She sat inside the kitchen window, a warm, heavy shawl pulled tightly around her shoulders and the bright curtains pulled aside so she could see what was going on. Hot tears stung her eyes, lingering for a while like glistening jewels in her long but now graying eyelashes before trickling down her cheeks, still firm and ruddy looking, made thus by sun and wind and rain. "It's best this way, Jenny."
The man's voice, steady and firm, had a bit of a quieting effect upon her. She raised her eyes to meet his. "We still have each other," he said softly, reaching from the chair in which he sat watching to find her small, well-calloused, work-worn hand and hold it warmly and tightly in his own.

She could not speak; her emotions were too near the breaking point. So, giving his hand three gently-firm squeezes . . . their silent "I love you" message . . . she sat back to watch.

It was a big auction sale. She knew this. So did he. The crowd of people milling about reminded her of one of the large holiness camp meetings which she and her husband had attended year after year in the summer time. Only, the camp meeting crowd and this crowd before her eyes had a wide and great dissimilarity in both the matter of conduct and in dress. The camp meeting crowd was modest and holy looking, talking, walking and acting like children of the King whom they represented and whose they were; the crowd before her eyes was motley, loud, boisterous and, for the most part, worldly. But this was an auction sale, she reminded herself, and not a camp meeting. Their auction sale, to be a bit more explicit.

The very thought sent paroxysms of pain and hurt deep into the pit of her stomach and of her entire person. She must have trembled or moaned, or both, for the man by her side drew her hand more closely to his bosom and looked tenderly and sympathetically into her face. "It's best this way, Jenny." He repeated the sentence-statement as lovingly and consolingly as any mother comforting her child.

She drew a breath of air into her lungs quick-like, trying to breathe the better. The pain inside her chest was almost unbearable. She looked at the work-worn hands before her; her husband's and hers. How many hours of labor and work had the combined pairs of hands put in? she wondered, noting the protruding blood vessels on her mate's beloved hands. Quickly she drew his hand up to her lips and brushed a kiss as gentle as a breeze over it. Then she smiled. Sadly. But a smile, nonethe-less. He answered with the three gentle squeezes of "I love you" on her hand.

She looked across the lawn to the meadow. Cars and trucks filled the beloved and oft-admired meadow to its extremity. She hoped their weight and their tire treads would not crush and suffocate or break and bruise the
roots of the beautiful buttercups and the fragile forget-me-nots. They belonged to the meadow. They were as much a part of it as was the land itself. Each spring they seemed to spring up out of nowhere, almost, and carpet the meadow in a buttery yellow and pale blue, the combination of the two flowers and their distinct colors producing a setting for any artist.

She felt a strong agony of pain tug and pull on her heart. It felt much like a rubber band when it was stretched to its extremity just before breaking. She stifled the sob that rose to her throat with a quickly breathed prayer for strength.

"We still have each other," he whispered somewhere close to her ear.

She smiled, repeating her silent "I love you" message on his hand. Then the auctioneer's sing-song, booming voice cut through the noise of the motley crowd and floated through the kitchen door to her ears. They were selling the stove.

She sat forward in her chair. How many meals had she prepared on that faithful old black wood and coal cook stove? she wondered, feeling that, of all things, the big stove should be retired to some place of prominence wearing a big red ribbon for excellence. Oh, the mountain of pies and cakes and home made bread that that oven had baked! she mused in sad silence. Did they know that they were selling a part of her with that stove? Would the hands of the new buyer-owner keep its black lids as clean and as shiny-black as hers did? And would they keep its water reservoir filled with water so the husband and children would have hot water ready for them when they returned to the house from doing the barn chores or the work in the fields? she wondered, as another paroxysm of pain shot through her being.

She felt her body tremble and shake with a strange kind of pain. She drew the heavy shawl more tightly around her slender shoulders. His eyes sought hers. He spoke his words of reassurance and encouragement, clinging more tightly to her hand. Then came the booming voice of the auctioneer. "Sold!" he shouted, as he stepped over to the cradle and, in his sing-song fashion asked, "Who'll start the bidding for me? What am I offered? Okay, what am I offered? Do I hear an offer? Ten dollars! Ten dollars. Now who'll make it fifteen? Fifteen! Fifteen dollars. . . ."
"Please!" she cried, covering her eyes. "Oh, precious Jesus, I need your help. Your strength!" Her children, no, their children, his and hers, all eight of them, had been rocked in that cradle. Slept in it, too, till they got too big for it. He had made it for her when they were expecting their first child. It was strong and durable. Solid cherry. Beautiful with both time and wear. And memories. What memories! Why, the cradle was a treasure trove of memories. And hopes. Hopes for the infant cradled within to become a shining Christian for Jesus.

Tears fell from her eyes and wet her lap. Another part of her was sold with the auctioneer's voice of triumph over the one-hundred dollar sale.

On and on the bidding continued as article after article was sold, bringing, as some old timers called it, "a top dollar." They would need the money, she knew, for they had no "nest egg" whatever to fall back on. The Lord, according to His Word, had always supplied their every need, repaying them in countless ways for their generosity and unselfishness in giving to missions . . . both foreign and home . . . and in helping the poor. They had educated their four sons and four daughters and had seen three of them . . . two boys and one daughter . . . go to the mission field as missionaries. Two other daughters were nurses; the fourth was a minister's wife. One son was a teacher; the other had taken over the farm. They were blest, she knew. If only. . . .

"It's best this way, Jenny. For you and me, best." His soft voice prodded her mind into the present moment. She saw the crowd move farther away from the house now. They were gathering around the farm machinery. She was thankful for the beauty and the sunshine of the day. It seemed to add to the excitement and the fervor of buying.

They moved close in to the tractor now. The auctioneer was calling for a bid. His voice reached her clearly. Plainly. And easily, too. She looked over at him. Was that a tear in his eye? She gently squeezed out her love message to him. He responded with a sad but resigned smile.

The bidding was in earnest now; higher and higher the price climbed. How could the auctioneer know that he was selling the welcome sound that greeted neighbors in the cool hours of a summer morning? And how could he know that a boy's favorite of all places was on his father's knee riding around the fields on the tractor, helping to plow, to plant, or rake hay? Or how could
he know how many cantaloupes and watermelons and dozens of eggs were
sold, and the money dropped into a twenty gallon crock where it was saved
and saved and saved until there was enough to buy the tractor? How could
he know that she had loved the sound of the steady "plut-plut" of the engine
and that its loudness or softness had told her how near to the house he was
or how far?

The triumphant shout, "Sold," again prodded her mind back to the
motley crowd of people. How final the word sounded! she thought, glancing
his way with a stab of pain in her heart. They had just sold a part of him now,
she knew, another treasured item that was a remnant of more than 60 years
of marriage and farm life. The faithful orange tractor was gone, she thought,
but the beautiful memory of the "plut-plut" engine song would remain as
steadfast as it always was in the ageless summer mornings of their farming
years together.

Item after farm item and article after farm article was auctioned off and
sold, bringing "top dollar" prices and taking with them a part of him and his
care of the machinery and equipment. Their farmer son brought them chili
dogs and fresh apple cider, bought from one of the local men who had
brought a "little restaurant" out to the farm for the auction.

He sipped the icy-cold cider mechanically and nibbled at the juicy-hot,
spicy chili dog. She did the same. Appetite seemed to have fled with the sold
items.

"Please, eat," the son cajoled and begged. "The day has been tiring
and taxing on you and your strength. You'll feel better if you eat. Stronger,
too."

Eat, did the son say! How could one eat, and enjoy the food, when a
part of you had just been taken from you? she wondered, watching, as the
meadow became cleared of its cars and pickup trucks.

Twilight was falling. The house seemed suddenly strangely still and
silent. "Are you ready to go?" the son asked softly and kindly, coming up
behind them.

She drew the shawl closer. He helped her to her feet. Like in a dream,
they followed the son to his waiting and warm car.
"The house is toasty-warm and cozy," the son said, again kindly, softly and gently. "You'll like it, Mother and Dad. You'll be near the meadow and not too far away but what you can still see the barn and the farmhouse. And you'll be near Miriam and the children and me."

He smiled his thanks and so did she. They had good children, every one of them. Kind and loving and thoughtful, too.

The car stopped in front of a small two-bedroom home. It was flanked on all sides by apple and peach trees. An inviting flagstone walk beckoned them toward the door where a soft light flickered through the windows.

The son helped them out of the car. The father smiled and looked around. Then he spied it. Or was he hallucinating? Imagining, perhaps? He brushed a callused hand across his eyes. He was over tired. Or was he? Again he looked. Then he smiled. It was no dream; no imagination on his part, either. There, in all his orange splendor, stood the tractor! He was almost overcome with joy.

The son smiled. "A gift from the purchaser back to the original owner," the son explained.


"He asked that he be kept anonymous, Father and Mother. Accept it for the reason it was returned to you . . love."

He wiped tears. She did also. "I will, son," he stammered softly as he walked over to the tractor and patted it lovingly.

"The giver thought you'd enjoy it to plow the garden behind the house and to mow the hay on the ten acres you've kept," the son explained.

"I will. Oh, I will!" the father cried happily. He felt almost young again.

"Your new home!" the son exclaimed, opening the door wide and ushering them inside.
She gasped in awe. It was cheerful and bright and cozy; not too many rooms to keep clean and no steps to climb. In the extra bedroom, looking for all the world like an infant should be in it, stood the cradle. The beloved, memory-filled cradle! She let out a little cry of happiness, tossed her shawl off her shoulders and rushed to the cradle where her tears of joy fell onto the soft pillow and the little quilt which her own hands had made and fashioned so many years ago. "Thank him," she cried. "Whoever he is. Please, Son, thank him for your father and me."

The son left them shortly after, promising that he would thank the giver for his parents. Then they were alone.

"It is God's gift to us," he said to her. "His gift of retirement to us. It is beautiful, Jenny. Beautiful! And now you will have no more steps to hurt and pain your legs."

"And not nearly so much cleaning to do, either!" she remarked, walking from room to room like an excited child. "Now, with God's help, I can manage again. This is custom-made for us, my dear. Oh, God is so good! So very good! And now, how about something to eat? I'm hungry. The cupboards are stocked with canned goods, and the refrigerator with milk and meat and cheese and produce."

He stepped quickly to her side. Taking her hands in his, he said, "Let us pray, Jenny. First of all, God! We'll have all evening to eat, God willing. I want to thank Him for the gift of retirement and for the just right house He provided for us."

"And for the tractor and the cradle, too. They make me feel like we're home and not in a new house at all."

He drew her close to him then together they knelt in prayer.