

4.

He was thoughtful as he continued on his way. Out of the mouths of the Dragon would gush a river of water. The Dragon had been seen in one of its manifestations as the spirit of Satan operating in human form. The flood out of the Dragon's mouth would take the form of words - filth and innuendo and the media would be the mouthpiece of the Dragon through its many outlets. The New Apostolics would be pursued by a flood of invective, a tide which would inflame the hearts of those who heard it. Historically, the mob had always attacked something they could not understand or have any part in. History always showed that the greatest violence came out of ignorance. The fury of the mob against Jesus, was the prime example.

He was almost tempted to turn his car on to the road that connected to highway Five, the road to freedom and to the north west, but he had promised to collect any who might be waiting at the church and now it was time to go and see.

The street outside of the church building was in a turmoil. Floodlights were trained on the building, a television van stood slewed across the road ahead of the small group of cars parked outside. The street's residents stood in their doorways watching, as reporters besieged the waiting members. Carl eased his car behind the others and stepped out. Immediately, he was the target for thrusting microphones. The competing media representatives fought to get the first interview. Behind them, he could see the frightened faces of brothers and sisters. He turned to face the determined news hounds. It wasn't a bad description when he came to think about it - they were like hounds that had their quarry by the throat.

"Is it true that you're on your way to meet with God, minister?"

"Aren't we all?" Carl parried lightly.

The irony seemed lost on the jostling crowd.

"What is the basis of your assertion that God is coming to your membership and not to the other churches?"

"I wasn't aware that I had made that assertion."

"Isn't it true that you expect God to come to you?"

"We are not expecting Him anymore - He has already been".

They were asking questions but not listening to the answers.

"I understand that you've made the statement that our city is going to be destroyed - would you care to enlarge upon that?"

Carl thought quickly. Obviously, someone who had attended the meeting earlier in the evening, had taken the trouble to make sure that the media would be present when they met again.

"I've made the same statement that the ministers of our church have been making for decades. I haven't made any personal predictions. I have quoted from the Holy Scriptures and reminded our people of a sequence of events recorded therein. Based upon the Holy Scriptures and certain events that have already taken place, it is our belief that this city, together with most others, is a candidate for destruction."

"But, do you believe that this city will be destroyed within a matter of hours?"

The questioner was persistent. Carl hesitated for a moment and then gave his answer.

"Yes."

"Upon what grounds?"

"I've already explained - the teachings of the Bible."

"Are you aware of the opinions of many who believe the teachings of the bible to be totally discredited?"

"Yes, I am aware of the opinions of others - they would be on good ground if they could persuade God to join their way of thinking. If He was to believe the bible to be discredited, then I guess, nothing would happen."

"What is supposed to be the form of this destruction?"

"Read the Book of Revelation."

The announcer tried another tack.

"Where are you and these people going?"

"Anywhere - away from the city. We're exercising our options to take God at His Word."

"Do you really believe that He will destroy this city? Aren't you going to look pretty stupid if - when - nothing happens?"

"Yes - to both questions - but when, not if, it does happen. You won't have the chance to look stupid."

"Do you believe this city deserves to be destroyed - every man, woman and child? Is that supposed to be a teaching of love?"

"I won't be doing the destroying - ask God - or perhaps, ask yourselves."

The crowd had drawn closer to hear his answers. The church's neighbours, who had disdained to attend at the church situated in their own street, now suddenly found interest.

"Is it true that most of your membership is missing?"

"It is true."

"What has happened to them?"

"They've already left before us - "

Carl started to hedge his answers. He sensed the mood of the crowd was changing from one of derision to something more hostile.

"Is it true that you've stated that Jesus Christ has already returned to take them away somewhere?"

"It is true - "

A hoot of derision rose up from the crowd.

"You are on national television, Mr. Steinbecker - do you still assert this to be the truth?"

"It's a pity that the New Apostolic Church wasn't asked for its comments on national television before this. Now, the information is a little too late to be of much use to anyone. Yes, it is true that the Lord Jesus Christ has returned and had taken to Himself those who allowed themselves to be prepared by the Apostles of Jesus for the Second Coming. It is true also, that a

destruction is to take place, which will involve this city and most other cities and areas of the earth. I hope that answers your question."

"Let's get this straight, Reverend - You are asserting that Jesus Christ has returned in the Second Coming?"

The announcer's voice was derisive, trying to unsettle the calm man who had responded to his interrogation without wavering. He had been trying for a hysterical outburst - that made for better television. Carl had had enough, there wasn't much to be gained by continuing the discussion.

"Can you explain why Jesus Christ has come to your small sect, rather than to representatives of the mainstream of Christian belief? It looks as if the Pope and other major church leaders haven't been notified of this supposed return. You would expect them to be the first to hear."

The announcer's voice was now sneering.

Carl turned and faced him squarely.

"You must ask Jesus Christ when you meet - however, he did know those who were His own! Now, if you will excuse me please?"

He started to walk past the announcer but there was an unexpected intervention. From the back of the crowd, a thickset man was barging his way through, he stopped in front of the priest's nose.

"I don't know what you've done with your own wife and children, Steinbecker, but you're not taking mine on this fool journey - "

The crowd fell silent, this was an extra titillation. Carl tried hard to place the man. June Meredith provided the answer, she stepped out of the waiting crowd of Apostolics, dragging a gangly boy after her.

"Stop making a fool of yourself, Bob!"

Bob Meredith didn't look at her, he focused his gaze on Carl.

"I know you fancied her when she was in your fool Youth organisation, now you think you can carry on where you left off - "

"Don't be a fool, Bob!"

June's voice rose higher.

"I'm taking Darren away from this city before it's destroyed - "

"You're going nowhere - understand? These people understand - a husband has rights and no mealy mouthed churchman is going to steal my wife and child - "

There was a growing growl of approval from the crowd, it gave Bob Meredith confidence.

"I see your lover boy has nothing to say, June. You're coming home with me and we're going to forget that this fool nonsense ever happened."

Bob grabbed June's arm, she cried in pain and looked at Carl with pleading.

"I'd do nothing if I were you, Steinbecker - "

The threat was undefined but Carl sensed how the mood of the crowd was becoming more and more ugly. It would not take much for violence to flare.

"I'm sorry, June - It has to be your decision - no one can be forced - "

Bob didn't give her the chance to answer. June's pleading eyes haunted Carl for a long time after. Her husband dragged her and his son back through the crowd, who closed tightly like a wall, to prevent any counter action. The announcer had been mouthing a running commentary of the scene into his microphone, Carl walked past him, knowing that it was time to take the initiative. He stepped out of the pool of light shed by the spotlight on the roof of the television van. John Prentice peered at him from the window of one of the cars.

"Glad to see you here, John," Carl said quietly, " - and you Helen. Listen - be ready to move off fast. I don't like the mood of this crowd. You'll have to use the pavement to get around that van - "

He looked back at the interviewer, he was gabbling into his microphone and staring into the camera. Carl couldn't hear what was being said and cared even less. He walked along the line of cars and repeated the instruction to the drivers. They were to head for Highway Five. If they became separated, they would meet at the Black Seal Ford. They all knew it, it was the place for Youth gatherings and congregational picnics - and it was just off the highway.

The announcer walked towards him. Carl waited for the renewed attack.

"Have you anything further to add to your dire warnings, Mr. Steinbecker - no expressions of Christian love, or kind thoughts for us ordinary people who can expect God to blow their heads off at any moment?"

The 'words of your God' and 'ordinary people', had been heavily emphasised. It was like baiting a bear. Carl looked at the hostile ring of faces behind the cameras, the crowd was swelling as others came from the surrounding streets, attracted by the bright lights or warned by their neighbours that there was a live transmission on the television and that some religious maniac was saying that the city was about to be destroyed.

Carl answered in the quiet way he had maintained earlier.

"I'm sincerely sorry that you didn't find it in your hearts to come and listen to what the ministers of the New Apostolic Church had to say during the considerable number of years this church has stood on this site. Now, I have repeated to you what the membership has known for a long time. These have been the teachings by which we have lived even though they have been disregarded by others. There is nothing that can be done to avoid the coming period of destruction. It isn't something to be negotiated with God. This city will be destroyed but I can't tell you exactly when, it might be hours, days or weeks - but it is my belief that it will be earlier rather than later. All I can suggest is that you find some sort of shelter - or get as far away from the city as you can - "

He gestured to the little convoy of cars.

"We intend to leave now - you have to make your own arrangements."

The announcer had a last thrust.

"If the favoured ones have been taken somewhere during the Second Coming of Jesus Christ - how is it that you and your group have missed out?"

Carl looked at him bleakly.

"We had our chance and failed to recognise what was needed. God made His choice and it didn't include us!"

Something in Carl's expression stopped the announcer from making another comment. Carl walked to his car. The crowd was silent - still, but gathering its hostility. The floodlight swung across the little convoy of cars, causing the drivers to squint into the glare. The big van stood its ground, blocking the road, it was a stand-off. John Prentice eased his car slowly forward until he was almost against the truck's front wheel - then, he jabbed the accelerator and swung up on to the footpath and around the front of the big vehicle.

The truck's driver jammed his gears into low and mounted the pavement, effectively blocking off the way of escape. The crowd stood solid behind the remaining cars. Carl looked around, three others had managed to follow John's lead. Six more stood in front of the church building, including his own.

"Why are you waiting - expecting that God of yours to do something?"

It was a woman's voice that shrieked from the crowd. There was a roar of derisive laughter. Carl turned to the announcer.

"Why are you obstructing us?"

The announcer looked innocent.

"I'm sure that the viewers would be surprised to hear you say that, Mr. Steinbecker - Why should we have any reason to obstruct you or your group? I can't speak for the onlookers, of course - "

The announcer babbled into his microphone, it was something to the effect that the crowd was becoming hostile and that they would bravely remain to report any events that might arise from the situation. Carl weighed up the options. The entrance to the church parking lot was clear. He stood for a moment looking at it.

"Why don't you go inside your prayer factory and ask for guidance - maybe your God will come and lift you over the truck - "

It was a catcall from someone else in the crowd. Carl turned and forced a smile.

"Thank you - that sounds like a good suggestion - if we may have your permission?"

He walked to his car and started the engine - his was the last in the line of the remaining

cars. He eased back a little, very careful not to touch any of those who blocked the escape to the rear. He drove slowly to the front of the line, leading the way to the sloping drive entrance. Hands thumped on the roof and side panels as he did so. The car park was at the back of the building, approached by a driveway that hugged the side of the church. He prayed, without realising that he did so, that the other drivers would follow his lead, they were all competent men - he hoped that they would be equally quick-witted.

The narrowness of the drive helped them. At times, he had complained about its tight dimensions. Arnold Taylor had always smiled and asked him if he had scraped the side of the church and if that was the reason for his complaint. Now, he was happy that it was tight, it meant that those who were running along the sides of the vehicles had to drop back, as each car ran the gauntlet of their fists. Carl prayed again, that none of the drivers or their passengers would become hot-headed enough to stop and retaliate - they had to keep moving.

The car park was small and was surrounded by a rickety wooden fence, much in need of repair and a paint. Arnold Taylor had appealed for help recently, so that it could be fixed - perhaps some of those who had ignored his pleas, were the drivers of the following cars. If so, they could take a certain inverse credit for what he was about to attempt. It might prove their only avenue of escape.

The mob was streaming up the drive after them, no doubt eager to deride a group of praying men, women and children. Carl watched his rear vision mirror until he was sure that the last car was just free of the end of the driveway. He plunged his foot to the floor, switched to high beam and hurtled his car at the weakened rear fence. He braced himself for the impact, despite which, the jolt nearly knocked the breath out of him. The fence splintered in all directions around the car - but he was through!

He didn't have time to find out who was following, he concentrated his efforts on finding a way through the rough, open ground. It was an empty building block, which the church had inspected once when it was thought that they might need to expand. The plans had never gone further and the lot had remained vacant. Carl prayed that it wasn't pot-holed or boggy. He was alm

ost surprised when he found himself on the road beyond. He wound down his window and looked back. The little convoy was intact. He gunned the accelerator again and lurched onto the roadway. They had bought only a little time, especially if the crowd were incensed enough to follow. He could hear the roar of anger from the direction of the church building. He mourned for it - whether they followed or not, they would certainly vent their anger on the little house of God.

He led the way through a tangle of back streets, avoiding the main roads. The earlier instinct that had told him that the Dragon's fury was about to be unleashed, had been well founded. He watched the trail of lights following, counting them from time to time to ensure that none had dropped out. He hoped they had all taken the elementary precaution of filling their tanks. They had a long and uncertain journey ahead and they might have no chance to top up.

He didn't lead them on to Highway Five, instead he opted to use a secondary road that had less likelihood of traffic at that time of night - however it would add fifty kilometres to their journey. He glanced at the dashboard clock - it was already 1.30 in the morning. The delay at the church had cost them a lot of time. He switched on the radio hoping for a late bulletin but there wasn't one, he decided to try again later.

There was no sign of pursuit and the road was quiet - just ahead was a rest lane, he slowed down and signalled. Obediently, the other five cars slowed down and parked behind him. Carl walked around to the front of his car and inspected it for damage. The bull bar had taken most of the impact - it was as well, otherwise he might have ruptured the radiator or smashed his headlights.

"That fence was tougher than Arnold made out," a quiet voice said from behind him.

In the light from his parkers, he identified Bill Pascoe. Bill was the stuff out of which Administration Brothers was made but he had never quite made the final grade, he had been considered on a number of occasions. He was one of those men with immense talents, who could have been quite an asset but he had never knuckled down to the dedication required of him. For all that, it cheered Carl to think that he was with them. Now, he would have to become an asset whether he liked it or not.

"You wouldn't have expected Arnold to wait for it to fall down, now would you, Bill?" Carl smiled.

"You made a good move," Bill enthused. "We'd have been in for real trouble if we'd have stayed much longer."

"I guess you're right - "

They gathered around him. The six cars contained twenty four souls, including the children, who were wide eyed and awake and feeling the adventure. Carl swallowed hard, suddenly glad that Mary had been faithful enough to be a blessing for their children. Except for Bill and himself and two others, these were complete families, husband, wife and children. There was one young couple - he remembered, they hadn't been married that long - two of the youth who had fallen for each other. Everyone had thought it so right when they had decided to get married. He dismissed the unbidden question - Why had they remained? It would be so easy to judge and be judged.

He greeted them all and told them what he had intended to do. There were no objections, he was assumed to be the leader, it was a situation to be adjusted later - or maybe, after he had made the first mistake. They set off again, he was fearful that they might arrive too late to meet up with the rest of the party. It was just possible that John Prentice might decide to press on, in the assumption that the rest hadn't been able to escape. It was the sort of thing that John might do - especially if his wife, Helen, had anything to say - and she usually had.

They continued to follow the secondary road for another twenty kilometres, before taking the crossroad that cut back across low hills to the Black Seal River. It wasn't one of the major rivers in that part of the country but it had proved to be quite an obstacle in the early days. The old road to the north west had crossed the river at the first fordable place - nowadays, the Highway ran much closer to the coast on high pylons over the mud flats. Black Seal Ford had become a backwater, a playground for those who knew it. It was only a few kilometres off the main road.

The secondary road led on to Highway Five, just above the turnoff to the ford. It wasn't

long before they nosed out on to the busier road. It hadn't been a bad ploy, Carl congratulated himself. They came to the turnoff from the opposite direction to the city. If by some mischance, their pursuers had got wind of where they were heading, they might well be setting up some sort of media ambush on the city side of the track.

Carl wondered why he should be so concerned with pursuers. He was making a melodrama out of what had happened earlier. The television crew had created an atmosphere and the crowd had responded. He hoped they had been forgotten by this time, dismissed as crackpots - idiots who would soon come sneaking back to the city, when they found it hadn't been destroyed and their doctrine was discredited.