It was that time of day between dusk and dark. The sun was low on the horizon, blue shadows flooded the valleys. From somewhere down along Walnut Creek, a great horned owl soaked the evening air with his distinctive hoot.
"Hear that!" Randall exclaimed to his friend Larry.

"I like it," Larry remarked. "Gives me a feeling of oneness with the land. And I never tire of the valleys and the mountains. Dad feels the same way about it."

"I guess maybe we can consider ourselves to be two special fellows," Randall said. "Privileged, I'm sure would have been the better word, stopping to think about it; for there are many special people in the world who are never privileged to enjoy the mountains the way you and I do. And always have."

"You can say that again. Look up, Randall. See?"

"The nighthawks. Quite a few of them out this evening, aren't there?" And the tall, broad-shouldered teen scanned the heavens with an accustomed eye.

"Sure are," Larry replied softly.

They stood watching, as the nighthawks moved briskly through the still twilight air. All was silent, save for the creek cascading downstream over the blue-gray stones. It was peaceful.

"Sometimes I feel almost like God has favored us," Larry said, with a catch in his voice. "I get all choked up over the numerous blessings He pours out upon me. No wonder the Genesis account says, "And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good." Think of it, Randall, you and I can come into the mountains whenever we have the time to do so or want to come. Some of our city friends rarely ever see a mountain, or get to hear the soothing murmur of a crystal-clear brook."

"That's true. I feel sorry for the apartment dwellers. But, say, hadn't we better hurry, if we're to get to old Jess Hibbard's place before midnight? Wonder if there is something wrong with him, like Mom said she feels there is," Randall said quickly.

"Knowing your mom, and my mom," Larry put in, "I'm inclined to believe there's a need there. I've never known it to fail, when either your mother or
my mother got that feeling that something was wrong. I wish poor old Jess would move at least a little closer in to civilization."

"He's too old to pull his roots up, Larry. Why, he's lived up here in these mountains almost all of his life. After Sally died, Mother said he became a loner. Guess he and Sally were only married a few months when that deadly flu plague killed her."

"I feel sorry for him. But he's not a man who likes pity. In fact, I guess he's been too satisfied and happy, living like he does, for me to feel sorry for him. But I do, just the same. If he lived closer to some of us we could look out for him better, and more frequently, too."

"But he doesn't," Randall replied. "And for so long as he lives, we'll be crossing the mountain to check on him. Did you bring your flashlight?"

"Did I ever!" Larry exclaimed, turning on the bright beam of light. "Dad brought new batteries home from town for both his flashlight and mine. Sure makes a difference in the light when the batteries are fresh."


"And goes out entirely, if they continue the pattern of neglect in daily devotions," Larry added, turning the light off until it was positively needed.

They fell silent now as they entered the dense mountains and started the climb upward, each a part of the land, and brave. The night held no fear for them; they had grown up in the country and were taught from infancy that God's All-seeing eye protected and watched over them under the heavy curtain of darkness the same as in the light of day. Somewhere ahead a twig snapped and they knew that one of the many wild animals was out searching for food.

Halfway up the mountain, they heard a shrill, bloodcurdling scream.

"The bobcat!" Larry exclaimed. "Dad said Mr. Rager saw it sometime back. Said it's a big one. And pretty, too, as mountain cats go. His reddish
brown coat is mottled with black spots and streaks, Mr. Rager told Dad, until he appears to have been dipped in India ink."

"Let's turn on our lights," Randall said. "They're afraid of the light. He's out hunting food."

Again there was silence as they walked upward, each thinking about the cat which, they knew, was a part of the evening shadows and of the midnight darkness and was, perhaps, the most solitary and elusive of all animals. Early settlers called him the ghost of the woods and believed that he had awesome powers for good as well as evil, Larry recalled having read in a book. To their thinking, he was both a blessing and a curse. His 2« to 3 foot length and his average weight of about 20 pounds, belied his strength, his cunning, courage, and ferocity. The book had stated that, for the bobcat's size, no animal was tougher, more determined, or more ornery. Like the coyote, the bobcat was a survivor.

Randall's thoughts were on the cat's movement of his tail. Even now, he felt sure he could see the twitching of the small, blunt tail, which he knew was marked by a thick pitch-black band that ran along the top of the tail near its end, with the very tip of the tail being all white. He knew the cat's tail was the barometer of its emotion, his mood from moment to moment. If the tail was held erect or arched gently over his back, then, generally, the bobcat was at ease . . . calm, content, unagitated. If the tail suddenly began swinging back and forth, like a whip, it indicated that the cat was upset and annoyed, and was prepared to pounce upon its prey or to fight.

Again the chilling scream, like that of a panther, sliced into the deepening night shadows, farther away this time. The nocturnal hunter was at work, Larry and Randall knew, searching for food, his only armament being his retractable 3 «-inch claws, which were indeed deadly.

"Even that bobcat is a miracle of God's creation," Randall said out loud. "His senses work in harmony, so I read sometime ago. Each sense helps and enhances the other.

"Wildlife biologists believe the cat's ear tufts may be some form of antennae that capture, absorb, and interpret sound. Imagine that, Larry! He gets his meals mostly through patience and cleverness, the book stated. And
he's a cunning, tireless stalker and hunter, a master of ambush. He has exceptional night vision, too."

"I think we must have read the same article in the same book," Larry said. "The article which I read stated that the bobcat can run up to 25 miles per hour over short distances. But he's not made for long-distance running."

"I read that, too. So maybe we did read it from the same book. Little matter; we enjoyed the article. And, frankly, I'd hate to fall prey to those 3« inch retractable claws, wouldn't you?"

"Would I ever! I'm sure they're razor-sharp. According to the article, he digs the claws deep into the dead wood, working them back and forth, as a carpenter might work his plane."

"Well, I'm sure we have no need to worry about him; the Shepherd-Protector of our soul and body, mind and spirit, has him moving away from the direction in which we must go. And, since each cat has his own range... an area with enough game to sustain him... we're not likely to encounter another mountain cat."

"That's so. But I think I'd like to see our bobcat just one time for the mere pleasure of seeing him. At a distance, of course," Larry said, as they walked quickly forward. "Mr. Rager said this cat could easily weigh forty pounds or more."

A silver-white moon made its presence seen and known in the inky-blue-black sky by turning on the "lesser light" and slowly making its way across the heavens. The silver rays shed slivers of soft light between the branches and upon the three tops, making traveling by foot a pleasurable thing for the pair. The cry of the cat had long since ceased to be heard. Each boy knew that, like a moving shadow, and as soundless as a small wind high among the trees and as elusive as a ghost, he had slipped into the darkness and was gone, a lone hunter until dawn.

"There's something wonderful about being out in a mountain at night, isn't it?" Randall said. "I'm sure we share a sort of kindred spirit with the way David must have felt as he cared for his father's sheep, alone on the hillside or on a mountain's meadow plateau."
"It's easy for me to understand where he received his Holy inspiration for writing the Psalms," Larry answered. "Alone with God on a mountain or a hillside, well, like I said, one would really become inspired. He lived close to many of God's beautiful creations In fact, we may even say that he was a part of them. Day in and day out, too!"

"He certainly appreciated God's handiwork, and was thankful for it all, that's a sure thing."

"And he seemed to have always been offering up praise and honor to God, too."

"No wonder God said he was a man after His own heart. I'm afraid I fall short of my praises to the Lord. In Psalms 116:12, David says, 'What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits?' Then he answers in one of the verses, by saying, 'I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the Lord.' God loves to be praised. And He likes for us to be thankful, too. By His help, I'm going to get on the praise committee, as old Brother Wisehart calls it."

The two boys chuckled. Brother Wisehart was a great old soul. He not only testified to loving the Lord but he gave sound evidence and full proof of the fact that he was real and genuine. He was, without a doubt, on the praise committee for Jesus.

"Old Brother Wisehart's another good example for you and me to follow," Larry said thoughtfully. "Thinking back over our church crowd, we young people have a lot of good examples to go by. I like to listen to the older people and get their advice. They traveled the road you and I are just beginning to start out on. They know some of the pit falls and the snares by which the devil tried to deceive them and drag them down."

"You're right, Larry. But I guess my dad's my greatest earthly pattern. Next to God, I take Dad's advice and listen to his do's and don'ts."

"That makes two of us," Larry said. "But I'm ever so thankful for those truly great and wonderful Christians in the church that we can look up to and depend upon too. They help me along this Christian journey. Somehow, it seems easier for me when I hear them tell of the battles God brought them through and of the victories they've won through obedience to Christ."
"And how their needs were supplied. Right on time, too," Randall added.

"Looks like we've reached the top of the mountain," Larry remarked, pausing for a moment to look up at the stars. "Can you imagine Abraham trying to count those beautiful heavenly bodies?"

Randall laughed softly. "Impossible," he answered. "But we'd better push right on so we can see if that 'certain feeling' was an accurate barometer of a wonderful mother's heart again." And they started downward.

(Chapter 2)

Larry and Randall made good progress down the mountain's side. It was a thrilling experience to be walking in the thick forest with the moon and the stars peeking in through the leafy branches and shedding soft light on their pathway.

Night had a way of transforming the mountains into a fairyland sort of thing when one was out walking in it, or standing still and breathing its beauty into one's being. What looked dark and sinister and foreboding from a distance was a thing of enchantment and exceptional beauty when one was traversing its interior . . . its heart . . . by moonlight. Especially so, when, and' if, the journey had begun before night had drawn her curtain; then one became a part of the gathering dusk and the ultimate night fall. There was a blending into the change and, as one's eyes adjusted and became accustomed to the night, it didn't seem too dark at all.

"Sure is wonderful up here!" Randall exclaimed, breaking the silence. "I can't say I blame old Jess for wanting to stay right here in the mountains. Talk about peaceful; this is! The outside world seems miles and miles away."

"One thing sure," Larry said, "Jess isn't bothered by gossipy neighbors. I guess he sees you and me as much as anybody. And our fathers, too, when they can squeeze it into their busy work schedule, to take time out to see him. He may be a loner but he's a nice loner; not crotchety and all soured up at the world."
"I like the animals he keeps, Larry; those three llamas are something else. They're not at all like I thought they'd be; they're tame, and as friendly as Jess is."

"Curious creatures," Larry said, laughing. "But I like them, I must admit. And his little flock of sheep; aren't they pretty? So are the goats. That old, old mule he has must have lived there as long as Jess himself has. He's old, Randall. Every time we come to sees Jess I wonder if Robb will be in his grave."

"And every time we get there," Randall added, with a hearty laugh, "old, gray Robb is still very much alive and doing the same kind of work Jesus has had him doing for so long as I can remember Robb -- pulling water up from the fresh-running mountain stream, in milk cans set on the home-made drag, for watering the animals and Jess' household uses."

"At least it's not hard work," Larry declared. "Maybe this is why old Robb's still among the living. And, too, Jess takes good care of his animals. Sometimes I think he'd have made a great veterinarian. He seems to know what to do for the animals when they get sick."

Randall laughed again. "I think loving care has as much to do with their healing as anything," he said. "He's as tender and as gentle with a sick animal as my mother was with me when I was a little child. I can remember Mom rocking me when I had the croup one night and was scared I'd never get my next breath. She was so kind and loving and gentle. And how she did pray for me! I got well, of course. This is quite obvious, isn't it? But I believe Jess feels towards those animals much like Mom felt for me that night so long, long ago."

"He's a good example of that 'righteous man' in Proverbs, who 'regardeth the life of his beast,' that's for sure. And I always enjoy a visit with that Holy man. I come away from his house feeling spiritually strengthened, Randall. I remember once, when I was really having it more than rough in school, and I mean rough, when Butch Garrity just wouldn't let up on me . . . . You know what a bully he is! Well, the trip across the mountain to check on Jess was just what I needed.

"He didn't know a breath of any of my trials, and my battles. But God directed him to relate an incident which he once had with a fellow much like
Butch is. It was such a close parallel that it could have been Butch himself. I sat, amazed, as Jess told me how the Lord had whispered to him, after much prayer, to turn the fellow over to Him completely and not to worry anymore. He said he did, and God took charge of things. What the Lord did, Jess said, he'll never know down here on earth. But he said the man never again bullied him nor treated him mean with contempt and hatred. He said he acted half-scared around him after that."

"Which proves to me that God knows how to fight our battles. And with such infinite wisdom too," Randall remarked.

"Hey, we're almost there!" Larry exclaimed, taking longer strides now. "I see the faint glimmer of Jess' kerosene light in the window."

"Which means that he's able to be up, at least or else how would he have gotten that lamp lit?"

The boys hurried now, anxious to see the kind man before he was settled down for the night. Then a sudden fear took hold of Larry.

"Say, what's Jess doing, up at this hour?" he asked. "It's late, Randall. You and I both know he's in bed early. Every single night of his life, he is. Let's get down there in a hurry."

They ran now. The door into the house was unlocked as always. Jess trusted people.

"Jess! Jess! the pair called, opening the door and waiting for an answer.


Randall rushed into the little bedroom off the kitchen-sitting room area. It was empty.

The two looked at each other for a moment, trying to decide what to do; which way to go in search of their friend.

"All I can say is, Mother was right. Again!" Randall declared.
"Let's go to the sheep pen," Larry said, feeling dazed with shock over not finding Jess in the chair or in bed. "Maybe he has a sick sheep. Or one of the other animals."

"I hope that's all it is," Randall answered. "But I'm afraid it's something worse than a sick animal. Let's go."

"I believe we'd profit by asking the Lord to direct us to him, Randall. Let's pray first, then go."

"That's an excellent thought. By all means, let's pray first, then go."

It wasn't a lengthy prayer, but it came from two fervent and earnest hearts and God heard it.

The narrow path from the back door to the cleared off meadow land and the animal shelters and barn was bathed in moonglow and plainly visible.

"Jess! Jess!" the pair called. "Where are you?" They stopped and listened, anxious for a responding voice. But there was none. The sheep were peaceful, and resting in their pen. The gates were closed in Jess' careful, methodic, nightly manner.

Larry and Randall hurried over to the barn where old, gray-whiskered Robb had his stall and where the llamas and the goats were kept. The doors were all closed for the night in Jess' customary fashion and habit, and a look inside revealed only that Jess was not there and that the blinding flashlight beams had served only to disturb the peacefully settled-down animals.

In alarm, they closed the doors just as they had found them.

"Please guide us to him," Larry prayed, looking heavenward.

"Amen," Randall echoed reverently.

Not having any particular direction in mind, Larry began walking, praying as he went. He found himself standing beside an old, weather-beaten shed in which Jess kept his scanty store of tools, wrenches, and odds and
ends of may-need things, as well as the wooden drag used for hauling the water, and a wagon, a plow and a cultivator.

    Seeing the door standing slightly ajar, he squeezed through to the inside. The flashlight's beam fell upon a huddled form, half off, half on the drag.

    "Over here, Randall," Larry called. "I found him." With lightning speed, it seemed, Randall hurried to the shed. Words were few in passing between them now. They felt for a pulse, and probed gently, searching for any signs of broken bones, all the while calling softly to the kind man, trying to revive him and coaxing for a response.

    A short distance away, Jess' flashlight was lying on the floor, breathing its last few breaths of dim light from the nearly-dead batteries. Randall picked it up.

    "His pulse beat seems good and strong," Larry told his friend. "I know we were taught in that class at school to never move an accident victim, but that was for people who can call an ambulance. There's no way we have access to the emergency squad or an ambulance; so we'll have to get him inside and see what we can do for him."

    "This will be a good time to apply our knowledge on how to save a life in case of an emergency," Randall said as he very gently rolled Jess over and lifted him carefully over his shoulder.

    A soft moan came from Jess' lips as Randall started from the shed to the house, carrying him as gently as any parent carried his child. Larry ran ahead and saw to it that the bed was ready to receive its patient, then he held the door open while Randall carried his heavy burden inside and very carefully laid him on the bed, removing the shoes and outer wear.

    They worked tirelessly over Jess, praying, coaxing and spooning warm tea into his mouth every now and then. With great relief, they saw the eyes flutter, then open.

    "I . . . I guess I stumbled and fell," Jess said, looking around the room. "Now where'd you two come from?" he asked, trying to sit up, but being shoved down gently by Randall and Larry.
"Mother had that certain feeling that something was wrong with you," Randall said. "She told Larry and me to come and check on you. And am I ever thankful that Mom obeyed God's voice."

The aged man heaved a great sigh of relief, then turning so he could look both young men in the face, he said, "I want to tell you something. Sit down now; I'll be all right. My kind Father mustn't be through with me yet, or I imagine He'd have carried me on Home when I fell there in the shed. I was looking for tools."

Tears slid out of the corner of his eyes. "I never cease to be amazed at how my Heavenly Father cares for me and looks out for me. You knew I was once married; I'm sure your parents have told you this."

The boys nodded assent.

"Sally and I were as happy as two people in love can be. We laid ourselves on the altar for missionary service; we wanted to be God's Ambassadors. We were willing to go anywhere; to do anything He wanted us to do. Then Sally took ill. . . ." A flow of tears rushed down the kind man's cheeks and for a brief moment he couldn't speak.

"Her end came swiftly," he said. "It was so untimely, to my way of thinking. I thought I'd never get over my grief. Then one day, when my tears were all spent and I felt I couldn't endure the deep hurt and pain and the intense loneliness another hour, God spoke to me. He let me know that He had carefully laid plans for the remainder of my days: I was to support and pray for the missionaries whom He chose to send."

Larry and Randall listened with excitement now. "You know the talent God gave me for carving," he said matter-of-factly. "All the little people and animals, and the tiny pieces of furniture that I carve, are sold in a big store in the city. After I pay my tithe, I send the rest of the money to the missionaries."

"Why I . . . I . . . you mean you make those beautiful things and . . . and sell them all?" Randall asked, remembering how old Jess had given both Larry and him several figures of the animals. "I love mine."
"I sell them all, yes, Except those that I give to my friends. Since each is an original, they bring a good price. God has made me a missionary all right." The old man's eyes were shining. "I'm a missionary supporter."

"But aren't you awfully busy then; carving all the time, I mean?" Larry asked.

"It keeps me pretty busy," the kind man admitted, smiling. "But any work that's done for Jesus, no matter how long it takes to do it, is well worth anyone's while. Nothing that is done for God goes unnoticed: Heaven's recorder makes a perfect and accurate insertion in the Heavenly book. We wanted to go as missionaries, Sally and I, but God had other plans and another arrangement. It's hard to get good, consistent, dependable supporters for missions. God told me that was to be my lifelong calling. I thanked Him for calling me to something so high and lofty, and began that very day to fulfill my calling by sending in my first big offering."

"But you hadn't had time to carve yet . . ." Randall remarked.

"That first big offering came from some sheep which I had sold the week before. From that day on my deep grief was eased and healed, and my carving career began. I have done far more by staying home and fulfilling my calling of supporting than I could ever have done by going."

"How do you know?" Lary asked, wondering. "Because God would have gotten me to the field if He had wanted me there. Instead, He knew that I was open to anything He wanted of me, so He called me to be a supporter. Oh, I tell you, I have been one of the happiest men living on this earth. My life has been rich and rewarding. And the best is yet to come."

Tears stood in Jess Hibbard's eyes. Tears of joy. "Remember this, fellows, whenever God tells you to do a thing, or asks anything out of you, if you obey, He always makes a way. And, under all circumstances, He cares for His own. He looks out for His children. Now, don't you think you'd best bed down for the night? It's late and, knowing your parents, I'm sure they told you to stay here for the night."

"You're right," they answered, going after the quilts in Jess' old, seaworthy, hand-me-down trunk. Again, they had learned a lesson from old Jess which would stay with them forever and would help them greatly in their
walk with the Lord: God cares for His own. Always. Be they a missionary, or the supporter working behind the scene.