

CHAPTER 18

"Uncle Carl, I've read the Book of Genesis - "

"That sounds a heroic undertaking. I would make a guess that you've hardly had the time, there's fifty Chapters."

"Well - I've read the bits that matter!"

Carl sighed and waited.

"I was thinking about what you told us last evening - about the length of time these people lived - "

Carl nodded. The boy continued doggedly.

"I've been doing some calculations - "

"I told you that it wasn't a matter for arithmetic."

"I know that but I have to know how long I can expect to live!"

"It's in the hands of God - you can't work it out by calculations! That's the point I'm trying to make!"

"Well! The point I'm trying to make is that you're talking about extended the lifespan from about seventy to somewhere around a thousand and that's a factor of fourteen times. I'm sixteen, which leaves fifty four from seventy and if I multiply fifty four by fourteen, I make it seven hundred and fifty six!"

He sounded breathless from all the mental exertion. He also looked very earnest. Carl answered slowly.

"That's about two hundred and fifty better than me! On the other hand, today, we could trip over a rock and find ourselves very dead at the bottom of the cliff. I told you, our life is in God's hands!"

Dar drew breath.

"So we could still meet with an accident?"

"We have no guarantees and we should take nothing for granted. On the other hand, how do we know how much damage has been done to our physical selves by our previous life of sin and stress and all the other conditions that might have damaged us, including the privations of the period of Destruction? Perhaps the damage is out of all proportion to our present age. No, Dar, you can't assume that you have another seven hundred and fifty years and I can't assume that I have another five hundred. We can't assume anything!"

It took a time to digest, then:

"There's something else, Uncle Carl. You said a lot about a child being a hundred years old and maturing much later and that this would be the way the population wouldn't outgrow the resources. That raises a few interesting thoughts - "

"It certainly does and I don't profess to have all the answers. A lot of what we want to know, we will have to experience to find out."

"For instance - does that mean that the period of gestation is going to lengthen - a woman will have to carry a child for something like fourteen times nine months - about ten years?"

Carl burst into a roar of laughter. Dar looked startled and then a little mutinous. Carl regained control quickly.

"Sorry, Dar! I wasn't laughing at you! I was just imagining the reaction from our womenfolk if that was to be the case! I would envisage lot of serious discussion before anyone decided to have a child!"

"So you don't think so?"

"I could hardly imagine it! Certainly, scripture doesn't have any

evidence that this was the case in the days when men lived the length of time we are talking about. No, I think gestation time will stay at nine months - and to carry the proposition further, I think a child will grow out of the helpless stage at about the same rate as they have done up until now."

"I suppose the women would be happy to hear that too! I guess they wouldn't want to have a toddler on their hands for twenty years!"

"Or the job of potty training for the same length of time!"

They grinned at each other.

"Dar, I see the longevity as being the flattening of the curve of life. Let me try to explain. - If some one lives to be seventy, you could say that they've reached their peak at thirty five, after that, it's all downhill to old age. I know plenty who wouldn't agree with me, but let's accept the premise for the moment. If a man lives to be a thousand, you could say that the curve of life is stretched longer. The peak could be expected at five hundred. So, a child can be a hundred years old and sexual maturity can be at two or three hundred, it's all a question of scale.

Let's look at the high old age these people can expect. It wouldn't be very tolerable if one had to endure failing sight or hearing for two or three hundred years, or weakness in the limbs, or general lack of strength. Scripture also suggests that those who reached such a high age, were vigorous and active until the time when they had to die.

If that applies at the end of life, then it will be comparable at the beginning. A child will go quickly through the early development stage, crawling, house training and everything that goes with being a youngster, even to the extent of learning to speak and walk. It will be after all this, that things will slow down and childhood will be a prolonged pleasure, which will gradually give way to adolescence.

If God wills, we are going to witness wonderful times and events. Parents will remain as youthful as their children. I have sometimes thought of the great periods of time the descendants of Adam must have either spent with each other or those who were alive at the same time. For instance, Lamech the father of Noah, was fifty six years old when Adam died and he was the ninth generation after Adam. That isn't to say that they knew each other, scripture doesn't say so, after all, man spread out over the earth.

Ancient legends of the Arabs even suggest that Adam didn't stay with Eve after the Fall and that the circumstances of their disgrace made them unable to bear the sight of each other. Whether that is true or not, I don't suppose there's would have been a very happy family life, we could expect that they would have been bowed down with grief and mutual reproach. Not a household that would have enjoyed happy family gatherings.

Noah was still living when Abraham was sixty years old - again there is no evidence to show that they knew each other but Abraham was the tenth generation after Noah. Scripture states that Noah planted a vineyard after leaving the ark - perhaps on the slopes of Mount Ararat, whereas Abram, as he was still called then, resided in the city of Ur, from whence he was told to go and find a new country. We are used to thinking of parents, grandparents, great grandparents and even great great grandparents. The generations to come will have to think in terms of ancestors we can hardly imagine."

Dar was very quiet for a while.

"And I can think of no one, Uncle Carl. No father, no mother, no grandparents - "

Carl swallowed and struggled to keep his voice neutral.

"And I have no wife - or children - and I can't look forward to seeing my descendants."

By the time eight harvests had passed, some of the more venturesome of the dwellers at Pringle's Head, had started to fan out from the centre of population. Carl suspected it to be a desire for freedom from the rigid rules recommended by the Councilman's Group, who had launched into an examination of the first five books of the Bible and especially those of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. He had to acknowledge that it had been a mistake to yield to the sudden impulse that caused him to recommend that they should be given the task of extracting the laws by which the community was to be governed.

There were other good reasons why the populace should fan out. The community now numbered nearly ten thousand. Larger areas of land were required to plant the crops to satisfy their needs, even though the yield from each harvest was prodigious. The natural inquisitiveness of man also impelled some to reach out beyond the immediate limitations of their surroundings. There was always the chance that they might come across another group and that they might be living under an easier regimen.

Carl was left well alone on his headland. His nearest neighbours were beyond the junction of the track that led to the lighthouse. Some had gone a little nearer to the old city but there was a general reluctance to cross over the ridge that overlooked the devastation. Perhaps in time, someone would resettle the site but it would probably be a future generation that had never known what the place had looked like in earlier days.

After their conversation on the headland, Carl's relationship with Dar became that of a father and a son. They hadn't fallen on each other's necks, after revealing their loneliness but each tried to compensate for the other's loss. Carl had the feeling that it was too good to last and it wasn't long before Dar showed signs of getting restless.

It was a misnomer to call the clique who ruled the town, the Councilman's Group. It was Martha who ruled, producing laws like a rabbit out of the hat, every time something was suggested to the contrary. The Councilman remained withdrawn and subdued, as if the surrendering of his power to the King of Kings had somehow stripped away part of his personality.

In apparent contradiction to the wishes of the Firstling, Peter Kharkov had gradually surrendered the task of looking after the various functions of feeding and the regulation of ten thousand citizens, placing yet more authority into the hands of Martha. He spent most of his time hidden away in a small valley above the town. It looked out over the ocean beyond Jacob's Bay, a potent reminder of earlier times of where he had once ruled.

At other times, he was to be found supervising the destruction of the Potolkin. The submarine was now an unrecognisable hulk, with much of her skin and all of her superstructure, cut up and reused in the rebuilding program taking place within the town.

The inner bulkheads surrounding the nuclear pile remained in the skeleton. As far as Carl could see, no one had tampered with it. It was a mute reminder that there were unresolved conflicts over its disposal.

Carl was therefore, not all that surprised when Dar confronted him one morning in the ninth cycle of harvest. He was as usual, straight to the point.

"I'm pulling out, Uncle Carl. I can't stand that woman dictating everything I want to do. I know she hasn't got a gun pointing to my head but it's no better than when I was under her thumb a year ago."

"I'll be sorry to see you go, Dar - you've been good company - "

It sounded trite and awkward. He wondered why he found it so hard to express his real feelings. Dar flushed.

"I've enjoyed being with you too, Uncle Carl - "

Carl nodded.

"When do you want to leave?"

"Right away - "

There was little more to be said. Carl watched him pack the small bundle that hadn't grown in size since the first days. They shook hands like polite strangers and Carl watched him stride off down the track to the main road. He continued watching for a long time, noting that he turned towards the town. Dar hadn't said the direction he had intended to take, but it looked as if he was heading to the north.

Carl went to his favourite place above the deep drop to the ocean. It was his place of retreat, the place he sought out when he had need to think. The departure of Dar had affected him deeply. He was open enough with himself to accept the reason why. The boy had treated him with all the respect and deference of a son. Carl flattered himself that he had acted in a fatherly way. It had been a mutual benefit to them. Dar had needed a father and Carl had needed a son. He didn't know how Dar was feeling at that moment, but Carl felt the departure of his son keenly.

He saw little of anyone else these days. Peter Kharkov had withdrawn from him since the time of the visitation of the Firstling. There had been something about that first night of the harvest and its aftermath, that had created a wedge between them. Perhaps Peter had seen the chasm that existed in spiritual understanding. Perhaps Carl's answers had been too forthright, or had touched some concealed nerve. The division was not of Carl's creating and it was something he felt powerless to alter. The rest of the submariners kept out of his way.

The same could be said of Myra Heston. She had taken up residence

in the town. Discrete enquiries revealed that she was sole occupant of the original ruin they had occupied. She had formed an unlikely partnership with Boris Arpov when it came to exploring the countryside. Carl sighted them once or twice, heading down into the devastated city. It was good that someone was still combing the ruins, he felt no inclination to do so himself.

The Firstling always appeared on the first evening of the eight harvests they had celebrated up to that time. It was he who had led the community in thanks-offering, as if to reinforce his message of the first occasion. He had spoken to them each time, teaching them and emphasising how much they relied upon the bounty of God and their increasing need for thankfulness. If he had any thoughts about the rules by which the community was governed, he didn't express them. As far as Carl was aware, the Firstling did not approach Martha or any of her group. It was also a fact that he did not repeat his visit to Carl.

The ocean was very blue and there was a gentle warm breeze. It was as it had been since the thawing of the ice of the nuclear winter. There had been a subtle change, however. It had taken time for Carl to realise it, but something was happening. The morning mist that had been so thick in previous months, and which watered the ground for crops, was now becoming much thinner. The flow of water from streams which had gushed down from the higher ground, or which had welled up from springs surrounding the town, was gradually decreasing.

This fact had not been particularly significant to Carl and he had kept quiet about it but eventually, Dar had reported murmurings of concern from the town. Conditions were going to change.

He returned to the doorway of the lighthouse and watched the submariners dragging away pieces of the Potolkin. Their task was nearly

finished and soon, Peter Kharkov was going to have to make another decision - another of his ships would be rammed up high and dry on the beach and the same procedure would start all over again. There was nothing else to do but to watch them and Carl's loneliness intensified.

It was some days after the departure of Dar, that very early one morning, he was called from his bed by the arrival of a deputation of five. He emerged half asleep and eyed the sombre quintet warily. Peter Kharkov was flanked on one side by Alexei Chernov and Serge Belin, on the other stood Myra Heston and Boris Arpov.

"Good morning - "

"That is the point, Carl Steinbecker, it is not a good morning!"

Peter pointed to the ocean behind Carl. He turned and adjusted his eyes to the increasing light of the dawn. It had been one of the darker nights, for the moon was new and shed little but reflected earthlight. Along the horizon was a dark band that had not been present on the previous evening.

"That is cloud, is it not?"

Peter gestured emphatically. Carl nodded - and wondered for what else was he to be held responsible.

"It certainly looks like it."

"So - the retreat of the cloud and the winter conditions was only temporary!"

"Are you asking a question - or making a statement?"

"I am asking whether this is a return to the conditions that existed before."

"In a word - no!"

"You are certain? Many lives could depend on your answer! It may be necessary to plan to get the population underground."

"All that is necessary is a little elementary faith in God!"

He turned to the silent companions.

"Myra, I would have expected you to have had a little more confidence!"

She flushed under the direct attack and came out defensively.

"If you had been on the receiving end of what Martha has had to say, even you could be excused for losing confidence!"

"So! She's behind all the panic! When are you going to understand that we are never going back to the conditions that existed before the Kingdom of Peace? Martha knows nothing! She's only good for extracting rules from bible passages!"

"Then, I wish someone would tell her so, Carl Steinbecker! You recommended her for the job! Now, all I hear are complaints from my men and a fair proportion of the rest of the town people. Are you aware that we are losing population because of her?"

Carl nodded wearily.

"I know, Peter - I know. I've asked myself a hundred times why I made the suggestion. Dar has gone for the same reasons - too many rules and regulations."

Peter looked startled.

"Dar has gone - "

"He left three mornings ago - said he couldn't stand being under Martha's thumb. Now - about the cloud. Didn't you expect it to rain again some time?"

Alexei Chernov interjected.

"How can we be sure that it isn't a return of the radiation cloud?"

"In my case, Alexei - because I have faith. In your case, I would

suggest you use your radiation meters to make sure! Our King and Priest does not lie!"

Peter gestured for peace.

"I will accept your word, but the town people are very nervous. You must speak to them."

"Peter - I can tell them nothing! Faith is required, I can't replace faith with words!"

"Carl - I will be quite firm about this. It has always been my opinion that you are a special person. You and your companion Myra, were brought to us by some mysterious means that I do not understand. The Firstling gave you the task to be my spiritual adviser. There are too many things I do not pretend to understand. I am trying hard to keep an open mind and maybe I shall never fully comprehend. Maybe, it will be another generation who is able to willingly accept all that is happening. You have to understand and excuse our scepticism - the crews of Russian nuclear submarines are not used to miracles and we are not educated to accept that such things can occur. We come from a society where the only gods were Marx and Lenin - and they certainly worked no miracles, nor did their politics and half baked economic ideas!"

The accompanying crew members exchanged astonished glances. Alexei Chernov's mouth twisted into a sardonic grin. He said nothing. Peter continued.

"I will try to talk in your terms. You want to say that you are nothing, but I say that you are something! You have explained many things to us and I believe your - our - King and Priest allows you to do so. The people need reassurance! This is the task that belongs to you - And - and please, get rid of that Martha woman!"

Carl swallowed, just how he was supposed to do remove the formidable Martha, was being left to his imagination.

"Why should the people listen to me?"

He was fighting a rearguard action and Peter knew it.

"They listen! Now get ready, I don't want a panic. We will expect you in one hour."

He turned and forestalled any further argument, leading his phalanx of four back down the track to the town. Carl stared after them helplessly and turned hopefully to see if the Firstling had emerged to talk with him. The space beyond the lighthouse was empty, as was the room he occupied. Great billows of cloud were gathering on horizon. Ominous looking thunderheads that reminded him of the reptilian cloud shape that had hung above the city after the triple warhead detonations.

He knew he wasn't wrong. He knew that there was no way that he could be wrong. There could be no return to the conditions of the nuclear winter. It was inconceivable that they would all have to descend back into the bowels of the earth to hide away from the return of radiation laden clouds of death. His thoughts were a turmoil as he prepared himself for the task before him. It was one thing to be convinced himself and quite another to be persuasive enough to convince ten thousand men, women and children, looking fearfully at the gathering blackness approaching from the sea.

Within himself, there was a voice, it said:

"Remember, those who are for us are greater than those who are against us."