His knuckles were white against the steering wheel of his veteran station wagon. Depressed, he hunched his back into the worn upholstery as if trying to slink away from the fact that it was "not his year." His mind kept probing his misfortunes like a tongue that refuses to stay away from a hole in a tooth with a filling out of it. He wondered how everything could have gone so wrong in such a short time. Waves of frustration washed over him with
sickening force as he thought of the events that had so altered his life . . .
and lifestyle . . . in the less than six months past. First, there had been the
closing of the plant where he had worked for better than 27 years. That was a
blow. A real blow. Idling more than 700 men in the small town, it had sent a
pall over the community. To add to his frustration, son number 3 had had an
accident with his trail bike and would carry to his grave the badly-injured,
crippled, lame leg. He had lost his best work horse, too. Not that one could
expect his animals to live forever; Whiteface was well past the usual lifespan
of a horse. Still, he had lost him. And what a loss.

He clutched the steering wheel tightly and pushed his back still harder
against the upholstering, not able to decide if the loss of income or his loss of
self-respect was causing the churning, turning, inner turmoil that made him
want to avoid family and closest friends. Oh, he was home at night, when he
was through tramping the towns in search of a job, but he was shut up, like a
closed book. His tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth these
days. His lips were drawn in tight, pencil-thin lines and were sealed.
Especially when she declared in that soft, unmistakable tone of voice that, 'no
matter how tight the finances nor how poor' they were, the tithe of all things
belonged to the Lord. 'A tenth, at the very least,' she maintained softly-sweet.

How, he argued silently again, could he afford to pay tithe when the
bills kept piling up and coming in? Certainly . . .certainly . . . God would not
require this of him in his present dire circumstances and sad misfortunes.
Was He not a just God, One Who pitied His children like an earthly parent
did?

Turning the station wagon, he started the climb up the long mountain,
keeping a watchful eye lest the red light come on on the oil gauge; he had
forgotten to check beneath the hood before leaving home and that oil
problem was, without a doubt, getting worse day by day. Certainly God would
understand now.

He slowed the wagon, eased it to the berm of the road, cut the motor
and just sat there. He wondered why he was going hunting in the first place.
He should have been out there in the asphalt jungle pounding the streets in
quest of a job. Any job. He had done skilled labor for 27 years. But what good
was skill or education when there were no jobs available? He had heard the
word "overqualified" so many times that he couldn't help but wonder if the
real reason wasn't the weight of almost fifty years that he carried on his
shoulders. Little comfort that; he certainly couldn't change circumstances nor turn back the calendar of his years. Well, he had come to hunt and, appealing as the idea now seemed, it was better than sitting at home, thinking and brooding over what had been done and could in no way be undone. What's more, a day in the woods always helped him to sort out his mind and put things in proper perspective.

He climbed into his gear and carefully loaded his rifle, checking and double-checking the safety, a thing he would unconsciously do countless times during the day.

The old logging road was heavily overgrown, not at all like it used to be and like he remembered it some six, seven years ago. He followed the trail for a long distance then looked around him. There was no more trail. It had ended. Getting his bearings, he plunged straight ahead. The going was tough. Sweat broke out on his forehead as he climbed over rocks and around boulders. Numerous deadfalls blocked his path and hindered his progress. A slender, withe-like maple branch slashed across his lips with vicious accuracy, drawing blood to the surface. Thorns and briars tore at his hunting pants. His boot slipped on a patch of ice and sent him sprawling to the iron-hard ground. He picked himself up and plunged ahead. His breath came out in painful gasps. He was breathing hard as he neared the top of the mountain. Slowly, his head began to clear and he looked around. He was now at a small bench that cries-crossed with deer trails. Hunting instinct, developed and acquired by his many years of close association with the woods, took command as the man made his stand to begin the long vigil that is as old as man himself.

He waited, absorbed in thought, relaxed in body and mind, lost in the wonder and awe at what spread out before him. He was not alone: Birds twittered and flitted above him and around him, keeping him from being friendless -- a blue jay hurled insults indiscriminately at the world; a cardinal darted from a nearby tree and flashed a pair of scarlet wings upon the snow; chickadees hovered protectingly nearby; a grouse drummed noisily to his right; behind him a woodpecker hammered relentlessly at a decaying beech while overhead screaming crows added to the cacophony.

He drew in his breath, feeling the magnitude of his surroundings; letting the healing power of the mountains wash over his tormented thoughts . . . his unanswered questions . . . and sink into the very depths of his being with
restoration. He needed this time alone, he realized suddenly as verses from the 71st Psalm voiced themselves to his enlightened mind: "In Thee, O Lord, do I put my trust: let me never be put to confusion.

"Deliver me in Thy righteousness . . . incline Thine ear unto me, and save me.

"Be Thou my strong habitation, whereunto I may continually resort: Thou hast given commandment to save me; for Thou art my rock and my fortress . . .

"Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth."

Tears darted to his eyelashes and hung there like sparkling jewels. The thin winter sun crept slowly across the sky, offering precious little warmth. Slowly the exquisite chill, known only to a deer hunter, penetrated his warm clothing and formed razor-sharp crystals of ice, as it were, in his bone marrow.

Getting woodenly to his feet he slung the rifle over his shoulder then eased slowly along the ridge, gritting his teeth as his joints grudgingly gave up their stiffness and circulation returned to his numbed fingers and feet. He was tired; no denying the fact. He dragged through the heavy brush, snapping twigs and making an unusually lot of noise, knowing that even a hard-of-hearing deer would long since have been alerted and would have quietly left the area far ahead of him. Little matter, he thought, walking nearly a mile along the ridge toward a stand that gave a clear view of the surrounding hillside.

He didn't see the old man until he was almost on top of him. He was leaning casually against the sturdy trunk of a white oak that hid him from all but the sharpest eyes. His weather-beaten face was as old looking as time itself, frosted with thick white hair and creases etched deeper year by year. His eyes were the color of faded denim with a merry twinkle dancing in them. The hands that lovingly cradled the ancient rifle were calloused and scarred by a lifetime of toil and hard work.

Embarrassed, the younger hunter apologized to his elder for thrashing thoughtlessly about in the woods and ruining his hunting. With a genuine
smile and a far-away look in his eyes, the old man waved his hand over the surrounding countryside and, laughing in a soft, deep way he said, "How could anyone spoil something like this -- so vast, so breathtakingly beautiful? Don't apologize. Sit awhile. I'm thankful for someone to talk to."

And sit they did. On a fallen log, surrounded totally and completely by God's handiwork . . . His tapestry of winter hues and restful color tones . . . they sat. Talked too. About anything and everything. But mostly, about God. The old hunter allowed that he was retired and spent a lot of his time in the fields and the mountains. He couldn't get around too well anymore, he said, but God saw to it that he was able to still be up and going. A great blessing, he added, with a softness that sent shivers of joy up and down the younger one's spine and melted its way clear into his heart.

He talked about how stubborn and rebellious he had been in his early teens and how it took a near-fatal accident to jolt him out of his haughtiness, the old hunter did. Said if God hadn't had mercy on him and loved him the way He did, he'd have been in a devil's hell and a Christless grave for well nigh unto fifty-two years. A slight shudder shook the old Woolrich coat he was wearing, making it shiver and tremble like the man beneath it when he uttered the dark sentence statement.

He related the instances that led to His conversion and subsequent entire sanctification. Detailed each one with precision and vividness until the younger man felt he was living through each instance himself -- like he had been there when each took place and happened.

"The devil's a sly old fox," the old hunter declared, still in that same steady, soft, convincing manner. "He knew he couldn't get me to go out and commit sin so he marshaled his hosts against me in another area. The tithing and offering area."

The younger hunter pricked up his ears. Running a gloved hand gently over the beautiful hand-rubbed oil coated walnut stock of his gun, he looked into the faded denim blue eyes, marveling at God's timing. His precision timing! His ways!

"Say, you talk about a battle!" the old man exclaimed, fingering the scratched stock of his gun. "Maude and the little ones and I didn't have flour for making bread. Nothing. I mean nothing! What little milk our three cows
were producing was used mainly to keep the three youngest children alive. We had corn in the crib. I told Maude we'd sell a load of corn, buy a few groceries and pay up some of our bills.

"I sold the corn all right. It brought top dollar. And that's when I fought one of the biggest battles with the devil that I've ever fought. I always tithed, Maude and I did. From the time I fell under Holy Ghost conviction, I tithed and double-tithed. Through His Word, God revealed to me that the tithe is the Lord's, and if I failed to pay and give a tenth of all my earnings and of my substance from the fields and the gardens, I was a robber. A thief. It never entered my mind not to tithe. Until that load of corn. We needed every penny from that sold corn. The devil told me everything . . . everything . . . We'd starve to death; our creditors would pounce on us like vultures; our farm would go at a sheriff's sale . . . All lies. Every one of them. Why I listened I'll never know. But I did. For a while, he had my ear. All my attention, too.

"I was reading in the Book of Leviticus at that time for our family devotions. When I read the last three verses of the last chapter I had a shouting spell. I felt as if God had tapped me on the shoulder and whispered the words in my ear: ' . . . the tenth shall be holy unto the Lord.

"'He shall not search whether it be good or bad, neither shall he change it . . .'

"I shouted and wept and cried until I was almost hoarse from shouting. My wife was blest out of herself and the children, not knowing what we were going through but sensing God's mighty presence, wept with us. When I arose from my knees that evening, the devil was gone. Never again has he battled me over paying my tithes and offerings. We've had some lean years, the wife and I. And our share of sickness too. But the tithes and offerings are all in. Paid up to date. In God's storehouse; the little church where we attend and get our spiritual food. And know something, Sir? We've never gone begging. Not once! Not for food nor anything else. God has cared for us. O how He has cared for us!"

And finally it was over. The old man got stiffly to his feet and slapped the younger man on his shoulders. "Gotta' be moving," he said. "This arthritis kinda' locks my joints up if I don't. Look to Jesus, Son. Yes, look to Jesus. And don't worry; He'll make things work out just fine. See if He doesn't! He's
like that; surprising us at every turn of the road with blessing after blessing. He's always on time. Now don't you forget this."

The hunter shook hands with the old man then watched him hobble away and be swallowed up by the woods. He had gained something precious today,-he temporized with a knot in his throat. The old man had bore burdens heavier and weightier than his; and for a longer period of time, too. But he had never allowed any of his crosses and trials to defeat him. Through Christ, He had always risen triumphantly over them and above them.

A sense of peace rushed through the hunter's soul. Like a warm healing balm it flowed. Hard times were still with him, he knew; but like the old man had said, God was always on time. The old man had talked, but he had also listened; not only with his ears but with his heart, and he had understood the things that had never been mentioned. He had sensed the forces that were gnawing deeply at the younger man's principles and he had banished them, gentling them by God-inspired and carefully-chosen words. For the first time in weeks, he raised his head high and smiled. Then, squaring his shoulders, he headed downhill. Down toward the much used old station wagon and the drive homeward.

A chance meeting? Never: A God-appointed meeting -- His soul, like that of the old man over the battle with the devil, was shouting. And why not! He had listened for the last time to the voice of Satan. It was settled. Forever settled: "... the tenth shall be holy unto the Lord."