THE OLD ONE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

He was old; very old. His footsteps, once nimble, quick, and strong, were now mere shuffles of the slowest pace. He was old; tottery too. His jaw, still set in a ruggedly-solid way, didn't lock as stubborn as before, not so stubborn as in days long since gone by. The finely chiseled features of his face were still there in strong outline, bespeaking of handsomeness in youth; but they were different now, somehow.

The people of the valley called him "The Old One." Without exception, this was his title. It was given with neither derision nor mockery. Truth of the matter is, it was a title of honor of sorts. For nigh unto fifteen-eighteen or
twenty years, the title was his. He accepted it for its worth, "wearing" it proudly; he was "The Old One."

Like ancients before him, Iris words were listened to carefully and attentively and in most instances his counsel and advice was mulled over, discussed and, generally, heeded and followed.

Like I said, he was old. He wasn't able to walk the ridges anymore. Perhaps the heavy digging in the coal mines plus the added toil of farming finally took their toll. The valley people remembered him though. He was the one clad in Woolrich and cradling his old gun much the same as a mother cradles her new born child. He was always the last one back to the truck, leaving one wondering how he fought the brutal cold or drenching rain. Quit never was in his vocabulary. He was lithe as a willow and straight as an arrow. His energy seemed endless and boundless.

He wasn't much to look at anymore. He was old. His frame sagged and the limp was noticeably painful, but the people of the valley and the tiny villages remembered the raw strength he had the day he helped a fellow miner out of his pit of death by digging and heaving, disregarding his own safety and very life, until the man was free. They remembered, too, the day he dragged crippled Bill's felled buck that long half-mile to the road.

But now he was old. He didn't talk much anymore, but when he did the people listened. He taught them many things; things about the great outdoors. He was a sportsman of the truest form and the noblest and honest sort. He believed in adhering to and abiding by all rules. He practiced what he taught and talked about to others.

He was a simple man; a legend really. His symphony was a meadow full of katydids on a cool September evening, and the only concerts he attended were held down in the hollow from his home and featured spring peepers.

He was an unselfish man, making do with what he had so his wife and children could have better, warmer things. Same thing with some of his poorer neighbors than he; he saved for long days to get a gun for the neighbor boys so they could go hunting with his boys and him. He knew that a boy hunting in the woods was a boy not being hunted by anxious, worried
parents. He passed up many a shot so his young charges could take meat home to their parents, or in the case of his own sons, home to their mother.

Using the great outdoors as a teaching aid, he taught his fellowmen to be compassionate, trustworthy and honorable. And they listened to and heeded and followed what he said.

And now he was old. Worry lines etched his forehead, his face and his brow. He sat on the porch, thinking. Deep thoughts, they were. His wife of better than fifty some odd years was now laid to rest in the cemetery on a pine-covered hill nearby. The children had insisted he come and live with them in their homes, but his resolve to live out his remaining days in the homeplace had won out. Thus he stayed, content with the familiar things but plagued by his "deeper" thoughts; thoughts which he had never had in younger years and in days of youth and good health.

He had first heard the message when a lonely traveler stopped at his door needing water for his overheated car. The young man, a clumsy sort of chap with gangly-looking arms and legs, handed him the piece of paper called a "tract" and prayed a prayer the likes of which the old one had never heard in all of his life. And then the young man had gone, saying something about wanting to meet him in Heaven.

Speechless, the old one had sat staring after the noisy old car. He felt honored to have been prayed for, and with. It was a new experience for him. A first-ever prayer prayed at his house; a first-ever prayer prayed for him.

He had "come to his senses" after some time and, looking down at his thin, wrinkled and bony hands, he saw the piece of paper. With a trembling hand, he held it up to his steel-blue eyes. Through the lens of his bifocals, he read the tract; not once nor twice, but five times. He was totally oblivious of his surroundings, so lost was he in what he had read. God loved him! It was a beautiful thought. Christ died for him! It broke his heart.

He had not prayed before. Never. But the young, awkward-looking, happy chap's prayer wouldn't hurt him to use as a sort of "pattern," would it?

And so, he'd begun, falteringly and haltingly, thinking of things the young fellow had said as he prayed. Soon he was praying in the first person singular. And that's when something happened! He was a different man! His
body was still old but he was made new on the inside. He was changed! Something wonderful happened in his soul.

Soul? Soul! He'd never thought of the word before. God must have taught him this.

He'd been so happy and overjoyed that he found himself shouting for joy. Then the burden had hit him; struck him like a bolt of lightning when it hits a tree. He'd seen that happen; saw how it divided the tree in twain. And now his heart felt that smitten!

He was old; very old; a legend of sorts. His feet! Would they carry him where he had go to? Would they? He started out. Down off the porch he shuffled, one step, two steps, three. . . . Would he make it? Could he do it? Oh, but he must. He must! For almost a century he had been listened to, looked up to, and been respected. His word and his counsel had been heeded and followed. Good advice, all of it. Yes, good advice . . . how to be a better citizen and a good neighbor; the reward of doing a day's honest work; how to work the land so it yielded in abundance. Good advice, it was, and so very practical for the village and the valley people. Only, he had not taught them how to die; how to be prepared for what was after death. He hadn't known. No one had told him. He had never heard. Not until the gangly looking chap stopped for water.

He was old. Could he do it? Oh, but he must. He must! Almost a century old, was he. Wasted years, they had been. Unprofitable years. No fruit to give His master; his Saviour-Redeemer. Nothing. Nothing but empty hands. Could he atone for the wasted life now!

He reached a neighbor's house. Pausing in the doorway, he read the tract to the family; read it over, twice to them. Then he prayed, using the young fellow's prayer as his model. "I want to meet you in Heaven," he said before he shuffled away.

On he went, neighbor after neighbor heard the message as the little tract was read to them. Then the prayer. And always, "I want to meet you in Heaven." Then he was gone, shuffling his way to the small villages, the limp in his leg noticeably painful, his pace getting slower and slower.
His hearers stared after him the way he had stared after the young chap. Something strangely new and wonderful was happening in their hearts. God loved them! Christ died for them! Tears fell. Knees bowed. Prayers ascended Heavenward.

He traversed the last little village. His head drooped heavily on his chest. Finishing his prayer in the last house he called joyously but weakly to the inhabitants, "I want to meet you in Heaven."

Then he shuffled away, hoping to reach his porch and his house before the night was half gone.

He was old. Very old. Tonight he felt older than ever. Older, but gloriously joyful, deliriously happy, and strangely wonderful on the inside. In his soul. "Trophies, Lord," he cried upward, as stars twinkled and winked down upon his tottery, shaky frame. "Just even one, Lord!" he pleaded. "I can't come without my love gifts to Thee, in return for Your great gift of salvation to me!"

The soft glow of a crescent moon gave light for the traveler's weary feet. He felt every bit like his title, The Old One. His legs and feet almost buckled beneath him more than once. But he was joyful, thankful, too. His mission was accomplished. Completed. His nearly a full century of years hadn't all been wasted. Ah, no! One day out of all those years he had made an attempt to do something of eternal value. And he had given it his best. His very best. His utmost for Christ's highest. And now he was tired. So very tired.

He crawled up the two porch steps on his hands and knees.

The people of the valley and of the little villages found him "asleep" in the rocking chair on the porch in the early morning, as they had beaten a path to his door to thank him for bringing them the message of salvation and to tell him that they, like him, had found the joy of salvation. They bowed their heads in reverence and in silence.

The Old One looked like an angel. His face was wreathed in a smile; a smile that seemed to say, "Mission Completed."
Gentle, loving, and tender hands bore his body up the hill and laid him to rest beside his mate. On his tombstone they chiseled the words, "He that winneth souls shall shine as the stars forever."

In a long procession, they filed down the hill singing, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. . . ."

The Old One would live on forever in the hearts and minds of the valley and the village people; his last words would never die!