

...IN TIME OF PEACE

Daniel 11:21-24

'A contemptible creature will succeed but will not be given recognition as king; yet he will seize the kingdom by dissimulation and intrigue in time of peace.'

1.

The old man moved rather more slowly these days, but he was still vigorous and active and the pace he maintained as he stepped the familiar path out to the end of the headland, would have caused many a younger man to protest. He was alone on his daily pilgrimage to the place he favoured most when he wanted to draw aside from the bustle of the metropolis.

He was well aware that in an earlier age, he might have been accused of selfishness, or of misusing the undoubted power he had been given, for this was a place he had preserved as memory of his past. This place had been witness to so many of the events through which he had lived and of a time when desperation and disease and death had so recently been banished. This was a place where he could still gaze out over the ocean which never changed.

The grass had long since covered the site of where the lighthouse had stood. How many centuries had it been since he had had to bow reluctantly to the wisdom of those who insisted that it had to be demolished because of the weakening of its foundations? He had known that the structure was becoming unsound and he had moved to other quarters deep in the hills above the new city, but he had clung to the associations the old ruin had possessed.

The demolition of it had been a traumatic at the time, the structure had withstood and defied the devastation which had visited the nearby city and it had seemed like an act of treachery to have it torn down. The lighthouse had been a place of memories, of happiness and significance.

He wondered why he had been prompted to think about those distant times on this occasion. The demolishing of the lighthouse was ancient history - even if it had happened in his lifetime. He reached the end of the headland and eased himself into his favoured place. It wasn't quite true to say that nothing had changed. Time had had an effect on the very rock upon which he now sat. Even in the mild climate, time and the elements had still mouldered away the tough substance of the headland, weathering and shaping over the centuries since first he had sat and looked down at the turbulent ocean below.

He clutched his staff over the top with gnarled hands and contemplated the infinite blueness, a cloudless sky above a calm sea. It was

the one direction he could still look without seeing the works of man - unless one counted the many vessels that skimmed across the waters in a never ending procession to the pulsing metropolis. He didn't choose to admire the sweeping ranks of man made pinnacles which pierced the sky to right and left, flanking the long beach to the north and southward, on the other side of the headland surrounding Jacob's Bay, before sweeping over the ridge that hide the reclaimed site of the Old Capitol.

He contemplated the fact that he was one of a diminishing number who could still recall that there had once been an old city on that site. Many of the young ones were beginning to doubt whether such a place had ever existed outside of the fantasies of the ageing Survivors. He consoled himself that there would still be a few centuries yet, before the last of that elect group could be expected to have lived out their prolonged lives.

He wasn't quite sure, but he thought that this must be the five hundred and tenth year of the Kingdom. Calmly, he debated how much longer it would be before he would come to this place for the last time. Reason dictated that it could not be much longer before he was permitted to follow Ruth into another realm of the Kingdom. He looked forward to it, without Ruth, it had become a lonely existence, even if the result of their union was all around him.

He had lost count of his descendants, although they all knew him, but he thought he had a family that extended to the fifth generation. Their extended lifetime was a little confusing, it wasn't always easy to decide where one generation ended and another began. He still hadn't grown used to the slowing down of the ageing process after a person had progressed beyond infancy. In his day, childhood had been a fleeting thing, a succession of free summers when he had escaped the schoolroom and had revelled in the sunshine. He caught himself short - that was a glamorised view, it had never been exactly like that. He was getting old and sentimental.

Things had been different though. Childhood had passed quickly, a few years from infancy to puberty and then the turbulence of youth. He wondered how the young people managed now. Their childhood stretched for about one hundred and fifty years and puberty was a drawn out, gradual phase which led to full maturity when they had reached three hundred or more. There was a tendency for them to marry young - if you counted one hundred and fifty as being young. From the age of five hundred or so, would come the long descent into old age - it was something they hadn't seen yet in the generations which had emerged since the beginning of the Kingdom. Only at the end of the thousand years would those who had been borne immediately after the establishment of the Kingdom, reach the twilight years. He supposed that to be the reason why the Survivors were looked upon with a certain reverence - they had aged whilst the new generations had remained young and contributed to the confusion in his old mind, It was hard when grandfathers, fathers and sons remained young enough to look like brothers.

He moved his foot restlessly and a small pebble rolled away over the edge of the cliff, causing a minor cascade of stones - a mini avalanche. He eyed the disturbance without passion, perhaps the rocks had been there longer than man himself and now, one touch of a restless toe, had sent them tumbling into the ocean. A reminder, perhaps, of the insignificance of man

and the futility of this thoughts.

An ocean-going transporter was skimming across the wide expanse of calm sea beyond the jutting headland. It wasn't an unusual sight, a succession of such craft left the loading bays close to the old city, every hour of the day. Old memories stirred again, it seemed to be a day for old memories. On the other side of the world, there were similar ports into which these craft entered. He couldn't help wondering if a dimly remembered old submariner sat upon a similar headland, watching them come and go and if he was surrounded with the generations of his family. It was not something to dwell upon. Long ago, a Firstling had made it clear that he would never see Peter Kharkov again.

It was time to return, he stood and allowed the stiffness of his joints to work loose, before he turned to retrace his steps to the metropolis. He confronted the skyline. The towering skyscraper pinnacles loomed over him, dwarfing the headland upon which he stood. He felt a moment's disquiet - the mighty works of man - like new Babel towers reaching up into heaven - For what, he wondered? For the Kingdom of God was on earth and so was the Lord and His Firstlings. He couldn't shake the feeling that the towering buildings carried the seeds of future conflict - but that would be not be for another five hundred years and what would then be the conditions?

He started to walk back, the multi-windowed buildings confronting him like a latent challenge, like the curious, innocent eyes of infants, which would one day lose their innocence and become all knowing. He walked briskly, trying to leave the past behind him at the head of the promontory. Perhaps it was not a good thing to come here so often. It wasn't that he was discontent, after all, he had helped to forge the new city, much of it had been his responsibility - even to the changing of the name. Pringle's Head had long since become an ancient memory. With the sprawl of the new city eventually overrunning and swallowing the site of the ancient capital, it had become necessary to find a new name. Someone had suggested the New Jerusalem - it might have been Dar. The suggestion was rejected firmly, there was only one New Jerusalem and that was the Bride and the Bride had already come down from heaven in the form of the Firstlings.

Eventually, they had followed the example of the city to the north, where they had renamed their town Bethany - They kept to the biblical theme, Pringle's Head and the site of the nuclear devastated old city, became Salem - the city of peace.

Father Carl had reached the end of the path leading to the barrier. The old track to the end of the headland, which had been so treacherous when dark and in inclement weather, had been upgraded to a sheltered walkway, which even the aged ones like himself, could traverse in safety. It wasn't the only change, Father Carl had initiated the barrier. It was the dividing line between the old and the new. It prevented the sprawl of the city from flowing out along the prime land on the crest of the headland and destroying what once had been.

He reached the end of the track and stood in front of a bland door set snugly within the masonry of the thick, towering wall which had been built across the width of the headland at that point. Normally, the gate was left open, it wasn't his private domain, but out of respect, when Father Carl

walked the headland, they always closed the portal.

The gate slid across silently and invited him to pass through. Father Carl hesitated, it wasn't indecision, he always hesitated. It was a mental adjustment and a reluctance to leave the past behind him and enter once again into the bustling present.

He walked forward through the entrance and paused once more in the small courtyard which occupied the space beyond the gate. It was three sided, a brief resting place for vehicles to set down visitors to the headland reservation. The fourth side opened directly onto the busy trunk road that linked the Old Capitol to what had been Pringle's Head. He was still not finished with reminiscences, this had been the road followed by so many in those early days. The road over the ridge which had been the exit route for the Survivors from the devastated city. Now, it was a multi-laned highway, a main artery connecting the two major sections of Salem and the more distant suburbs strung along the seashore to the north.

A Pod waited to carry him to his home in the hills. The driver looked vaguely familiar. A passenger door opened and the driver smiled affectionately as the old man climbed in slowly.

"Peace, Father Carl."

"Peace, Brother - ?"

"I am Marcus Steinbecker, Father Carl. I'm your third generation descendant."

"My boy! I'm sorry - I tend to lose track these days."

"There ARE rather a lot of us - at the last count I had two hundred and three cousins, first, second and third, removed and otherwise."

"I can't promise you that it will get less complicated as you live longer! Now, enlighten an old man, tell me, whose son are you?"

Marcus eased the Pod into the stream of traffic and took up a regulated position in the flow.

"My father is Paul."

"The second son of Amos."

"Correct."

"Well - at least I can still get something right!"

Marcus grinned at the old man with real affection, he was still as sharp witted as ever but he persisted in playing a little charade that he was going senile.

"Which way would you like to go?"

The old man considered the question. It really didn't matter much, the Pod followed a regulated pattern, computer controlled. Left alone, it would take the least congested route to the given destination. It was all very easy and the driver was really superfluous. He was suddenly glad that he had fought the ancient battle soon after the establishment of the Kingdom, against those who wanted to sit under their fig trees and their vines and eat the fruits thereof, and forget all the advances man had made prior to the Destruction.

To those people, any scientific knowledge was necessarily evil because it had led the world to destruction and devastation. Carl had argued that the establishment of the Kingdom implied the full use of man's intellect for good and peace and not hiding his head in the sand of ignorance. If they lost the knowledge they possessed from before the time of Destruction, they

would impoverish the future generations. The debate had waxed long and fierce and in the end, the question had been put to the Firstling. His answer had been simple.

"It is written: 'Beat your swords into ploughshares'. I have said already: 'Use every resource'. Combine those two statements and use the result for good and not evil and you will give your children a wholesome inheritance."

Perhaps there was something for young Marcus to learn on this day.

"Let us go to the Memorial - it's just a little detour."

Marcus nodded, it was more than a little detour, it was right out of the way and he had other things to do apart from ferrying his aged ancestor around the city. Obediently, he fed the new co-ordinates into the computer. The Pod changed course.

They plunged deep into the heart of the old city from the ridge that divided it from Jacob's Bay. Marcus wondered briefly if the bay had been named after the biblical Jacob, somehow he doubted it. He nearly asked the old man but that would have shown his ignorance. Abruptly, the Pod emerged from a skein of streets around the Memorial and slowed to a halt, as if it had lost its way. Father Carl contemplated the great open space. It had changed little in the five hundred odd years since the old had been swept away in a few moments of fiery insanity. He remembered the first time he had come there after the Destruction, with Myra Heston and Dar and he thought of those who had crawled from the holes in the ground and their imploring gestures. He shivered involuntarily. Marcus was immediately concerned.

"Are you cold, Father Carl?"

Carl shook his head.

"We used to have an expression: 'Something walked over my grave'. We are walking over graves, young Marcus - the graves of millions who were vaporised in three mighty flashes of heat and light, brighter and hotter than the surface of the sun."

Marcus cleared his throat.

"I learned in school that this was the place where the warheads struck - "

"That's the scholastic, cold blooded, factual description. Ask some of the old Survivors how it was - what they experienced. Ask them soon, for they won't be with us much longer. Ask and remember, for you will live into the time when this madness might be repeated!"

Marcus cleared his throat again, it wasn't a subject he liked to discuss.

"I find it hard to believe that those times could return, Father Carl."

"Do you read your scriptures? - probably not! 'When the thousand years are over, Satan will be let loose from his dungeon; and he will come out to seduce the nations in the four quarters of the earth and to muster them for battle, yes, the hosts of God and Magog, countless as the sands of the sea. So they marched over the breadth of the land and laid siege to the camp of God's people and the city that he loves. But fire came down from heaven and consumed them; and the Devil, their seducer, was flung into the lake of fire and sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been flung, there to be tormented day and night for ever.'"

Carl looked across the open space that he had ordered to be preserved when plans had been drawn up to restore the old city. They had called it the Memorial, but nothing had been built to commemorate the event

that had turned the very material of a city into globules of fused glass and stone which had flowed into grotesque featureless gargoyles, or here and there, a shadow of a human being who had been vaporised into an imprint on a stone. No structure had been necessary as a focal point - the site was sufficient.

Carl murmured almost to himself.

"Remember this place too, young Marcus. After I am gone, it will not be long before it will become too uncomfortable to remain. The site will be redeveloped and the memories obliterated and with that obliteration will be added another reason why men will follow after Satan when he offers so much at the end of the thousand years."

It was with some relief that Marcus followed the old man to the Pod. There was no indication that a further detour was required and Father Carl remained immersed in his own thoughts for the remainder of the journey to his home. Marcus left him in peace. He had a genuine affection for the old man - but contact had to be in small doses.

Carl watched the departure of his great grandson and the Pod, back down the winding track between the hills and towards the distant city. He smiled to himself, well aware of the impact he had on that generation. He was some four hundred years older than his descendant and that created a separation that made the so-called generation gap of his youth seem puny, and yet, how troublesome that gap had been in his young days. How much more so was it for the smart young man who had been in such haste to depart.

Carl sighed, it would have been nice to have some company for a change but that was becoming a rare luxury these days. It was a sign of his advancing years and the diminishing numbers of the Survivors. He turned to enter through the door of his home, it took a little time for him to adjust from the sevenfold brilliance of the sun. It was something his old eyes found harder to accept. He was conscious of his age, of ebbing strength and faculties.

He was not ill, for illness had been banished in the Kingdom of Peace, unless it was psychosomatic; the product of disordered thoughts, and governed by the prophetic utterance of Isaiah: 'but the sinner being a hundred years old shall be accursed'. So many had never learned the truth of that saying and still persisted in sinning out of the evil of their own heart - and they earned the consequences. Fleeting, he had a hazy memory of the Councilman, the first man to die in Pringle's Head, before it became Salem.

He walked through the house to a balcony that jutted out over a chasm. The cliff descended sheer for hundreds of feet to the valley floor far below. It was a vista in which he experienced sheer delight. It was a place for contemplation, for preparation for the inevitable moment when he would leave the earthly realm of the Kingdom and move on into another. He realised how much he was thinking about death these days. Some would have described it as morbid. He saw it differently; death was not morbid, it was a continuance, a logical consequence of living.

His usefulness was nearly spent, he was no longer so active in the deliberations and planning which followed the visitations of a Firstling, who provided the impulses for their well being. It was a task to be left to younger

men - men like Joel, his oldest son. Joel was a mere forty-four years younger than his father, but a comparatively, a young man in his prime. He was mature in his assessments and well endowed with the necessary gifts to lead the running of the Administration.

Most of the Survivors had moved on from active duty. These days, their primary task was to recall the terrible times before the advent of the Kingdom and thereby to reinforce the warnings which issued from the lips of the Firstlings - the never ending warning: 'Fear the Second Death'.

Carl sighed deeply, there was no doubt that even now, the warning was falling on deaf ears - How would it be in another five hundred years when the vital change would take place and they would be confronted with the consequences of ignoring the admonition? Jesus had once asked in His time: 'Will I find faith on the earth when I return?' Perhaps that questions could be repeated in another form: "Will there be any who have heeded the warning to beware of the Second Death?"

These were questions he had once discussed with his family. When Ruth had been by his side and when their family had been young and still occupying the empty house. Now, they had gone away and their own families had gone in their turn and their children's children had spread beyond his ability to recognise them - as had been the case with the young man who had driven him - and Ruth had been laid to rest sixty-five years earlier.

It was still a fact that it was not good that man should be alone, he had hoped she could have stayed with him longer, but as he had said so long ago to Dar, it was not a matter of arithmetic. No one could guarantee their longevity. The thought of Dar reminded him that he had not met with him for a number of years. He would be ageing too, although he had once calculated that he could live into the seven hundredth years of the Kingdom. It would be interesting to see how he had weathered the years.

Carl felt a quickening interest, it was still something for him to do; to plan and execute a visit to Dar and his great clan. Dar was now a patriarch who still occupied the lands bequeathed to him by Peter Kharkov, although the extended city of Salem washed around the fields that had once been vineyards. All that had changed. Dar's domain was an oasis in the midst of the urban sprawl - it was a controlled urban sprawl but still one for all that. When Dar died, or when he moved out of the estate, it would be swallowed up and another memory of the former days would be gone.

Carl's lip curled in distaste. The creeping extensions to the city were inevitable, he didn't resent the fact that the population was growing, or that they had to live somewhere. It was just that it was all so self-defeating, as each memory was swallowed, it would deafen the ears of the future generations to the admonitions to prepare for the Judgement Throne.