"You sure you want to go up the mountain today?" I asked Jon, my nearest neighbor boy, pal, and friend. "There's a 'heap' of snow up there."

"No more'n down here, Robb," Jon answered in good humor and high spirits.
I spun around and looked him full in the face. "It's obvious you haven't lived here long enough to know some things," I said frankly. "These mountains get snow. Tons and tons of snow. The valleys are nothing like what's up there," I added, pointing toward the mountain's top.

"I still want to go, Robb," Jon declared, shoving off provocatively on his snowshoes then making a long turn back to where I stood, thinking.

"I'm not sure it's the thing to do right now," I ventured, trying to choose my words carefully to add weight to what I wanted to say. "I'm not sure Dad would approve and . . . ."

Jon turned and started out across the snow, calling across his shoulder, "O. K., O. K., I'll go by myself. Maybe I haven't lived here as long as you, but these mountains are mine to explore and to climb same as yours. They're not rebufing me in my desire to know them better; they're inviting me. Good-bye!"

I stood, stunned by Jon's outburst, shocked by his hot retort. If only Dad were home. Or Mother. But they weren't. Dad was at work and Mom had stayed overnight at a neighbor rancher's home ten miles away to nurse the wife back to health. Morn was a nurse. She and Dad trusted me. What should I do? I wondered, trying to spot Jon through the dense evergreens but failing to do so. Already the mountain had swallowed him up. Bowing my head, I prayed for guidance. Then I knew what I must do.

Going quickly into the house, I grabbed my heaviest, warmest insulated clothes and shrugged into them, pushing some nourishing items of food into the deep pockets as I headed for the door.

Following Jon was easy; the snowshoes left a clear trail.

Soon I was deep into the mountain. I felt in my pocket, and when my hand touched my faithful compass. I sighed with relief. No telling where Jon would go, nor how soon I may need the little instrument, I reasoned, noticing the direction in which Jon was now traveling.

I was truly frightened now. What would happen to me . . . to us . . . I wondered, if the man saw us near his cabin? Only once had I seen it, and that, was not up close either. All sorts of tales and stories about the Hermit,
as old Jake was called, had circulated from one ranch house to another down in the valley where we lived.

"He came prospecting for gold," one rancher told Dad years earlier. "I heard he had left a wife and a couple youngsters somewhere back east, and when he didn't 'strike it rich,' he was too embarrassed and proud to admit it and return to them. So he hid away out here."

Another declared old Jake was an outlaw, hiding away from the law.

Knowing that Jon didn't realize the dangers of these heavy, deep snows, I plunged ahead, praying for God's help and protection and guidance.

As I came in view of the cabin, I saw a large, heavily bearded man coming toward me. With his long matted hair, he looked like a lumbering grizzly bear. He wore dirty trousers, knee socks and a plaid coat, and carried a great woodsman's ax on his shoulder. "Stop!" he shouted. Don't go up there. Stop!"

Shaking and shuddering, I rushed, on, feeling his eyes boring into my back. A frightful sensation; stupid, really. But I couldn't shake it. Turning my head, I looked back. Sure enough, the old man had stopped. He was watching me. Suppose he followed us and. . . ."

Again I shuddered, thinking of all the wicked and evil things the man may be capable of doing. And Jon and I alone and far from home. Worse still, no one knew where we were! Oh, if Jon had only listened to me, I thought, breathing harder now, knowing we were climbing.

A new fear gripped me, as I felt the prick of sleet mixed with snow on my face. A storm! Possibly a blizzard! O Jon! Jon! my heart cried. Turn around! Turn around! You don't realize how sudden these blizzards strike here, nor how fierce and deadly they can be. They seem to come from nowhere. Turn, Jon!

The wind was rising now and snow was falling in earnest, Jon's tracks were harder to follow now. It was pointless for me to try to find him, I knew. Both of us would freeze to death if we stayed up here long. "Jon!" I shouted above the now-roaring wind. "Jon!"
No sound, other than the howl of the wind and the snapping of an occasional limb or branch of a tree as its heavy load of ice and snow sent it crashing onto the forest floor.

"Jon, turn around. A blizzard, Jon! You'll die in it."

No reply.

"Oh God, help me! Please, help us! Jon's not ready to meet You. I can't see his tracks anymore, Lord. And even if I did, I'd be doing the wrong thing by going after him knowing certain death would be ours."

I stood listening, hoping to see Jon emerge through the new blinding snow in front of me. But such was not the case. No Jon appeared.

In the half-light of the storm I looked at my trust compass, knowing that, were I to get home, I would have to trust it rather than my now much befuddled and over-wrought sense of direction. With a fervent prayer for Jon's salvation as well as his safety, I turned around. And then I heard it.

Even in that wild storm, there was no mistaking the distant barking of dogs. I heard it. Them. Above the howling and shrieking of the wind. I heard them. They were getting closer. In a moment the snarls were loud and clear, just feet away.

And then a face appeared. A grizzled face with deeply set gray-blue eyes that glinted like a gun metal. Again I felt them bore into me. He looked fiercer than ever, with the snow clinging to his hair and beard like some figure from Norse mythology. White breath billowed from his mouth like smoke. I barely suppressed the urge to scream and run.

He looked at me. But not for long. And suddenly, I saw for the first time that the fierce light in the old man's eyes was burning with compassion and concern.

"Where the other one?" he asked quickly, his eyes taking on a worried look. "Die! You'll die in this blizzard."

"I . . . I don't know where Jon is," I admitted through chattering teeth. "I lost his trail. I told him not to come but. . . ."
"No time to lose," Old Jake declared emphatically, "People freeze to death only a few yards from their door in these blizzards. Can't find their way." he added, looking me over as if deciding what to do with me.

Seeing the compass in my gloved hand, he gave a quick order, telling me to "steer" by the compass so far south then go directly east. "You know your way' in these parts," he said, much to my surprise and delight.

"Follow that compass, boy," he shouted as he and the dogs pushed away, upward, in search of Jon. "You'll find the cabin, boy. Go in and thaw out and make yourself at home." His voice faded with the screaming blizzard. He was swallowed tap in the blinding, driving, freezing snow.

Realizing I was again alone in this vast wilderness of swirling snow and sleet, I felt panic, churn inside me. This would never do, I told myself. Never. A fellow couldn't think clearly with fear clutching his heart, trying to squeeze the life out of him. So I prayed, asking God to remove the mountain of fear and to replace it with His peace and an inner calmness. And He did. Confident in Him, I pushed downward toward Old Jake's cabin.

My face felt numb and frozen. I wondered if Jon had known enough about this land to which he and his parents had only recently moved to dress warmly and adequately. If not . . . I tried to thrust the tormenting, nagging thought out of my mind, knowing full well the end result if he hadn't.

I thought of Old Jake then and a lump plopped up in the middle of my throat, a lump which no amount of swallowing could abolish. Old Jake, the man whom I had so wrongly judged, or mis-judged, choosing to believe the fabled tales I'd heard rather than trying to understand him and witness to him and learn the truth about him. From his lips and not another's! Old Jake, risking his life for a couple of fellows who went on their way, heedless of his shouted warning to, "Stop! Don't go up there!" He knew what was coming; knew the suddenness of these blizzards; knew how deadly they could be. Yes, he knew all the time. What's more, he cared. About us, Jon and me.

Tears of shame and contrition over my lack of concern for Old Jake and his spiritual state slithered out of my eyes and froze on my cheeks as I pushed steadily onward, not sure where I was and wondering how much farther I had to go till I'd find the cabin. A sudden Scripture rebuked me:
haunted me even: "... and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears:

"But with righteousness shall He judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and He shall smite the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips shall He stay the wicked. (Isaiah 11:3-4).

I had been guilty on both counts, I told the Lord humbly and repentantly I had judged Old Jake by the "sight" of my eyes and by the "hearing" of my ear. And I had been wrong. All wrong. Here was a man . . . a human being and not an orge, as I had so feared whenever I saw him from a distance . . . with human feelings and human concerns and burdens the same as mine.

How could I have been so blind? I wondered, checking the compass and turning due east now, noticing that while it was snowing heavily here it was nothing to be compared with the way it was coming down in the higher elevation. Visibility was better, too, I observed with a thankful heart, and there was no sleet.

Deep in thought over how wrong I had been about the grizzled old man, the clearing came hazily into view. I was so overjoyed and relieved over having found it in this storm that I emitted a loud and hearty, "Praise the Lord," as I glided toward the cabin.

A dozen or more Malamute huskies barked loudly as I came around the rows of high-piled, fence-like, stacked firewood toward the door of the beautifully constructed log cabin. Never had I seen such an abundance of firewood. I looked at it with awe, realizing the many man-hours that went into the sawing, cutting, splitting, stacking and piling of this fuel supply. Then I stepped onto the porch and turned the knob on the door.

The cabin, which heretofore had been a fearful and much dreaded thing, now looked inviting and warmly appealing. As I entered and felt the warmth flowing from the black wood stove to every corner of the house, I dropped into a rocking chair and cried like a child. All the pent-up emotion over Jon's stubbornness to explore the mountain and the ultimate blizzard now broke like a dam and, for sheer relief and thankfulness to God, I spilled it
out in tears. Unashamed, healing, cleansing tears. Then, reverently, feeling like my life was given back to me by God, I knelt and prayed.

Much later, rising from my knees, my soul bathed in God's glory and His presence and knowing I was freely forgiven for my wrong judgment of Old Jake, I opened the door of the cabin and listened, hoping for the sound I now longed to hear -- that of the team of proud huskies bearing the old man, whom I had suddenly developed a deep Christ-like love for, and Jon.

The Malamutes in their pens set up loud barking when they saw me and I wished I knew their names. What beautiful creatures they were, I mused silently, recalling that Dad had said the old man raised huskies for sled dogs and trained them. My esteem for the man climbed and grew steadily. Why had I erased all the good things from my mind which I had heard about this man? I wondered as I closed the door and checked the stove for more fuel.

Old Jake had said for me to make myself at home and, after being inside the cabin for several hours now, I knew the words were sincerely meant; knew they came not merely from his mouth but from his heart. I checked the enormous blue enamel coffee pot on top of the stove, wanting to have plenty when Old Jake returned with Jon. And he would return, I was sure of that. I was a bit dubious about Jon returning, however. If he had reached the summit and got caught in one of the frequent snowslides that happened up there, well he may not be found till late summer. If then.

A shiver ran up and down my body at that thought. Jon couldn't die; he hadn't made his peace with God! I remembered sadly and fearfully the many times I had cried to get him to ask Christ to save his soul and come into his heart. Each time I received a careless shrug of the shoulder and an, "It's OK for you, Robb; but I don't need God. I'm making it pretty well on my own."

The loud and excited barking of the Malamutes outside fought me quickly out of my thinking. Old Jake! Old Jake was coming! I knew it as surely as I knew my name. That barking was a dead give-away; a friendly, happy kind of barking.

I ran to the porch, peering as far as possible into the haze made by the falling snow. At last I saw it, the team of proud-stepping huskies, mouths opened wide with pleasure, eyes alight with excitement and happiness,
pulling the dog sled. And Jon. Keeping pace with the sled was Old Jake, his face and hair and beard the picture of a snow man. A human snow man, from head to toe.

I rushed out to meet him. Urgently, he pushed me back. Gathering Jon in his strong woodsman's arms, he motioned me toward the cabin, speaking not a word.

We worked like silent mutes, the two of us: me, opening the cabin door and holding it wide; Old Jake all but stumbling up the steps and through the doorway and into the bedroom where he laid Jon down on his bed.

Gesturing for me to remove Jon's outer garments, the old man rushed outside to unharness and care for the dogs. In a little while he was back. Peeling off his snow and ice-encrusted coat, heavy socks, gloves and boots, he went to work on Jon. Rubbing, massaging; massaging and rubbing. After awhile, looking at me with tired eyes full of pity and compassion, he whispered, "Coffee, boy. Strong, hot coffee. Hot!"

I ran to the stove. Shoving the enamel pot to the stove lid where the flames licked up around the wood hotly, I waited till I heard the loud gurgle, gurgle, gurgle of the boiling coffee. Then I poured it, steaming hot, into a nearby mug and hurried back into the bedroom.

"Thanks," Old Jake whispered. Lifting the cup to his lips he bowed his head, gave thanks silently, then began slowly sipping the boiling brew.


Old Jake raised a hand in protest and now his voice came out audibly and clear. "Thanks," he said graciously, "but no. I am not only saving the boy, I am saving Jake, as well. I am 'thawing,' as you say, but in the way that is best for me. See? I can talk now. At first I could not open my mouth even. Why do you cry, boy?" he asked, seeing my unconcealed, suddenly-flowing and unceasing stream of tears.

"Be . . . because, oh, Jake!" I cried. "I love you. Love you. You saved Jon's life and . . . "
"Not yet, boy," he interrupted. "Not yet. A Higher Power and I are working together to try to save his life. Serious. Very serious."

"Jake," I said quickly, "I want you to forgive me. I misjudged you. I . . . I thought you were a . . . a. . . ."

"A madman," Jake finished for me, laughing now. "I'm used to it, boy. But my heart belongs to God. I'm soft as melted butter inside."

"Call me Robb, please," I blurted, feeling suddenly at ease in the presence of this man. "I'm sorry Jon and I have caused you so much trouble," I blurted. "If only we would have heeded your advice. But Jon was set on going to the top. I warned him. When he wouldn't listen, he started out alone. Later, I followed, hoping to head him off before he reached the top. I know how tricky and treacherous these countless tons of snow can be up there. The least little movement can trigger an avalanche."

"He'd never have made it to the top today," Old Jake declared. "The weather up there is like a wild, howling, ferocious beast. No human could stay there long and live through its frigid fury. But see, he's coming 'round. Another cup of coffee, Robb. Hot. This time some of it will be forced down your friend's throat. See! He's trying to open his eyes. . . ."

Old Jake's voice had a ring of victory in it, a note of triumph to it. With a light heart, and an equally light step I hurried after the coffee, knowing that everything was going to be all right with Jon. And with Jake and me. Yes, indeed! God had had to teach me His lesson the hard way, but I had learned my lesson well. Never again would I judge after the "sight of the eyes," neither "reprove after the hearing of the ears." By His grace and help I meant to follow Matt. 7:1, "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

Pouring a second cup of still-boiling, strong coffee into the mug, I hurried back to Jake, my mind in a happy whirl over the days ahead -- days spent with Old Jake listening to his episodes of the gold rush days. I had a lot of catching up to do. Yes, a lot of catching up.