

**The Mountain of Seven Gables** is a journey of survival and redemption set against the backdrop of Northern California and the John Muir Trail from Yosemite to the summit of Mt. Whitney. It is by no means a religious book, but it does recognize the spiritual nature of man through Josh who founders in his Christian faith, and through Saul who struggles with his Jewish roots in a darkness that nearly consumes him.

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## **THE MOUNTAIN OF SEVEN GABLES**

By the time the branches of the old elm trees lining the midtown streets of Sacramento had leafed out with a fresh cloak of green, Josh was nearly overwhelmed by his wretchedness. It was then he thought about an escape to the mountains, to the places where he and Becky once found contentment in the good years of their marriage.

He began to frequent the stores that specialized in light weight camping and hiking equipment. Summer was nearly at hand.

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Author's website. <http://www.mountainofsevangables.com>

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# **THE MOUNTAIN OF SEVEN GABLES**

**A Novel**

by

**EARL ROGERS**

Also by  
Earl Rogers

A YANKEE ACE IN THE RAF

FLYING THE RIM

For all the men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States, past and present who served, fought, or died to keep America the land of the free and the home of the brave.



## CHAPTER 1

Josh Gibson swung his backpack onto a log bench and stood for a moment staring at the foaming waters of the Merced River. Behind him lay the sun-washed meadows of Yosemite Valley. Ahead, the mountains of the Sierra Nevada awaited in solitary splendor.

Though Josh lacked the skills of an athlete, his lean body, strong legs, and straight-back military bearing gave him the appearance of one. A dusting of gray showed at the temples. He was just about to enter the fourth decade of his life. He stood alone, his dark eyes scanning an assortment of refugees from suburbia who came on foot, on bikes, and on buses to this place called Happy Isle. His whole demeanor, the defiant stance and down-turned expression, told any observer in the crowd to keep their distance. Today he was hostile and unapproachable.

As he stood there watching, his thoughts turned back to the days of preparation, when he was certain this would be an easy way to make a clean break with Becky. It was all so simple. He would go into the mountains and come out the other side with a clean slate, like going through a car wash. However, his life with Becky refused to be stuffed in a box. Their last phone conversation was especially vivid. She sounded tired, her voice barely audible. He could hear children in the background. The call was his, and he gave it his best shot. He wanted them to get their life back together, but Paula and her children had driven a wedge between them. "Let go, Becky," he had pleaded. "They're not your responsibility."

End of discussion. He anticipated Becky's

predictable response, a plea for an instant family. It was not the life that Josh wanted, so he changed the subject.

"We haven't seen each other for months, Becky. Does that mean we're separated?"

Her silence annoyed him. It had been a long day. He felt the anger welling-up and tried to hold it down. It burst out of him with a bellow. "Why don't you go hire a divorce lawyer, Becky?"

"Maybe I'll just do that, Josh!" she shouted back.

The fury in her voice didn't surprise him. He'd pushed her over the edge. He could picture her slamming down the phone, then waiting while he waited, each of them hoping the other would call back. He felt remorse and hoped she did too, but he would never know. She was in Fresno, while he lived in their big empty house near Sacramento, one hundred seventy five miles away.

Most guys had mother-in-law problems, but he had to have a sister-in-law who was trying to dump her kids off, so she could be free to live her licentious lifestyle. *Damn it Becky! I'm not buying it.* He nearly shouted aloud as if Becky were right there listening. *I'm not making any more sacrifices either. Vietnam was enough for a lifetime.* The situation infuriated him every time he thought about it, but he couldn't get it out of his mind.

He bent over the drinking fountain and stood back to glance at a trio on the bridge. The young woman leaned over the rail showing off her long bare legs then hurried to catch up with two male companions. He hoisted his pack defiantly and strode across the bridge limping slightly. On the far side a group of tourists argued among themselves at the trail

head. He stepped around them and planted one foot on the John Muir Trail.

"How far is it?" asked a curious girl.

"Two hundred and ten miles-"

Conversation stopped.

"-to Mount Whitney."

"Excuse me!" She studied his large pack. "We're only going to the falls."

His expression softened. "In that case-a half-hour, maybe."

Josh followed the flow of sightseers ascending a paved path under big-leaf maples and California Laurels. Foot traffic thinned beyond the Vernal Falls Bridge where he began a steep climb through dense stands of Douglas fir. He emerged from under a canopy of trees to a vast empty sky and a distant view of a river spilling over a giant stair-step at the head of the valley.

The trail carried him for another mile or so to a footbridge crossing the river above Nevada Falls. On a granite ledge with metal railing near the precipice of the falls he paused to watch the dark waters of the Merced River vaulting into space hurling out loops and coils and long, lazy streamers that floated in the air like strips of white silk billowing and twirling in the wind currents to cast themselves in a thunderous rainbow mist on the rocks far below.

"It makes my toes curl," said a voice edged with apprehension. Josh turned to face the young woman he had seen on the bridge at Happy Isle. Her large eyes mirrored the pale blue sky seen through a thin layer of high clouds. Her face showed excitement mixed with a hint of fear.

The shorter of her two companions reached for

an arm.

"No Thad! Please!" She pulled away.

"Scott," she pleaded with the taller man. "Tell him."

"She's afraid of heights, Thad," he said leaning farther over the metal railing to show his contempt for acrophobes.

The girl relaxed and brushed the ripe wheat hair from her face. She looked at Josh with a nervous smile. "I just don't like standing so close to the edge."

"Same here," he answered and reached out with one hand to touch the railing at arms length. He looked down into space and felt a stirring in his bowels like the river as it churned over the granite ledge, scattering water droplets in a dazzling cloud of vapor. He used to sit in the door of a chopper and not feel the same cringing toe-curling sensation he felt standing here at the edge of the falls.

Thad stepped back to view the girl through a camera lens. He waved her into the foreground. "You're too tense, Kat."

"I'm not tense; I'm petrified."

Thad lowered his camera and gripped the girl's shoulders gently moving her away from the rail. "Stand here, Kat; keep your eyes on me."

Josh turned his back on the falls and leaned against the rail, confronting his fear of heights. As he watched the photo session, underscored by each snap and click of the Nikon, he still felt puckery.

Thad stepped around in a wide arc, eye glued to the viewfinder. "Get over here, Scott." The tall one with the red mustache postured as he moved over and locked an arm with the girl.

Thad slid the strap over his head and handed the

camera to Josh. "Would you mind?"

"Sure. What do I do?"

"It's set; just squeeze the button," said Thad who looked to be the younger with his smooth cheeks, shaggy head, and frank eyes. He stepped into the picture and pulled on a broad brim hat that hung down his back, suspended by a loose chin strap.

Josh squinted through the viewfinder and pressed the shutter. Thad retrieved the camera. They thanked Josh, hustled into their packs, and scrambled up over the rocks. Josh picked up his pack and followed the trail up the river, but the three were already out of sight.

The sun had dropped well past its zenith when Josh sat down on a fallen log beside the trail and took from a side pocket of his pack a piece of cheese, a biscuit, and some lemonade powder that he mixed with water in a metal cup. He washed the cheese and biscuit down with the lemonade. For a brief interval his mind found a simple thing to dwell upon, a pair of chipmunks. Transfixed, he watched them chasing over rocks and among the fallen branches, racing around the base of a tree trunk their tails straight up like miniature flags. This moment of grace ended abruptly. He broke off half a chocolate bar, put the other half in his shirt pocket, and started on his way.

Switchbacks led up through a forest of ponderosa and lodgepole pines past the trail to Clouds Rest, where a few years back he had stood with Becky at dawn looking down above Half Dome deep into the shadows of Yosemite Valley and gazing across the slash of Tenaya Canyon to the polished face of North Dome and turning east to marvel at the frozen moon

poised above the bone white peaks of the Clarks Range. At that moment, beyond reach of all human cares, a soft wind caressing his face, he could almost believe there was a God. But soon afterwards he fell back to his old way of thinking, *if there is a God; you can't prove it by me.*

Now, trudging up a steep trail at the end of a tiring day, he got to thinking about the year that he confronted God concerning his own mortality on the jungle trails of Southeast Asia. That year began the day after he boarded the plane with a group of GIs bound for Saigon. Actually it began two days later, if he counted the extra day gained for crossing the International Date Line. He checked-in with the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement at Long Binh and quickly got a taste of reality when a few mortar rounds dropped over the perimeter fence. At that very hour he began facing up to the possibility of his own demise, a prospect that challenged him, like a stern schoolmaster, over the next eleven months, until his luck ran out in the A-Shau Valley.

Doctors at the 95<sup>th</sup> Evacuation Hospital at Da Nang more or less patched him back together before turning him over to the surgeons at Camp Zama in Japan. Four months later he flew home, if you could call Letterman General in San Francisco home. At least it was U.S. soil.

Embarrassed, he sat in the hospital waiting room staring out the window, while his widowed mother bowed her head and recited prayers-aloud-for the benefit of GI sitting around in assorted casts and bandages and wheel chairs.

"Mother," he whispered. "It's the wrong time for this. Save it for church." He never called her mom. She

wasn't his best friend; she was his mother.

His dad on the other hand had been a friend, so far as he could separate the friend part of his dad from the dad part. His dad rescued him from youth groups and Bible studies and after-church picnics. "Got tickets to the ball game, Sunday. Wanna go, Josh?"

"Yippee!" he yelled with a skip and a jump "Behind home plate, huh dad?"

When his dad nodded, Josh ran for the closet to retrieve his mitt. Behind home plate wasn't the best place to catch a fly ball, but the last time he sat there a foul ball came over the netting, hit the empty seat next to him, and bounced away for some other guy to grab. He wasn't going to let that happen again.

When his dad announced at dinner that he was taking Josh and his older brother Jim on a camping and fishing trip in the mountains, Josh knew his mother wouldn't be pleased about Josh missing Sunday school. She darn well wasn't pleased and said so loud and clear, but his dad said they would be communing with God in the great outdoors. The scowl on her face showed that it wasn't what she wanted to hear, but, when it came time to go, she made sure they had plenty of food and marshmallows and chocolate-chip cookies.

Now her voice assumed a cloying tone. "What's wrong with prayers, dear?"

"Jeez," he hissed. "If these guys want to hear that stuff, they can go to the chaplain."

She faced him with a dark, stern look. "My Joshua, you've certainly changed." A small woman, smartly dressed with manicured hands and tiny feet, Ruth Gibson expected devotion from her son. "You're still a believer, aren't you?"

Josh gave it a moment's thought and decided she could use a dose of reality. "In fate, Mother, I believe in fate."

His wasted body was an empty shell. He found no solace in the religion of his youth. No God was powerful enough to drive out the memories and nightmares that filled his mind. He purged God from his brain, distanced himself from his mother, and enrolled in classes at U.C. Berkeley.

Through gaps in the trees ahead Josh glimpsed the trail getting steeper. Off to his right the land curved around a promontory sweeping away to the south and east into the Merced River Canyon. He walked away from the trail and found a level place near a stream where he unloaded his pack, spread a ground cloth, shook-out his sleeping bag, and stretched full length, drowsing until a chill wind blew down the mountain. Stiffly he got to his feet, pulled on a windbreaker, and walked down out of the trees into a patch of sunlight.

For a moment he studied the view then circled back to the stream feeling confident he had picked a place well off the beaten track. Even so, he was surprised to see a tent beside the stream a few hundred yards away, but its occupant was nowhere around. He built a small fireplace with stones and gathered sticks for a cooking fire. At sundown he dropped in a handful of pine needles, lit a twig with his Zippo lighter, and poked the flaming tip under the pine needles. He had kept the Zippo, because it was special. It would always remind him of Sharon, and it worked in the wind.

## CHAPTER 2

Sharon caught his eye in a small sandwich shop on Telegraph Avenue not far from Sather Gate, where he often stopped for coffee and a smoke.

"Mind if I sit here?" she asked.

He nodded reluctantly, because he didn't care much for the students with their superficial protests of the war; as if they could possibly imagine the hell that he had seen with his own eyes. The plain girl in the faded jeans and rainbow top worn under a plastic raincoat set her tray on the table and lowered her bag of books and her dripping umbrella to the floor. His eyes fell on the only item on her plate, a large piece of chocolate pie.

"It was calling to me," she confessed. "Don't tell anyone, but I'm chocoholic." She glanced around and lowered her voice. "I've got my eye on a one pound chocolate bar at the cash register."

"How do you stay thin?"

"Sprouts. Between binges I eat sprouts."

Josh warmed a little to Sharon's banter. It turned out they lived in the same building, a six story apartment around the corner. They joked about the ancient open cage elevator that clanged and clattered at each floor. The door was supposed to have a safety lock, but a second story tenant, drunk according to Sharon, had accidentally pulled the door open, fallen down the shaft, and broken a leg.

"Take the stairs," said Josh. "They're faster."

She seemed frail and thin. When they walked to the campus on the wet sidewalks, he thought she might blow away like a maple leaf in the wind. He felt

protective and walked her to classes every day. Sometimes she failed to show; and Josh left for the campus without her.

"Where were you yesterday?"

"Not feeling well," was her stock answer.

He felt for her hand; she reached for his. They looked at each other feeling awkward for a while, but a small ember of gladness glowed inside of Josh. When they stopped at the coffee shop, she always ordered chocolate pie. It was the secret laughter between them. They talked about the present. She was taking music and art. He was in his second year of engineering.

Sharon opened the door to the past one day, when she asked about his limp. He hesitated to explain for fear of find himself standing on the opposite side of a barrier from this girl to whom he was so attracted. In all likelihood she had been caught up in the college counter culture, while he was soldiering in Vietnam.

"I was wounded," he told her.

She looked surprised. "You were in Vietnam?"

"Yes, for almost a year. When I was hit, I had one month left of my tour."

"Oh, Josh" she answered and held his hand tightly without questioning him further. Instead she began to pour out her own story of an aimless, drifting life in the drug culture of the 1970s.

"But all that's behind me now," she told him.

On a winter afternoon behind a Pacific storm that whipped over San Francisco Bay, the air smelled fresh and salty like the seashore. Clouds raced across the sky; and a cold wind blustered around the buildings of the Berkeley campus. Sharon, in a yellow hooded windbreaker, clung to his arm as they hurried through

Sather Gate and down the street where trees thrust their bare branches skyward like pilgrims reaching their arms in supplication.

Josh bundled her through the door of the apartment building; and they rode the cranky elevator jolting to a stop. When she fell against him, they held on to each other a moment. Inside her apartment he pulled her into the warmth of his jacket and moved her toward the day bed in the pale light streaming through the window, while the wind blew and rattled the panes. Josh felt the bones along her spine and thought she seemed so thin and frail.

Some weeks later she invited him for dinner. Her apartment was spare, but neat with a few pieces of furniture, and some posters on the walls. Music played softly, but Josh could recognize only one melody; and he was wrong about that.

"Appalachian Spring?" he wondered aloud.

"Simple Gifts," she called out from the small kitchen. "A Shaker tune you know. 'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free," she sang in a clear soprano.

The dinner was vegetarian, not particularly to Josh's liking, but she had a flair for disguising the tofu. She grew serious explaining to Josh about the shallow, superficial life she had fallen into. The downward spiral continued, until one day she awoke to the ugliness and futility of her existence. Through a steady transformation, she began to discover that drugs were not the path to nirvana; and love was not the sexual revolution.

"To love," she hesitated. "To love is to imitate Christ." Across the table she gripped his hands and held his gaze afraid to let go. Gradually her grip

relaxed; and her eyes softened. "I have so little time to make things right, Josh."

Josh did not know what to make of the conversation. He wanted more than friendship, but she seemed to be holding him at arms length. At the end of the evening they stood at the door, while she looked at him with eyes that were bright and moist.

"Josh," she laid one hand on his cheek. "I love you, but I wish it were not so."

"I don't understand."

"Goodnight, my dear Josh." She closed the door gently.

Sharon was dying of cancer.

On the last day they spent together; he sat next to her hospital bed, "I want you to have this, Josh. It was one of the few things left of my father's effects. He was a Navy pilot killed in the Korean War." She handed him the Zippo lighter. "You look so much like his picture." She held his hand and shared her faith and her love of Christ. But none of it made sense to Josh.

At her funeral he sat by himself in the back of the church and, with tears streaming down his cheeks, he clenched his fists in anger at the God he didn't believe existed, as he listened to the words spoken by her friend Becky.

"With love we remember Sharon, 'For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.'"

## CHAPTER 3

Josh finished his meal in the fading twilight. Darkness crept in under the trees, as he laid his flashlight on the ground, squatted on his heels, and began rinsing his utensils in a plastic bucket. Unaware of any sounds save the gurgle of water, he suddenly sensed a presence. Fear struck him like a cold gust of wind. A plate slipped from his hand into the soapy water, as he raised his eyes and looked across the narrow stream at a pair of boots caught in his flashlight beam.

He struggled to his feet, lost his balance, fell backwards, and sat hard on the ground. The flashlight beamed upward onto a bushy bearded face with a beak for a nose and dark sinister eyes magnified by thick lenses. A black knit cap came just above the ears. Josh dropped his gaze down the checkered sleeves to the thick-fingered hands hanging loose against dark woolen trouser.

The man's lips slowly parted revealing twin rows of yellow teeth. "Frightened you, eh?" He stepped across the narrow stream with his hand extended. "No need to fear Saul Cantor."

Josh refused the hand and got to his feet. The man stood with his back to the lingering glow in the west. "I came to warn you," he growled.

"Warn me? About what?"

"Bears! Get your food up high." He gestured at the rope stretched between two trees like a clothesline, where Josh had hung his food in nylon bags.

"I'm not expecting bears. I've hung my food so the mice can't get into it."

"Mice!" the man scoffed. "They only nibble;

bears vandalize." He pointed at a dead branch silhouetted high up against the sky. "Get your food up there; throw a rope over that limb."

Josh stood there wondering if he should humor this guy. Was he some kind of a nut? "I can handle it," he said. "I've got it figured out. The bears are organized. The main force works the valley. They knock over trash cans, break car windows, and scare the wits out of car campers. The reserves work over the heavy use campsites at the lower elevations, harassing backpackers, ripping open packs, and generally disrupting sleep. That's why I'm up here. There's a bear shortage. They can't get all of us."

For a moment the man stared at Josh in silence, then threw back his head and roared with laughter. "You forgot one thing."

"What's that?"

"They collect the troublesome bears and drop them out here in the back country."

"So maybe they've learned their lesson."

"Have a pleasant sleep." Saul turned and disappeared into the darkness.

Josh looked up at the stars from under heavy eyelids, rolled on his side, and retreated to the deep warmth of his sleeping bag. After a while he groped for the flashlight, snapped it on, and read the face on his wristwatch—half past twelve. A rock under his pad poked him in the hip. He changed positions and lay there hearing the trees rustle and the water gurgle. A twig snapped, and somewhere out in the forest a pine cone thudded to the ground. His ears perked up when the rustling stopped; it began again.

"Mice," he said under his breath.

He raised-up on an elbow, peered into the darkness, and strained to see the food bags that hung on the rope he had strung between two trees. Slowly his fingers tightened around the flashlight, and his heart began pounding. A large indistinct shadow moved slowly back and forth blocking his line of vision. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, it seemed that one of the food bags was gone, and another was absorbed in the huge shadow.

Josh hesitated, uncertain, muscles tensed. He thought about an angry bear rushing him as he struggled to unzip his legs from the sleeping bag. Then he thought about covering meekly while the creature slowly devoured the menu for his entire trip. The long hours spent in preparation flashed through his mind, the repackaging of freeze dry food, the careful sorting, labeling, and weighing of each meal.

He stiffened his backbone, sat upright, and aimed the flashlight at the shadow. A pair of beady red eyes stared back into the light beam. He took a deep breath.

"YEE-E-OW," he shouted gaining courage with the sound of his voice. "YEE-E-OW," he bellowed once more leaping out of his sleeping bag, standing in his socks and underwear waving the flashlight.

The bear stopped chomping, reared on its hind legs, raised a paw, struck at the food bags, then dropped on all fours and lurched into the night.

Josh surveyed the wreckage. A gob of frothy saliva dripped from one of the food bags. Another lay on the ground ripped open with the food scattered. He salvaged what was left and put everything under a tarp right next to his sleeping bag. If the bears wanted his food, they would have to get him first. Disgusted, he

crawled back in his sleeping bag and slept till daybreak.

A hot sun directly overhead beat down upon his shoulders as Josh followed the deep rutted trail across Long Meadow keeping an eye on a motionless figure seated on the ground with knees drawn up, head down, apparently sleeping through the midday. At one hundred paces the figure resembled the stained, trail worn pack propped beside him against an exposed root of a towering ponderosa.

At a dozen paces the pack began to take on a personality of its own, blossoming with assorted items fastened to leather tabs by pieces of rawhide laced through brass grommets. A blackened pot hung by the handle. A metal grill dangled loosely. A rolled up poncho and a coil of rope shared the same leather tab. Tent stakes lifted one side of the flap, while the head of an ice ax protruded from the other. Bulging side pockets revealed its owner to be a walking general store.

At five paces Josh slowed his gait, cleared his throat, and waited. A hand was raised from behind the up-drawn knees. It held a book. Two fingers reached across and turned a page.

Josh heaved his pack to the ground with a grunt, put both hands in the small of his back, and stretched away the soreness.

"How much did they get?" asked the sonorous voice.

"What?"

"The bears? How much damage did they do?"

Josh looked down at the bearded face and decided the voice was not mocking him.

"How did you know?"

"I have ears."

"There was only one bear."

"Two. They called on me first."

"I only saw one. He ripped into my food."

"Do you have enough left?"

"I'll make it." said Josh unzipping a side pocket of his pack. "Did you say your name was Saul?"

"I did indeed."

"Well take a look at this, Saul." He pulled out a small, round, aluminum butter container and handed it over.

Saul examined the puncture holes in the lid and bottom. "I'd say the bear had twenty-two caliber teeth."

He stretched out his legs, closed the book, and removed his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose. Without the glasses he seemed sad eyed and myopic, not the fierce specter of their previous encounter.

Josh stood still for a moment before offering the hand he had refused the night before. "I'm Josh," he said. "Joshua Gibson."

"Well, Joshua, what brings you into the mountains, and how is it that you're traveling alone?"

Before Josh could answer, Saul reached into the top of his pack to retrieve a loaf of bread and a roll of salami.

"Cut a slice of this," he offered. "Help your self to the bread."

Josh waved them away, but the salami looked spicy; and the rich loaf of dark bread awakened his palate.

Saul ignored the rejection. His hand dove into the pack once again coming up with a large red onion.

"Here, you'll need this for flavor. Have you got a knife?"

"Are you sure you have enough?"

"Does it look like I'm suffering a famine?" Saul patted the side of his pack. "Good food is one thing I never deny myself, not even in the mountains." He hugged his ample girth.

Josh cut two pieces of bread, a slice of salami, and a thick ring of onion, stacking them into a sandwich. He held the sandwich with both hands, bit down, and felt his jaw ache with the first bite.

"You ask what brings me into the mountains," said Josh reflecting a moment. "Maybe I'm here because I like sore muscles, turned ankles, bruised feet, blistered heels, and hard ground for sleeping. And I'm most happy when I'm soaked and cold and bone weary and making camp with soggy gear at the end of a stormy day" He took another bite of sandwich, crunching on the onion slice and tasting its sharp burst of flavor. The funky mood that dogged him for days began to melt away.

"Just kidding," he said. "The real reason I'm here is because I like the solitude. It gives you time to think. The views and the wild flowers and the scent of pines are a bonus."

"To observe the miracle of nature and to reflect on one's own life, eh," said Saul.

"That'll work," Josh answered, "if you don't reflect too much on the downside."

"Ah. You have not lived up to your own expectations?"

Josh wasn't taking the bait. When you spill your life and especially your personal troubles, you set yourself up for some unwanted advice from a stranger.

"What about you," he countered. "What brings you here?"

Saul closed his eyes and bowed his head as if in prayer. When he looked up Josh saw an expression of absolute anguish in the wrinkled brow and the drawn face. It passed so quickly that Josh was uncertain what he had seen.

"Never mind," said Saul dismissing the question with a wave of his hand. Or was he denying the moment of anguish? Josh wasn't sure, though he did noticed the title of the book Saul held in his lap, *The Psalms of the Jerusalem Bible*.

"Depression weighs a man down," Saul went on. "Good thoughts make him glad. That's why I am sitting beneath this tree with a book studying nature as it were. Nature has a calming effect on one's mind. Nature provides an infinite supply of riches. Each spring, flowers grow along the streams and in the damp places after winter snows have melted. Spring follows a progression in the Sierras. The higher you go; the later spring comes. So there are flowers blooming all the time, at least until the snow falls. After the flowers have died nature prepares the seeds for a rebirth the following year, when they blossom in more profusion and greater beauty than before. One should not grieve over the death of a flower."

At that point he paused, closed his eyes, and rubbed his forehead again with that painful look on his face. Josh wondered what he should do if this guy was having a stroke or something, a heart attack maybe, miles from anywhere. *That's all I need just when I'm getting started. Go for help because this old guy's heart gives out.*

"You OK?" he asked.

Saul ignored the question. "The death of a flower," he repeated. "Why shouldn't we anticipate its reappearance to be even more beautiful? Nature is wasteful yet, at the same time, lavish and abundant. Don't you agree, Joshua?"

"I expect you're right."

Overhead a pair of Clark's crows thrashed about among the cone laden branches. They watched as the black and gray birds tumbled out of the tree and flew across the meadow.

Saul got to his feet. He was a solid man with powerful shoulders. His pack must have weighed 80 pounds, yet he stuffed the book into a side pocket, closed the flap, hooked a hand under the shoulder strap, and lifted the pack with ease.

*So much for coronaries,* thought Josh. *He's an old bull.*

"Now then Joshua, I'll enjoy your company for a ways."

"Where're you headed?"

"Cathedral Peak, today."

"And then where?"

"Who knows? Today is important, not tomorrow, or a month from tomorrow. But of course, one must have a destination. Mine is a mountain top in the central Sierra."

"You're a climber?"

"A teacher."

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