I awoke to the lusty song of the mocking bird outside my window and to the softly-tuned notes of Great Gettin' Up Mornin' coming from Aunt Sally as she stirred about in the kitchen beneath my upstairs bedroom window. Usually, as the day advanced, Aunt Sally's rendition of Great Gettin' Up
Mornin' was anything but softly-tuned: she sang it loudly and with such gusto and fervency that, as a small child, I could almost visualize the saints coming from their graves and ascending heavenward like a great company of shooting stars, brilliantly bright and shiny white. But the early morning hours extracted nothing more than softly-tuned notes of the song from Aunt Sally's lovely voice out of kindness and deference to those she loved and cared for, I knew. And I loved her all the more for her gentle consideration and thoughtfulness.

Aunt Sally wasn't an aunt at all. Not in the truest sense of the relation-word, that is. She was my mother's closest and dearest girl friend when each was in grade school and high school. Aunt Sally's parents owned a big plantation and had many hired hands working the plantation. It was from these that she first heard and learned her favorite of all songs, Great Gettin' Up Mornin'.

"What do you mean by 'Great Gettin' Up Mornin' '?" she had asked one of those dear, gentle-hearted mammies when she was twelve years old.

"Oh, honey chile, you mean you don't know 'bout what's gonna happen one o' these wonderful mornin's?" the mammy had responded in kindly shock. And then she had proceeded to explain and expound to Aunt Sally what the Bible said was going to take place and happen; how the dead in Christ were going to rise up from their graves in the earth and from the bottom of the seas and wherever they were buried. She had been so dramatic and convincing with her exposition that Aunt Sally said she knew instantly and immediately that she wasn't ready for the Great Gettin' Up Mornin'. And she had confessed, with tears, that she knew there would be no gettin' up for her if the trumpet sounded just then.

"But you can go up, too, honey chile, if you gets yo' heart washed white. That's you' ticket fo' goin' up."

"But how can my heart get washed when it's inside my chest?" Aunt Sally said she had asked, trembling with fear and conviction, and broken-hearted to know she wasn't ready to go up to meet the Lord, to whom the mammy was always singing or praying.

"Why you precious lamb, you' don' take yo' heart out and wash it over a board like mammy washes her clothes, no ma'am: you merely says, 'Lord
Jesus, I'se got a dirty heart; it's dirty-black. But I don't want it dirty black; I wants a clean heart. A white heart; whiter than snow. Please, Jesus, wash my heart. Forgive my sins and save me.

Well, Aunt Sally did what mammy told her to do and she was genuinely and soundly converted. Like a bird freed from its prison-cage, she hugged mammy and danced around her for pure joy, then she ran up the garden path to the big mansion called home to tell her mother and father what had happened. She was so happy in the Lord.

Her mother was shocked; her father was angered. But being only twelve, they became tolerant, feeling that it was nothing more than an emotional spurt which would wear off with time.

It never did, however. So genuinely changed and different was Aunt Sally and so rooted in Christ and her newfound faith was she, that at age 16, her parents made her leave home. She had disgraced the family, they said, by embracing the faith of their lowly hired hands and by making converts of others to the same faith, among whom were my mother and both her parents--my grandparents.

Aunt Sally found work among friends and lived with my grandparents after that. She and my mother were like sisters now. They sang together in churches and in mission halls. Each met her husband while singing in a camp meeting.

Aunt Sally and her husband gave themselves over completely to mission work, laboring tirelessly and lovingly among the poor, the downtrodden, and the castoffs of society. She was disowned by her wealthy parents, despised and hated by her two older sisters and a younger brother, loved and cherished by her kind husband and many friends, and revered, respected and adored by those with and among whom she labored and worked.

Her marriage came to an abrupt and sudden end after nine years when pneumonia put the man she loved in the grave and almost ended her own life. No longer strong physically, and having been weakened beyond any description, with her own bout of pneumonia and a viral infection, she had had to give up the work she loved most to do.
For a while, the little apartment above the mission continued to be her home. Then one day while in prayer, my dear father felt strongly impressed that Aunt Sally must be brought to our home and kept there.

"We have plenty of room," he told Mother and me, "and I feel it's one of those 'unto the least of these' things about which Jesus spoke. Sally will be a blessing to us."

Mother, of course, was overjoyed and wept softly, saying she had been praying for Sally and had been asking the Lord what they could do and in what way they could help her, besides the monthly love-check they always gave to her.

So it was that dear Aunt Sally came to take up permanent, till-death-do-us-part residence in our house. She and Mother began singing together again in churches and missions and nursing homes and prisons, as Aunt Sally's health allowed and tolerated. We were such a happy family. Then, three years after her arrival, my father died in his sleep one night of an apparent heart attack. We were devastated, Mother and I; but Aunt Sally's faith and powerful prayers buoyed us up and carried us safely and gently through the months of shock and grief and pain and helped to bring us out more than conquerors through Christ. Our home would never again be quite the same, but we were taught the wonderful lesson of the All-sufficiency of God's grace and His power.

Mother went back to her profession of nursing shortly after Daddy's death and Aunt Sally took over the household duties, along with my assistance, as I grew old enough to help. We missed Daddy dreadfully but we had a hope that grew brighter day by day and a growing faith that never diminished. Aunt Sally's Great Gettin' Up Mornin' now became very real to me for I knew without any doubt whatever, that my beloved father would indeed be gettin' up, and rising from the earth that now covered him, at the first blast of the great trumpet.

Aunt Sally was a small slender woman with eyes as gentle as a dove and a heart as big and generous as anything I had ever seen. She had few earthly possessions because she gave constantly to the poor out of her own meager stock and fare. She was, indeed, a pilgrim in a strange land, declaring by her daily walk with the Lord that this world was not her home. She was merely journeying through it while she labored and worked for the
Master -- her Savior -- and waited for the day when He would call for her to come Home and take up residence in her eternal home I loved Aunt Sally with all that was within me, and rarely ever did I think of her as anything other than my real, earthly aunt.

I got out of bed and rushed to the open window now, listening to Aunt Sally's sweet voice and to the lusty, mimicking songs of the mocking bird. He was singing his melodies from the topmost branch of the crape myrtle, less than twenty feet away from the kitchen windows that faced to the back of the lawn. His beautiful songs this morning were a serenade to his mate, I knew, as she sat patiently and expectantly upon the nest of eggs beneath him.

He was quite a romantic, singing to her and serenading her whenever fancy struck, be it one or two or three in the morning, and I thought how flattered I would be had I a boyfriend who would stand beneath my window on a brightly moonlit night, strumming his guitar softly while he sang songs to me.

I smiled at the thought and hurried away from the window, wanting to make the bed and tidy the room while the air was still cool. I loved the early part of the morning and was an early riser. I found it easy to absorb what I read from the Bible early in the morning, and praying seemed to be easier, too. Of course, I encountered some battles with Satan -- who doesn't when they pray? But I discovered early in my Christian life that I could make contact with Heaven far better and easier on a refreshed mind and body than when the entire physical being was tired and fatigued and exhausted.

Half an hour later I tiptoed down the stairs and let myself out the open door to the big porch at the front of the house. The air was still fresh and cool as I settled into one of the four sturdy cane bottom rocking chairs, made by my dear grandfather, and opened the Bible and began to read.

From a nearby flower bed the sweet fragrance of night-blooming jasmine and roses was wafted to me on a gentle breeze that stirred through the trees and left the leaves trembling and shaking merrily.

I sat for a long while in total silence, listening to the sounds of God's creations and offering up sincere and deep heartfelt thanks and praise to Him for all the beautiful things He had blest us with and given to us. Then I meditated on His goodness and kindness and as I did so, He drew near. His
presence was warm and comforting and wonderful and so very real. I felt I could reach out and touch Him. I wept for happiness and holy joy. I praised Him; He poured out blessing after blessing upon my soul. I praised; He blessed. And I discovered something wonderful that early morning there on the front porch -- that, not only did the Lord inhabit the praises of Israel (Ps. 22:3) but He inhabited my praises, as well. My soul was refreshed, renewed, revived, and filled to overflowing.

I began to pray then and, as I did so, Alice's face came before me in clear and sharp outline. Alice Brooke and Angela Kensing and I were best friends. Close best friends. I always felt the Lord favored me when He sent these two wonderful Christians into my life. And lately, Alice hadn't been quite like herself. I had no idea what was wrong.

The urge to pray for her was strong: by now, it had fastened itself upon me in a heavy burden. Weeping, I dropped to the porch floor on my knees and began to pray for my friend.

Part 2

Aunt Sally and I had just finished getting the house in order and were sitting on the glider in the backyard sipping icy-cold tea when Angela and Alice came along the side of the house, calling my name.

"Marie. Marie, where are you?"


"I agree with that statement," Angela remarked. "And, yes, I'll have some, thank you."

"Bring two," Alice called as I hurried into the kitchen. "I love Aunt Sally's tea -- hot or cold. It's always so mild and delicious. So just-right, according to my palate."

"So what are you doing?" I asked as we all settled down to drink the deliciously-refreshing cold beverage.
"How about us climbing the long hill to the cemetery?" Alice asked. "It's only a two-mile walk. Four, round trip."

"Sounds good to me," I replied. "Unless you need me," I said, turning to Aunt Sally with questioning eyes.

"Need you!" she exclaimed kindly. "Why, Marie, you've done more than a day's work already. And, of course, I won't need you. We have everything in tip-top shape and, until your mother's up, I don't want to make more noise than I have to."

"Is she on the night shift?" Angela asked.

"Yes, she is," I answered. "She comes home looking ever so tired. I'll be glad when she's back on the 7 till 3 day shift. Last night must have been quite a night. She said there was one emergency case after another. All night long too! I'm not so sure anymore that I want to be a nurse," I answered, seriously.

"I still think that's what I'll study for after I graduate from Magnolia High, God willing," Angela said. "You can do such a lot of good for people. And I love working with people. I honestly feel that's my God-given calling."

"I love working with people too," I replied. "And all my school years I thought I wanted to become a nurse, like my mother. But lately, I don't know. It hurts me when I see her come in looking so utterly exhausted and tired."

"Your mother's not quite as young as she used to be," Aunt Sally declared, laughing. "There was a day and a time when she didn't mind it like she does today. Years have a way of making work seem harder for us."

"Do you notice it?" I asked suddenly, remembering that Aunt Sally and my mother were the same age.

Aunt Sally threw her head back and laughed. "Do I ever!" she exclaimed.

"But you always seem so full of pep and . . . and. . . ."
"Thank you, my dear," Aunt Sally said before I had finished speaking. "The Lord gives strength for my days, as He has promised. But, yes, I feel the weight of the years creeping up upon me."

"But if you feel like this and you're not old, what then?" Alice asked seriously and thoughtfully.

"Then I think it's time to see a doctor and find out the why of it," Aunt Sally answered, pouring more tea into our glasses.

Something much like an arrow shot into my heart when I heard Alice's question and I wanted to run away and be alone and cry. Her poignant question stirred and churned the already uneasy feeling I'd had inside me for some time. I looked at her, but if something was wrong with her she managed not to show it or to let on.

Angela looked at me and furrowed her brow as if to say, "What's wrong with Alice?" then just as quickly she was her usual jolly self again. But I knew her well enough to know that she, too, was troubled by the unexpected question.

We sipped our tea in silence for a while then Angela got to her feet quickly and said, "Are we ready to go? Or shall we do something else?" She looked searchingly at Alice.

"It's fine with me," I replied. "Maybe you'd rather just stay here," I added to Alice. "We'd have a great time here, if you'd rather do this. We always have a wonderful time, just being together."

Alice laughed her soft, sweet laugh, then said, "What makes you think I'd rather not go up the cemetery road? On a morning like this I like nothing better than to be out walking on a country road. I've never seen the flowers more beautiful. I often wonder what Heaven will be like"

"We'll be finding that out one of these days," Aunt Sally declared, brushing tears from her eyes. "You know, I'm sure, that my favorite song is Great Gettin' Up Mornin', and I'll tell you why I like it so well: First, it's because the Lord used that song to bring me to Himself. And, too, I believe those dear, dear people who slaved away working for my wealthy father, but
who knew God, and walked with Him and talked with Him, knew a lot more about Heaven than many professing Christians I know.

"Those dear old mammies sang Great Gettin' Up Mornin' until they were beside themselves with holy joy. And talk about shining faces! I never saw anything like it. I'm sure it was the same shine the Israelites saw on the face of Moses when he came down off the mount after having spent all those days alone with God. I often felt, after listening to those mammies sing and seeing the glory of God on their faces, that they must have had at least a peek or a glimpse into Heaven."

"Were you with them much?" Angela asked in wonderment.

"Oh my, yes. Two of Mammy Johnson's little girls and I used to play together."

"Didn't your parents mind?" Angela asked, in even more amazement.

"Not so long as it was only Mammy Johnson's little girls. Mammy seemed capable of doing almost anything and everything. She rose to every emergency and crisis with supernatural strength and wisdom and ability. She was wonderful. She was always available when Mother, or any of us, needed help. Mammy was special to all of us. I guess you might say she was favored."

"Wasn't she the mammy who led you to Jesus?" I asked Aunt Sally.

"That's right. And oh, my, how she could pray! I'd go down to their little cabin in search of the girls and many times I heard Mammy praying. Chills ran up and down my spine in shivers. And when she'd start singing Great Gettin' Up Mornin', and get shouting happy, I was scared. Sabrina and Mandie told me not to be afraid, that Mammy was just having a wonderful time with the Lord. And after I got saved, I knew what they were talking about. Serving the Lord is wonderful."

"Have you ever missed the luxury and the wealth you were accustomed to before you had to leave home?" Alice asked softly with a twinkle in her eyes.
"Never! Not once," Aunt Sally answered without the slightest hesitation. "I have something that no amount of money can buy: in Christ I have peace and soul-rest and a well of overflowing joy. I am fully satisfied. What's more, I am an heir with Christ. And I'll have a mansion -- in Heaven. I am blest! I am blest! All glory to His name!"

With tears flushing her eyes, Alice rushed over to Aunt Sally and threw her arms about her. "I knew what your answer would be," she said. "But I just wanted to hear you say it. I love you."

"And I love you, too Alice. And now I think you'd better be leaving if you're going up that steep hill. Of course, you're all still young and it won't take you as long to climb it as it would for some of us oldsters," and Sally laughed pleasantly as she carried the pitcher and the glasses into the kitchen.

"Let's go," Angela said, jumping to her feet, bubbling with an excitement and an eagerness that was contagious. "I could sit all day and listen to Sally talk," she declared, as we left the yard and started out on our walk.

"You know," Alice said pensively, "I believe the Lord will have some very special rewards for people like Sally. She had so much at one time, of worldly goods, but she turned her back on it all and went to the lowest type of people to help them and minister to them. That's sacrifice."

"And total death to the old self life," I added, recalling my dear mother's testimony to me one day as we worked side by side in the vegetable garden at the end of our big yard. "Both Aunt Sally and she sought to be sanctified wholly as soon as they heard it preached, she said, and they didn't stop seeking until each had a definite witness of the Spirit within. And with both Mother and Aunt Sally, the day by day, week by week and month by month daily holy living and manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit is undeniable testimony and proof that Holiness of heart is real and that it keeps one sweet and calm and joyful under all pressure. And when those adverse winds blow, too. I've never seen anything but Divine love manifested in either one of them."

"And those are the only kind of people who will enter Heaven and inhabit that beautiful land," Alice remarked, adding rapturously, "Oh, I'm so
happy to know that I'll be there one of these days. And there'll never be any sin and no sickness. Oh, won't it be wonderful!

Her eyes seemed to be gazing into that beautiful City. She reminded me, suddenly, of an angel. Angela and I stared at each other.

Part 3

We were barely a quarter of a mile into our climb up the steep hill to the cemetery when I noticed Alice lagging behind a bit. Automatically, and without saying a word about it, Angela and I slowed up somewhat. Then Angela, being full of vim and vitality and with long, slender legs, started ahead again at her usual brisk, fast-paced stride, calling as she did so, "I'll race you up the hill.

This was an ordinary and quite usual thing for one or the other of us to call out and do when we were out walking; especially, when and if we were climbing a hill. It seemed we enjoyed pitting our strength and tolerance and endurance against each other to see who could run the longest and the farthest before succumbing to sheer exhaustion and breathlessness and collapsing, finally, on a grassy, tree-shaded mound, gasping for breath and laughing till our sides ached. Today, however, there was no responding chorus of excited, "Let's go!"

"Go ahead," Alice said, reading my thoughts like words in a book. "I'll be along," she added sweetly, "but it will be at a slower pace, I'm afraid."

Tears swam in my eyes. Turning, I put my hands on her slender shoulders. "You . . . you aren't feeling well, are you?" I asked hesitantly, sensing something for which I had no words. She looked at me, saying nothing.

"Shall we go back?" I asked just as Angela bounded down the hill to us, apologizing profusely and sincerely.

"I'm sorry," Angela cried. "I really am. What's wrong, Alice?" she asked.

"I wish I knew."
"Are you hurting?." I queried with intense concern. "I . . . I mean, are you in pain?"

"Not exactly. Let's climb to the top and then we can talk. There's lots of shade in the cemetery."

"But . . . are you able to go that far?" Angela questioned, her sparkling, deep-blue eyes great pools of doubt now.

Alice smiled. "Let me try. Always, reaching the summit of this hill has given me a feeling of accomplishment. It may be my last time ever but I want it to be a long-lasting and most treasured memory for me. Now wipe the gloom from your eyes and the dark, glum expressions off your faces; I want this to be one of our most cherished and loveliest days of all of our lives. If you want to run, Angela, run. You too, Marie. I'd join in the race if I could, you know this. But I'll have to settle for a slow and easy pace, I'm sorry to say."

"What . . . what's wrong?" Angela and I asked simultaneously.

"I honestly don't know," Alice replied with patient candor. "Let's talk about it when we're beneath those lovely old pines that sigh and whisper secrets over the ancient graves of the Josiah Penderghast family. How many are laid out there; was it twelve or sixteen we counted?"

"Sixteen," Angela answered, as we started upward once again, this time at the slowest pace we'd ever climbed the hill.

As always, reaching the top was worth the rigors of the climb. I, like Alice, felt the feeling of accomplishment.

We meandered slowly through the cemetery, walking reverently and respectfully along flower-bordered paths, well-manicured grass and neatly trimmed hedges and evergreens until we reached the copse of beautiful pines.

Entering the shaded, quiet place, we settled down on the soft carpet of needles and listened for a long while to the whispering of the breezes through the lofty, sweet scented, gently-swaying pines.
"I hope I'll be buried beneath a pine tree when I die," Alice said softly, breaking the spell of murmured whispers through the pines.

"I hope you're not thinking of dying already!" Angela exclaimed, sitting suddenly straight as a board and just as rigid too.

I gasped, then let my breath out in a more relaxed manner, hoping I hadn't betrayed the inner fear that grabbed my heart when Alice made her spoken wish.

"Are you . . . I mean, . . . well . . . are you ill?" I finally managed to ask, looking our dear friend full in her sweet face. Alice had the kind of face, or countenance, that just couldn't conceal her feelings very well.

Alice took a deep breath then looked far into the distance, it seemed, before she spoke. "Like I said a while ago, I can't say that I hurt. Not actually. At least not often, or much. It's . . . well, I can't exactly describe this . . . this . . ."

I waited, breathlessly. Angela looked like she, too, was breathless.

"I have difficulty breathing," Alice said matter-of-factly. "And I'm ever so weak. More and more, it's an effort to do almost anything. I'm tired most all the time anymore, too."

"Maybe you should see a doctor," I advised seriously, on the verge of tears.

"Mother made an appointment for me with our family doctor. When I was born," she said, "they discovered something or other wrong with my heart. But they all told my parents it was not serious nor was it anything to worry about. And until recently, I've been pretty healthy and strong. So, whatever is wrong, if anything, I should be finding it out within a short time: my appointment is only two days away."

"Oh, I hope the doctor will help you," I cried, adding, "you can count on my prayers, Alice. We serve a great God. Nothing is impossible with Him." I felt like crying.
Angela sat in dumb silence for a long while, seeming not to know what to say. She was near to tears too, it was evident and ever so obvious.

Our time together passed all too quickly and hastily. The walk downhill was far easier on Alice than the climb up, and I felt my hopes for her well-being soar. Perhaps a good vitamin could help, I thought.

We parted and separated on our usual note of mutual friendship and sincere Christian love, planning the next get-together time the day after Alice had seen the doctor.

"We'll be in touch by phone," both Angela and I told Alice by way of encouragement, adding that we were available at any and all hours if she needed us.

I had a long and good season of prayer that night for Alice. I felt the Lord helping me as I prayed; but when I tried to go to sleep I couldn't: somewhere inside me my "instinct" bells were ringing, sending warning signals which prevented me from sleeping well. Several times I dozed off into a momentary stupor-like sleep but awoke to a sobbing which shook my body. Unable to stand the nagging, fear-laden thoughts any longer, I rolled out of bed and fell on my knees in fervent prayer after which time I got back into bed and fell asleep.

The jangling of the telephone awakened me several hours later. It was Mother, calling from the Intensive Care Unit where she was a nurse. "Marie," she said gently, "Alice was just brought in. Pray. She's a very sick girl."

"Alice!" I exclaimed in alarm. "What's wrong with her, Mother?"

"Her heart. It's serious."

"Bu . . . but . . . oh, no!" I broke down and began to cry. "Maybe Angela's folks would allow her to use the car for us to come and see her . . . ." I said.

"No, honey; Alice is too sick for company. Just pray for her; this will help her far more than your visit right now."

"Is . . . is she . . . very . . . I mean . . ." I couldn't ask the question.
"She's very low, dear. The doctor says her hours are numbered. She's close to the countdown, Marie."

"No!" I exclaimed again, in little more than a whispered breath as fresh tears ran down my cheeks.

"Call Angela and tell her to pray. I'll call you back if there's any change. I love you. Be brave, honey."

After Mother hung up, I sat on the bed with the sheet drawn up around me, hugging my knees closely to me and weeping brokenly. I felt like that which I had just heard was unreal -- a dream, even. But common sense told me it was anything but a dream.

Coming to grips with reality, I called Angela then fell on my knees beside the bed in fervent prayer. And then the phone rang.

"Mother," I cried, "Is she better?"

"Much better, honey; she was just released from her weak body and is now enjoying full and complete health in Heaven."

"Oh, Mother!" I could do nothing but cry.

"She'll be waiting for Angela and you. I was with her till the last. She looks like an angel. I'll be home within three hours, God willing. Now you go back to sleep. I'll see you soon, the Lord willing."

I called Angela again and we wept together over the phone. Then I made my way down to Aunt Sally's room and unburdened my heart to her, sobbing like I had never sobbed before. She listened patiently as I related all that Alice had told us up in the cemetery. Then she gathered me close to her heart in a gentle hug and said joyously, "There's going to be a great reunion in that Great Gettin' Up Mornin', Marie. Did you forget about this?"

I drew back from her a little and looked into her dear, sweet face. "Why Aunt Sally, there is!" I cried joyfully. "I hadn't thought of it. What a grand reunion! I believe I can sleep now. Goodnight, dear Aunt Sally," I said, as I hurried back to my bedroom.
The church was crowded with people who had come to pay their last respects to Alice, and the entire front was like a bank of blooming flowers; row after row of them, many of them Easter lilies. Their fragrance and perfume filled the sanctuary with a delightful sweetness. So like Alice's life, I thought, as I sat there, looking at the beautiful and peaceful form of my dear friend, once so alive and full of laughter, now so silent and still.

The service was one of victorious jubilation and when a group from our church sang He Lives, my heart began to hammer joyously-wildly inside my chest. I knew where Alice was. There was no doubt in my mind. Knew, too, that because Christ arose, she, with the myriad other departed saints, would someday rise again. I grabbed Angela's hand and squeezed it for joy.

Aunt Sally looked at both Angela and me and whispered ever so quietly but meaningfully, "There's going to be a Great Gettin' Up Mornin' one of these days, girls." Her face was radiant.

A tear dropped onto my dress. I was smiling. "I know it!" I whispered back.

The End