

CHAPTER 7

As the first day of the Kingdom wore on, it became obvious that Apostle Carter was no longer with the group. He did not present himself for meals and searching through the surrounding area proved a fruitless exercise. The sun began to set and the search was abandoned. His name had been called for hours, all they heard in return, was the echo of their own voices.

They had kept close to the crown of the hill into which the complex had been driven, reluctant to go beyond the protective screen of shattered trees. In any case, there was such a tangle of undisturbed undergrowth that it was reasonable to accept that the Apostle had not gone in that direction. Bill Pascoe declared the obvious.

"He's gone, Carl - vanished into thin air!"

The group had trickled back from their searching to assemble in front of the Complex entrance. Carl nodded.

"I'm inclined to agree with you - he has gone - or more correctly, he has been taken. We've searched everywhere and I'm ready to accept that he hasn't come to any harm, I don't think we should allow ourselves to become concerned."

Myra Heston raised strong objections.

"People just can't vanish into thin air. I refuse to accept that my father has left of his own free will - He's not the sort of man to go off somewhere without telling me. There has to be some explanation for his disappearance! I know we've searched, but he could be laying injured somewhere, or perhaps he's lapsed back into his trance. I can't bear the thought of him helpless

somewhere, staring into the dark - "

Her voice broke. Carl stared at her emotion helplessly, then:

"I think you're wrong, Sr. Heston. This is the Kingdom of Peace and the Lord would want you to be at peace. Even with His decision to take your father away. Do you remember the story of Philip and the eunuch? It says in Acts, 'And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing'. As I remember, Philip found himself many miles away. Your father was and is, a very special person and I'm sure the Lord has a special purpose in taking him away. If Philip could be taken up by the Spirit of God, then so can your father. Let's remember, the Kings and Priests can do anything - I emphasise - anything!"

Sr. Heston looked mutinous, clearly she was far from satisfied, reluctantly, she accepted that there was little more that could be done.

The sun was very low and the decision was taken not to spend the night within the Complex. The air was balmy, reminding Carl of a holiday he had once spent in the tropics. He tried to work out what time of the year it was, but he couldn't be sure. On reflection, he had to admit that it didn't matter, for the climate and the conditions they now enjoyed had nothing to do with the previous order of things.

It was a good night to spend in the open, they built a fire and gathered round to consume more of the rations they had brought from the storeroom. It seemed hardly credible to remember that the last night they had spent in this way, was the one before they had fled into the hillside, barely outstripping the deadly breath of the cloud that had spewed out from the devastated cities - and that it had been only three and a half years ago, it was even harder to measure the equivalent in terms of eternity.

Carl had no feelings of anxiety about the future and looking into the animated faces of his brothers and sisters, he could see that were similarly filled with peace and confidence. He looked up into the darkening sky and saw the first stars and soon, the familiar patterns took their shape. They had remained changeless, to witness the awesome alteration to the conditions on a tiny planet around an insignificant sun. A tiny planet that had become the focal point of an eternal plan devised by the Creator before even those stars had been placed in their patterns. The bright diamond hardness of their display seemed to press down. The air was utterly clear and so sweetly clean that it could almost be tasted.

The first day of the Kingdom slipped into the first night and those who slept on the hilltop were undisturbed in their dreams. They awoke as the sun emerged in the east and most had a wonderful feeling of well-being, only Michael the ex-major had been busy. He had risen early and re-entered the Complex to retrieve some items of equipment. He busied himself wandering around from one side of the clearing to the other, taking readings of the air and soil. He looked baffled. Carl watched him without comment until he nearly blundered into him.

"What does that tell you, Michael - that we're in some kind of radioactive soup and don't know it?"

Michael looked at him square in the eye.

"I think this counter is on the blink, the readings are abnormally low - even lower than what was considered to be acceptable natural radiation before the Nuke. It isn't possible for residual radiation to have cleared in the way this meter's telling me."

"Do you have another meter?"

Michael nodded and made for the Complex entrance. Carl called after

him.

"Bring out all you have, they can't all be wrong but they will all read the same."

"What will it take to make him accept the obvious?"

One of the nearer brothers had overheard the conversation.

"We will have to be patient, at some time when he can't hide behind his prejudices, he will have to accept what has happened. It can't be easy for him."

"Does that mean that Satan is still on the loose and able to influence him."

"By this time, I would expect Satan to be bound - but the free will of man isn't bound. It is even possible for a man to do evil out of that which is within his own heart - without the prompting of Satan."

"So we can still sin?"

Carl nodded and thumbed through his battered bible until he found Isaiah 65 and quoted a sentence.

"But the sinner being a hundred years old shall be accursed."

"And that applies during the Thousand Years of Peace?"

"Isaiah 65 has a lot to tell us about the Thousand Years of Peace."

They stirred the fire and ate some more of the rations, Carl wondered how much was left in the storehouse. Michael had been in charge of the daily doling of portions and he had kept a tight lip when it came to telling how much they had in reserve. Michael was nowhere to be seen, no doubt he was still trying to work out why his monitoring equipment was consistently showing such baffling readings.

Carl looked around the animated group of his brethren and felt a surge of emotion rise within him. The Lord had done great things for them. Almost

without realising it, he started to hum the old choir hymn. 'When the Lord turns again the captivity of Zion, we shall be like them that are dreaming. Our mouths then with laughter shall be filled. Our tongues then with singing shall be filled. They shall be saying among the heathen, the Lord has done great things for us.'

The refrain was taken up by the rest, even those who had been long away from the congregation, managed to find a place in the melody and those who knew the respective voices harmonised, so that the melody bounced off the hillside.

'They that sow in tears, in tears, they shall reap, shall reap in joy. Who goeth forth with weeping bearing precious seed, shall come with rejoicing, shall come with rejoicing, bringing their sheaves with them.'

The old hymn reached its crescendo and the last echoes died away. They looked at each other tearful and smiling and then at Carl. He was spared any comment and he doubted if he could have found a voice to speak if he had tried. Carl looked up, a man stepped out of the tangle of trees to one side of the clearing. At first, he thought it was the Apostle rejoining them but this was a stranger, he walked into the centre of the group and sat down cross-legged, close to the fire. He looked around at them and seemed to embrace each one with that look. Carl found he was having difficulty getting his breath and his heart was hammering.

"Peace be unto you."

The voice was soft and gentle. He went on:

"The Lord has done great things for us and in particular for you and those others who once formed the congregations of the Lord during the time of the Apostles. He has preserved you, your bodies and your souls, against the evils of the cast down devil, who has reigned on this earth without check,

for the last three and a half years. That is now finished, Satan is bound, and the Kingdom is established and from this time forth, conditions will change, so that those things that are recorded in the prophets will be fulfilled."

The stranger could have been any other refugee from the shattered cities who had sought refuge in the countryside during the period of destruction. This was no shining angel, in no way was he different to them in dress or appearance - but they knew that he was different. Carl remembered the scripture passage, where travellers said to one another: 'Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?'

The stranger looked at Carl and the gentle smile did not waver. Carl felt as if his heart would break before the eyes turned again to the group.

"It will already be obvious to you that the deadly cloud of radiation and the poisoned soil, has been corrected. Not only has this evil been taken away but the Curse of the Earth has also been removed. In practical terms, this will mean that the words found in Isaiah will become a reality.

'For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off'.

Truly wonderful conditions will apply in the Kingdom, again, I remind you of the prophecy of Isaiah.

'For brass I will bring gold and for iron I will bring silver, and for wood brass and for stones iron: I will make thy officers peace and thine exactors righteousness. Violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation and thy

gates Praise.'

New laws are written into your hearts and the greatest one shall be Love. Once again I remind you of Isaiah:

'And I will rejoice in Jerusalem and joy in my people: and the voice of weeping shall no more be heard in her, nor the voice of crying. There shall no more thence an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days, for the child shall die an hundred years old; but the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed. And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: for as the days of a tree are the days of my people and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain, nor bring forth for trouble; for they are the seed of the blessed of the Lord, and their offspring with them. And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer, and while they are yet speaking, I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust shall be the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord.'

'Moreover the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day that the Lord bindeth up the breach of his people, and healeth the stroke of their wound.'

The earth will bear crops in each month of the year, so fertile will be the soil - for the Curse is removed - the crops will be like those of Canaan, from which Joshua and Caleb returned bearing a single cluster of grapes that required two men to carry it.

So, my dear brethren, I have told you a few things. Now, the time has come for you to do your part, to leave this place and take up your citizenship

in the new Kingdom. Journey back the way you came, for a little distance. In that journey, you will witness some of that which I have told you. Be glad, be joyful and praise the Father who loves you. I will watch over you and will come again to you in due time."

Suddenly, their eyes were flooded with tears, the light of the rising sun was very bright, and when they had blinked away their tears, the man was gone.

A small voice broke the silence.

"Uncle Carl, was that the Lord Jesus?"

Carl knelt down in front of the youngest of the Pride family and answered softly, hardly able to control his voice.

"I believe that was our King and Priest, into whose care we have been placed. You will see him again and when you do, you can ask him his name."

The child seemed satisfied, Carl wondered if his answer had given the same degree of confidence to the rest of the group. He knew no more than they. Any debate was shelved, they had been given direction, it was time to leave the hilltop that had been a green oasis in the midst of a desert and go back the way that had come, back into that desert, there to await further directions.

Michael, Allen and Paul, the non-Apostolic trio who had shared their refuge during the three and a half preceding years, had been witnesses to the coming of the stranger, his words and his departure. It was clear that Michael and Allen were trying to feel their way in the changing circumstances. Paul was different, during the three and a half years, he had been the supporter of the group, although he had wavered during the last moments, when the choice to remain within the security of the Complex, or to brave the unknown outside with Carl and the rest, had proved too much for

him.

Carl had no worries about him anymore, Michael was the one who needed the extra support and also Allen, who had always seemed a subservient shadow to his officer. Now, it could be said that Allen was someone in his own right and could no longer rely on the concept that his superior officer gave the orders and that it was his duty to obey without question.

Michael took the initiative, rising from his squatting position and walking slowly to Carl's side.

"The directions you people received. I presume that - man - had something to do with your religion, I can understand that you will want to do as he says. I don't understand what he was trying to say but I can see well enough that something pretty drastic has happened. I presume this to be the parting of the ways - "

Carl shook his head and gripped his former sparring partner by the arm.

"Michael, the directions are for you as well. I know you don't understand, just come with us. We all have a wonderful future, I can promise you that. If we are told by our King and Priest to move out from this place, then we must do so - and can do so with total confidence."

Allen and Paul had joined them.

"And that applies to us as well?"

"Of course! Don't you understand! We are all to be the citizens of the Lord's Kingdom - there is no distinction between us - no measurement of the past, whether we were New Apostolic or not. Those Apostolics who failed to take part in the First Resurrection - like me, have no extra privileges or priorities in the new Kingdom - we are all citizens and we will all be taught of

God and we will all share the riches He has to offer. The only distinction between we who were New Apostolic, will be that we have a little more knowledge about the events that led to this time."

Michael nodded slowly and forced a grin.

"Looks like you win after all - Carl - but take pity on someone with a good deal less faith and make sure you strip the rest of the stores out of the Complex. You won't find much - "

It was Carl's turn to look surprised.

"I thought you were talking out doling out rations to last at least ten years."

The grin broadened.

"I took a gamble that your 1335 days were going to produce something. We had enough left for another forty days - that was all!"

Carl shook his head in wonderment.

"You played your cards close to your chest, Michael."

"When you're dealing with a religious fanatic, Carl, you tend to be a little careful! I was never sure what you were going to ask for next."

They watched the members of the group returning from the storehouse, they hadn't waited to be told to strip the place.

"I would reckon that you're taking away the equivalent of what you brought here from Clancy's store."

"And now we're heading back in that direction. I wonder what we'll find."

"Not much would be my guess - places become derelict quickly in the desert climate. Then, there might have been other refugees who would have picked over what you left."

"If they did get to Clancy's, it would seem they didn't come in our

direction - "

"Perhaps they did and perhaps they didn't - they could have been camping out here for all we would have known."

Carl shivered involuntarily, remembering the conditions they had met when they had first come back to the surface. Any luckless refugees in those conditions would not have lasted long.

The group was soon loaded and ready to leave their haven. Carl took a long, last look at the entrance to the Complex which the Lord had provided to sustain them in the Wilderness. So much had changed, even in the few hours of the existence of the Kingdom of Peace. No longer was there a Woman Clothed with the Sun, who had fled before the wrath of the Dragon, to be protected by God in the Wilderness. The conditions, the groupings of people that had belonged to the Time of the Dragon, no longer existed. He had told Michael that now all would be equal citizens of the New Kingdom.

A similar change had taken place at the First Resurrection, then the New Apostolic Church had been separated into Firstlings, the Woman and the Remnant. Each had had their own destiny - suddenly, for the first time in years, he thought of June Meredith - force of circumstances had separated her from them as well - he wondered what had become of her.

He led the way into the tangled ruins of trees that surrounded the clearing. Earlier, there had been a path that had led from the outer perimeter of the Reserve, where they had first been confronted by gun-toting Rangers. The path was blocked with fallen dead trees and branches that had been plucked up by the ferocity of the storm's turbulence. It took a lot of time to work their way through and over the debris and the sun was climbing steadily all the time. Carl resigned himself to a long, hot walk, especially when they descended to the floor of the plain that surrounded the Ranges.

They came to the edge of the trees and stood in a silent line, looking out over the flatlands below. Carl sucked in his breath and then let it out again.

"It's an ocean!

Bert Harris, who was inclined to speak and think later, contributed his opinion. John Prentice offered a different assessment.

"It's floodwaters from all the melted snow and ice - its all settled in big sheets. The subsoil in the desert doesn't allow it to drain."

It sounded more plausible.

"Whatever it is, we can't go down that way - there's no way through."

There was a general murmur of agreement at Bert's further pronouncement. Carl kept his peace - they weren't arguing, they were still bound up in their human reasoning. It would take time to change.

Carl shouldered his load and set off without a word down the track that led to the water. At first he was alone and then he heard the clatter of stones being disturbed by other feet, he didn't look back. It wasn't long before he was joined by Bill Pascoe, who said nothing as he kept up the pace. Carl grinned and found his brother grinning in return. When they came to a turn in the path, he could see that the rest of the group were straggling out on the upper section of the road - but they were all following. Some of those at the rear looked a little less enthusiastic than those at the front, but that was to be expected. They all had much to learn.

He looked back when they came to the foot of the escarpment that led to the peaks of the Ranges. They towered over them and he remembered how ominous they had looked when they had first approached them three and a half years earlier. He looked at the road ahead, it was dry as far as he could see. The air was crystal clear and though the sun shed a brilliant light,

it wasn't hot. He had no time to consider this apparent contradiction of the Laws of Physics. Who had created the Laws anyway?

He inspected his troops and they returned his look confidently. There was no sign of fatigue. 'But they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.'

That thought set him walking again, the road was long and straight but they became increasingly confident that it would be open for them until they reached the point when their King and Priest would again give them direction. Carl felt free, it was wonderful to think that no longer was it necessary for him to make the decisions.