

CHAPTER TWENTY

I saw him for the third time, and once more he spoke his name. Only a few weeks past, I woke to find him standing by bed, a figure clothed in light, so tall I felt he must surely bump the high ceiling. For the first time, he smiled at me, no longer come to rescue me from trouble of my own making.

I am Mitrael, appointed guardian of this place. Not many days from now, I will lead here a group of believers that you do not know. This place will once more ring with laughter and joy. From time to time, others will come, and find here a place of rest and solace. You have been obedient to the Lord's calling, and He is well pleased. He has prepared your reward, and you will soon go to receive it. He has heard your prayer for your wife, and she will leave with you. When the appointed time has come, you will both know. I will speak to you next before the throne.

I woke Emily at once to tell her what I'd seen. She just said, sleepily, "Yes, Dear, I know," and went back to sleep. The relief and joy I felt just then no one could measure, or even understand without knowing it themselves.

The next day, for the first time in several years, Liz came to see me, with an older Julie in tow. The idea that she had made the trek from Bentown alone amazed and terrified us. She told me of things I never even suspected here in the valley: Of a great earthquake that leveled whole towns and cities, including much of Bentown; of a great fire and hail storm which destroyed much of what the earthquake left, but stopped short of her door. Young Julie popped with pride about her Gran.

"We saw the fire coming, and heard the hail hitting like bombs out there in the dark, and I was *real* scared. But, Gran said, 'Don't worry, Sweetheart, the Lord saved us from the earthquake, and He'll save us from this as well.' And she was right! The fire burned up to our part of town, and stopped! Next morning, we saw some of the big hail stones lying around, but none of them fell on us!"

We adults exchanged glances. "Liz, you know what this means, don't you?"

"Of course; the time of the Great Tribulation has come. We've expected it for years, because everything pointed to it. Now, the Lord's final victory is near, and all of this evil time will be behind us. Isn't it glorious, Hankie?"

"Yes, Liz, but also very dangerous. Should you be out walking with this young child with so many bandits around, and with that horrible Green Halcomb out there somewhere, lurking? He promised to destroy anyone who came close to the Valley, and I believe him."

She sighed, and nodded. "I know all of that, but I couldn't keep Julie there in Bentown any longer. She's at a very impressionable and vulnerable age. Brett and his crowd grow bolder all the time, and I don't know how much longer the Lord will choose to shield us. I have to get Julie to Louise and Max, and I'll return to take my chances."

"But, Liz," Emily interjected, "Have you prayed about this? Surely the Lord wouldn't all of a sudden withdraw His protection from you, after all this time."

She glanced at Julie before she answered, and appeared to be choosing her words. "I have prayed, Emily, for many long weeks, in great agony, and I believe the Lord sent me this way. I can't tell you everything just yet, but I believe what I'm doing is connected with your vision, Hank, of a deliverer the Lord plans to send to our

town."

I remembered, but I remembered something else, too. Another part of the vision, about a brutal murder, back in Bentown. Liz? No – that didn't minister to my spirit. *Julie!* No, surely that couldn't be right, not while Liz still had breath. . . . It was awful to contemplate; I pushed it from my mind. Liz looked at me curiously, but said nothing.

That night, when Julie lay safely in bed and asleep, she told us what she didn't want to say in front of the girl. "The Lord has sent me to die, I know that. If that doesn't happen, the man He has chosen will not go to Bentown. I have known for years that my death would be sudden and violent, but I didn't know when or how. Now, I know the time draws very near, but the Lord will not permit me to know how it will happen."

"Surely you don't believe the Lord would deliberately send someone to die, Liz?" I protested "That's monstrous."

She smiled a sad smile, "Ah, but Hankie, He sent Christ to die for us. I have a choice, just as Jesus did. Paul knew he was facing chains, and probably knew he faced death, when he decided to go to Rome at the Lord's direction. I have a choice, too; I can stay here, and be safe for the rest of my life on this earth. If that's the case, the Lord will find some other way to carry out His plan, but the responsibility for all the souls lost in the meantime would be mine, even if He forgives my disobedience. No, I know what I have to do."

"But what about little Julie? She'll be in danger, too."

"Don't worry about my Julie, Emily. She's in the Lord's hands, no matter what happens to me. She has a part in His plan as well."

Almost I blurted out what the Lord had shown me about Julie, but the Spirit restrained me. She carried heavy enough a burden already. I said nothing more; Liz was determined, and no one could argue with her when she made a final decision, especially one she believed came from God. We talked of more pleasant things then, remembering all the great times at the Academy. We remembered Bandy, too, as the laughing, outgoing young boy Liz had met and loved all at once. This, too, though, brought memories of death and sorrow, so we turned to other things. We spoke of my first real glimpse of Emily, that fateful August day, and the love we shared over the many years since.

We spoke of Max and Louise, and of their trouble with their daughter Gloria. Max visited us several months before; Gloria married Bob McCrattick, partly out of spite toward her parents. Bob was a drunkard, and a bum, but something about him, maybe just that, attracted her. A month after their marriage, she deserted him, saying she couldn't stand being around him and his booze any more. She left home, and moved to Ashland to join a male friend of hers there. Louise just recently left to see if she could bring her home.

Liz heard some news that had yet to reach us, isolated as we were. The current County Judge Executive, an old political crony, had appointed Max sheriff. The political bosses in the county remained strangely silent after the Judge made the announcement.

"Something's going on there, Hank. It stinks. They're setting him up for something; surely he knows that. If I know Max, and I do, he figures he'll do whatever good he can for as long as he can, and praise the Lord for the opportunity. I just hate to think what might happen to him when they get tired of playing their games. And poor Louise; she has enough to worry about. Don't tell Julie she's not there; don't tell Julie *any* of this. Please."

We gave her our promise. The next day, she proposed to leave; we figured she would leave in the morning, to cover as much ground as possible, but she waited until that afternoon. We no longer questioned her judgment, or her leading. That last good-bye was one of the most wrenching I ever experienced, more so than

the one with Miriam and Walter, almost like the one at Mae Mae's bedside before she died. We commended them both into the Lord's hands, and watched them until they moved out of sight. I know beyond any doubt they never reached Pikeville.

Two week later, on a bright summer's morning, a group of people walked into our valley, thirty-two in all. They told me of their guide, whom I took to be Mitrael, though I said nothing. He disappeared when they reached their destination. They had come all the way from Prestonsburg, through a wilderness made the more treacherous by fire, earthquake and bandits. None had them had come to any harm.

My heart leapt when I saw one of them. Beyond any doubt, this was Phillip, who had disappeared with Kay years before. He didn't recognize me, and could not recall his life farther back than the last few years. The Lord would answer all my questions soon enough. I didn't press him, or attempt to fill in some of the missing years.

The Lord had granted Phillip the gifts of prophecy and discernment, and he had counseled that particular body of believers to leave their homes. Mitrael himself, who had played a direct role in the salvation of one of the women, had gone to take them out and lead them here. I remembered the passage in Revelations which speaks of great angels preaching the Word in the last days, and wondered if he might be one of those. The Lord assured me he wasn't, so I dropped the subject.

My favorites among the newcomers were Martin and Marcia Henry, and their three lively girls. Marcia, especially, spent long hours with Emily and I, asking us how the valley came to be a place of refuge. I assured her I was only the caretaker, but told the story of the school and our church, with some details omitted. I also shared the tragedy that had taken our loved ones from us several years before, and she wept with us. She had heard the story, but shoved it aside at the time. She had become a Christian only a short while before.

She gave us some more first hand news of the earthquake and the storm of fire and hail. Their homes, unlike Liz's, had suffered some damage, but had not been destroyed. She was amazed that we had suffered no damage of any kind in Misty Valley, and that we didn't even know what had happened until someone else told us.

"How have you kept this valley such a lovely place, just the two of you, for all of these years?"

"We weren't alone, Marcia, my dear. The Lord always provided. You've seen the goats; they're everywhere. I don't know where they came from, or how they came to be here. They just all of a sudden appeared, and they've kept the grass and weeds trimmed back ever since. They also keep our yard in a shambles, and chew up our clothes when we let them, but we love them just the same. Our dog, Horse, died a few years after we moved here, so those have been our only pets, and pests, for a long time. That black billy over there is Snake, because he's that mean. The spotted kid running over by the house, playing with *your* kids, is Spot, of course. That big one, there, we called 'Horse,' in honor of the best pet anyone ever had. Horse, though, the original one, always thought of himself as a member of the family, and we agreed."

A couple of weeks after the first group, ten more pilgrims arrived. Phillip organized a work group, headed by tall, lanky Martin Henry, and they began cutting timber to build some more homes. The available space filled up rapidly.

Some people came for just a few days, and left again. For them, Misty Valley was a way station, a stopping point to somewhere else the Lord wanted them to go. Some of the original group have been talking about going out, too, to win others to Christ, and using the Valley as a base of operations. What matters to me is that they continue to use it for the purpose the Lord intended, a shelter in a time of storm. The idea that He chose Emily and me to prepare this place for His people is too wonderful to conceive. Why He chose me, I never quite understood, because I could think of a lot of others who would have done a much better job.

Maybe that's the whole point; I didn't, couldn't, do the work, but the Lord could, and did.

My physical pain has increased lately. Even mild exertion causes me severe angina, and Marcia, for one, is deeply concerned. I just smile, pat her hand, and tell her not to worry. The Lord is calling me, and I can't refuse the call; I never could. The ghost of Mark Mantill reared his head briefly, during one especially bad spell, but I put him to rest for good.

I am sitting now under that great old maple, still alive and more vigorous than me. Someone built a bench against the trunk years before, and I enjoy sitting there. I remember sitting in this sane spot with Felicia, or with my Emily, and talking for hours on end. Lately, Marcia and I have sat here, and again the hours fly swiftly by. My mind wanders now, dancing from memory to memory, each perfectly fit in its place. I remember even my birth mother, and find the grace to release that memory, too. Thoughts of Auntie Mae crowd in, and of the school, and my courtship of Emily. The years are but a moment, and they all parade by in their order.

I realize vaguely that my physical body is dying, though I feel no more pain. Emily, my dearest sweetheart, walks toward me. She smiles as she sits by my side. She leans over and whispers in my ear, "It's time, my husband." Her small hand slips into mine.

A voice calls to us, "Come up, Children; it's time." We stand up together. I look at my Emily, and realize that she appears as lovely now as ever she was in the bloom of youth. I've always seen her that way, really. Curious how the shell she left behind looks so worn and haggard; I never noticed that before. My own body was nothing great to look at either, not that it ever was. Emily always told me, though, she considered me the most handsome man alive, and I sort of believed her.

I never realized you could walk on light before. Two angels, who have been our personal guardians all of the years we couldn't see, come to meet us and take us up. Mitrael stands before the Throne, as he promised. The One sitting on the throne rises to His feet.

"Welcome home, good and faithful servants. Enter into my joy."

Together, we walk toward the Light. . . .