Gathering the last crumbs of extra sleep, the sound of spring penetrated Gregg's fuzzy edges. At first it was quite faint, but it moved steadily toward him, like the passenger train he heard every night as it moved along the tracks full speed on its way to New York City. Even in his usual morning confusion, it was unmistakable, and he jumped out of bed to look out the south window.
There it was, a ragged string of Canada geese honking out their cadence as they turned tail on the sun and headed north. Pulled by God's powerful instinct, they had left warmth and comfort to fly toward the promise of spring.

Seeing them made Gregg hopeful. With geese flying north against a clear blue sky and the sun glistening off their powerful wings, could spring's full awakening be far behind?

He jumped out of bed and grabbed for his clothes. The mornings were still chilly. He dressed hastily. Seeing the geese made him latch on to new hope.

But, then, there were other signs of spring's near approach also. Only ten days ago he had tapped the ancient maples on the family farm and begun the annual rite of boiling down the sap over a wood fire. He and the old uncles.

It meant lots of hours; cleaning the sugar shack, washing hundreds of buckets, drilling holes for the spiles, gathering the sap each day, and tending the fire while the clear sap became the amber essence of March.

But just as the sap was boiled down to its rich syrup, so the hours were, generally, distilled into rich moments -- the telling and re-telling of stories that grew from year to year, and fruitful silences as one watched the fragrant steam rising from the pans to join the crisp night air.

Things were different, though, since his father and mother each passed on to their eternal abode and were at rest with their Lord. Oh how he did miss them! The old uncles' behavior was such that he could scarcely tolerate much more. His parents had prayed so earnestly and fasted so faithfully for their salvation. It seemed to Gregg that, instead of them getting closer to yielding to God, they were getting farther and farther from doing so; that they were keeping as great a distance as possible between God and themselves.

Gregg straightened the bed covers then made his way downstairs. He wondered why the uncles had never yielded their hearts and lives to God. What circumstances had kept them from doing so? he wondered. He never ceased to be amazed over the fact that brothers could be so different. His
father was a real saint, if ever there was one. So long as memory did its recall for him, he had known only a Spirit-filled, God-fearing, God-honoring man in the person of his father. The old uncles, on the other hand (his father's two older brothers), were totally irreligious. Profane, even.

He shuddered, thinking about their profanity. Hard work and long hours though farming was, he would much have preferred doing it all by himself. But his dear father had made the arrangement for his brothers to help on the farm long before his sudden passing and so the two felt duty-bound. Wen, not exactly duty-bound but more like hired help, they were.

They were good workers, Gregg admitted silently. Yes, excellent workers. Their years seemed not to have diminished the amount of work each could do in a given day. This, too, amazed the young man. Many a man with far less years on his shoulders than the old uncles had, would long since have declared war on the rigors of farming and would have retired, or just plain quit. Not the uncles, however. Every morning, as surely as the sun rose in the east, the pair could be seen driving into the farmyard at six sharp! Their punctuality and hard work was a thing not common to many of his peers and counterparts, Gregg realized with concern.

He prepared a breakfast of hot cakes, eggs and sausages, drizzling some of his recently cooked-down maple syrup over the cakes and sausages. Breakfast was one of his favorite meals. He must remember to tell Colleen this when they were married, the Lord willing.

At thought of his soon-to-be bride, Gregg's heartbeat quickened. It would be wonderful to have a woman in the house again. He missed his dear, saintly mother's presence more than ever. Colleen would fill that emptiness. Too, she would grace the house with her godlike ways. His parents would be both pleased and happy, had they lived and known that he was marrying her.

He washed the dishes and put them into the cupboard. Glancing through the kitchen window, he saw the old Packard coming up the lane, bringing the old uncles. A smile tugged the corners of his mouth. The Packard was almost as old as his two uncles were. It had belonged to Uncle Ira for all the years that Gregg could remember. And many years before that, he knew. The car was still in good shape, he conceded with a broad smile. The two uncles pampered it and kept it in A-1 condition. But, then, why
shouldn't they pamper and care for it? They had neither children nor a wife. Uncle Ira's wife had passed away after only two years of marriage, his father had told him one time when he had inquired why his uncle was not married. And Uncle Jack, who had been jilted by his sweetheart, had never courted another young woman, declaring stoutly that he could never again love as he had loved his Jenny Lou.

The two had lived together since the time when Uncle Ira's wife was laid away. And it had been a good arrangement for both, Gregg felt. At least they weren't alone and, since each uncle was skilled in woodworking, they shared a common interest. That common interest had netted each a nice sum of money as they worked in their shop after leaving for home when the day's work of serving on the farm was through.

Gregg heard the car pull into the driveway and stop. In his usual and customary way, he hurried outside and welcomed the uncles. For the first time ever, he noticed Uncle Ira's slowed-down pace. Uncle Jack looked tired and stooped.

"Hey, why don't you come inside and let me fix you some hot cakes?" he asked, slapping his uncles on their shoulders. "You look like you could stand some. I heated maple syrup and drizzled it over my cakes and sausage. Quite a meal, I tell you, Come inside."

"Sitting around never got any work done," Uncle Jack said quickly. "Besides, we've had our breakfast."

"Hot cakes?" Gregg asked quickly, smiling. "And eggs over lightly, with lean pork sausage?"


"Then you must come inside. I'll fix you a breakfast like you haven't eaten for a while."

"Can't get work done by eating!" Uncle Jack countered, wiping a bit of dust off the old car's hood.

"Hot cakes sure sound tempting to me this morning," Uncle Ira admitted, following Gregg toward the kitchen door.
Uncle Jack mumbled something under his breath and stood adamantly beside the car. Gregg knew, however, that the old uncle would soon be inside the kitchen with Uncle Ira and him; he enjoyed food too much to remain outside while others were eating.

The fragrant aroma of the cakes brought the uncle quickly into the kitchen. "May just as well have a few cakes myself if no one else is going to work around here," he said, seating himself at the kitchen table and sipping the milk which Gregg slid before him.

The pair ate in silence for some time, enjoying with apparent relish the special treat.

"Good syrup, isn't it!" Gregg exclaimed. "Nothing like 100% pure maple syrup to pour over one's french toast, waffles, or hot cakes."

"Good. Very good!" came Uncle Ira's immediate reply.

"A good waste of our time," Uncle Jack answered grumpily. "All those hours of cooking and hard work!"

"But still good eating," Gregg said, with a hint of laughter in his voice. He thought of the friends from the city whom he had taken back to the sugar bush only a few weeks ago. They slogged on foot across the muddy cornfield which was then impassable by anything but the tractor and the four-wheel jeep. He recalled how they had smelled the wood smoke as they hurried against the evening chill toward the pine-board shack nestled in a hollow.

It was peaceful and pleasant inside, eons away from city noise and city jobs.

"Does it pay?" one of his friends had asked, his mind a virtual computer of dollars and cents, profits and losses.

It was hard to know just how to answer the question. In terms of cost-effectiveness, probably not. If time was money, as with his friend, definitely not.
But if one was looking for something to do while waiting for spring, and the trees were all trimmed and the tractor was overhauled, and one felt the urge and the need to cut some wood and walk through the gray drifts still piled high where the sun failed to reach them--then it was profitable.

In any event, Gregg found himself pulled to the woods each year just as surely as the geese who winged their way north, instinctively moving toward the simple, unchangeable beginning of things. In this sense, one didn't figure the monetary value, or loss of it. Some things were priceless. Money couldn't buy the feeling of satisfaction nor the joy of accomplishment that he received each spring as he set the cans of boiled-down maple syrup in row after row on the pantry shelf. Some would be sold to his regular customers; others would go to the uncles and himself. Yes, he had decided, it was profitable . . . to his well-being.

"How about taking the day off?" Gregg said to his uncles. "There's not that much work to do yet. You look tired. A day of rest may be quite beneficial to you."

"Who says we're tired?" Uncle Jack bellowed. "I guess we're old enough to let you know how we feel, young man."

Uncle Ira stood to his feet. "Be quiet, Jack!" he ordered firmly. "You know you're not feeling well. Neither am I. Gregg's right; a day off would help us."

"What's wrong?" Gregg answered quickly. "Shall I take you to the doctor?"

"I'll not go to a doctor, I want you to know, young man." Again, Uncle Jack's voice bellowed out like a bull that was enraged.

"Will you let me pray with both of you, then?" Gregg asked, surprising himself by his boldness. "I've been greatly concerned over your lost condition. . . ." His voice trailed through the silence in the kitchen.

Uncle Jack started to speak, but just as quickly as he opened his mouth, he closed it again. The color drained from his cheeks. His eyes were lowered. Tears shimmered in Uncle Ira's eyes. Then, in rapid succession, they chased each other down his full, round, sunbrowned cheeks.
Gregg, who had been reticent and hesitant about speaking to the uncles, sensed an urgency to do so now. Always, before, when he mentioned anything about God to them, and their need of being born again, he was harassed, made fun of, and even cursed at. It seemed to anger the pair, who declared vehemently that they didn't need God; that they could run their own lives without Him. And, on more than one occasion, Gregg had felt like he was, indeed, casting his pearls before swine.

"I... I... we..." Uncle Ira stuttered. His face was the picture of dejection. Of utter hopelessness. And, yes, of lostness!

Something his father had said to him before crossing the line of worlds now struck a responding chord somewhere inside Gregg's being: "Watch for the signs, Son," his father had whispered in his weakened condition. "And, Gregg, don't lose faith; your uncles are going to get saved. I don't know when, nor what it may take, but they're going to get converted. I must leave you, and them. Watch for the signs..."

Tears, so sudden, so warm, sprang to the young man's eyes. Watch for the signs! It was as though something within his being had become suddenly illuminated; as though he had received a command from Heaven's headquarters to charge.

As tears flowed freely from his eyes, Gregg put an arm around the shoulders of each uncle. "I wish I knew that you were ready to die," he said, brokenly. "But you aren't. And as surely as the sun comes up every morning and sets at night, so surely each of you is going to die. But after death, what then? The Bible says it's going to be the judgment. Are you prepared to face God?"

Uncle Ira slumped over the table and Uncle Jack sucked his breath in quick-like, like he was gasping for air. Gregg wondered what more he should say.

"I... I thought you had... given up on us," Uncle Ira stammered brokenly as he raised his head and looked into the honest eyes of his nephew. "I... I'm scared, Gregg; scared of death; scared to meet God."
"So am I," Uncle Jack bellowed. "We've been wicked, Ira and I. Thought we were smart; that we could do as we pleased and ignore God's do's and don'ts. We were fools. Fools, do you hear, Gregg?"

"Oh pray! Pray!" Uncle Ira pleaded. "I'm an old man. A foolish old man with wasted years. I can't recall the years I wasted in sin, but do you suppose God can forgive me for living them all for the devil, Gregg? That's asking a lot out of Him. I'm almost ashamed to come asking. . . ."

"I'm coming!" Uncle Jack exclaimed, dropping to his knees on the kitchen floor. "I know what I need to do and I'm going to do it. Now!"

Gregg did little else besides weep; his heart was too full: The uncles were doing their own praying and confessing and repenting.

Standing on the porch as the Packard pulled away sometime later carrying two joyful, newly-converted uncles, Gregg lifted his eyes skyward. Another flock of geese was moving northward. He heard their honking before he saw them. Signs of spring! he thought. How easily recognizable were the signs! His heart felt a thrill of excitement. But more so over the remembrance of his dear father's words: "Watch for the signs, son. They're going to get converted."

Turning, he walked back into the kitchen. He may have been a little slow at recognizing the signs of which his father spoke, but he was thankful for the faithfulness of God's Holy Spirit, who was the convictor of men's sins - and who knew but what today was not God's day for the uncles to do a total and complete turn about-face! Of one thing Gregg was sure: the Almighty had softened their once-hard, bitter, and calloused hearts and, in the softening process, they had been humbled.

He fell beside a kitchen chair on his knees and thanked God for His Holy Spirit, without which no man could come to Christ.