It was the darkening sky that drew her to the window. Or was it the darkening of the room caused by the darkening of the sky that did it? Little matter, through either the darkening room or the sky, or both, she was drawn magnetically to the window.
Parting the sheer curtains slightly she looked through the windows, shiny-bright and clean. The slate-gray sky was gently sprinkling snowflakes onto the earth. They spun dizzily through the crisp winter air like miniature flowers before settling silently on the ground, where they helped to weave and fashion a carpet of whitest white. It was quite spectacular, the beauty they were creating outside. On their spacious and well cared for lawn, especially, she mused silently, as her eyes took in the total spectrum of beautifully and expensively landscaped acreage and trees and bushes. An four seasons, their lawn was a thing of beauty and a haven of quiet seclusion, and she loved it all. How she loved it!

For some strange reason, her eyes wandered to the big slate blue shingled house across the road from their lawn. She was sure she had seen movement inside the kitchen windows. But the house had stood empty ever since the strange Mrs. Pickerling had died, some better than four months ago, she knew. Surely, no one would have moved into its enormous interior in such cold weather! she thought. Still, she had seen movement of some sort inside those long, narrow kitchen windows. She knew she had; it was no mere figment of her imagination. Not at all.

She parted the sheer curtains a bit more, keeping her eyes fixed upon the slate-blue shingled house. Then she saw faces.

At least she was sure they were faces. Five of them. She drew back from the window, wondering who their new neighbors might be. The faces at the windows looked young. Like children. What a switch! she thought as a smile formed at her mouth. From age to youth; old to young! But they were there, she knew. Yes, they were. At least five of them. Young. It was an uplifting thought.

She hurried in to her spacious, well-planned and meticulously-clean kitchen, eyeing the cookie-filled canisters on a top shelf of one of the cupboards. Children. Cookies. They went together. She smiled. Taking a large, empty, covered container out of one of the cabinets, she began filling it with cookies of every design, shape, size and variety, not putting the lid on until the container was full. Then, content and happy, she waited until she heard the laughter of her own dear children as they came gleefully and merrily up the winding driveway from where the school bus had left them off.
"A surprise!" she called happily as they trudged, red-cheeked and bright, into her warm kitchen.

"Surprise, Mother? What is it?" Gretchen couldn't wait. "Please," she pleaded.

"Yes, Mother, do tell us. Please!" Bobb added, his great, wistful eyes searching her face for the answer.

"Don't keep us in suspense, Mother dear," Holly implored, "or we may not survive. It was curiosity that is said to have killed that poor old proverbial cat. Remember?"

A peal of laughter followed Holly's statement. The mother's heart felt warm. Good, too. "And now," she said, as she stooped and looked into the eyes of her youngest, "What do you think the surprise is, Bobby?"

"Kittens! Buffy had kittens again," the seven-year-old piped up brightly.

Again a loud peal of laughter followed. Holly rushed to her baby brother and hugged him to her. "Buffy's kittens are only a week old," she said, laughing. "So pity poor Buffy if she has another family so soon. How could she take care of any more babies?"

"Well, she only has seven," Bobby replied matter-of-factly. "Mama and Daddy had eight."

"But not all at one time," Gretchen answered sweetly. "Buffy has seven tiny babies to care for all at the same time. That's a big family, Bobby."

Bobby looked a bit troubled. Seven babies at once would be quite a few to care for, he decided. Still, Buffy seemed not to mind in the least. In fact, she seemed happy over her big family. Hadn't he listened to her purr and purr while she fed them and washed them?

Yes, he had. That meant that Buffy was happy. Very happy. She always purred when she was happy.
"Don't take your coats and boots off," the mother said with gaiety in her voice. "We have neighbors, and now you and I are going over to their house to welcome them."

"Neighbors? Where?" The voices chorused the questions together.

"In Mrs. Pickerling's house. I saw children. . . ."

In a merry scramble for the door, the children were soon outside, waiting for their mother.

Five sets of footprints made a path from the back kitchen door of the big white house and across the enormous lawn to the door of the slate-blue shingled house. Knocking was unnecessary; children's voices carried their own message and their own welcome.

The door flew open and five eager-faced children formed a welcoming semi-circle inside. "Come in," the oldest said with a smile. "You must be the Archers from across the road. Our mother said you'd perhaps be over."

"Why, yes, we are the Archers," the mother replied pleasantly. "Welcome to our neighborhood! We brought some cookies for you."

"Oh that is so kind of you!" the oldest girl exclaimed with tears in her eyes. "I am Valerie Croaton and these are my brothers and sisters. I am pleased to meet you, Mrs. Archer."

"Your mother, where is she, Valerie? We won't stay long; but I did want to meet you all and welcome you here to our neighborhood."

Tears stood bright in the young girl's eyes now. "Mother's in the hospital," Valerie explained. "She fell yesterday while cleaning windows upstairs and hanging curtains. Daddy's with her now."

"Is it anything serious, Valerie?"

"A broken leg. And she won't be home for Christmas. This is what really hurts me," Valerie cried, looking down at the baby in her arms. The other four children had scattered in the house, Mrs. Archer noticed, taking her three youngest along with them.
"That's too bad!" Mrs. Archer declared. "Is there anything I can do to help you? I could take care of the baby while you finished unpacking."

"Thank you kindly. Mother said she wanted us all to stay together. I'll soon be sixteen. She trusts me with my brothers and sisters. Besides, the unpacking's finished except for a few little odds and ends kind of boxes. The reason the house looks so bare is because we don't have enough furniture for it. We lived in a far smaller house than this. Where we came from, I mean. When Mother received the notice that her Aunt Martha had willed the house to her, she felt we really must live in it. Then Daddy's company transferred him nearby. So we're here."

"So Mrs. Pickerling was your mother's aunt! That made her your great aunt, Valerie. She kept pretty much to herself after her husband died. I do hope you'll be happy here and that you will come to like the house."

"I'm sure we will, Mrs. Archer. But it may be some time before we'll have enough furniture to make the rooms look cozy. Some of Aunt Martha's nicest things were sold to pay off back taxes, they told Mother and Father."

"Will your father be here for Christmas, Valerie?" Holly asked. "You and I are almost the same age," she added. "I'm Holly Archer."

"That depends upon how Mother is feeling and getting along. It was a bad break, Daddy said. And Mother's been in quite a lot of pain. And say, that's great news; that you and I are nearly the same age!"

"Maybe you'd like to take Christmas dinner at our house, the Lord willing?" Mrs. Archer said. "Our children will all be home from school then. We'd be simply delighted to have you over. I know your little brothers and sisters wouldn't be so lonesome, playing with our children. Talk it over with your father and then let us know, will you?"

"Oh, I will. that is so kind of you. Thank you."

"We'll be going now; but if there's anything I can do to help you and your parents out I'd consider it a great honor to be able to do it. Until later, may God bless you all. I shall be praying for each of you. Your dear mother, especially. It must be hard on her, leaving her family."
"If you need me, Valerie, I'll stay and help you," Holly volunteered. "At least I could help to take care of the baby and keep you company."

Valerie smiled. "That is appreciated, Holly. More than you can know. I'd love to have you stay. Melissa misses Mother something dreadfully. She's been so fussy since Mother had to go to the hospital."

"Then I'll stay right here and help you take care of her. I'm noted for my ability to rock babies to sleep. Right, Mother?"

Mrs. Archer smiled. "I don't know how I'd get along without you, Holly. And yes, you're a wonder at putting the little ones to sleep and at quieting them when they're fussy or hurting with pain."

"Is it all right if I stay with Valerie for a while?"

"Of course, honey. But the children and I'll go home now."

All the way across the snow-covered lawn to their own house, Mrs. Archer heard nothing but how wonderful the Croaton children were.

"Sally's almost as old as I am, Mother!" Gretchen exclaimed in glad surprise. "I'll be thirteen in July and Sally will be thirteen in September. Isn't it wonderful! I'm so happy that I feel like shouting hooray."

"Billy and Danny want one of Buffy's kittens," Bobby announced grandly. "I told them she has seven."

"But they're too tiny to give away just yet, Bobby," Robb said in defense of the still almost-helpless little creatures. "Besides, Kip wants one, too. He and his sister Dottie and I are almost the same age, too. Dottie's a year older and Kip's not quite a year younger. Isn't that great! But, Mother, they don't have anything for Christmas. Dottie said their daddy told them that this year they wouldn't be able to get them much for Christmas. They had a big hospital bill for Melissa and they were going to pay that first. Know what I'm going to do?" Robb was excited.

"Tell me," Mrs. Archer said as they filed through the back door into the warmth of the house.
"I'm going to empty my bank and buy Dottie and Kip each a Christmas present. The wise men brought gifts to Jesus and I'm going to take gifts to Kip and Dottie in Jesus' name."

It was contagious, Robb's kindness and charity. Soon every member inside the warm house was involved in doing something special for the Croatons. Mrs. Archer, out of their abundance, wrapped gifts for each member of the Croaton household, giving her three children toys and clothing to box and wrap for the little ones in the slate-blue shingled house. It was exciting. Love filled the big white house to overflowing. Robb prayed that God's love might shine through every package and be felt in each and every gift as it was unwrapped by their new friends.

Gretchen held the soft, warm, brand new pink sweater up before her and looked at it. Her mother had bought it for her only two days ago. It had never been worn. It still smelled new. And fragrant, like the store in which her mother had bought it. Sally would love the sweater, she knew. It would look beautiful on her. And it would keep her warm, too. Maybe she would wear it when she came to church with her, Gretchen thought. Sally had promised her that she would come faithfully.

Folding it carefully, Gretchen put it between the clean, white tissue paper in the box. Then she wrapped it in lovely red paper, taped a big gold ribbon on it, put Sally's name on it and placed it with the gifts which her mother had already boxed and wrapped for their new friends.

"What about candles and some evergreens, Mother?" she asked. "Candles inside those lovely old windows would make the house look cozier and warmer, don't you think so?"

"It really would, Gretchen. And up in the storage room we have ever so many candles that we're not using. We'll get as many as there are windows, and tonight, after your father is home, we'll take them over and help Valerie and the children to decorate."

"Could we take some evergreens, too, the Lord willing? That big open stairway would look beautiful garlanded in evergreen ropes and red ribbons, Mother. And don't you know they'll love the fragrance of the pine! Oh, I love to smell it!"
"There's plenty of the pine roping left in the garage. We'll share it, of course. Get everything together, Gretchen. After the evening meal, we'll have your father drive us over, with all of the decorations and some oranges and apples and bananas. I'm sure Valerie and the children would enjoy popcorn, too. So we'll put a bag of popcorn in with the fruit."

"This will be the most wonderful Christmas ever!" Gretchen exclaimed. "I know by actual experience now that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Oh Mother, my heart feels so warm and so wonderfully right; like we're pleasing the Lord and doing what Jesus would do if He were here."

Tears of joy filled the kind and loving mother's eyes. The greatest joy came, however, when the candles were all shining warmly through the many windows in the slate-blue shingled house, and when the pine evergreens graced the mantel in the living room and curled flagrantly upward along the banisters of the open stairway, and Valerie stood back in silence and wept for joy and happiness. "It's beautiful!" she cried. "Beautiful! How can we ever thank you for your kindness to us!"

"Gretchen put evergreens and red ribbons on every bedroom door upstairs, too," Sally announced with shining eyes. "Won't Daddy and Mother be surprised and happy!" she added quickly. "Oh, I am so happy!"

"There's more, too," Bobby said. "We have lots and lots of gifts for you. They're wrapped and . . . ."

"Bobby!" Robb cried. "You mustn't tell secrets."

"But I can't keep my secret," he replied with honesty of heart. "I'm too happy."

Mrs. Archer looked at her husband and smiled. Their children were experiencing the blessedness of giving. It would reap benefits in the years to come, she knew, and it would be repeated in their lives over and over again and again.

Again she smiled.