Carolyn Firestone stood inside the cottage home and stared through the sparkling-clean window panes to the snow-crusted fields and hills beyond the woods, her face reflecting and mirroring her deepest inner feelings of misery and pain and bitterness over recent happenings. She stifled a sob as she ran nervous fingers through her well-coiffured hair, deciding for the twentieth time or more that, although all else she had loved and cherished
and held dear was swept away from her and Anton, she would maintain a sense of dignity and womanliness in her outward appearance at least.

She watched till she saw Nicole board the bus for school at the end off the narrow dirt lane down which the child walked, then she turned away quickly from the window to survey the kitchen, comparing it with her beautiful, modern and spacious kitchen at Bittersweet Acres, where everything about the enormous six-bedroom, two-story house was a thing of modern convenience and beauty and a showpiece of superior architecture and art.

A choking sensation of suffocating smoke sent her scurrying to the black cook stove, with its equally black, unsightly looking stove pipe that edged its long arm upwards toward the ceiling till finally it crooked its ribbed elbow and disappeared into the narrow brick chimney which hugged the house tightly on the outside.

She coughed as billows of smoke rolled upward when she opened one of the front stove lids. Panic and frustration boiled up within her, giving her a sickeningly weak sensation. Draft . . . damper . . . Anton had used the words as he had worked something somewhere on the stove. Where was the draft button? she wondered. Damper, too?

Frantically, Carolyn's fingers moved over the door of the warming oven at the top of the old-fashioned stove. Not finding anything to push in or pull out, she lamented aloud, "You miserable, miserable, ugly, unsightly looking thing!"

In seeming protest over the declaration, another billow of smoke spurted from the stove.

Sputtering and coughing, Carolyn dropped into the big rocker and sobbed. "What will I do? What will I do?" she wailed aloud into her hands.

Suddenly, she remembered having seen Anton turn something or other on the stove pipe after he opened something else near the front of the stove.

Getting to her feet, she surveyed the pipe carefully and discovered a strange and peculiar looking handle sticking out of it. Cautiously she touched it then quickly she gave it a half-turn in the opposite direction from which she had found it before stepping back to see what would happen, if anything.
She breathed a sigh of relief when finally the stove stopped smoking.

Hurrying to open the doors so the smoke would clear out of the house, she noticed that the snow, which was falling ever so gently and lazily and lightly when she kissed Nicole before sending her off to school, was now coming down thickly and heavily, blanketing everything around her in a downy, new white coverlet. Suddenly she had the most dreadful feeling -- like the entire world was closing in about her, squeezing her into the walls of the cottage, isolating her completely and cutting her off entirely from civilization.

In disgust, she shut the door with a loud bang then set to work to put the house in order. Anything to keep her mind occupied, she reasoned.

The hours slipped away, and in spite of her abhorrence for the size of the cottage-home, Carolyn conceded grudgingly that the two-bedroom house was indeed both cozy and attractive and, if one didn't mind anything so small, it was really quite adequate. For one thing, it afforded a protective and dry roof over her and Anton's and Nicole's head. They could have been homeless! Had it not been for Grandma Ashley's kindness and benevolence in willing the house to her, Carolyn realized suddenly just how destitute they would have been.

She closed her eyes as once again the glaring headlines of The Herald flashed before her in large, dark, bold outline. "Building Tycoon Bankrupt," the paper publicized shamelessly -- almost jubilantly, she thought, clenching her hands together in tight little fists as she recalled every single, detailed and descriptive sentence in the evening paper.

"There isn't anything so valuable and important as one's soul, Carolyn!" her sister Ruth had told her after hearing the news and rushing to her side to console her. "Who cares about these earthly, temporal things anyhow? They're transitory--they fade and pass away. But that which one possesses in his soul . . . ah, this no man can take from him. Do you know Him, Carolyn? Is Jesus still Lord and Master of your heart and life, dear?"

Carolyn cringed now, recoiling how, in pretense that something important needed done in another part of the house, she had excused herself quickly and fled up the wide curving stairs, thereby evading her sister's forthright question and the probing of those large, tender, blue eyes.
Ruth was different than she. For so long as Carolyn could remember, her sister had always been spiritually inclined. She had considered her dark-haired, blue-eyed sister odd -- in a confusing way -- and extremely old-fashioned in both her dress and her ideals. Yet it had always been to Ruth that she fled when an ill wind blew her way.

Ruth was genuine. She was real. In a way, she seemed almost transparent: one always knew where she stood on anything spiritual and Biblical. She and Derek had a lovely home with nice furnishings, yet each seemed detached from it all. "Things" never seemed to fasten their hold upon Ruth: she was always more concerned with the spiritual part. She was an excellent wife and mother and as neat a housekeeper as could be found anywhere, but her house and its furnishings were "under her feet." She had built upon the Solid Rock, Jesus Christ, and Derek and she held the things of earth loosely.

Carolyn picked up the afghan she had begun to crochet before Anton's shameful demise in the business world and began adding stitches, her mind, all the while, wandering to Bittersweet Acres and the beautiful house out of which they were driven. If only Anton had not continued to invest all of his collateral. . . . If . . . if. . . .!

Her fingers worked rapidly as the bitterness over their loss boiled and churned within her. "The nerve of those bill collectors!" she declared aloud. "The nerve! Confiscating all our furniture, the paintings on the walls and my beautiful, beautiful crystalware and silver!"

Angry tears stung her eyes and dashed madly down her cheeks. Everything was gone! Everything! Overnight, they had become paupers. Well, almost paupers. They did have her grandmother's modest cottage-home and it was free of debt. One wasn't exactly a pauper when he owned property, small though it may be in comparison to their fashionable and big house. Oh if only she could be content with what she had, like Ruth always was, she soliloquized longingly.

Feeling suddenly very chilly, Carolyn put the afghan down and hurried to the kitchen stove to feed more wood into its seeming ever-hungry mouth. The old-fashioned but perfect time-keeping clock on the mantel struck three deep sonorous tones as she passed.
Three o'clock! It couldn't be. Where had the day gone!

A new thought struck her then: it was a frightening thought: Nicole should have been home ten minutes ago! Where was she?

Carolyn went to the window and looked out. What she saw made her feel sick and faint. The snow was fairly "pouring" from the sky and a frigid, capricious northeast wind was blowing and drifting it every way. She could see absolutely nothing but the swirling, blinding, driving snow as it piled higher and higher and deeper and deeper around the house.

Fear clutched her heart with a choking sensation. She opened the kitchen door for a breath of fresh air and the wind nearly knocked her down. Again, panic boiled up within her. What could she do? she wondered, feeling a sudden, impulsive urge to do something but not knowing the proper course to take. Where was her little Nicole? Frozen perhaps?

Carolyn paced nervously through the house, peering through the windows into impenetrable snow. Visibility was zero. Absolutely zero. Suppose Nicole was even now somewhere along the lane in the blizzard, trying to find her way home!

Shoving chunks of wood into the stove to keep the fire going and the house warm, Carolyn quickly shrugged into several sweaters and her heaviest, warmest coat. Hurriedly she slipped the shoes off her feet and pulled on a pair of tall, fleece-lined boots, then tying a wool scarf around her head and another about her nose and mouth, she rushed outside, pulling gloves on as she went.

She crossed the porch by sheer grit and will power rather than by sight since visibility was nil, and when she reached the edge of the porch and felt the clothesline pole she breathed easier. Every step she took, she knew, would have to be taken by holding on to a familiar landmark. She could see nothing nor distinguish anything -- absolutely nothing but the stinging, swirling, blinding snow in front of her nose. It was a dreadful feeling, and frightening too.

With her hands clutching the clothesline, Carolyn stumbled across the yard. Where to next? she wondered as her hand told her she had reached
the line's extremity. She dare not let go without having something else to hold on to to guide her; she would lose her way and freeze to death in a very little while.

Thinking she heard a faint cry, she called loudly, "Nicole! Nicole honey, where are you? Nicole. . .!"

She strained her ears, listening. All she heard was the screeching, screaming, driving, moaning wind knocking the breath out of her chest and shoving its icy fists down her throat.

She stood for a long while, rooted to the spot and wondering what to do next. There was a large maple tree nearby. Could she find it? she wondered, slicing through the heavy snow with her free hand and trying to touch the sturdy tree which she knew was there but which she couldn't locate. She must find Nicole. She must!

Without realizing what she was doing, Carolyn let go of the clothesline and stumbled forward a few steps, groping blindly for the tree. She couldn't find it.

Realizing she had relinquished the hold on her only lifeline to safety in her zeal to find Nicole, Carolyn stood in dumb silence for a long while. Slowly the shock of her plight wore off and an icy fear gripped her heart. She was lost. She knew it . . . so near to the house but oh, so far.

She moved her feet: they felt mechanized. Unreal. Which direction was the clothesline? she wondered, trying frantically to get her bearings yet not daring to move for fear she go in the wrong direction and thus further complicate her plight.

A dull, numb sensation crept rapidly over her body. Could she be freezing?. She stomped her feet and moved her legs, trying to keep her body in motion without moving farther away from the life-saving clothesline, which she knew couldn't be too far away. She dare not remain here, she knew; she'd freeze to death.

Never, in all her years, had death stared her full in the face. But now..., now she was having a personal encounter with this heartless, cold, bold enemy and she was not ready to meet him!
Tears stung Carolyn's eyes and her sinful past swirled before her like the driving snow. She had been such a selfish young woman, never fully satisfied with what she had but always wanting something new and different. And what had all the luxury and finery benefited her? she wondered now, recalling her insatiable lust and desire for "things." Was any of it of value, now that death and she were staring each other full in the face? What good would Anton's wealth benefit and profit her now? Could money or material things have saved her from freezing to death?

Standing there, growing more numb by the moment, Carolyn read her own verdict to the questions that seemed to flash on somewhere deep inside her brain, demanding answers. Simultaneously and instantly, she realized that she had put all her faith in things tangible -- things earthly and material. Like her sister had told her, the things to which she had been holding and for which she had been grasping, were transitory.

The revelation startled Carolyn. Heretofore she had given little or no thought to things spiritual, striving only to live for self. But now her thoughts changed: she was in a corner and she was facing sure death unless some miracle happened. Worse still, she wasn't ready to meet the God whom she had spurned and rejected all her life. She didn't want to go to hell! Oh no. No! No!

In anguish of soul, she cried into the screeching, screaming wind and the driving snow, "Lord, save me! Be merciful to me a sinner and save my soul. I'm sorry I sinned against Thee. I'll make all my wrongs right. . . ."

Peace flooded the young mother's heart, and joy. She knew her soul was washed in the precious Blood of Jesus Christ.

"Thank You, blessed Savior, for Thy mercy to me!" she exclaimed happily, feeling all new and gloriously different -- transformed -- on the inside. "If Thou wilt, Thou canst help me to find the clothesline post."

She uttered the sentence with faith as simple and strong as a child's and when she reached out this time her hand found the object for which she had prayed.
Praising Him who had not only saved her soul but her life as well, Carolyn stumbled through the drifting snow toward the cottage, her hand never once relinquishing its grasp on the clothesline.

Once inside the house, she removed her cumbersome coat and boots and scarf, then, standing near the stove, she warmed her numb body. The cook stove no longer seemed ugly and unsightly to her. It was beautiful, she thought, patting the warming oven gently and almost affectionately. In holy laughter she laughed aloud at the blessed change in her heart and in her attitudes. No wonder Ruth was always happy and joyful! She had finally learned her sister's secret of real joy.

Pulling the rocking chair close to the stove, Carolyn knelt beside it and unburdened her heart to her newfound Lord and Savior, asking Him to protect and shelter and keep Anton and Nicole safe and to reunite them again when the storm abated and had blown itself out.

A deep inner peace and calm enfolded her and she knew that the One who had so mightily delivered her would care for and look after her loved ones.

She went to bed early that night. Committing everything into God's hands, she slept peacefully, and when morning came and she looked through the windows on a world of shimmering white, she marveled at what she beheld. How like her heart the landscape was -- clean and white!

Movement along the lane caught her eye. With a glad cry of thankfulness she rushed to the porch and waved her apron high in the frigid air. It was Anton! He was coming to her, and in his arms was Nicole!

Rushing back into the house and closing the door, Carolyn fell on her knees and offered thanks to the Lord. The most priceless gifts on earth were coming home to her. Little matter that Anton had lost his wealth: they still had each other! This was what mattered. Yes, these were the things that counted. And they were hers -- to have and to hold!

Suddenly, the cottage-home seemed to have been transformed into a palace. Her entire being had a warm and tender feeling, something she had not felt for a long, long time -- a sort of innocence and delight in simple things that for far too long she had not known.
Quickly, she began getting things together to make feather-light hot biscuits for Anton and Nicole. This morning was the beginning of new things for her.

Carolyn could hardly wait to tell her husband of the glorious change in her heart and life For once in her life, she knew what real satisfaction was.