It was the tolling of the village church bell that drifted in through the partially opened windows and sent Sandy flying up the stair steps, crying, "No. No. No! Stop it! Stop it! Oh, No-o! It can't be. It can't!"

She squeezed the palms of her hands over her ears, trying to drown out the clear tones of the tolling bell or, at the least, to muffle its sound. But
the bell continued, Dong . . . dong . . . dong . . . Slow, evenly-spaced tolls, each one adding yet another number on to her father's age at the time of his death. Not until the last year of his life was "dong-ed" out for the villagers and those in the outlying areas to hear, and to know his age, would the sexton cease his pull on the stout rope that rang the bell.

Sandy flung herself across the bed and lay, shaking and sobbing, as the bell dong-ed on. Didn't she and her mother have pain and sorrow and grief enough without being reminded that today was the day when they would be lowering her beloved father into the cold, cruel, heartless grave! she thought.

The last mournful dong hung momentarily on the still, brittle-crisp air of early spring; then it faded away completely. 52 years old! Oh, it couldn't be! He was too young to die; too much a part of their life, her mother's and hers, to be dead.

Death was cruel. Heartless, too. Like the grave which, within a very short time now, would swallow her father's once-strong and vibrantly-alive body up in its cavity, heartless and cruel!

"O God!" the girl cried. "Why? Why did you allow it to happen? We loved him so."

Sandy sobbed. It seemed unreal; more like a horribly frightening nightmare than reality. She still wasn't sure that the news was correct. Yes, she knew her father was dead. She had seen him lying inside the satin-lined casket. Seen him two days and two nights in a row. In spite of the accident which had taken his life, mangling his body and totaling the car, the morticians had put him back together again until he looked like he was asleep and not really dead at all.

And the drunken driver who had caused the accident and killed her father, where was he? Alive! Alive, and completely unscathed and unharmed! This was what was so hard to believe. A righteous man killed; the wicked going scot free. Well, not really scot free, she reasoned. He was issued a stiff penalty and a stay behind bars. But that could never undo the wrong which was done nor right the manslaughter which was committed. It could never bring back their father and the husband. Never.
"Sandy, John and Marsha are here." Her mother's kind voice called, bringing her back to the moment. Back to the painful present. She got to her feet, gave a quick glance at herself in the mirror, then hurried to the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face, making sure the tears were washed away. There would be more, many more, she knew; but for now, she must try to be brave for her mother's sake.

John was a bulwark of strength for both her mother and herself, she knew. But John was married, and had a family of his own to think about. While he and Marsha and their little ones would be in and out to help, to strengthen, and uplift all they could, it was she, Sandy, who would have to be strong. For her mother's sake.

"Please help me, kind Father," she prayed, as she went down the stair steps. "Give me of Thy strength and, above all else, may I constantly have a forgiving heart and spirit for my father's murderer."

John helped their mother into the front seat beside Marsha. Sandy took the "reserved" seat between Justin and Nicole in the back. Their little faces looked sad. Sandy reached over and tucked a small hand in each of hers. The children snuggled close to her. She smiled for them. No need adding her grief upon their breaking, not-fully-understanding heart, she reasoned.

The village church was packed as the mortician led them down the center aisle to the front. Justin clung to Sandy's hand, exclaiming tearfully, "Bad man kill Paw-paw. Bad man. . . ."

"Sh-h, honey," Sandy whispered. "We must love that man, not hate him. Jesus loves him. And Jesus can forgive him, too."

Justin leaned his head against Sandy's arm, satisfied that if his aunt said he must love, then that's what he would try to do. Both Nicole and he sat perfectly still through the beautiful singing and the prayer. Even through the message.

It was the minister's words that arrested Sandy's attention and got her mind off her father, lying so still and lifeless inside the casket. "We must forgive," the minister was saying, "if we expect, or want, forgiveness.
Jesus was the greatest forgiver of all. Think of it; He who knew no sin nor ever committed sin, forgave! Hanging suspended between Heaven and earth, He looked upon His crucifiers and those who hated Him so passionately, and said, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.'

"He who declared that, 'I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.' This same One said, 'If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.'"

Sandy bowed her head. In her heart, she knew there was a spirit of forgiveness toward the man who had snuffed out her father's life. The pain of his wickedness and of his wrong-doing would be there for a long while, she was sure. But the spirit of forgiveness would help to assuage and buffer the pain, hurt, and grief.

It was out at the grave site, just as her mother, sustained between John and Marsha, and she, Sandy, and Nicole and Justin were leaving the grave, that a sheriff stepped up to them leading a teary-eyed young man.

Looking the broken hearted mother and wife full in the face, the young man said, "I'm sorry. Sorry! Please, can each of you forgive me? I didn't mean to kill this man. But drink's a demon. It was my god." He was sobbing brokenly.

Sandy gasped. This... this couldn't be! But it was! The sheriff nodded positively so; it was her father's murderer, through drinking.

Walking away from John's strong arm, Mrs. Knight laid a gentle hand upon the shaking, trembling shoulder of the young man. "Son," she said with tears in her eyes as well as in her voice. "Son, you are forgiven. But why not change and turn about-face today? Jesus is waiting for you. He can wash away your every sin and set you free from these evil habits."

"I asked Him to forgive me back in the church," he replied, "and He did. I confessed my sins to Him and told Him how very sorry I was for committing them. But I had to have your forgiveness, as well. I am a father. . . . " His voice shook and trembled, then broke completely. "I... I can imagine how my two small sons would feel had some drunken driver snuffed out my life. I can't bring that good man back," he sobbed, "but I'll do anything I can to help
you, once I am back into circulation. Something happened in my heart, there in the church. Seeing the grief and the pain which I had caused, broke my heart. I wanted to change, and I have. Thank God."

"How did you happen to . . . to get out to come to the funeral?" Sandy asked softly, curious to know what had made this possible.

"It's a new program we've started," the sheriff replied, speaking for the young man. "We figured it may give them a jolt, seeing how much pain and sorrow and grief they've caused. Of course, it may not always work nor affect a change. And, in some instances, it would be too dangerous to allow, since feelings run high and tempers are explosive at a time like this. But this young man asked to come: Said he had to see you, to try to make amends and a confession of his evil doing."

"Again, you are forgiven," Mrs. Knight repeated softly," and may the living, resurrected Christ live His transforming power in you and through you. May your life be living proof, daily and constantly, that Jesus Christ not only has power to save from all sins, no matter how vile or evil, but that He has power to keep from those same sins. We will all be praying for you, young man. Be a God-fearing man; a father whose sons' chief delight will be to grow up to be a man like you!"

Without warning, the young man wrapped his arms around Mrs. Knight's shoulders and, shaking from his sobbing, he exclaimed, "I will! I will! It's a promise. I have been resurrected to newness of life in Christ. I, who was dead in trespasses and sins, am alive in Christ. Don't look so startled," he said, drawing away from the mother and facing John, Sandy and Marsha. "How do I know some of these terms I am using? I'll tell you; I have a holy, God-fearing mother. I came up in a good old-fashioned Sunday School and church. I even had a wonderful experience with the Lord when I was eleven or twelve years old."

Sandy brushed tears from her eyes. John was visibly moved. "I started down," the dark-haired young man continued, "when I began to work at the big plant in the city, and I've been going down hill ever since. His death," he said, sobbing again and motioning toward the closed casket ready to be lowered into the ground, "jolted me awake. Wide awake! I'm a new man; a changed man. In Christ. Like I said before, I'll do anything and everything possible to help you. If you will not think me presumptuous," here he looked
squarely at John, "I would like the privilege of visiting your mother when my debt to society has been paid. My wife and I both will be needing the support of and the spiritual help which your mother can give. She's a holy woman; this I recognized when I first saw her."

John grabbed the outstretched hand and with tears flowing down his cheeks, replied, "What Christ has forgiven and washed in His Blood, I dare not call common nor unclean, as the Holy Spirit revealed to Peter in that vision on the house top in Acts 10. Through the precious Blood of Jesus, we are brothers. By all means, go to see my mother. She will be a bulwark of strength to you and your family. And, like she has done for my sister and me, along with the holy example and spiritual guidance of our godly father, she will guide you gently, though sometimes severely if needed, along life's journey toward Heaven."

For a long moment the young man stood and wept, looking with admiration and awe at this wonderful family. Then, in an emotion-packed, hoarse voice, he said, "Thank you. Now I can live the better with myself and with my conscience. The memory of what I have done will be with me forever, I am sure. But having Christ's complete forgiveness, and now yours, will help to ease the guilt. Again, thank you. And, thank God!" Turning to the sheriff, he said, "I'm ready to go now."

Brushing tears from his own eyes, the sheriff turned to Mrs. Knight and said something in a very low voice which, to Sandy, sounded like he exclaimed, "Mission accomplished!" Then the two were gone.

"Your father died not in vain," the mother remarked as John led her toward his waiting car.

"And he isn't really dead!" Sandy exclaimed suddenly with a victorious note in her voice. "He has just begun to live! Oh, Hallelujah for the promises of God and for the resurrection! Death is not death to the child of God; it is life. Resurrection life! Bless the Lord! Bless the Lord!"

John grabbed his sister and spun her around. "You can't imagine how thankful I am to hear you shout," he said. "For a while, you had Mother and Marsha and me worried. The shock," John added. "We were afraid you'd dwell on the injustice-of-it-all side, until Christ would have little or no place in your thinking and, ultimately, the peace and joy of God the Holy Ghost would
leak out. It is to those whose mind is stayed on Him that He promises perfect peace. O thank God, Sandy! Thank God! Now Mother's mind and Marsha's and mine will be at rest. We will triumph, in Christ, as a family! Blessed be God forever and forever!"

A hearty amen came from Sandy.