"Spare my ribs!" I cried as Missy's elbow jabbed me soundly.

"Would you ever!" Missy exclaimed indignantly, starting toward the back of the church. "I can't believe this. I just cannot believe it! Talk about nerve! Gall! Ugh!"
Rubbing my ribs gently with my fingers, I followed Missy's gaze. Standing between the last and the next to the last pew, uncertainty and fear etched finely but distinctly upon her delicately beautiful face, was one of the most lovely young women I had ever seen.

"She's beautiful! I exclaimed. "She looks almost unreal. Who is she?"

I moved away from my friend; my ribs needed preserving, I decided. Missy moved to match the distance I had put between us. Seeing her elbow beginning to jerk, I stepped away just in time, crying out teasingly but hoping for the "preserving" results, "Spare my ribs, please Missy!"

"Sorry Trista, she said apologetically, "I mean no harm to those skinny little ribs of yours. But I'm shocked. Absolutely and positively, shocked. The nerve of that girl! I can't believe what I'm seeing."

Being rather new to Berrysville and to the church where we attended, I knew precious few people. "And why would you feel that way?." I probed gently. "Isn't church the place for all who will to attend? I'm happy to see a new face. It's the first one I've seen since we moved here five weeks ago."

"But Trista, you don't understand!" Missy was exasperated. Placing her hands upon her hips, she blurted, "That's Carlene Hall. Her beauty got her into a peck of trouble. No, it was more than a peck; I believe I'd be safe in saying it got her into tons of trouble. She's been gone for over a year: her folks sent her away to some relatives after she. . . ."

"Please, Missy!" I cried. "Don't say anymore. I . . . I feel terribly uncomfortable when people begin to gossip around me."

"Gossip! Who's gossiping? It's the truth. Carlene threw James Goings overboard so fast when she got in with Ted Brown from high school that it wasn't funny. Why, everyone knows there isn't a finer young man anywhere than James. And Ted was Carlene's downfall. Imagine! And now, here she is, just like nothing ever happened. I can't believe this!"

I glanced quickly toward the rear of the church, hoping for a chance to give Carlene a welcoming smile, but she had seated herself and seemed to be staring at the floor. Almost, I hurried back to her, wanting her to share the
pew in which my parents and I sat, but the service had already begun so I decided I had better get settled myself.

I forgot all about the shy looking, extremely petite beauty in the course of the service and only when the final amen was uttered and Valeria and Missy and Alicia thronged around me and mentioned her name was I aware that I had had what, to me, was a distasteful introduction to Carlene, although I had never actually met her nor been introduced to her.

I liked Alicia and Valerie and Missy. We had had some wonderful times together at church as well as in each other's homes, and we had even gone shopping together, just the four of us. Today, however, for the first time, I felt uncomfortable and ill at ease in Missy's presence.

"I'd like to give her something to think about," Missy declared to all of us as we started down the aisle toward the back door. "I'm sure James is hurting, seeing her here. I wonder whom she thinks she is. Does she think, do you suppose, that people will run to her and fall all over her to welcome her back! That's what I call nerve!"

I had a sickening, sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. Something I had heard came rushing back to me with such force until I felt hot, salty tears run down my cheeks. "No," I cried. "No, I'm sure some will never fall over her to welcome her back; for no one but spiritually dead professing Christians are so heartless and uncaring and ruthlessly unkind as to kill their wounded. Why, even the world wouldn't treat this . . . this Carlene like you are treating her. They would not push her farther down and stomp on her and trample her to death. Someone in their ranks would take pity upon her and try to help her."

"But Trista, you don't understand!" Missy insisted firmly. "Carlene committed an awful sin; that's why her folks sent her away for a while."

My tears continued to fall. "I guess we all need to remember the words of Jesus told to the accusers of the adulteress woman . . . 'Let him that is without sin cast the first stone.' Each of us professes to being saved and sanctified wholly, and this is good. But I wonder, when we were in sin, had we been treated as Carlene is being treated, and were we given the cold shoulder as she is receiving it, would we have become converted, do you suppose, and would we have come back to church? Ever?"
Missy's head dropped; tears sparkled in her pretty blue eyes. "I . . . I see what you mean," she remarked, walking slowly away.

Alicia and Valeria looked sad; their countenance wore a look of deep thoughtfulness.

"I'm sorry," Alicia said quickly. "I see now just how evil and how wicked it is to gossip. I . . . I guess, in a way, I'm guilty too; I haven't felt very good about Carlene being here."

"And that expresses how I felt also," Valerie confessed. "But I see how it is, and I mean to do something about it. I certainly don't want to grieve God's sweet Spirit out of my heart and my life. Thanks, Trista, for your stand, and . . . and . . . for your compassion and love toward the fallen. You've taught me a lesson," and she and Alicia made a silent exit through the church doors.

I dried my tears and turned to go to Carlene but a single glance at the pew told me the sad story -- Carlene was gone. I felt numb with grief and shock and pain for the shy looking girl whose face was etched indelibly on my mind. I would help her, by God's grace. Jesus had said those who loved Him were as lights in the world; I meant to be a fight that would help to bring Carlene back to Jesus, the Light of the world.

I looked for Carlene when I got to the mid-week prayer meeting at church; truth of the matter is, I got there especially early. I told my parents that Carlene needed a friend and, with their permission, I wanted to sit with her, or have her sit with us, whichever she preferred. As always, they were gracious, and said they would join me in praying for the unfortunate beauty.

Carlene came in after the service had begun. She passed by the last pew, in which I was sitting, and slid shyly into a pew three rows in front of me. I waited until the song leader had begun leading out in the third song when I slipped up to where Carlene sat and slid in beside her. "Hi," I greeted her cheerily, giving her hand a tight little loving and gentle squeeze. "I'm Trista Morgan; quite new here, and so delighted to have you and to see a new face in the services."
Carlene gave me a quick glance; not a "once-over," mind you, only a quick glance. And in that momentary, fleeting look I saw a very frightened and sorrowful young woman.

"I'm Carlene Hall," she said, in what was barely above a whisper. Her mouth parted softly in a sad but genuine smile.

"I'm so happy to meet you, Carlene," I replied, giving her hand another little squeeze.

"Thanks," she answered, smiling again. "I'm happy to meet you, Trista. I . . . I hope you'll be my friend."

I looked over at Carlene in time to see tears trickle from her eyes and run down her cheeks in a steady, shiny stream. Again, I squeezed her hand. "Count on me!" I whispered in a positive manner.

Carlene relaxed after that, and each of us settled down to benefit from the service and to partake of the spiritual blessings as well. Reverence in church was a natural thing for me, having been well instilled within me from infancy by my parents.

Carlene tried to slip away as soon as the minister's final amen was said, but I held her hand and urged her gently to remain by my side. She seemed nervous and uneasy as the people filed out of the church. I remained by her side, reassuring her with a smile as some stopped to shake her hand and tell her they were happy to have her in the service.

My heart felt full, and like it was going to burst with joy, when I saw Missy and Valerie and Alicia coming down the aisle with arms outstretched and open wide as they rushed to Carlene and welcomed her back. Their tears mingled and intermingled; I wept with them. It was a beautiful sight to see.

"I . . . I almost didn't come back," Carlene said, speaking so softly that I had to strain to hear. "I made such a fool of myself and such a mess of my life until I was tempted to end it all. Then I remembered the joy and the peace I had had in Christ before I backslid and got into sin, and I knew what I must do."
"Alone in my room one night, I confessed everything to the Lord. In true repentance, I came to Him. He freely and wondrously forgave me and washed me in His precious blood and, shortly afterward, He purged and cleansed my heart from inbred sin. Today I stand in His sight justified and free from sin. Thanks for loving me, and for caring, even though you know how far I had fallen; this means more to me than you will ever know."

Missy was sobbing by now. "God had to . . . to change me, Carlene," she confessed. "It took a certain genuine Christian, quite new to this church, to open my eyes and show me just how critical and self-righteous I've been. Oh, it hurt me, that revelation; but I went down before God in humble compassion and deep, godly sorrow. I stayed in my room on my knees until I knew I was forgiven of my sins of being critical, self-righteous and censorious and then I began seeking in earnest for a holy heart; a cleansed and purified heart. Some hours later, I had my personal Pentecost: the old carnal nature was taken out, root and all, and with this glorious death to self -- to Missy -- I was freed from the self-righteous and critical spirit. Oh Carlene, I love you so very much! I'm so gloriously and blissfully happy until I can scarcely contain myself."

"You're not the only one who prayed," Alicia remarked, looking at Missy. "I went into my closet, literally, and closed the doors and stayed there till everything was fixed up and settled in my soul. I don't want anything to keep me out of Heaven; I mean to go There by God's grace."

"That includes me too!" Valerie declared.

"You . . . you'll never know what this means to me," Carlene confided.

"Carlene! My but it's good to see you in church again!" James extended his hand in welcome. "We've prayed so much for you."

Carlene's tears looked like diamonds. "Thank you, James," she replied softly. "God answered those prayers. My soul is safely and securely anchored in God's Haven of Rest. I'm back in God's fold."

"Say, that's great!" Tom and Joe exclaimed, overhearing Carlene's statement as they stepped closer to welcome her back.
"We've all missed you dreadfully," James remarked. "And now that you're home, how about going with us to The Doughnut Hole! Joe's father makes the greatest doughnuts ever. And he even sells hamburgers and hot dogs. It's new; opened three weeks ago."

Carlene's eyes brightened. "Th . . . thank you," she answered. "You're all just so wonderful Yes, so very wonderful. I'd love to go. Again, thank you."

"Then let's go!" the group chorused.

Carlene was overwhelmed with joy. Tears splashed down her cheeks; happy, grateful tears. "Come, Trista," she said softly, "let's go."

Outside the church, more young people joined us. "This seems like old times!" Dottie Curtis exclaimed, seeing Carlene. "Oh but we have missed you! So glad you're back!"

"Let's go!" Tom called.

Carlene looked up at me and smiled. Squeezing my hand, she said kindly, "Thanks for letting God's light shine through you, Trista. You're real. And now, let's go; we mustn't keep anyone waiting. . . ."