of hers. Why not bring her here when she is free from her work and let her choose whatever it is you want changed or redecorated? I'll come along for discretion's sake, and also to help. She'll love to work in her own house, I know. And, thanks, but I'll not live in with you and Trish."

"You're a smart little thing, Arla. Thanks for the input of feminine intuition and information. You're right, of course. I had thought to surprise her, that's all. But what; a surprise it might have been, with my color schemes, et cetera!" And Johnny's laughter rang musically. "But what about this little cottage? Do you think you'd enjoy living here, Sis? If you won't live with Trisha and me, I mean. From both of us, the welcome mat's there, all through the house."

"This I know, Johnny. You are both so kind and so generous. But I feel you and Trish should begin your married life with just the two of you; no third
party, even though I am your sister. This little cottage, well, I'll love having it to live in."

Johnny unlocked the door and Arla stepped inside. The windows were curtained with bright, cheerful curtains and the four simply but comfortably furnished rooms seemed to beckon her to sit and rest awhile. For some strange but beautiful reason, she felt at home. "Oh Johnny," she cried happily, "I love it. It's home. I feel relaxed here. The house and I need each other."

Johnny laughed at that remark. "You come up with some of the cutest sayings," he told her. "Who heard . . . ever . . . of a house needing anybody?" Again he laughed pleasantly.

"This one does. So does yours. They seem lonesome uninhabited. Can't you just feel the difference in the atmosphere when there's laughter and pleasant speaking voices in a house? Even the house seems pleasant and . . . and kind of like it's smiling and is happy."

"The key word there is 'atmosphere,' Arla. That's why you feel as though the house were smiling and was, as you phrased it, happy. The 'atmosphere' of right attitudes and loving words and kind deeds does, indeed, make everything seem bright and happy. Even the inside of a house. Or wherever. I'm glad you like Live Oaks Farm; I do, too. And this shall be your home, dear little sis. Just as soon as you want to move into it. God has provided for each of us. So abundantly, I might add. And now, let's sit down for awhile; I have something more to tell you."

"I hope it's more pleasant news, Johnny, and nothing bad."

"This will be of the more unpleasant nature, I'm sorry to say. But I feel you should know about it now. Sooner or later these things have a way of getting around to one," Johnny stated as he settled his body into one of the easy chairs in the homey living room.

Arla took a deep breath then leaned back against one of the soft throw pillows on the sofa. "Say on," she said resignedly, fully convinced by now that it was more news about Gram and something which she had done, or which she had tried to do. Or undo. Grandfather's will being the case for a noble attempt at its undoing, she thought silently.
Without preamble, Johnny said simply, "If Gram could have accomplished her purpose, Live Oaks Farm would never have become mine. The day she made me leave . . . that very day . . . she tried to have Grandfather's will regarding us, broken. Changed. Remember I told you I saw her in the bank the day I went for my interview."

Arla nodded. She felt sad, sad for Johnny's and her grandmother. Why did she seem to hate them so deeply? They had never done anything out of the way to her.

"The attorney told me she gave him a hard time, threatening him, harassing him, and even trying to bribe him to do what she wanted done," Johnny continued. "She spent days in the city, as you well know, and each one spent was in an intense effort to undo Grandfather's will. But it was impossible. Her expended energies failed and her efforts were futile and fruitless. This, of course, only infuriated her more, for, as both of us know, our dear Gram likes to have her way. I'm sorry to have to say this, but we know only too well that it's the sad truth. I wish I could say it's easy for me to pray for her, but I can't, Arla. And I try. Oh how I try! But my prayers don't seem to get farther than my voice carries, and this frightens me, dreadfully so. I fear for our grandmother's soul."

Johnny said the last sentence with such finality that Arla trembled. She had had the same fearful feeling and thought. With all of her being, she wanted to run to Gram, wrap her arms around her neck and, in loving concern and tender compassion, say, "Gram! Gram! Turn to Jesus; don't trifle with spiritual things! Please! Please, don't lose your soul and go to Hell!"

But Arla knew she couldn't; Gram would drive her away, off the property. Oh, if only God would not seem so far away when she tried to pray for her grandparent!

(Chapter 21)

The week before Johnny and Trish were married, Arla moved her few earthly belongings into the well cared for little cottage at Live Oaks Farm. Settling in was easy; she felt as though she had just come home from a long and difficult journey and could finally relax. With the last thing in its proper place, she dropped to her knees and poured her happy heart out to God in a
prayer of joyous thanksgiving and praise for the blessing of the neat little
house and its myriad flowers surrounding it. She was blest beyond anything
she deserved, she felt. And she would be near those whom she loved so

Johnny had brought Ha Penny over to the pastureland on his farm.
With the two other horses which he had bought, she adjusted almost
immediately to her new surroundings. To Arla's delight, the grazing land was
closer to the house than it was at the Borks. This made it easier for Johnny
and her to see the little mare more often throughout the day. Frequently, she
came to the edge of the field and, standing inside the board fence, she lifted
her beautiful face and neighed for Johnny and Arla, who usually rewarded
her with an apple or a carrot. In no time at all, Fawn and Mystery, the two
new horses, followed suit and, like Ha Penny, they became lovable and
friendly "beggars."

Out of a sincere love for his grandparent, Johnny had tried to reach
Gram to let her know of his upcoming marriage to Trish and to invite her to
the simple wedding. She answered the phone, to be sure, but each time she
heard Johnny's voice, the receiver clicked on her end of the line.

"I guess there's no need I try," he told Arla after he had made one last
attempt and effort to speak to his grandmother. "It's obvious that she hasn't
softened. And it's also obvious that she doesn't want to speak to us. I had
hoped that she'd attend our wedding. But I'm reconciled; she won't be coming
even though Trish sent her an announcement."

Arla's face was a study of soberness and seriousness. "Weddings are
meant to be joyous and happy occasions," she said softly. "It may be for the
best, Johnny, that Gram won't be there. What if she came and then went into
one of her tirades. And . . . and made a scene!"

"I'm sure we'll not have to worry about that," Johnny answered soberly,
adding plaintively, "Oh how I wish things were different between Gram and
us. We could have had such a beautiful and sweet relationship. May God
have mercy on her poor, lost soul."

A year passed; then two. Gram refused and forbade any and all types
of communication between her two grandchildren. Once, Johnny had driven
over to the big house, hoping and praying that he would be able to see Gram and talk to her but his dream never became reality. She refused to answer the door when he knocked and called her name. With a heavy heart, he drove away. Neither time nor change had seemed to mellow her heart.

Three weeks following Arla's marriage to Justin . . . after her twentieth birthday . . . Johnny and Trish were blest by a son. Their first-born, John Jr., was a grand and beautiful combination of both parents, having eyes the blue of Trish's and an oval face like Johnny's.

"I feel like God has opened His storehouse of blessings and has poured them out upon Trish and me," Johnny remarked to Arla and Justin as they cuddled the tiny infant, who was richly endowed with a pair of super-healthy lungs.

Tears sprang to Arla's eyes and shimmered on her long eyelashes. "I know how you feel, Johnny," she said softly. "My heart is overflowing with thankfulness to God for giving Justin to me. Or me to him. Whichever. Yes, God has poured His rich blessings out upon all four of us since we got converted and then became filled with His Holy Spirit. My heart overflows with praise to Him for crucifying and eradicating that horrible carnal nature within me and then purging and purifying me thoroughly and entirely and filling me with His sweet and heavenly Holy Spirit."

"That's the beautiful thing," Justin added "The cleansing and the filling with the Holy Ghost."

"I have been so happy," Arla said, looking at Johnny especially, "until the happenings and nightmares of the past have faded into almost total oblivion. Besides knowing and loving the Lord, Justin and I have our own home. And you and Trish have Live Oaks Farm. And now you have Heaven's added blessing of a child of your own, too. God is so good to each of us. So very good. Sometimes Justin and I feel almost overwhelmed when we count our blessings"

Days passed into weeks; weeks into months. Five, to be exact. The happy couples were growing spiritually and walking in every ray of God's holy light, putting Him first and foremost and attending all the services at the little church.
Returning home from the service one Sunday night, Johnny had just unlocked the door and helped Trish and John Jr. into the house when the phone jangled noisily and insistently. Before answering it even, he knew it had something to do with Gram; his heart told him so. With a trembling hand he lifted the receiver. The voice on the other end of the line was urgent: "Come to the hospital immediately," a nurse was saying. "Your grandmother is not well. She wishes to see you and your sister. It's urgent. She's calling for you."

"Thank you," Johnny replied. "We'll be there as quickly as possible."

"Room 5084," the nurse said. "Hurry, please."

"I will. Again, thank you." Johnny was shaking as he walked away from the phone.

"Bad news?" Trish asked, coming from putting John Jr. in his crib.

"Gram's in the hospital. She's calling for Arla and me. We'll have to go, my dear. I hate to leave you alone with the baby, but I guess I'll have to. We may be there for hours, and I can't ask you to. . . ."

"To what, dear husband?" Trish broke in. "I'm going with you, honey. And I think Justin should go, too. You and Arla are going to need our support, I feel. And our love. Mrs. Bark's the perfect grandmother; she'll be delighted to take care of our little one until we return."

"Thanks, dear Trish. You're God's very special gift to me. Shall I bring Mrs. Bork here or take John Jr. over to her?"

"I think it may be easier on her to care for him in their home, Johnny. But let's call her and ask her."

Almost immediately, Johnny dialed the number and was informed that, since John Jr. was asleep in his own little bed, the kind woman would come over and stay with him at Live Oaks Farm.

"Now to get Arla and Justin," Johnny said.
"I invited them over," Trish said. "They'll be here here any minute now. Justin declared that you and I must have some of Arla's fabulous chocolate cake and fruit salad. They went home to get it."

Lights shone faintly along the hospital's long corridor as the four walked soberly toward room 5084. Justin gave Arla's small hand a tight little squeeze of reassurance as they approached the door and Trish whispered softly to Johnny that she would be praying for him. No one, however, was prepared for what they saw: Lying on the bed, looking ash-gray beneath an oxygen tent was Gram, surrounded by and connected to life supports. Her eyes were closed; her breathing was labored. She tossed her head restlessly about on the pillow and two nurses hovered over her, anxiously.

"Gram! Gram!" Johnny and Arla cried simultaneously, rushing to the bed.

Tears sprang to Arla's eyes and dropped warmly onto the cold hand that lay limp and cold on top of the sheet. "I love you so much," Arla cried.

Johnny lifted the hand to his lips and kissed it, weeping unashamedly. "Gram," he said softly, "we're here."

Like one coming out of a dream from a far-away place, Gram's eyes fluttered open. Then she stared at the two, wide-eyed. "You . . . you've come!" she whispered in a barely audible voice. "I'm so . . . glad. My hour has come. . . ." She looked from Johnny to Arla. Fear was registered on her face - - in her eyes.

"We love you, Gram," Arla said tenderly. "So does Jesus. May Johnny pray with you? Please?"

Pulling her hand free from Johnny's, Gram raised it and waved it furiously. "It's no use," she declared. "The door is shut, and no amount of praying will ever open it for me." Opening her eyes wide, she looked from one nurse to the other; then she said, "Leave the room, please. I wish to be alone with my grandchildren for a short while."

The nurses exchanged glances. Then, turning to Johnny, one of them spoke softly to him. "Call us when you need us," she said. Then, they were gone.
"Close the door." Gram's order came out so weakly that for a moment neither Arla nor Johnny was certain what she said. But they had only a moment in which to be uncertain; mustering all her strength, the grandparent spoke in no uncertain tone of voice when she said "Shut . . . the door. And who are these in the room with you?" she asked, with a startled look in her eyes.

Immediately, Justin and Trish took their places beside their companions.

"This is my husband, Gram. And Trish is Johnny's wife," Arla said.

Gram closed her eyes. She struggled for breath. "Let me do the talking now," she said, opening her eyes and focusing them upon her two grandchildren. "Don't stop me, please. And don't interrupt me. I must tell you this before I go. Time's running out in my hour glass. Oh-h-h! What a fool I was. What a fool!"

Her eyes closed, and a look of torture and torment contorted her once-beautiful face into some horrible looking person. The four young people looked on in pity and love, praying silently.

"I sealed my doom!" she exclaimed. "And now it's so dark!"

The words came out with such vehemence and force that it startled the couples.

Closing her eyes and gasping for breath, Gram picked at the covers and tossed about restlessly on the pillow. "It happened many years ago," she said. "My father and mother went to an old fashioned revival meeting and got converted, genuinely converted. And sanctified wholly shortly afterwards."

Justin looked at Arla; Arla looked at Justin. She recalled his words of many months ago: "It wouldn't surprise me that your Gram knows more about God than you think," he had said. Or something similar to that. Arla let out a small gasp, remembering the words. Justin put an arm around her.

"My parents, up till that time, were irreligious people. After that meeting, everything changed. I despised both them and their changed lives. They pled
with me to get right with God; prayed for me, too. And one day, many weeks later, I went to church with them. There, under Holy Ghost conviction, I ran screaming to the altar and was gloriously converted. Oh, what an experience with God I had." Here Gram turned her head to the side and pushed her face deep into the pillow, muttering sadly, "Oh what a fool I've been. I played the fool and I'm lost."

Johnny touched her cheek lightly with his hand. It was a caress.

"I . . . I'll finish," Gram said quickly. "I ran well for many months after I was converted. Then, failing to go on into heart holiness and purity, I became slack in my church attendance, even more so in my daily devotions. It wasn't long until I was totally backslid. My parents' tearful entreaties that I repent and do my first works over were totally ignored. And one day, after hearing their impassioned prayers to God for my soul, I looked upward and said, 'God, please let me alone.'"

Johnny gasped in shock; Arla's face turned white. Gram coughed loudly. Then taking a deep breath, she continued. "He did it; God took me at my word and left me. Alone! From that day to this, the gentle Holy Spirit has not spoken to my heart. Not once! After I uttered those fateful words . . . which I meant at the time... He took His convicting Spirit from me. Never has He returned. Oh, it's so dark out there. So very dark. And I am dying . . . ."

She coughed until she lay exhausted on the bed. Again her eyes closed. But only for a brief period of time. "I must tell you all," she said, mustering up what little strength was left. "When I told my dear father and mother that I had made my decision and had asked God to leave me alone and that He had done just that, it crushed them. It was almost like I extinguished their physical life with my startling words and decision; they died shortly after, in total victory, I must confess.

"I went on to college, feeling carefree and light. I enjoyed the pleasures of sin and the material gifts of this world immensely. Your grandfather and I met and fell in love and married. He was totally different than I, and shortly after our marriage he suggested that we begin our life together by taking God into our plans. I refused to comply with his wishes; so for a long time he attended church by himself. Then one day he stopped going, seeing that I had no intentions of ever going. He is in Heaven, I want you to know; two days before he passed away so suddenly, he told me that he had repented of
his sins and was born again of God's Spirit. He begged me to do the same. . . ."

"Let us pray for you, please, Gram," Johnny begged. "God is gracious and merciful and longsuffering. Perhaps He. . . ."

"It is no use," Gram exclaimed with a frightened look in her eyes. "I decided my destiny that day. But listen to me; I must finish, for it won't be long now until I'll be gone. When you got saved, Johnny . . . you too, Arla . . . I couldn't control myself. I was furious, and I despised you both. I want to ask your forgiveness before I go. . . ." She searched their faces eagerly. Her eyes looked frightened and frantic, like a hunted animal.

"Oh Gram, you are forgiven," Johnny and Arla cried simultaneously, "freely forgiven."

"Thank you came the relieved reply. "I don't deserve it, the way I treated you. But thank you. And Johnny, forgive me for trying to cheat you out of your inheritance. I worked very angle I knew, pulled every wire I thought I could pull. But it all failed. So, before I die, will you forgive me for this too? I've been such a wicked grandmother. And so unkind and loving. Please, both of you, forgive me. I can't die until I know that you forgive me for all. For everything!"

"Oh Gram, we do! We do! came the instant reply.

"I love you!" Arla cried, stooping over the weak form and kissing the ashen looking cheek. "So do I!" Johnny declared tearfully.

Gram fixed her eyes upon the two. "Let me look at you," she remarked. "I want to take your look of peace and of love with me. To remember. Where I am going, there won't be any of this. The soul, once it has known its God then strayed from Him, is restless and dissatisfied. Much like a homing pigeon, it wants to return to its Father's house. I was like this after I backslid . . . until I asked God to not bother me anymore. I sealed my doom that day. Oh, would to God I could feel just one tug of His Spirit upon my heart, just one pull at my soul. But it's too late. Too late! Forever too late."

Gram was struggling for breath now. Vainly, she tried to raise herself from the bed. "Oh, it's so horrible!" she exclaimed in anguish. "And so dark!"
Arla stroked the limp hand. Her tears fell freely onto the bed covers. She tried to pray, but her prayer was a mere format of repetitious phrases and sentences.

Gram's eyes opened wide in a wild, frightened looking stare. "They're coming for me!" she screamed. "Oh, I'm lost! Lost! Forever lost! I'm burning in the flames. Oh, it's so hot. Lost! Lost!"

With another wild scream, her tossings ceased. The breath from her lungs came out in one last, final "poof." Her eyes closed in death. The body was still. The door swing ajar; nurses came running into the room. One look, and they knew. With gentle hands and a look of compassion, they led the young couples from the room.

"Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near:

"Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." Isaiah 55:6-7.

(The End)