

## CHAPTER 11

Sleep had not come easily to David during the night that followed the visitation of the Firstling. For a long time he lay awake, the intense light of the moon flooded the room as if it was daylight. It added to the unreality of what they had experienced. At first, he had refused to even look at the sack entrusted to him, keeping his eyes resolutely on the open gap of what had once been a window. In the end, he had been unable to resist the temptation to look in its direction.

It was a very ordinary looking bag, its original use undefinable under the filth that had accumulated during the three and a half years it had been used during foraging raids. He had put it down hurriedly, as if the touch of it had burned him and now it rested in an untidy heap against the far wall. It looked empty - perhaps it was, he had no inclination to investigate.

In the end he slept fitfully. In his dreams, the Firstling seemed present, always smiling and gesturing to the sack. Just before the dawn, when the brilliant moon had already set, giving a brief interlude before the explosive light of the dawn, he lay awake once more, dreading the moment when he would have to rise and take hold of it again and perform the duty entrusted to him. He heard June stirring and rose quickly, grabbing the sack and leaving the room before she had the chance to speak.

June joined the rest of the population in the square and watched David slumped against the base of an ashen tree stump. He was staring down at the sack clenched between his fists. He was quite still and he looked as if he was praying. His eyes were tightly closed and he was sweating profusely. The townspeople watched quietly, gathered in a large circle around him. It

was some time before he became aware of their presence. He looked up and stared and then slowly opened the neck of the sack. He didn't look down.

There was a cautious movement forward, a woman pushing her child by the shoulders. The rest watched as a small hand entered the top of the sack and came out clutching a large portion. The smell of fresh, warm bread drifted into their nostrils and there was a murmur of awe from the rest.

There was no jostling for position, eventually, each one received their share. When it was June's turn, she stared into David's eyes for a long moment. She took his portion as well, for she sensed that he would not take one for himself. The expression on his face remained with her for a long time. His brow was beaded with sweat and he looked like a man in the depths of some undefinable fear. She felt helpless. There was nothing she could do for him. She went back to the shelter they had been given in one of the broken buildings.

She set about making it habitable and tried not to compare it to the minimal comfort they had enjoyed in the Bunker. She looked at their small heap of belongings. All they possessed had been packed into the bundle they had brought down the hillside with them. It consisted of blankets and the remains of clothing from the storehouse.

Some hours had passed since the morning's episode. She stood motionless, thinking again of the miraculous events of the previous evening and that which they had experienced in the square. The sack used by the Firstling and David, was leaning against one wall, where David had placed it after his first commission to dole out fresh bread to the community. It had put it down with obvious relief and David had gone off somewhere and had left it unattended. It was a typical gesture on his part. It would take a long time for him to change.

Since the time he had left, there had been a stream of visitors. For the most part, they were the adults and the women whose children had been healed on the previous day. It reminded June of a pilgrimage. They came out of curiosity, the women leading their healed children in a kind of wonderment that they had awoken to find them still whole. They hadn't had much to say, they looked as if they wanted the reassurance that came with association. June and David were something special, the Firstling had said so and therefore, if they wanted the miracles of the previous day to be repeated or sustained, it was well to keep close to those who were on such good terms with the miracle worker. June was quite sure that the real understanding of what the Firstling stood for, was outside of their comprehension for the moment. Not one of her visitors had approached the sack from which they had been fed. It was eyed with a mixture of awe and fear but it was left well alone.

The stream of visitors dwindled eventually and she was left in peace - but not for long. She looked up with resignation, as another shadow blotted out the shaft of sunlight from the doorway. It was Taggert. He looked uncertain about venturing further into the room.

"Please come in Mr. Taggert."

The invitation was incongruous, a kind of pretence left over from previous days, when politeness and formality still ruled.

Daniel was asleep on the makeshift bed, the visitor contemplated the sleeping child.

"He's a fine boy."

June waited. Taggert flicked a glance at the sack and quickly turned his eyes away.

"I wanted to talk to you."

"I'm surprised. Why would you want to talk to me and not to David? I understand you've already had quite a conversation!"

He shifted uneasily at the reminder.

"Those were different times - I've already tried to make amends."

"No need to get defensive, Mr. Taggart. As you say, they were different times and now they're behind us. So - what do you want to ask me?"

He hesitated a moment and then gestured to the sack.

"I need an explanation for - that."

"You saw what we all saw - the power of the Firstling, is it so strange that he was able to create bread?"

"From rancid slime?"

"You saw the healings - How do you think he managed to restore damaged brain tissue, or seared flesh, or shrunken limbs, or dead eyes. He did it in the same way as Jesus, when He healed the sick in His time. Jesus used the creative power to restore flesh to the lepers and to activate what was dead into life.

At the start of the Gospel of John, it says: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God, All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men, And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.' It goes on to say a little later: 'And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.'

Jesus was and continues to be the Word. The Firstlings have the same creative powers and are commissioned to use them during the Kingdom of Peace. Jesus was the Firstborn of many brethren - and these brethren are the Firstlings. As for the sack - it will never get less. Neither did the tub of

meal and the vessel of oil of the widow in the time of Elijah the prophet. It is refilled from the same power that is able to restore flesh and bone - from creative power.

When Jesus fed the hungry multitude with five loaves and two fishes, He also used creative power, because 'by the Word all things were made that were made'. When the five loaves and two fishes were fed to the multitude, in the end, there were still twelve baskets of scraps left."

June looked into the beard framed, deeply lined face. He had made some sort of attempt to wash away most of the grime it had carried on the previous day. After a long silence, he blurted out:

"You believe in straight speaking, it seems. All right, so do I! I like to think I have an ordered mind and I've been trained to be disciplined and to react in defined ways. I don't understand what's happening and I don't like not understanding."

June nodded.

"I can appreciate that. It isn't easy for you to understand. We're facing a lot of changes. Each day will be like a challenge, with something new to learn. The secret is, that the sooner you can accept that God cares for you and that He's set up His Kingdom of Peace on this earth and that Jesus has returned with His Firstlings, the easier it will become to understand that nothing is impossible."

Taggart flicked another glance at the sack.

"Like - like being fed good bread from rotten scraps?"

"Like that and the healing up of your maimed and sick - We all saw what happened to them - "

He sat motionless for a while.

"I couldn't sleep last night. I went over and over again what I thought I

saw - what I know happened. When I got up this morning, I went to some of those who had been - changed. I expected them to be as they were before - but they're still whole and healed and walking around. How can it be possible? It isn't possible!"

"You saw it for yourself. It comes down to faith in the power of God, Mr. Taggert. When you read the stories of miracles in the gospels, did you see them as stories for children, or did you accept them as real events?"

He stumbled over his answer.

"I guess I didn't really give it a lot of thought. Even if those things were true then, I can't believe they can still happen."

"Why?"

"Because - because this isn't the time for miracles. We have - or we used to have - medical science and all the different ways of extending life. Even drugs to cure leprosy. Organ transplants - you name it."

"So, miracles went out of date! They became a far fetched story used to strike awe into the ignorant and superstitious!"

"Something like that."

"What you saw yesterday - and what you ate yesterday and this morning - proves that the age of miracles still hasn't passed. The Kingdom of Peace will have no shortages of food or supplies. Miracles will be performed as necessary and when they aren't necessary, they will stop."

Taggert pointed to the sack.

"Will that stop too?"

"You can count on it. As soon as we can produce crops - and they are promised for each month of the year - the sack will no longer be used."

"You sound very sure."

"I am sure. When the Israelites were journeying to the Promised Land,

they experienced hunger too. They had no bread, so they were told to go out in the morning to gather food that fell from heaven - "

"Manna from heaven!"

"Correct - When the time came that they could be fed out of their own resources, the Manna stopped. That will be the way of the sack. David will open it night and morning until the first crop comes in - then it will stop."

"Did this - this Firstling tell you that?"

"No - but that's the way it will be!"

"I wish I was as sure."

"You will be one day - that's why David was given the job of holding the sack and not you! That doesn't mean that you have nothing to do. This town needs pulling down and rebuilding. The land around it needs clearing, crops must be sown and tended and then harvested. You're the man to get things going, Mr. Taggart."

He shifted restlessly.

"I tell you plainly, I'm glad I wasn't given the job to look after the sack! Just tell me one other thing. You talk about clearing the ground and sowing. That will be a good trick! We haven't any seeds so where's the seed to come from?"

June hesitated.

"The Lord will provide, Mr. Taggart. Clear the ground and cultivate it first. Don't worry about the seed, the Lord will do it!"

Taggart left soon after. Daniel started to stir and it gave the Town Leader the excuse to escape from the candid, unyielding eyes of the woman. She provoked a medley of emotions, he felt uneasy with her but she attracted him. It wasn't an attraction like he had known in earlier days, although she was good looking enough. He was attracted to her because he sensed she

had a lot of the answers.

He had gone to her in preference to David. He hadn't told her why but it was something he had talked over with his senior men, they had all voiced their misgivings. It was almost like a new superstition. They shared an indefinable feeling that David was somehow set apart because he could hold a sack of mouldy food, from which could come warm, fresh bread. He wasn't a man like themselves anymore. They had come to a whispered agreement that the mysterious stranger of the previous day, was something vastly different from an ordinary man and by association, David was also different.

When the boy was awake, June took him up on her arm and walked out into the sunlight. She looked upward and squinted. She wondered if it was her imagination, but it did seem to be getting brighter but there wasn't any corresponding increase in temperature. It made no sense - no sense that is, as measured by the Laws of Physics that had applied in previous times.

There were few people on the street and those that were, kept apart from her. They weren't unfriendly, just wary and timid of the unknown quantity she represented. It was a short walk to what had once been the town square.

The shattered ruins of shops and offices flanked it. In the centre had been a garden and a car park, now shattered. On one side, the municipal building was a not so magnificent ruin. A firestorm had swept through the town as a prelude to the nuclear winter. All of the trees that had lined the square were ashen stumps but miraculously, there were small shoots forcing out through the crust of ash.

She doubted if even the original inhabitants would still have recognised the place. As if in answer to her unspoken question, she came upon the remnants of a name. On the ground, as if it had slid off the facade of the neighbouring building, was the shattered emblem of the town and part of

its name. Now she understood why they referred to it as they did. They had called it Devil Town. It hadn't been named solely to strike fear into competing communities, for the letters stood out clearly in their undisturbed resting place.

"It's only part of the name."

She hadn't noticed Taggart standing a little behind her. She turned and wondered if he had been following her. He had some of his lieutenants with him. They had stopped a few paces from her - in another time, she might have felt uneasy facing the semicircle of watching men. She shifted Daniel to rest on her hip.

"What was the rest of the name?"

"When we came here originally, we were in a camp a mile out of the town - you see, most of us were soldiers - I suppose you could call us the lucky ones. We were posted out of the city before the warheads hit. We didn't think it was much of a posting at the time, especially when we ended up in a dead and alive place like Mandeville. That was the original name of this place - Mandeville. Symbolic I suppose - 'Man' got blown away and left the 'devil' behind, just like this sign!"

June nodded the name didn't mean much to her. The town was well away from the capital but she wasn't sure how far.

"So you called it Devil Town!"

Taggart's face twisted into a slight grin. It looked as if he hadn't tried the exercise for a long time.

"It was a epitaph to the times - a touch of sarcasm on my part, I'm afraid."

June nodded again, rocking Daniel from side to side.

"I don't know how you think, but in my opinion, it's not such a good

name anymore. We made some wonderful experiences yesterday and this doesn't feel like a Devil Town! Don't you think it's time for a change? The devil is bound for a thousand years, we want no reminders of his existence."

"You might be right. It's all the same to me. So - what do you suggest?"

"That's up to you - I haven't been living here for three and a half years, it isn't my town."

Taggert stood silent and wasn't helped by his lieutenants.

"It seems we're out of ideas for a name - "

"Then - call it Bethany - it was a place Jesus loved."

Taggert shrugged.

"It's different, anyway - Bethany it will be."

June looked at the shattered remnants of the old name.

"Perhaps it might be a good idea to break that up - we want no reminders!"

The square started to fill with some of the town's population. They stood silently, as Taggert and his men organised the destruction of the ancient name. June held her ground, there was no suggestion of hostility from the crowd. They quietly watched as the five letters were obliterated.

When that was done, Taggert announced his plan for rebuilding the town. There was no great debate or alternative suggestions, his authority was accepted without question. June watched groups go off to the various sites he had earmarked for demolition and rebuilding. She left the square as he started to organise his farmers in a similar way. She was impressed with the tranquillity and the co-operation. Perhaps, this was going to be the hardest part to get used to in the Kingdom of Peace - harmony.

David was waiting for her when she returned.

"I went exploring."

"So did I."

"I didn't find anything I didn't know about already - I know the place well enough, I had to come here often - when we were in the Bunker. There's nothing but streets choked with fallen stone. Not a living thing survived the fire storm. The Town Gang took over the place afterwards. Perhaps we ought to go on!"

"That's not the story I got from Taggart! I didn't realise you were so restless. You seemed to think it would be a good idea to throw in our lot with the Town Gang, but if that's what you think we should do - and if our Firstling agrees - so be it."

He hesitated.

"Why would he disagree?"

She pointed to the sack.

"He gave you a job, David. I have the feeling that you don't like the responsibility - It was something you always tried to avoid. I don't say that in to accuse, it so happens you dislike responsibility and that's a fact. The Firstling entrusted the task to you. Is it so much to ask of you - that you hold open the mouth of a sack, so that others can reach in and take what they need?"

He sat on the dirt floor and stared into the dust.

"You have no idea of what it does to me, June - Unless you held the sack yourself, you could have no idea of how it feels. This morning, when I had to sit in front of the whole community, I was frightened to do it. I didn't know, you see. I wasn't sure - whether it had all been a dream - or whether there would be anything other than a few scraps of rancid slime. I wasn't sure whether the miracle would be repeated. I wasn't sure that my own filthiness and sinfulness as a person, might not get in the way and that the food

wouldn't be as filthy as I was. I doubted, June! I doubted and God help me, I will doubt every time I have to repeat the process.

I didn't go exploring this morning - I wanted to be alone to find some answers. I went out to look for 'Jones' or whatever his name really is. I wanted him to come to me and listen to what I had to say and to take the responsibility away from me. I didn't know whether I ought to pray, or whether prayer doesn't count anymore. I tried talking out loud into the wind but the only answer I got was the sound of my own voice!"

June knelt beside him and cradled him, for once, she had no immediate and ready words to provide the answers. He quietened down after a while. She looked across at Daniel, he was still sleeping. She looked back at the man in her arms. With David, it was like having two children instead of one, for whom to care. She wished it could be different, just for once she would have liked to have someone upon whom she could depend. She said gently:

"I'm sure the Firstling hasn't made a mistake. He chose you because he could look into your heart. He knows you much better than you know yourself. It's like dealing with Jesus Himself. He was always able to read the hearts of men - He could see on the inside. The Firstling knows all your faults and failings and he loves you. He took away all our faults last evening. It reminded me so much of a divine service, especially when it came to the Absolution and Holy Communion.

Think of the sack as the chalice, David. The Firstling was the Officiant and then he handed you the consecrated bread so that you could serve it in the future. This time, it wasn't bread for the soul, it was bread for the flesh.

Once Jesus blessed five loaves and two fishes and then gave the baskets to the Apostles to serve to the hungry multitude. By giving you this

task, the Firstling showed his confidence and trust in you and he enrolled you as his helper. Don't run away like a Jonah, live up to your namesake, David the king!"

She kissed him on the cheek and hugged him. He was such a child! A boy amongst men. She changed the subject.

"I found out where we are, this morning."

It caught his interest.

"You know they called this place Devil Town?"

"Yes - To frighten the opposition, I suppose."

"That's what I thought too, until I found the remains of the real name. I used to be called Mandeville - It isn't any more. I got them to rename the place - Bethany."

The degree of her influence over Taggert didn't register. He seized on the old name.

"Mandeville was about a hundred - no nearer one hundred and fifty kilometres from the city. So, that's where We are! I've just remembered something! There used to be a New Apostolic congregation here. I wonder if there's any sign of it - they had a church - perhaps we can find the remains of it. I'm going to explore!"

He jumped to his feet enthusiastically and was out through the ruined doorway before she could answer. She tried to get rid of the feeling that one of her children had gone out to play.