Cliff's breath came out in great white puffs as he hurried away from the house out into a world of winter white. Seven inches of snow had fallen overnight. The naked tree boughs hung low from their newly accumulated load. The snow eased up at daybreak, but occasional giant flakes floated softly through the air, looking for all the world like some of the delicate tatting patterns Cliff had seen his Grandmother Oxford create.
The world was deathly still, except for the soft twitter of a bird awaking. Cliff liked the early morning; liked it almost best of all. Running a trap line had been his ultimate goal and desire. He was at the age, and the stage in life, where each boy in the family was expected to help offset household expenses by earning money and buying many of his own clothes. Cliff liked the idea; it made him feel mature and grown up. And he had fared well this winter; pelts were bringing a good price. Especially prime ones. And that's where his trouble had started.

He headed into the wind, determined to complete his mission regardless of what the cost or the outcome would be. Grandma Oxford had preached him a sermon that went clear down to the inmost part of his soul, and she knew nothing about what had happened. What's more, she didn't know, even, when she told about her brother stealing animals out of a neighbor's traps, that she had hit him, Cliff, squarely between the eyes.

He could scarcely wait to get away from the supper table. He was sure that everyone knew what he had done. His heart thumped and hammered wildly inside his chest. He felt wicked and awful.

As quickly as he could do so, he excused himself from the table and hurried out to the barn. In a far corner of the dark haymow, he wept and prayed, confessed his sin and repented, and not until he knew he was forgiven and that his sins were covered by Jesus' precious blood did he return to the house and the warm kitchen.

The smell of freshly popped corn greeted him when he opened the door and stepped inside and the sound of merry voices floated out to him from the big living room, where the family always gathered for relaxation and laughter before the final prayer and bedtime.

Cliff found his bowl of still-warm, lightly-salted and buttered popcorn on the back of the wood-burning cook stove. Picking it up, he carried it to the living room and joined the family for the time of closeness and fellowship.

He slept well, in spite of the awesome mission before him. And when he arose at four and tiptoed out of the room and down the silent stairs, he thanked God for sending the Holy Spirit to "arrest" him, through Grandmother's story of a long-ago incident and happening. He knew it was
wrong, and sinful and wicked and evil to steal. But that one fur, that prime fur, in old Mr. Towley's trap was just more than he could pass up. And since he knew the aged bachelor was ill and not able to run his line regularly, he felt he'd never be the wiser for what he hadn't caught.

Shivering a bit from the cold and apprehension, Cliff patted the bag that he'd slung over his shoulder. The wind bit his cheek and nipped at his nose, but his heart felt warm with an indescribable warmth. He had a long journey, he knew, but what were miles, compared to getting a thing taken care of by making full restitution for one's wickedness! There was no comparison, he decided, pushing ahead at full speed.

He was deep in the woods now, following the never dry stream still onward and farther. Mr. Towley was a rare breed! Cliff thought. A true woodsman. A stubborn survivor, if he'd ever seen or met one, the young boy realized. Every day, without fail, unless he was too sick to do so, the man ran his trapline for the entire length of the seasons. And this in spite of the fact that he was not only old but that he had a withered leg that made walking difficult and extremely painful at times. But he was a true plodder, allowing nothing to deter him or stop him.

Cliff wondered about the man now. He had never known him to be fierce; but, then, neither had he ever seen him nor been around him when or if someone had stolen from him.

The thought sent chills tingling the length of Cliff's spine. What if the man was hostile and beastly when angered? He may be beaten or even killed, he thought. He knew that many a murder took place when one was in a rage and had a fit of anger. And Mr. Towley was not a Christian.

For a brief moment Cliff was tempted to turn around and go home. But he realized that if he did so, and if he failed to make restitution, he would backslide and would no longer have peace with God. Too, his conscience would torment and lash him until he would not be able to rest.

Straightening his rapidly broadening shoulders and with a look of complete determination on his face, he moved ahead rapidly. At any price, he meant to keep God's smile and His approval upon his heart and life. He had committed the sin, he would be man enough to confess it to the man and to make it right.
Five deer raced out of a laurel thicket in front of him and bounded away, white taft flags lifted high in flight. At any other time he would have been excited and thrilled; now, however, it scarcely registered on his mind. His one objective and thought was to make full restitution for his awful sin. He had broken one of the ten commandments and the Bible stated that if he broke -- or violated -- one, he was guilty of all. That in itself was a frightening thought.

Tears trickled from his eyes and crystallized on his ruddy cheeks. There was a time in his life when he would never have thought, even, about taking what didn't belong to him. Oh, he wasn't a common thief. Or was he? True, it was the first time he had ever stolen. But reason told him that the so-called "common" thief had had his first time too. Yes, indeed! Sin was such a progressive thing, he realized suddenly: it didn't stop with that first act. Oh, no. It progressed to more sins, and then to still more, until one became so chained and bound that he couldn't stop. And true to the Word of God, one's sins always found one out. There was no hiding anything from the All-seeing eye of God.

A stiff wind had come up; it shook the boughs of the trees and sent the snow from their naked arms swirling around Cliff's head and body in great clouds of white. He hurried on toward the isolated cabin home of the bachelor, wanting to get there before midmorning, if possible.

He left off following the creek now and took a sharp turn north, thankful that he was nearing the eagerly desired place. Oh, it would be so wonderful to know that he was clear with both God and Mr. Towley.

The thought gave impetus to his feet and legs and he reached the clearing in record time.

He hurried across the open stretch of land to the rustic porch, taking the four steps two at a time. Before he had time to knock, Mr. Towley was standing in the open doorway. "What brings you here?" he asked in a gravely sounding voice which always frightened Cliff.

"May I come inside, please, Mr. Towley? I'm afraid this wind may not be good for you. It's bitter cold this morning."
The man sized Cliff up from head to foot. "What's in that bag?" he asked.

"That's what I came to see you about." And Cliff let the bag drop gently to the weathered porch floor.

"Come in," the man said gruffly. "But I guess you know I don't much fancy having company."

"Thank you, Mr. Towley," Cliff replied, stepping inside the cluttered but warm house. "I'll only stay long enough to tell you what I did and to ask your forgiveness and make full restitution, then I'll leave."

"What did you do?" the man demanded, watching Cliff as he began untying the burlap sack.

"This," Cliff replied. "I stole from one of your traps. And I'm sorry, Mr. Towley." He lifted the beautiful, shiny, perfect pelt from his sack.

Mr. Towley's nostrils began to dilate. Cliff felt the man's eyes were boring or burning holes through him. Then he nearly shouted, "A thief! I... I'd never have thought it of you. How many more did you take?" He took a step toward Cliff.

"None, Mr. Towley."

"You expect me to believe that! If a man steals once, he'll do it again. Now, out with it; how many more animals have you taken from my traps?"

Cliff faced the man with honest blue eyes. "None, Mr. Towley. Until I stole this prime one. But the Holy Spirit arrested me. I've been miserable. Last night, out in a corner of the haymow, I confessed my sin to God and asked Him to forgive me and to save my soul. And He did it, Mr. Towley. That's why I'm here: the Lord Jesus Christ forgave me and now I want to ask you to forgive me also. I am so sorry I listened to the voice of the devil and took it. I'll never do it again. I'm changed; from the inside out. I have a new heart, Mr. Towley. And besides your fur, I brought you four of my very choicest pelts. Please, will you forgive me?"
The man's eyes never once left Cliff's face. He studied him for a long while. Then he said, "You . . . are you serious, boy?"

"Oh, I am. I am! My soul is at peace with God since I confessed and repented of this awful sin. And now that I am clear with God, and ready to meet Him, I want to be clear with you. Will you forgive me? Please?" And Cliff was crying.

Mr. Towley dropped down into the nearest chair, shaking from head to foot. In a broken and much humbled voice, he said, "I forgive you, my boy. Freely. But why'd you do this? I'd have never known. . . ."

"But God knew! He saw it when I took that beautiful animal from your trap and took it home. Sin's an awful thing, Mr. Towley; it will land one in the lake of fire unless it's confessed and forgiven by God and washed away in Jesus' Blood. Oh, my heart is so happy and free and peaceful since Jesus came into it."

"I . . . I'm an old man, my boy. Yes, an old man. And time's getting away from me faster than I like to think about it. And . . . and I'm not ready to make the crossing, son. I'm scared. Terribly scared!" And Mr. Towley's shoulders were now shaking with sobs.

Looking up into Cliff's face, he said brokenly, "Will you help me, please? I want to know that when I must go there'll be Someone there to guide me and to be with me. I guess what I'm trying to say is, will you pray for me? I want to have peace in my soul."

"Oh, Mr. Towley, Jesus is waiting right now to come into your heart. He'll forgive your sins and save you. While I pray, you confess your sins to Jesus and ask Him to come in. . . ."

All the way home, Cliff felt like he was walking on a cloud. He was now at peace with both God and man and Mr. Towley was ready to meet his God, when the time came. The dear man now had his Guide, Who would guide him safely and gently through the valley of death into the presence of God. It was a miracle how God worked. Yes, through restitution!