

CHAPTER 8

A deputation awaited them, as they descended the last slope into Devil Town. June looked into the grimy, haggard faces of about twenty men and women, some carried children. It didn't have the appearance of a war party.

David opened the conversation.

"Greetings - "

Taggart was at the front of the group, he stepped forward.

"Greetings - and welcome."

June had a feeling of unreality and marvelled at the change of attitude in such a short time. The Town Gang had been a thorn in David's side for over three years and now they were being received into their midst as if they were long lost friends.

Devil Town hardly warranted that name. June wondered why it was named so, possibly it had been to strike fear into the hearts of competitors. In earlier days it would have been a substantial country town. June eyed the nearer buildings and made up her mind that she wasn't going to risk living in any one of them. They were in a state of total ruin, with the remaining walls teetering at crazy angles, ready for the slightest touch to send them falling.

She looked beyond the man that had greeted her, into the faces of the women. They were watching her with equal wariness. Some held their children close to them, swaddled in the folds of tattered blanket pieces. Others were more openly exposing the youngsters to the sun. She wondered if she could ever become friends with them, or if she would be closed out of their circle. She realised suddenly, that it was over three years since she had seen anyone other than David or her son and that the last woman she had spoken to had been one of the unfortunates being herded across the plains

by the horsemen from whom they had escaped.

The group closed in around them, it didn't seem to be a hostile gesture, rather it was almost protective, as if they had been assimilated into the community. There was no animation in the faces around them. David was trying to keep up an inconsequential conversation with Taggert, as if his previous contact with him had been all sweetness and light. June glanced at his face, it still bore the traces of what they had done to him. The only evidence of the Kingdom of Peace and the change it had brought, was that the previous hostility had evaporated away. What had replaced that hostility was a kind of apathy, a kind of waiting for an infusion of emotions that hadn't yet happened.

They picked their way through the ruins of the town, following the line of what had once been a main street. They kept to the middle of it, for on each side were piles of broken stones and debris, shaken down by the aftershock of the nuclear detonations. The area was scorched and lifeless. The fire storm that had followed, must have been a terrorising nightmare for the original, luckless inhabitants. She wondered if any of those who surrounded them dated from those earlier days, or if this community had been refugees from some other area, possibly even the city itself.

She looked back when the group came to a standstill, beyond those who had brought up the rear. There was no sign of 'Jones', the stranger they had met on the road. She turned to the front again. Taggert was explaining the reason for stopping.

"We've sent for the other groups who live in the forest and the hills. There's no food left and we're going to starve unless we move out and find some more. I reckon that we'll have more chance if we combine to make a bigger group."

David said nothing, it was June who asked.

"What will you do if you meet another group as big or even bigger than yours - and what if you meet the Hill People?"

Her questions remained unanswered because of the arrival of another crowd from one of the side roads. They approached cautiously, obviously expecting some sort of

trick. Their leader looked as if he wasn't quite sure why he was even considering entering the territory of the Town Gang so openly. Once again, there was an exchange of greetings and then an enquiring silence.

The leader of the Town Gang repeated his concept of the future - a bigger and better group who would be able to take on any opposition for available supplies. It was a form of words that didn't seem to have the ring of conviction. June spoke up again.

"You still haven't answered my question."

The answer was short.

"The bigger the group, the more likely we are to survive."

"Even if it means fighting?"

Someone else interjected.

"We've fought before to survive."

He also sounded uncertain.

"Are you sure you can still fight - or that you want to fight?"

Taggert turned on June abruptly.

"And what would you do - lay down and die? Starve and your child with you?"

Other groups were coming in from all directions. June began to doubt the wisdom of what they had done. It would have been better if they had stayed isolated until this desperate mob of people had moved on.

"I want to tell you what has happened. How many of you realise what has taken place?"

There was total silence.

"Why has the sky cleared after three and a half years? Why are you able to mingle together, when only two days ago you would have slit each other's throats on sight? Why is the air warm and why are there signs of life all around you, where nothing has grown for years?"

She was about to go on when she saw 'Jones' join the back of the crowd. She

watched him work his way to the front and then stop. She stared at him, he returned her stare and smiled gently. One of the women stepped in front of her.

"So, now everything is fine with the world is it? With your world maybe, the sun's shining, the winter's gone and now the trees are sprouting - you've got a wonderful world but what about this and some of the others here."

The bitter voice stopped and she pulled aside the filthy blanket that covered the head of her child. June forced herself not to shrink back in horror. She stared at the child, it was hydrocephalic and drooling. One after the other, the other women revealed what they had kept hidden. Children deformed from birth due to the radiation doses sustained by their parent's genes.

Then a group carried a man forward through the crowd and uncovered his head. The features were smeared. It was the only word that came to June's mind - smeared, as if they had melted and had flowed.

"He's just one of many who survived the fire storm. Some others are worse - "
Taggert spoke in her ear.

"How does it happen that you and your child and your man, are untouched?"

There was no venom in the question, just curiosity. She looked at 'Jones' and saw that he was waiting for her to respond.

"We were under Godly protection - we had special care during the three and a half years of the destruction."

The crowd was silent, then someone called out.

"What made you so special? Didn't the rest of us matter?"

June shook her head wearily. Why was she expected to carry the burden of answering such questions - especially when one stood by silently, who was better qualified to answer. When she looked up again, 'Jones' wasn't where he had been standing. She wondered if she could have been so totally wrong - perhaps he was just another traveller, summoned to join the rest of the growing group. They now numbered

several hundred. Then she saw him, moving through the crowd again until he stood next to Taggert. She pointed to him.

"He can answer all your questions!"

He turned to look at her and his eyes seemed to burn through her. Her heart started to race and she dropped to her knees. David joined her after a moment of bewildered hesitation.

"Sister, you saw what others could not see."

It was a commendation - approval, warmth and love. She thought her heart would burst. 'Jones' walked over to the woman who had showed her child. He held out his arms for the infant, staring intently into the woman's eyes. She hesitated for a moment and then responded to something in the look and handed him the child. June blinked the tears from her eyes and watched him cradle the swollen head. One hand brushed lightly across the baby's forehead, as if to sweep away a stray lock of hair and then the same hand stroked the mouth and features. June watched his face, the intensity of the expression transfixed her.

He handed the child back to its mother.

"Peace, sister."

The woman stared at the child as he moved on and held out his arms for another child. The other women moved around the returned infant, as did some of the men. June caught the murmur of awe and exaltation that flowed through the crowd. Taggert sank to his knees beside her.

"Who is he? You know! - Who is he?"

June swallowed and found her voice.

"He is our King and our Priest - and we are all citizens of the Kingdom of Peace - and Christ is Lord of All and King of Kings - Now can you understand what has happened?"

He shook his head.

"I don't know what you mean."

The crowd ebbed and flowed around the figure of the Firstling, but there was no jostling. It took a long time before he had placed his hands on all the children, then it was the turn of the adults. The man who had been shown to June and David, was carried forward. The crowd grew silent. The Firstling knelt beside the man and gazed into the disfigured face. For a while he was motionless and the two stared at each other as if no one else existed, then the kneeling figure stretched out his hand and touched the angry red scars on the left cheek and then strayed across to the other side. It might

have been a trick of the light, or the increasing radiance of the sun but it was as if a haze of incredible power took place between the healing hands and the disfigured face but when this was past, the features had been reshaped as if they had been clay in the hands of a sculptor.

The Firstling rose and held out his hand to the recumbent man. It was an invitation and a command, nothing was said. The man slowly extended his hand and there was a groundswell murmur of awe from those in the crowd who knew that he had not been able to stir without screaming in agony from the lesions that had formed on his flesh after it had been seared by the nuclear fires. The Firstling took the extended hand.

"Rise - and go in peace, brother."

The man scrambled to his feet, he looked down at his hands and feet and to those parts of his body that were exposed through the rags, then he looked back into the face of his healer. He tried to speak, but instead he sank down to his knees and clenched his hands together and wept.

"Go in peace, brother."

They led others forward who had suffered in similar ways and when he had touched them, they all were restored. When he had finished healing them, he gestured

that they should sit on the ground. As far as David could assess, the group now numbered more than five hundred. They were very quiet, waiting to see what this miracle worker had to say to them. Here and there, one of those who had been healed, would look at a hand, or touch a place that had been a oozing, weeping sore, as if they couldn't believe that they were not in some kind of dream and that the former condition wouldn't return. The Firstling remained standing, looking out over the semicircle seated on the ground.

"I have used the power of the He who was the Firstborn of many brethren, the Risen One. Your flesh is healed but there is much more that must be healed before the Peace of His Kingdom can permeate your souls. During the time of Jesus, there was an episode when a man who was sick of palsy was brought to Him. Jesus said to him 'Son, be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee'. Some of those present thought that He had committed blasphemy, but Jesus knew their thoughts and asked: - 'Which is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise and walk?'. Those whom He questioned could give Him no answer.

Unless your souls are healed, the damage caused by past exposure to the influences of the evil one will still remain, you will have no peace, your souls will be restless and will constantly cry for relief - just as the wounds received during the time of destruction, caused you to suffer and cry out to a God you did not know. Now you shall know Him and you will know His power and authority, for no one will suffer during the time of the Kingdom of Peace.

By the power of Him who brought the eternal sacrifice for all men and who drew to Himself those who could be fashioned to become the Kings and Priests of His Eternal Kingdom, I free you from the ravages of sin and evil and implant within your souls the Peace of Him who first conquered death and sin and hell and who first resurrected and thereafter ascended to the Father.

You have seen a change upon your wounded bodies, that is an outward

expression of the power that has been wrought upon your souls. A far greater activity has been affected there, you have been freed of all your past transgressions, not only those that have occurred during the past three and half years, where many of you murdered your fellow man to steal a crust to sustain your hunger and others raped and pillaged the weak and defenceless. You are freed of the burden of all sin, even that of indifference to the activity of the Holy Ghost, who was revealed to men through the ministrations of the Lord's Apostles."

He paused and looked in the direction of David and June.

"There are two here who can tell you of that activity and whose task it will be to reveal the wonderful patience and faithfulness of the Father of Love, who has pursued your souls and continues to do so during this time in which He has promised that all men will be taught of God. Remember one thing, however, you have been freed from the consequences of your past sinfulness and the power which Satan was able to exercise within your souls. During the thousand years of this Kingdom, Satan will be bound and unable to influence your thoughts, words or deeds. If any man sins, therefore, it will be out of the evil of his own heart, for Our Heavenly Father has not removed your free will. You are given the same choice to exercise that freedom, as was Adam and Eve - be warned by their experience.

At the end of the thousand years Satan will be released once again. Beware that you do not fall under his influence, as did the first human pair. He will approach you through the evil of your own hearts, for that will be your weakness. He will call upon you to exercise your free will and to follow some plausible proposition which he will put before you. You may say: 'That is a long time ahead and we will have plenty of time to adjust our ways'. I say to you: Start as you intend to finish, control your free will, control the evil of your own hearts and submit yourselves to the Will of the Father, and to the Will of the King of Kings, who is one with the Father, and to the will of the Kingly Priests, who are one with the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost."

The crowd was utterly silent, almost as if they were spellbound. The Firstling looked at them without speaking for a while.

"You have so much to learn, brethren - and so much to unlearn. Firstly, you must unlearn your old ways for they were driven by the spirits that have controlled the world up to this time. These spirits have caused a striving nature in humanity. To strive for Godly values has always been a virtue but the spirits that instilled striving after human values, did not originate from God. Now, you must unlearn those characteristics and replace them with the characteristics of the Kingdom of Peace, where each man will cooperate with his neighbour and where there will no longer be strife and anger, jealousy and covetousness. What you will do for yourself, you will be doing for others. In the teachings of Jesus, you will find what is needed. Now will the Sermon on the Mount become a reality. Now those things which seemed so impossible to attain, will be realised. You will learn the value of turning the other cheek. You will learn the value of going the extra mile and will do so gladly. You will become Children of your Father which is in Heaven. He has made His sun to rise on you. I repeat to you the admonition of Jesus: 'Take no thought saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? For your Heavenly Father knoweth that you have need of such things. But seek ye first after the Kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for those things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.'"

Again, he fell silent. June drew in a deep breath, she had been hardly conscious that she had been breathing so quietly, so that she didn't miss a single word. Every word was precious.

The Firstling stood in the centre of the semicircle. In appearance, there was nothing to show that he was anyone other than another refugee from the Destruction. He was tall and lean, a youngish man in his thirties. There was something vaguely

familiar about him and she wondered if he had been someone she had once known in one of the local congregations before the time of the First Resurrection. She corrected herself, before the time when she had ceased to attend the services so many years earlier. She had a sharp twinge of regret. How different it might have been if she had shown a little more stamina when it came to her faith, but it had been easier to yield to the easy way of avoiding the arguments and tantrums of her husband. In those days, he had been a pleasant enough person to live with - but only if she didn't bring up the subject of her faith or her wish to attend the services. It could have been so different - she might have been standing in front of the crowd herself - a Kingly Priest, instead of looking back at the greatest lost opportunity anyone could have suffered.

The Firstling turned and gazed into her eyes, there was a warmth, a love and she felt the anguish drain from her soul. It was too late to look back and the future would hold a different promise.

"Bring the remaining supplies of food to the front. Let no one hold back!"

There was a shuffle of bundles being passed over the heads of those in the front. David noticed that no one came within contact of the standing figure. When the movement had finished, the Firstling contemplated the pitifully small heap.

"This is all you have? Let no one hold back!"

There was a long pause and then another few bundles were passed forward.

"Let no one look around to see from whence they came!"

The admonition was sharp.

"We will not condemn or criticise each other's frailty in the Kingdom of Peace!"

The Firstling knelt in front of the pile and opened one of the bundles. June caught the smell of rancid food and was nearly sick. She looked at David with new respect, he had never brought that kind of result from his scavenging. The Firstling opened the other bundles, one after the other and then emptied them all into the largest sack. He asked for no assistance. He looked up.

"Let each one come forward and take enough to satisfy his hunger - take no more than you need."

For a moment, no one stirred and the Firstling stood patiently, with the sack opened widely between his hands.

"Is no one hungry?"

A child ventured forward, June saw that it was the one the woman had shown her. It walked confidently, all signs of its hydrocephalic condition gone. The Firstling stooped down so that it could reach into the sack. The child didn't hesitate, scooping in with both hands and extracting a great chunk of bread. June caught the smell of it, it was fresh, as if newly baked. The child walked back to its mother. There was no further need for an invitation but curiously, there was no jostling or competition. The words of the Firstling concerning competition and striving, must have had some impact - at least, whilst he was still with them. June wondered how long it would last when he wasn't with them. As if in answer, the Firstling spoke softly.

"The doubter receives nothing!"

The last one to be served was David. The Firstling held his eyes and stared across the open mouth of the sack. David looked down and saw that it was still full, despite the quantity that had been distributed. He looked up again into the Firstling's eyes.

"For each future meal, you will hold open the sack, even as I do it."

David hesitated and then nodded and took his portion hurriedly and almost ran back to June and his son.

"What did he say?"

June's question was soft but insistent.

"I have to look after the rations!"

"Why you?"

"I don't know - "

David suddenly felt the pressure of responsibility thrust back on his shoulders - it was something he had always wanted to avoid. The Firstling smiled gently.