

At the edge of the airfield they paused. There was no fence to stop them from crossing the field. It had never been designed as a permanent installation and there had never been a formal separation from the surrounding countryside. There were buildings over on the other side, close to a gantry that had served as a Control Tower. All of the buildings were shattered. It was a scene of total devastation and they realised how lucky there were to be alive - Carl corrected himself - not lucky - blessed. They were still confronted with the question for which there was no immediate answer. What were they to do? To stand waiting at the side of the field might have been a fine example of faith but somehow it seemed improper. God helped those who helped themselves. Roy Bryant had not indicated where he had intended to take them once they had reached the field but the Control Tower was the logical target.

They walked across the airstrip - there seemed little point in adding to the distance by detouring around the perimeter. They made an assumption that nothing would try to land on the wreckage scattered runway. In any case, with the destruction of the city, the co-ordination of evacuation flights would have ceased. In fact the whole program described by Rescue Control would have terminated.

They passed the shattered remains of the aircraft that might have been destined to take them to safety. If they had been manned when the windstorm struck, there was now no evidence of the crews. Carl shrank from investigating the broken fuselages. If the occupants were dead, they would be beyond the help of the ill equipped Apostolics. It was self interest perhaps cowardice, but he declined to subject his group to yet more trauma.

They found that landing strip itself was surprisingly clear of wreckage. They quickened their pace as if they were crossing a main road that was temporarily free of traffic. It was a contradiction between their logic and their heart - there was a certainty that nothing would come from out of the distant horizon, countered by a lingering hope that something could and might.

As they approached the cluster of buildings around the Control Tower, the extent of the damage became obvious. The buildings had not been very substantial in the first place, little more than a timber frame and a few sheets of corrugated iron. In earlier times the strip would have been used for infrequent visitations of light planes from the city, or for crop dusters. The gantry had served as the Control Tower, it had been blown on to its side. Carl wondered where the occupants of the buildings had gone. He was more than happy to see that there were no corpses laying around. Whoever had survived had been evacuated hastily, there were no vehicles of any description. Sombrely he faced the group.

"This is as far as we go."

They stared back at him without answering. They looked a sorry lot - filthy with the dust and debris from the fields. The men sported three day beards. No one had washed for the same length of time. The soup they had shared on the previous evening was no longer keeping the walls of their stomachs apart. He enlarged on his statement.

"We can go no further. There's nowhere to go."

"Isn't that accepting defeat?" Sr. Heston asked sharply. "You owe it to

the children - "

He looked at her long and hard - it was so short a time since the confrontation with the group on the previous evening. For once, it was she who dropped her gaze.

"There's a limit to what we can do. We're exhausted, we're hungry.

God has shown us our limitations. We can't fight atom bombs and their after effects. We are defenceless and helpless and we've done our part as best we could. I want to remind you that God has already contributed His portion. He has already fulfilled the prophecy of the flood from the dragon's mouth. He has fulfilled the prophecy of the opening of the earth. Do you suggest that we should do anything more, when all that is asked of us is that we shall wait for Him to fulfil the prophecy of the provision of wings? I'd be interested to hear any other views."

They were silent, shifting their gazes to the ground. Carl reflected - what a strange mixture they were - including himself. They plunged from ecstasy to despair, from sublime faith to utter doubt - all in the space of a few minutes. It needed only a small setback and that was enough to create total dismay and despondency. He didn't like to guess how long they would be tested, how long they would have to wait for the 'wings', but he was sure that this was the end of the line. If necessary, they would sit in the dust at the side of the field and wait for something to come along. If they were proved wrong, in the same length of time, radiation would begin to filter down on them causing irreparable damage and death. Radiation was something they could not outrun and there was no point in trying.

He sat down on the hard ground and clutched his knees with his arms.

He didn't look at them but he knew they hesitated before they followed his example. They said nothing, even the children were quiet. Even they had quit complaining of their hunger, perhaps realising the futility of it when there was nothing to eat. All of them were exhausted, spent by the trauma of the previous hours. They sat silently for two more hours, whilst the sun increased in strength on their heads and backs. Carl sensed the rebellion before it was expressed.

"This is our last test," he said quietly. "Those who wait with patience will experience the faithfulness of God. Those who are about to complain - save your breath and use it to pick yourselves up - and leave!"

He continued to stare along the strip into the shimmering heat haze.

There was no response to his ultimatum. He didn't know them well enough to know if any of them would have left. He knew what he had to do and even if they all elected to leave him, he would remain.

They waited through the heat of the day. By late afternoon, Carl began to be assailed by doubts. He fought with himself, knowing that he couldn't surrender. The others were restless, but as yet they had not rebelled. The great cloud above the city was expanding. It hadn't reached them yet but it would only be a matter of time. Inwardly, Carl started to plead and wrestle. If he was wrong, he wanted to be shown - he wasn't the only one in jeopardy. If it was his pride that was keeping them sitting in the dust, he wanted to be corrected.

John the deacon, spoke up from the silent group.

"Perhaps we should try to build a shelter for the night?"

"If you wish - I'll stay here!"

"Don't let your faith become stubbornness, Carl!"

"And don't let your doubt become an excuse, John!"

"Carl, you're not the only one who has faith! It isn't our fault if the Lord hasn't seen fit to work according to your timetable! I see no reason why we can't try to make ourselves comfortable. Personally, I've never followed the precept that our faith requires sackcloth and ashes. You aren't considered more holy, if you make it as uncomfortable as you can for yourself!"

Carl made no answer, he hardly heard him - nothing mattered, except to hang on to the slender thread of faith that insisted that God would provide. The others moved around him and away, leaving him almost alone in the gathering dusk. - Almost alone, but not quite. Sr. Heston had left her father where she had bidden him to be seated hours before. Carl was conscious of his Apostle's presence but didn't look at him when he said:

"If only you hadn't left us, dear Apostle - I wouldn't be saddled with the responsibility - Am I right, I wonder? Perhaps I'm just being stubborn, like he said."

There was no answer - Carl would have been surprised had there been. He geared himself to rise and join the others. It would be an admission of defeat - or maybe, of a return of common sense.

From out of the east, a light pierced the darkened sky, pointing down and searching the ground below. He could hear nothing - not at first - and then unmistakably, came the drone of a plane's engines. It was coming in facing the setting sun, whose last rays illuminated the wreckage surrounded airstrip. Carl held his breath as the large bird found its way carefully, apparently hovering before dropping down at the extreme end of the tiny strip.

The priest let out his breath in a shuddering sob, while the rest of the group dropped what they were doing and raced to the edge of the strip. The transporter thundered by, clouds of dust spurting out from beneath its wheels. The pilot was fighting to bring it to a standstill before he ran out of runway. There was just enough. The pilot swivelled the plane one hundred and eighty degrees and shut off the engines. It sat like a nesting bird at the far end of the field.

The Apostolics broke into a trot, finding energy they did not know they possessed, to race to the stationery bird. It remained dark and silent except for the illuminated cabin in the nose. They could see the pilot and somebody else moving about. After a while, a hatch opened a little way behind the nose and a man dropped to the dusty strip followed by his companion. They stood in the shadow of the plane and eyed the sixty strong group crowded under the wing.

"I'm Carl Steinbecker - these are the people you've been detailed to ferry out of her."

The pilot contemplated him silently for a moment.

"I'm Flight Officer Conroy and this is Flight Sergeant Brooke - Sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Steinbecker - we're received no instructions to ferry you or anybody else out of here. We've been diverted to this strip because our destination doesn't exist anymore."

Underlying the military crispness, there was a note of total hopelessness.

"I might add - communications are disrupted and we've been out of touch with Command for about two hours. I guess we won't be going anywhere unless ordered!"

"You can't be serious!" Carl stammered. "Damn it man - don't you know what's happened to the city?"

"We're here, Mr. Steinbecker - does that answer your question?"

"Then, you must realise that a radiation cloud is heading our way and we've got to get out of here - "

"I've no instructions, Mr. Steinbecker - this is a military aircraft, assigned to other duties. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll report to the tower - or what's left of it."

"There is no tower! The place is wrecked - can't you understand?"

There's no one here! I don't know if they're dead, or whether they've been evacuated. There's no one to report to!"

"I'll take a look for myself, if you have no objections."

Carl shrugged helplessly in the darkness.

"Please yourself - I'm not telling any lies."

They watched the two airmen walk over to the remains of the shacks and gantry.

"Even if you could talk them into taking us, they can't take off in this light." Bill Pascoe declared.

"And there isn't enough runway for the extra load," Peter Attwell interjected gloomily.

"They will take us!" Carl responded vehemently. "They will! It's God's Will! How many more transports do you expect to land on this strip before the cloud rolls in?"

"The strip will not be long enough for them to take off!" Peter argued stubbornly. "With or without us, they won't make it."

"If we can accept what Roy told us, other transports found a way yesterday." John assured him soothingly.

The two airmen were returning, barely visible in the gathering darkness.

"Well! Did you find anything that we didn't?" Carl asked sharply.

Conroy's response was short.

"No - We'll try to raise Command from the plane."

"If you do - make sure that you get your orders to take us along!"

The two airmen clambered up into the belly of the machine through the hatch they had used earlier. The sun was totally gone before they returned but there was still a ruddy half-light from the fiery reflection of the forest fires around the city against the menacing cloud.

"We were not able to raise Command."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that we remain until further orders."

"Even if it means your deaths and the deaths of sixty men, women and children? Even if you have got the means of evacuation?"

"Sixty men, women and children are a tiny addition to the billions who have already died, Mr. Steinbecker," the Flight Officer snapped. "I suppose that sounds callous to you? Have you any idea of what is happening? It's Armageddon - the end! The U.S. and the Russians are swapping hydrogen warheads. Most of the major cities of the world are wiped out. Billions have died and billions more will die of radiation or injuries, with no one left to offer the slightest assistance to them. There has been no distinction between military and non-military targets. Over the Northern Hemisphere, there is a cloud measured in millions of square miles and so dense, you can't tell the difference between night and day. It's spreading and it will smother the earth. It's the nuclear winter the scientists have been talking about. Nothing will remain alive on the face of the earth in a matter of a few weeks. So you will

forgive me if I don't sound sympathetic to your problems!"

They glared into each other's faces, their features thrown into red and black contours by the dark red glow from the fiery sky.

"Not all will die and there won't be a total nuclear winter," Carl said carefully. "Some are destined to survive."

The airman interrupted him with a snort of derision.

"And you imagine that you are some of those destined to escape, I suppose? I'll give this much to you - you've had luck on your side to get this far - but now your luck has run out! It has run out, just like the luck of the Israelis who started it all. They believed they had a special destiny too, they believed they would never be conquered. They believed their nation was invincible - now they're wailing another tune - those that are left of them. But they're not wailing at their Wailing Wall in Jerusalem - that's gone, so has the rest of the city - the Soviets saw to that, together with Tel Aviv and their other major centres. I said this was Armageddon and I wasn't exaggerating. The last word we had from the Middle East was that the Israelis were making a last stand of the Plain of Esdraelon, near the old fortress of Megiddo - isn't it poetic justice? The Battle of Armageddon is really taking place on the traditional site - while the rest of the world bleeds to death!"

"So! The scriptures are being fulfilled literally," Carl answered. "Did you expect anything else? All right, Flight Officer Conroy, I've been patient with you and I've tried reason, now I'm going to give you a short scripture lesson. The prophecies of the bible are being fulfilled, not only on the Plain of Esdraelon but everywhere. God's purpose will not be thwarted by man's resistance or stubbornness. I tell you this - you will fly us out of here, not because I say you will, but because God says you will! You might defy me but you had better think twice before you start to defy the God you seem so eager to meet face to face!"

Conroy eased his hand down towards the holster at his hip. The move wasn't lost on Carl.

"That won't help you - against me, or my God."

"Just so that you remember that it is there, Mr. Steinbecker."

Carl nodded curtly - he looked across at the Flight Sergeant, who hadn't said a word during the exchange. The man's face was impassive - there was no hint of sympathy.

"The Flight Sergeant and myself will sleep on the plane tonight - just so that you don't get any ideas - "

"If it makes you sleep any easier - we have no pilots in our party."

Carl led the group away from the aircraft, back to the broken down huts. They held a council of war.

"Can we be sure that this is the wings you talked about?" Bert Harris questioned.

"For the time being, we can take that as read," John interjected. "Like Carl said - how many more transporters can we expect to land here?" There was a general murmur of agreement.

"So, it comes back to the bone-headedness of one man," declared Bill Pascoe. "Something ought to be done about him!"

Carl let them carry on.

"Such as what? He has a gun - "

"Not to mention his crewman - "

"That makes two men and one gun - maybe two guns - there's sixty of us - "

"We do nothing!" Carl interjected emphatically. "We do nothing, because we have no need to do anything. We're New Apostolics and we aren't about to start acting like those who stripped us of everything and who ended up swallowed by the earth. Have you forgotten who we are and why the plane has been provided? Regardless of what Conroy has to say, God will take a hand."

"So, we just sit and wait, while our children go hungry and cold and the cloud gets nearer!"

Bert Harris summed up the general disgust. Carl agreed calmly.

"Just as we sat in the dust and waited all day for Our Father to provide."

"We have nothing to eat and we face a cold night." Sr. Heston spoke from the darkness.

"We can stand the cold and even a little hunger - and God knows that too - " John spoke out.

"We ought to stand guard." someone suggested. "There might be other bands of refugees who saw the plane land."

"We have nothing to steal - "

"They wouldn't know that - How about it, Carl?"

"I'll stand and watch for a while - I have some thinking - and praying - to do."

He walked apart from them towards the strip. It was like moving under infrared light. The fiery cloud over the city had not lessened in intensity. He shuddered to think of what it would have been like when the fireballs had exploded. In a moment, normalcy would have given way to searing pain - to annihilation. He tried not to think of those he had known - the neighbours and their children - friends with whom they had shared occasions - even Mrs. Bellamy. The New Apostolics who had remained to take their chances with the city - June Meredith came to mind. He tried to stop his imagination reaching to far - she had been a beautiful girl and even if she had survived, she might be dreadfully disfigured or waiting death from radiation.

He was faced with the nagging doubt that their flight might have been worthless after all. In front of the others, he had maintained an inflexible certainty that the Lord would provide. There had to be something more than waiting for a lingering death from radiation. He had to be right that it was God's intention that they should be lifted up to a place reserved for them in the wild. Surely, it wasn't going to end dependent upon the whim of one man who stood between them and their means of safety?

He was a little surprised to find that he had walked nearly to the end of the strip. The large plane stood silently where it had turned. Carl contemplated it for a long time - it had to be the two wings given to the woman - it couldn't be otherwise! He shrugged and turned back to walk the way he had come. He jumped back in fright, as he confronted the man who had quietly joined him. He had moved very softly. It was the Flight Sergeant.

"Sorry to startle you - you were deep in thought."

"I didn't hear you come - "

"I didn't want to announce my movements to the world."

Carl searched his face in the red half-light. He was younger than the Flight Officer, perhaps in his early twenties. His features were open and pleasant enough, even though he looked desperately tired.

"Jack Conroy isn't a bad sort, Mr. Steinbecker. He does things by the book and expects everyone else to do the same."

"I attempt to do things by the book too - although, it's a different book."

"I know that - You mentioned New Apostolics earlier."

Carl stiffened.

"You've heard of the New Apostolics?"

"You might say - through a third party."

"I see - "

"I've got to make this quick - get your people ready by first light."

"Ready?"

"Ready to leave!"

Brookes turned and walked swiftly back to the darkened aircraft. Carl wondered if Conroy had seen them talking. It would depend on whether he was suspicious enough to keep an eye on his crewman. Carl went back to the rest of the group. He explained the conversation to them, trying to keep down the excitement it created.

"I have no idea of what he can do - or what he means, but be ready - "

They snatched what little sleep they could. It was cold and they were hungry. Long before first light, they were ready for whatever the Flight Sergeant had in mind. Carl led them along the strip in the darkness and told them to lay down in the tall grass and keep quiet. The plane was only a matter of a dozen metres from them. It was still in darkness and silent.

Carl looked up at the sky, he could still see the stars, which meant that