Barbara Walls stood on the front porch and looked from the end of her folks' small acreage of land to where the wooded area began. From the first day of her arrival, to the place bequeathed her mother by a late aunt, the wooded area had seemed both intriguing and ominous. Living in the city with her parents as a small child, she was not used to the uncommon quietness of the country and the strangely-quaint old house in which she now resided. No
small, dainty-looking house, this one; it was large; enormous, really, with gables and a network of extravagant gingerbread work around its upper extremities so elegant and ornate as to make one stop and gaze in awe at its intricate design and pattern. A gift to his wife and the house, her mother had said, from her late uncle's skillful hands and his varied talents and abilities.

She inhaled deeply of the clean, fresh country air, so unlike that of the city. Her keen sense of smell picked out the heady fragrance of the spice bush, now in a profusion of dainty yellow blossoms at the far end of the lot, and the sweeter, more "romantic" fragrance of the myriad lilies of the valley, which seemed to be growing everywhere, displaying their creamy-white bells in the cool shady nooks on the north side of the house. No matter where she looked nor where she walked, she was surrounded by flowers, shrubs, bushes and trees of every beautiful sort and color. Without any doubt, this late, great uncle and aunt of hers were lovers of things beautiful and lovely and, today, her parents and she were the recipients of this lovely legacy.

As she viewed the land, Barbara thought about the greater, richer, more important legacy left her by these two departed loved ones: if there was anyone, she realized, whom she admired as true saints of God, it was this great-aunt and great-uncle. Always, from her earliest days of childhood, she saw Jesus in the pair. Not that she saw them frequently after her father's transferal to the city; she didn't. But the memory of the times spent with them on cool summer evenings and on special Sundays in church with them was as sweetly-fragrant as the lovely, blooming lilies of the valley. Christ was honored, loved, served, and revered in their home. Not just on Sunday, but throughout each and every day of the week. Their love for the Lord was genuine, deep, and real.

She went inside to check on the pot of slowly-simmering, bubbling stew which she had made (to surprise her mother when she returned from some needed shopping in town), then she left the house and hurried along a rose-bordered walkway to the end of the lawn and, feeling like an excited child about to emerge on some great and mysterious adventure, she entered the woods.

She paused momentarily, looking around, wanting to make sure that her sudden spurt of daring would not forsake her once she was in the heart of the tree-shaded cool woods. Then she plunged ahead, having a great desire to either sing or whistle to bolster her courage and help allay her fears,
but the melodic songs coming from the birds in the woods quenched and squelched the desire instantly. She was surrounded by music, it was everywhere; and the songs from the feathered warblers and songsters were like nothing she had ever heard before. They enfolded her, mesmerizing her completely and binding her in their heavenly sounding spell. She couldn't move. She was afraid of never again hearing and experiencing what she was now hearing and experiencing, it was almost as though Heaven's music had dropped down into the cool woods and she alone was the enraptured listener.

She felt something warm skip down her cheeks and when she reached up to brush it away she discovered she was crying. They were tears of rapture and joy and ecstasy. "Thank You" she whispered heavenward. "Thank You, kind Father, for such beauty"

The tranquillity and the peacefulness of her surroundings wrapped around her entire being with something akin to being enfolded in a downy-soft warm blanket on a frigid night. She felt God's presence drawing her -- calling her -- to prayer. Heeding the sweetly sacred summons-invitation, she knelt humbly in His presence. She had learned early in her walk with the Lord to give instant obedience to His faintest desire and wishes; always, it paid big dividends spiritually.

Refreshed greatly in the inner man after praying, Barbara continued through the woods. She was ecstatic over finding all kinds of wild flowers in bloom. She was walking in a naturalist's paradise, she felt, and the greatest thrill of all was knowing that each lovely plant was there because of God's special planting.

She gathered handfuls then kept walking until she was almost through the woods. Just as she reached the fringe of the woods a voice called out to her, startling her:

"Good morning, Dearie. I knew God would send you."

Amazed, Barbara looked in the direction from which the voice had come. And then she saw her; a woman whose hands and arms were twisted out of shape from crippling arthritis and whose hair was one great, long, tangled-looking mess.
"Go . . . good morning" Barbara answered, standing immobile and almost afraid to move. She felt like turning and melting into the woods, recalling the words of one of the girls in church.

"You live near a witch," Blenda Gage had told her one evening after the young people's service was dismissed, while they walked down the foyer of the church into the main auditorium for the evening service.

"A witch!" Barbara remembered having parroted in little less than a screeching exclamation. "Are you sure? How do you know?" she asked, fearfully frightened.

"Everybody over there knows it. She never goes anywhere and even her hands and arms look witchy, they say. And her hair -- ugh!"

"Over where, Blenda?"

"Over where you live, that's where."

"Are . . . are you sure?" Barbara had plied.

"That's what I heard" Blenda replied as she walked away with a smug smile on her lips.

And now, here she was, face to face with . . . with . . Barbara shivered, then she shuddered.

"I asked my kind Father to send you" the woman continued pleasantly. "I knew you'd be coming, Dearie. My Father never withholds these beautiful and simple blessings from me. Oh, He is so good to me! So kind! I wonder if you'd give me a hand in getting my hair up, Dearie, please. I washed it early this morning. My, what a time I had! But I can't put it up neatly anymore; the pain is almost unbearable at times. Arthritis, you know. But it won't last forever, Dearie: I'm almost Home. Can you imagine what this will be like -- no more pain; no twisted, distorted-looking body! Oh, I tell you, I'm going to have a time when I get There."

All the fear she felt melted instantly away as Barbara listened to the softly-spoken words of this gentle hearted woman. A witch! She wished she
knew who had started such a tale. The woman was a saint, a real Christian, on her way to Heaven.

Smiling, she hurried over to where the woman sat on a glider, trying, every now and then, to gather the strands of her long hair into the palms of her twisted, pain-wracked hands to coil up on her hand.

"These are for you" Barbara said, holding the beautiful bouquet for the woman to admire and smell. "I'm Barbara Walls; I live in the house where my Great-uncle Jack and Aunt Nellie Massey lived until they passed away."

"And I'm Dorcas Preston. I loved your great-aunt and uncle. My husband and your Uncle Jack built the church we all worshipped in after their conversion and sanctification. My, such meetings as we used to have then! I tell you, Dearie, God was all over the place. And, say, those flowers are beautiful! Thank you for bringing them to me. I love flowers. I used to have a lot of them before this arthritis set in so badly."

"They're for you, Mrs. Preston, with my love, I'm really happy to know you"

"I'm more than happy to meet you, Dearie; I'm overjoyed. Ecstatically so. You see, since our dear old minister passed away seven years ago-- about the same time my dear John died, and this arthritis got really bad -- I have had scarcely any visitors. I don't drive the car, and with no one coming by to see me, well, you are like a breath of fresh air and like spring perfume."

Barbara gasped. How could professing Christians be so unconcerned and so insensitive to the needs of its people?

"You . . . you mean no one from the church came by to see you?" she asked, incredulous.

"Old Peter and Anna Wiseman came by whenever they were able, shortly after John died; then they had to go to a nursing home and I haven't seen them since. And I suppose all the younger couples are too busy to come by. I don't feel badly toward anyone, Dearie. You can't, you know, and get to Heaven. The road to Heaven allows no hard feelings -- nor bad and evil ones! -- on it. Each time I asked my Father to send help to me He sent sinners here to help me. And do you know what?"
"What?" Barbara asked eagerly.

Dorcas Preston smiled. "It was His way of doing a double job -- I received the help I needed and for which I had asked, and they had the gospel preached unto them. In my crippled condition, He sent me hurting, needy souls and many of them are, today, Christians. Now Dearie, there's a vase on the buffet in the dining room; the flowers will look beautiful in it."

Barbara was amazed at the cleanliness and the orderliness in the house, as she put the flowers into the vase and filled it with water then hurried out to where the woman sat in the sun-dappled shade.

"I'm ready to work on your hair," she said softly, as she bent down and kissed the snowy-white head.

Tears filled the elder woman's eyes. "Oh, my Heavenly Father is most kind to me!" she exclaimed joyfully. "Always, He sends me such wonderful people. I am truly blessed."

Barely able to speak, Barbara said, "I am the one who is truly blessed. It is wonderful to know that our closest neighbor is also a Christian. And, as for getting to church, God willing, my parents and I will consider it an honor to take you with us to every service. And, of course, we will see to it that you get well-balanced meals regularly, the Lord willing. We are saved to serve. This is a direct answer to my prayer; I've been asking the Lord to guide me and lead me to someone who really needed help, and He has done this today. God willing, I'll take care of your hair regularly, and I'll do the housework weekly. You must labor under dreadful circumstances and with intense pain."

"My kind Father always helps me, Dearie. And oh, how I do thank Him when I'm finally able to finish. And do you know something? He comes ever so close to me and lets me know how much He appreciates me for remembering to thank Him. Never forget to thank Him for His answers to your prayers, Dearie. He loves to be praised and thanked."

"Thank you, Mrs. Preston, for reminding me; it's so easy to forget to be thankful. I'll try to always be like that one grateful leper who returned to Jesus and thanked Him for making him whole and clean. Now tell me where your
hairbrush is and we'll soon have this beautiful hair of yours crowning your head."

As she brushed and combed, Barbara knew she had to have a long talk with Blenda Gage. It was sinful and evil to spread tales; especially, tales that were totally and completely false and untrue.

Pity and love arid compassion enveloped Barbara's whole being for the woman, whose pain and suffering, she felt sure, was of the worst sort. In a gesture of overflowing love, she threw her arms around her neighbor's shoulders and said softly, "I love you, Mrs. Preston."

"Thank you, Dearie. Those are beautiful words coming from your lips. Not many young people today have time for an old crippled-up woman. Oh, my Heavenly Father is so good and kind to me. He sends such wonderful blessings my way."

Barbara kissed the silky-soft hair on Mrs. Preston's head, then brushed the long tangles into shiny-smooth strands, knowing God had directed her footsteps through the shaded woods to the home of their neighbor. And, suddenly, the move away from the city into the quietude of the country had meaning. And fulfillment. Mrs. Preston was among those "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these. . ." 

Barbara felt joy bubble up in her soul.