The Club House, as the group of young men called their meeting place, was pretty well filled when Terry Rankin pushed the squeaking door open and walked inside. Smoke hung blue-gray above their heads, choking Terry as he entered.

"How often must we tell you three not to smoke in here?" he sputtered angrily, coughing and throwing the door open wide to allow fresh air inside while he gave Randall and Grant Pelfrey and Bruce Simons a scathing look that filled the others with fear.
Bruce walked over to Terry and grabbed him by the lapels of his coat, saying, "Look, wise guy, you're not the only member of this club: all the rest of us pay dues too. So I'll smoke if I want to."

Terry stood his ground, unmoved and unafraid. "No you won't," he answered fearlessly. "That is one of the rules here. You knew this when you joined. So, out with the cigarettes, all three of you fellows."

"Oh, so you're wanting a little church here after all," Bruce countered defiantly and mockingly. "I thought the purpose of this club was to get out from beneath all the rules we've been submitted to all our lives growing up in the church. I was under the impression that we were all fed up with those do's and don'ts; those 'thou shalt's' and 'thou shalt not' things. I guess I was wrong."

"Look Bruce," Terry said, holding his own without giving an inch, "that doesn't give you nor anybody else the right to violate what is a rule for us, and that is one of our few rules.

If your parents saw you fellows smoking . . . well . . . they'd be heartsick and heartbroken and you know it."

"Goin' soft, are you?" Bruce mocked. "I think you're in the wrong crowd and with the wrong group. You should have stayed with the Matthew Adams and the Bill Watson kind; they're real stickers for obeying all the rules."

"You'll have to admit they've got the 'goods,' " Thad Cathers piped up from where he sat near the rickety table. "They're not counterfeit, that's for sure," he added.

"You gone soft too?" Bruce tantalized.

"Facing facts, Bruce, that's all," Thad replied, asking suddenly, "Where's Miles? He's usually the first one here. After all, this meeting place was his brainstorm.

Sometimes I'm not sure at all that it was a good idea. It's kinda' like we're making a mockery of our parents and the church."

"Who cares?" Bruce stormed.

"Well, we're all from church families," Thad acknowledged, "and I certainly wouldn't hurt my folks intentionally. I'm sure they'd be shocked . . . and . . . and hurt if they knew how we've castigated the church and the preacher and . . . them."

"Miles is here," Terry said, seeing the old car top the hill then veer off down the dirt road toward the cabin.
Miles stumbled through the doorway a short time after. He was pale, and trembling fiercely. His hair was disheveled and unkempt looking from running nervous fingers through it so often.

"Are you sick?" the fellows asked simultaneously, seeing the look on his face.

"Sit down, all of you," he ordered, motioning with his hand. "All except you, Bruce, and Randall and Grant; you get rid of those abominable cigarettes now. You have violated one of our rules. Obey me. Now. We came together, not to smoke, but simply because we didn't want to obey rules. I was wrong. All wrong. . . ."

Shocked gasps ensued. Bruce grabbed for the door and, shouting, "Coward! Coward!" he hurried away, followed by both Randall and Grant.

As soon as things quieted down, Miles spoke. His voice trembled and shook with emotion. "I was wrong!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "So wrong. Forgive me, all of you, please. I rebelled against rules in my home and rules in our church and, not satisfied with my own rebellion, I incensed you fellows against them too. Oh, I was so wicked."

He leaned his head against the door frame and closed his eyes. Tears stole out from beneath his dark eyelashes. It was deathly still in the cabin.

"A lot of us felt the same way you did, Miles," Terry said, trying to placate this sudden turn of events.

"But I helped to make you that way, Terry, and this is the thing that hurts me so dreadfully," Miles confessed.

"We were able to think for ourselves, though," Marlin Weeks said. "And each of us made up his own mind; So stop blaming yourself. And, if I may ask, why this sudden turnaround and change on your part? I thought you were really sincere in all you said about being fed up with rules and such things."

"I was, Marlin. Oh, I was! And I'm sorry for it now. Today, around noon, death and I stared each other in the face. I could have been killed . . . ."

"Wh . . . what happened?" the fellows asked in unison.

"Dad told me to go with Mr. Blankenship to get a load of lumber on his old truck. I was to load it for our neighbor, who has a heart condition. We were on our way back to his home when he suddenly blacked out, or whatever, and the truck
went off the road then rolled over. I was thrown out on the grass, knocked unconscious. The old truck has no seatbelts so, naturally, I wasn't fastened in.

"When I regained consciousness, a nurse was working over me in the hospital. And in that precise moment, death looked me full in the face. I felt strange, like I was dying, and I knew I wasn't ready to die. Oh, fellows, I'd have gone to hell, to burn forever and to be tormented in the flames. I'd be there now, but for the grace of God and His great love for me.

"I tried to get up -- I wanted to run to our pastor and beg him to pray for my lost soul -- but the nurse pushed me down, saying I must lie very still until the doctor had examined me.

"I passed out again, then rallied; and this time I called on God to be merciful to me and to save my soul and forgive my sins, promising Him that I'd make full restitution of everything I'd done that was sinful and evil and wrong. And suddenly, and instantly, my burden of sin was gone; it rolled away. I knew I was born of God. I felt invigorated: I was new. In Christ. And I felt the Lord touch my head and my body with total healing.

"The doctor examined me and had x-rays taken of my head, my back and my ribs. Everything came back fine. He dismissed me, said I could go home. Mr. Blankenship's in the Intensive Care Unit in poor shape. God spared my life: He knew I wasn't ready to meet Him the way I was."

It was as silent as death in the cabin. Save for an occasional clearing of the throat, everything was quiet and still.

"Regarding my feelings on rules in the church, I apologize for saying anything against them. I'm sorry for it. Forgive me, please. We need rules -- Bible rules -- to go by and to govern our lives. Lying in the hospital, I had time to think, and I realized that my attitude and my feelings were all stemming from the rebellion in my heart. I was every bit as vile and as wicked as were those men in the Bible who refused to do as Moses told them to do. My heart was just as rebellious as theirs was. The earth opened and swallowed them up; I was near death but God spared me. They were killed for their rebellion; I was spared.

"I repented genuinely and thoroughly," Miles said brokenly. "I want each of you to do the same. We're all from the church. Our parents and loved ones and friends have prayed long for us. And now, as the one who incensed you greatly against the rules in the church manual, I want to help you to God. We've sinned against Him, fellows, since these rules against which we've bucked and kicked and fought were taken from the Bible. They were, and are, meant to help the Christian on his journey to Heaven, just as a danger sign along the road is meant to alert us to something that will be detrimental to us if we don't heed it and obey it."
"Since the Lord saved me, a few hours ago, I have come to realize that my entire life is governed by rules, and so is yours. When we drive, we have all the rules of the road to obey in order to follow if we want to continue to have our driver's license renewed, and to be free from any accident. For good health, we have the rules of proper eating and adequate rest and sleep to follow and adhere to. The list could go on and on. Yet I was being so persistently stubborn that I failed to realize that God, too, has rules by which His children are to be governed, and which they are to follow, to be a separated people -- unto Himself.

"My parents wanted me to stay in bed for the rest of this day and night because of my close encounter with death. I told them everything. About us, and this cabin, too. And I told them I felt I must see you so I could try to make amends for all the evil I had done in influencing you. So here I am. I'm changed; new in Christ. Saved from my sins; washed in the Blood of Jesus. I want each of you to be saved, too, and to get ready for Heaven. You may be the next to face death. Besides, each one of us has seen -- tonight -- how, that 'since we'd decided we didn't want to go along with the church rules -- not ever -- how far some have gone the wrong way." Miles wept openly.

"I feel so guilty," he said. "So guilty! If I hadn't rebelled so against the church rules -- the manual -- and criticized it so fiercely, I'm sure Grant and Bruce and Randall wouldn't have taken up smoking. And I doubt that LahRee would have cut her hair and gone all out for the world either. Oh, fellows, I'm to blame. I'm forgiven, thank God, but oh, the wreckage and the damage I've caused by my words and my rebellion!"

He groaned; then he broke into sobs and knelt by the chair. "If anyone wants to pray," he said, "come and kneel here."

Terry was the first to bow. He knelt beside Miles and prayed like he was already in the flames of hell. Marlin followed. Then Thad. Then Ben and Luke and Morris and Doug. One by one the Spirit of God convicted them and one by one there was a prayer meeting -- a personal prayer meeting.

The door squeaked on its rusty hinges as Kyle and Brandon left the cabin but those engaged in earnest praying never heard. They were awakened by God the Holy Spirit to eternal things. They would choose the High Road -- the way of the cross and of Holiness.