



**RAPTURED**

# **Raptured**

**A Novel on The Second Coming of the Lord**

**By Rev. Ernest Angley**

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# Raptured

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# Chapter 1

It was an early spring morning, the frosty air still crisp with the winter chill that had not completely taken its departure. Just beginning to peep over the hills, the sun bid a cheery good morning to old Mother Earth. The smell of spring scented the air, and the birds were singing so loudly it seemed they would surely burst their throats for gladness.

It was just prior to “getting-up” time for many people in the city of Alabesta when it happened...

Suddenly hundreds of people disappeared into thin air. Had they all been in one place, the mystery of their disappearance would not have been so confusing; but some had vanished from every section of the city. The people left behind were appalled at the dreadful catastrophe that had struck their city.

Many had gone to sleep Sunday night beside their loved ones and awakened Monday morning to discover that their companions or children had vanished into thin air, taking nothing with them. Almost every home in the city was affected either directly or indirectly. All the babies and small children in the city were gone; not one was left. In some homes the husband had vanished and the wife was left; in others, the wife was taken and the husband left.

It was utter chaos! People driving cars suddenly vanished, leaving their automobiles to stop as they could. Trains without engineers were wrecked; and airplanes, suddenly pilotless, crashed to the ground.

The inhabitants of the earth were dumbfounded as they searched in vain for missing loved ones. People were frantically running the streets, searching and crying hysterically.

Special bulletins unceremoniously interrupted television and radio programs as the newscasters breathlessly announced the unbelievable news: “Thousands of people vanished like magic from the face of the earth about six o’clock this morning! The government is at a loss to explain the greatest mystery ever to take place in the history of mankind!”

Calls were coming in from other cities, states and nations. It was the same heart-rending report from everywhere: people had vanished into thin air. What had happened to the universe that had caused people to disappear suddenly, leaving behind no trace of a clue as to their fate? Speculations about where they were and what had happened to them were on the questioning lips of thousands. There were many bizarre explanations.

Only yesterday Mother Collins, sitting in her beloved church, had heard the preacher say, “The Rapture!” She sat straighter in her pew, listening attentively. Her intent eyes were fastened upon the speaker’s face so that she would not miss a word.

The message was being proclaimed by a young man about the same age as her son Jim. As she thought of Jim, a tear rolled down her care-worn face and dampened her blouse. Surely he had been a bundle of love dropped down from Heaven. He had proved such a blessing to her in the trying years after her husband, Jimford, had been brought home one night, cold in death. She felt, at that time, that life was not worth living; but as she looked down into the little, round anxious face of her boy of three, she realized she did have something to live for. Little Jimmy belonged to her and Jimford. He was their own flesh and blood. That dark time seemed long ago now as she sat this bright sunny morning and listened to the wonderful message on the coming of her blessed Savior.

Yes, Fairview was having a revival; as the young preacher Leo Maspero spoke with scholarly confidence, his voice rang with the Spirit and power of God.

“In the Old Testament, the Jews were promised by the God of Heaven that He would gather them back to the Holy Lands. Since 1921, the greatest gathering in the history of the Jews has taken place. In 1948 the Jews, at last, became a nation once more. Today the Jews are stirred more than they have ever been since God scattered their forefathers among all nations.

“Dear friends, as I read how the Jews have fought for Israel, I realize the coming of the Son of God is very near. As we look for the Son of God to make His appearance in midair, and for the Church—the Bride of Christ—to be raptured, the Jews are looking for the Redeemer of Israel. They are expecting Him to come to set up an earthly kingdom.

“He made His appearance almost two thousand years ago; however, when Christ was born, they said He was not the Son of God, but an imposter. The prophets of old—Moses, Isaiah and others—spoke of His coming, so their unbelief was not because He came at an unexpected time; it was because His birth was too humble for them. Because they could not believe their King would be born in an ox stall and laid in a manger, they shouted, ‘Let Him be crucified and His blood be on us and on our children!’ In ignorance the Jews crucified their King, the Son of the Most High.

“Today the Jews are still looking for their Messiah. There is a Man of Sin, or a false Christ, who will possess all the characteristics that the Jews expect of their Messiah; when he makes his appearance the Jews will accept him as their Christ.”

As Mother Collins listened, her mind wandered to the trouble in the Middle East and the reports she had read in the newspapers. She felt weak, and her heart ached within. It was not because she wasn’t ready to go, nor was it because she didn’t love the Lord and have a desire to be with Him; it was because her only child, Jimmy, was not ready to meet his Lord.

Oh, if he should be left behind to suffer the tortures of the Tribulation or take the Mark of the Beast...Oh, no! Not that! He must be saved!

The young preacher continued: “In the sixth chapter of Revelation, John said he saw the Lamb open one of the seals and a rider on a white horse go forth with a bow in his hand; and a crown was given unto him, and he went forth conquering and to conquer.

“Some people think this is Christ because the rider is on a white horse, but this cannot be Christ because the Lamb—Christ—is the One to open the seal.

“You may ask, ‘Isn’t white a symbol of peace?’

“Yes, white is a symbol of peace; and when the Antichrist comes, he will come as a peaceful king. Daniel said by peace he would destroy many.

“When we say ‘Rapture,’ we mean when the Son of God makes His appearance in midair and the Bride of Christ, the Church, is caught up to be with Him.

“Some may wonder or want to know when this Antichrist will come. In the ninth chapter of Daniel, it is recorded that Daniel was praying and wanted to know what was going to happen to his people the Jews. As he fasted, prayed and confessed their sins, he received this answer from Heaven: ‘Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people.’

“We understand these to be not ordinary weeks, but weeks of years. Sixty-nine weeks of years were fulfilled up to the crucifixion of Christ. The Jewish Dispensation closed and the Gentile Dispensation came in. The Jews have one more week of years, or seven years, to complete their seventy weeks declared in the Book of Daniel. That time cannot begin until the end of the Gentile Dispensation. The Rapture of the Bride will bring to a close the Gentile Dispensation, and then the Jews’ final seven years will begin.

“You may say that the Church must go through half of the Tribulation. This cannot be true according to the Word of God.

“Isaiah 26:20 says, ‘Come my people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee: hide thyself as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast.’

“In the Book of Revelation, one of the seven churches was promised that it would be delivered from the hour of temptation that is to come upon the earth to try all flesh.

“It is not logical for the Gentile Bride to be left here after the Gentile Dispensation has come to a close. Also, if we are to go through half the Tribulation Period, we could wait until the Man of Sin makes his appearance and then count three-and-one-half years; and we would know when the Son of God will make His appearance and Rapture the Church. This is not in accordance with Scripture. Jesus said no one—not even the angels in Heaven—knows the day or the hour of the coming of the Son of God.

“The spirit of the Antichrist is already here, but he cannot be revealed until the Church is gone. I think of the Church as a dam. As the dam holds the water back, the Church keeps the Antichrist from making his appearance. When the Church is removed, then the Antichrist will rush in and make a covenant with the Jews for seven years.

“Everything that must be fulfilled before the Rapture can take place has been fulfilled with regard to the gathering back of the Jewish people into their promised land.”

As Mother Collins sat there with misty eyes, holding back further tears, the birds on the lawn were making melody while the sun’s rays played on the stained-glass windows. She felt it was wonderful to be there and hear the message. If only Jim and his wife Lucille were saved, it would have made the morning complete.

As her mind wandered back to Jim’s childhood, she thought of his little golden-brown head of curls bowed as he earnestly said his prayers. That was always a touching scene to her.

“Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. God bless Mommie, Aunt Jeannie, Uncle Bill, and God bless everybody.”

Those beautiful, touching bedtime scenes caused her heart to swell as she thought what a wonderful man her Jimmy would become. Who knew, he might be a minister; not that there were any ministers in their family, but God might use him. Many people seem to think things like that run in families. Some things might run in families, but when it comes to God’s work and God, He calls whomsoever He chooses. That is God’s way of doing things. There could be no greater honor bestowed upon Jim than for him to become a minister, chosen and anointed by God to deliver His great spiritual truths.

Mother Collins once mentioned this to Mrs. Kirkland as they were talking about what they wanted their boys to be when they grew up. Mrs. Kirkland threw up her hands and cried out in disbelief: “A minister! Susie Collins, you must be out of your mind to wish such a dull, second-class life upon your child. Not I! I want my boy to be famous so the world will idolize him. A minister!” she sniffed. “Oh well, you always have been old-fashioned and straight-laced. But do you know what? I love you anyway; and if it takes Jim’s being a minister to make you happy, I hope he will be for your sake.”

As Mother Collins sat reminiscing about the conversation, it seemed only yesterday that her son Jim was a child. Jim did not choose to become a minister. He was not a child of God, nor even interested in religion. Law was the most interesting, important concern in his life.

“It looks as if the coming of the Lord is so very near,” the minister said. “The signs pointing to His coming have been fulfilled, and He could come any time and not do an injustice to the Scriptures. Who knows? It might be today!”

Mother Collins had read the Book of Revelation and the Book of Daniel; the study of the

Antichrist was always interesting to her. This young man made it plainer than anyone she had ever heard. He made Jesus' coming feel so close it seemed that every sinner in the building should surrender to the Lord before leaving the service.

The minister urgently continued: "The Antichrist will reveal himself, and the covenant will be made with the Jews. The Jews will rejoice, and, no doubt, the bands will play as the Jews march for joy. Remember, they have been looking a long time for this great event. They will erect their temple in Israel and offer their sacrifices to God as their forefathers did.

"I have been told that the Jews have their stones carved out and waiting so they can erect their temple when their Messiah makes his appearance. In just a short time, they will have their temple erected and be ready to offer their sacrifices.

"We might call this man the Little Horn, that Wicked One, the Beast, the Son of Perdition, or other names and still be talking about the same person. The Bible gives him a number of different names.

"Daniel tells us in the Book of Daniel that craft is made to prosper in his hand. That means factories, all types of industries will flourish. The Antichrist will do something his forefathers did not do; that is, he will divide the spoil with the people, making it more convincing that he is the Son of God.

"When Hitler was manifesting such great power, some thought he would be the Antichrist; but Hitler could not have been the Messiah of the Jews because he did not favor the Jews. The Antichrist will favor the Jews above all other peoples. Hitler had them killed by the millions.

"The first three-and-a-half years will be a peaceful reign, and the Jews will offer their sacrifices to God. One day after the first three-and-a-half years, the Jews will go up to the temple to worship, only to find that the Antichrist has defiled the temple with some unholy sacrifice and set himself up in the temple of God, showing himself to be God. They had not believed him to be God, but the Son of God; their eyes will be opened and they will realize that they had been deceived.

"A part of the Jews will flee to the wilderness where God has a place of refuge prepared for them away from the Antichrist.

"In the thirteenth chapter of Revelation John said, 'And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy. And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion: and the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority,' Revelation 13:1,2.

"In other words, John said he saw a man rise up out of the nations. This is the Antichrist with his governmental power. John goes on to say that all the world wondered after the Beast, and they worshiped the Beast. Also, John said they worshiped the dragon, or the devil, who gave power unto the Beast.

"In this same chapter, we see another Beast come forth. John said he had two horns like a lamb, he spake as a dragon, and he had power to call down fire from Heaven. This is the third member to help make up the Antigodhead.

"In the trinity of the Godhead we have the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. In the Antigodhead are the devil, which is the Antigod; the Antichrist, which is the Beast; and the Antispirit, which is the False Prophet.

"As this is a Holy Ghost Dispensation, the Holy Ghost works in the interest of Christ. He is not working to glorify Himself, but the Father and the Son. In that day, the Antispirit will be working to glorify the Antichrist and the devil. He will deceive men with the great miracles he is able to

perform and tell those who dwell on the earth to make an image of the Beast: ‘And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed. And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads,’ Revelation 13:15,16.

“Let me persuade you to make preparation to meet your Lord. He may appear before another sunrise. ‘Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh,’ Matthew 25:13.”

A hush lingered over the audience; everything was deathly still. As the minister closed his Bible, the choir began to sing, “Tomorrow May Mean Goodbye,” and the congregation stood for what he said could be the last altar-call invitation before the Rapture. Conviction gripped the hearts of the people in a great way; some wept aloud. Mother Collins felt the place was covered with God’s Spirit. Numbers were going for prayer; but others were standing back, determined not to seek God in that service. They thought they would accept Him sometime in the future, but not this morning.

The last glorious testimony of those who had found Jesus was given, and the audience dismissed. Amid joy and praise to God for bringing so many into the fold, the people passed slowly out of the church door in two’s and three’s talking about the wonderful service and how near the coming of the Lord seemed.

Mother Collins walked briskly along the road, with the glory of the Lord shining on her countenance. From a distance, no one would have believed her to be in her sixties because she walked so spryly, but a close view of her kind face with its many wrinkles revealed the metamorphosis resulting from the long years of life’s journey.

Hester Bell Wilson stepped up her relaxed pace to overtake Mother Collins. She usually walked slowly, but she wanted to talk with someone this morning.

As she quickened her steps, she wondered why people wanted to spend so much time in church, why they seemed to enjoy it. She just could not understand some people. Why couldn’t people go to places where there was some action? It seemed to her these places would be a lot more interesting. She was told such places were not “Christian-like,” and she did not want people to think she was a little heathen—even though she did not have much “religion.”

Cheeks flushed, black curls blowing in the noonday breeze, Hester Bell hurried to catch up with Mother Collins. With a twinkle in her eyes, Mother Collins looked up into Hester Bell’s pretty round face as Hester, gasping for breath, overtook her.

“Hester Bell Wilson, is something after you?” she asked teasingly. “Land’s sake! A body would think a young girl like you would not be in such a rush to get home on a beautiful day like this.”

Hester Bell fell in step with Mother Collins, trying to think of an answer that would cover up her real feelings. If she had to tell a lie to look brave, she could do that, too.

“You know good and well I am not rushing to get home. I do declare! Mother Collins, if I didn’t know you so well, I would say you saw me trying to overtake you, and so you walked a little faster. Anyway, now that I have caught up with you, what do you think of that horrifying message this morning? I have never had so many goose pimples on me in one hour in all my life. Of all the tommyrot! That preacher saying the Lord might come just anytime...he had me so scared I didn’t know whether to run or stay. Even though I knew it wasn’t true, I was scared within an inch of my life. Couldn’t he think of anything more pleasant to talk about? Where did he get all that stuff?”

Mother Collins listened quietly without comment to Hester Bell's emotional outburst. Suddenly Hester Bell stopped and looked searchingly down at Mother Collins, confused by her complacent quietness.

"You...you don't believe all he was saying, do you, Mother Collins?"

Mother Collins spoke calmly but convincingly and to the point. "Yes, Child, I'm afraid I do. That wasn't something new to me this morning. I have been looking for Jesus for a good many days now."

"You mean it could happen right now as we walk along here together?" inquired Hester Bell.

"That I do, Child. I mean exactly that."

Hester felt more goose pimples rise as a cold chill ran up her spine. "You mean everybody believes that fantastic story about people being changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and the dead coming out of the graves?"

"No, I'm afraid everybody doesn't believe it; but I wish they did. It will be so sad for anybody to be left behind when our Lord comes."

Hester Bell stared wide-eyed for a moment. Oh, why did she ever decide to overtake Mother Collins anyway? Never had it crossed her mind that anyone would believe such a ridiculous story—not even the minister who told it.

"Well, you can swallow such doctrine if you want to, but nobody could ever sell me on anything so outrageous. I wasn't born just yesterday."

Hester tried to sound convincing and pretended she was not going to let it bother her in the least, but there was a tremble in her voice that could not avoid detection.

"The very idea," she went on, "of Gretta Helman being caught up in the air! She must weigh about three hundred pounds. Could you ever feature her sailing through the air?"

Hester Bell gave a loud, nervous laugh; but as Mother Collins remained sober and composed, Hester Bell felt a big lump rise in her throat. What an eerie feeling this "Rapture thing" was! It seemed to Hester a thousand more goose pimples suddenly came to life.

Oh fiddle! she thought. Why does a whole Sunday have to be spoiled like this? I bet if I live through this I'll never hurry to ask her about anything else.

"Do you realize, Hester Bell, if everybody were expecting the Lord to come, this would be a different world?" Mother Collins' penetrating eyes were sparkling like diamonds. "Yes, this would be a different world," she continued softly as though she might be talking to someone closer to her than Hester Bell.

"There would be no lewd movies, no drinking, no wild parties, no dancing, no blasphemy, no homes broken up by divorce, no prisons, and no murders or suicides. Yes, indeed, this would be a great world."

Hester, who had been listening attentively, spoke abruptly. "It might be for you, but not for me. Horrors! I hope nobody ever makes me believe a story like that. I would be scared all the time. Why, I would be afraid to go to sleep—or afraid not to. I'd be scared to go away from the house and afraid to stay there. Mercy! This gives me the creeps! I have always been afraid of God."

"Dear Child, you don't have to be afraid of God. He loves us. In fact, He loves us so much He sent His own Son that we might be born again and have all our sins washed away in His blood. No, Child, there is nothing to fear if you are prepared," Mother Collins said.

"What if someone you loved more than anyone else in the world would write you a letter saying that he was coming to take you to a beautiful place where there are no sorrows, no heartaches or pain, where you would never be sad again or want for anything? He would tell you

that the street in his city was pure, wonderful gold, and the gates were of pearl. You would have a mansion to dwell in, with a river running close by from which you could drink and live forever. You would not have to fear death. There would be no wicked people. Everybody would love you, and you would love everybody. Best of all, your wonderful friend you love so much would live right there in that great city with you. Would you be afraid? Just because this wonderful friend would say he could not tell you just when he would come for you, that you should be ready to leave any time, would you be afraid and worry all the time; or would you go about with a song in your heart, wishing your dear friend would come that very day?"

"Oh, if I had a friend like that, I would be delighted for him to come," Hester answered without hesitating. "Of course I wouldn't be afraid. But the coming of God's Son is different; I don't know Him," she frankly admitted.

"You have not become acquainted with my dear Lord and taken Him as your personal Savior," Mother Collins said brightly. "That is the reason you are afraid. If you will only let Him come into your heart, then you need not fear any longer. Jesus is that dear Friend I was talking about. He went away, but He said He would come again and take us to be with Him. You see, Child, it is a wonderful thought to know someone loves you and will soon come to take you away from trouble to a place where you will be happy always."

After what seemed an eternity to Hester Bell, they came to a white picket fence surrounding the six-room white bungalow where Mother Collins lived. At each window hung neatly-starched white organdy curtains, lazily flapping in and out, brushing against the window sill. The red geraniums on the front porch nodded their heads in cheery welcome. A beautiful grassy lawn kept to perfection and the shrubbery formed a charming picture.

With troubled eyes Hester surveyed the neat, attractive home and thought if she lived in a place like that she certainly would not rejoice in somebody coming to take her away.

"I guess here is where I stop. Won't you come in, Hester?"

"Oh no, I must go home. Mother will be looking for me." Hester knew her mother never expected her home at a certain time. She just wanted to get away from Mother Collins.

"Better come in and have some fresh cookies with a glass of cold milk. I just baked them yesterday. I thought maybe Jim might bring Baby Sue over. She always says, 'Mamma, want kukie!' She is such a wonderful child. I wish she could be in Sunday School.

"Come on in, Hester," she insisted.

"Oh no! I'll stop some other time." Down the street Hester went quickly, thinking longingly about those delicious crunchy cookies. She had to deny herself a spicy treat all because some preacher wanted to scare everybody to death by preaching that God's Son might come just any time and snatch people away. What a world this had turned out to be! Not on your life would she have stopped and eaten cookies—no matter how good they were—if she had to hear more about people disappearing and sailing through the air.

Hester rushed on, almost afraid to look up into the sky for fear she might see the Lord. Finally she arrived in front of a two-story white house trimmed in yellow. Hester took the stone steps two at a time, rushed across the porch and burst into the living room.

"Mom, are you home?" she shouted.

Of course she knew her mother would be there. She was always home that hour of the day. In fact, it would not be long until the gang would arrive to play cards. Hester did not go for their parties—especially on Sunday. Although Hester was not saved, she had a conscience; and it would not allow her to do just anything. She must keep the friendship and good will of people like Mother Collins and her Sunday School teacher. They did not believe in people living and

acting in opposition to God's Word.

Hester whisked through the kitchen; and, before her mother could say anything, she exclaimed, "Mom, the Lord's coming!"

Susan Wilson looked startled for a moment, but answered as quickly as she could gather her wits. "Now who has been putting such nonsense into your head? I declare! You can't send children any place this day and age and feel assured they will not hear something they should not."

"But I should hear this, and you and Pop should, too. It isn't a thing that should be kept secret. The minister said so."

Hester had forgotten she was angry with the minister, and she quoted what he said.

"Reverend Maspero said it might be just any time; and according to the Bible, it looks as if it might be right away. If you are not a child of God and walking in the light of God's Word, you will be left behind.

"Mom, the deplorable, horrible things the people that are left will have to go through..." Hester began to relate all the message. If the young minister could have heard her, he surely would have smiled.

Hester, seeing the fear on her mother's face, began to mix her imagination in with the message. Well, after all, why not let her mom feel a few goose pimples, too, since she would not go to church and let the preacher make them rise on her? Hester felt she had experienced more than her share that morning!

When Hester paused to take a deep breath, her mother blurted out, "Why that's absurd! I don't believe that. People have been telling that for years and years, and it hasn't happened. Nothing but feeble-minded people believe such false doctrine. I was just reading something along that line the other day. A well-educated minister of some big church—I forget what denomination—but anyway, he said some people were forever talking about signs of the coming of Jesus and looking for Him to show up just any time. He said his denomination used to teach that, but they had learned better. He said this is a day of enlightenment, and no one but the ignorant and uninformed believe such nonsense. Intelligent people don't believe such rot."

"Yes," interrupted Hester, "and he is just like those people in the days of Noah. They refused to believe that water was going to cover the whole earth, and they failed to get ready to escape it. The minister said so," she said with triumph.

Susan Wilson's face turned pale at this; she stood motionless, deep in thought.

"It's foolish for me to give this any more consideration whatsoever," she finally said with a dry laugh. "Now, run along, Hester. We won't speak of this again, and I don't think you need to go back to that church anymore. Such stuff as you heard this morning is not good for your nerves."

"Aw, Mom, you shouldn't talk like that about the coming of God's Son. It isn't pleasing to God. Thousands of redeemed saints are looking for Him, and all of those people could not be fooled, now, could they, Mom?"

Hester looked questioningly at her mother. Susan Wilson was much too upset to talk about it any longer, but she would not have admitted it to Hester or anyone.

Hester turned and mounted the stairs to her room. She changed from her blue church dress into more casual clothes.

Susan Wilson moved about, deep in thought, as she prepared luncheon. Yes, she remembered the teachings of her mother who had been planted in Mother Earth years earlier. She, too, had been one of those old saints of God who shouted and rejoiced as she talked about the coming of

her Lord. That seemed such a long time ago.

For the last few years, Susan had not thought much about the coming of the Lord. To tell the truth, she could not say for sure how long it had been since she had gone to the Lord's house to hear the message that God intended mankind to hear. What if the Lord would come? The minister said it could be any time. It was shocking news to learn that people were still believing and honestly looking for Jesus to come and catch people away. She was sure that people of today could not and would not believe a story like that.

About that time Hester bounded back into the kitchen; her mother dropped the paring knife with which she had been peeling potatoes and jumped as if she were shot.

"Scare a body to death! I declare! You don't use the sense God gave you the day you were born!"

"I'm sorry, Mom," Hester apologized. "I didn't mean to frighten you. What's the matter? Are your nerves bad today?"

"Yes! Yes!" she exclaimed, nervously glancing toward the door as if she might be expecting to see a ghost make his appearance.

At last, lunch was on the table. Hester's father had been out on a Saturday night spree; and, as usual, he did not feel well. He was sullen at the table and did not want to talk. Hester's mother jumped at the least noise.

"What has come over this family?" Hester murmured, sliding back her chair. "Nobody seems to want to talk. I think I'll go to Nancy's house. Maybe the balloons aren't all burst there."

Susan looked up sternly and said in a harsh tone, "You will do nothing of the kind, Hester Bell Wilson."

Her mother always stressed her full name when she was really annoyed with Hester about something. Of course she blamed Hester for upsetting her about the coming of the Lord. After all, she was the one who came home and disturbed her peace of mind.

"You will go to the kitchen and wash the dishes. That's where you will go. I am expecting the gang over this afternoon for a game of bridge. Stir some lemon into the pitcher of iced tea that I put on the counter before you begin. If you really get busy and do your work thoroughly, you can go to Nancy's," she added firmly. "The girls would rather have the house to themselves anyway. I hope your dad will find someplace to go, too," she said, glancing sharply in his direction.

"But, Mom," Hester replied earnestly, "what if the Lord should come this afternoon while you are playing cards? Then what?"

Susan looked confused for a moment before she answered, "Now Hester, I mean for you to hush such silly nonsense around here. The Lord is not going to come; and, furthermore, who cares if He does? It is no concern of mine," she added boldly.

What a front of indifference she was putting on. But behind that mask was an uneasy feeling that she could not get rid of.

Hester hurried to finish the dishes, slinging them down hard enough to break; but somehow they managed to remain unshattered. When she began to wash the pots, it sounded as if she were pounding them into a new shape. What did she care? She felt that all people had children for was to have someone to do things they did not want to do.

She began to sing the chorus of "Our Lord Is Coming." The choir had sung it that morning, and it kept ringing in her ears.

Susan Wilson was in her room, dressing for the bridge party. A cold chill enveloped her; perspiration broke out on her forehead like rain drops as she listened to Hester singing.

"For goodness sake, Hester, stop that yelling and go on over to Nancy's. I'll finish the kitchen

myself. Maybe then I can have a little peace and quiet around here.”

That was enough for Hester. No one ever told her more than once to leave the kitchen. She was always ready to go—now with a smile of triumph.

Hester dashed cold water on her face and gave her black hair a few strokes with the comb she picked up from the window sill. Off came the apron and out the back door she ran to tell Nancy about the coming of the Lord.

Mother Collins was walking up the steps quietly as Hester hurried down the street past her house.

“My! how I would like to have the energy of that girl,” she spoke aloud, as she watched Hester’s swift steps. “I used to have that much,” she said with fond remembrance.

There was no one around to hear Mother Collins except her dog Butch, but he wagged his tail as if to say he believed every word. After she reached down and gave him a big pat on the head, declaring him to be the best dog in all the world, she entered the house.

Mother Collins’s home was not large, but it was large enough for her. Surely it was a picture-book home if there ever were one. There was a small living room, dining room, kitchenette (where she ate most of the time), two small bedrooms and a bath. Her Chippendale armchair held the precious old Book that Mother Collins loved better than life itself. It had been her greatest comfort in the years gone by. Hour after hour she had searched its deep truths about the God of the universe, and these truths had become dear to her. The more she learned about Him, the more she loved Him and the closer she was drawn to Him. Indeed, it was the Book of all books; and it gave her the “blessed hope” she carried in her bosom that Sunday.

As she prepared her noonday meal, her mind kept recalling the message she had heard that morning. What a glorious message! True? Yes, it was all true. She had read it again and again in God’s Word. Why couldn’t everybody see it and get ready?

Jim, her only child, had been trained the right way; he knew about the coming of the Lord. She had prayed so many times for him, but he would not surrender his heart to the Lord. In fact, he had seldom gone to church in the last five years since he married Lucille. Jim was a good, moral boy, and she believed that he would make a worker for the Lord if he would give God his life. It might have been different if Jimford had lived, but God always knew best.

The officials of the Universal Bank had been given a tip that the bank was going to be robbed one night. Mother Collins had pleaded with Jimford not to stay at the bank, but he felt it was his responsibility as president of the bank to be there if something happened, to help avert a calamity. Something indeed had happened! There was a gun battle between the gangsters and the law, and Jimford had been shot three times: once in the arm and twice through the heart.

Mother Collins had looked at his cold face, but she did not look through eyes that held no hope. Murmuring amidst the tears, “Jim, I’ll meet you,” she had the consolation that he was a child of the King—and that was worth more than anything money could buy.

Overwhelming pain clutched her heart as she entered the big, empty house that first night after Jim had passed away. With every little noise she had looked for him, wishing, hoping that she were dreaming and would awaken to find that it had all been a bad dream. She longed to hear Jimford say, “Mother! Darling! What’s wrong, Sweetheart? You must have been having a dreadful nightmare.”

Although Jimford had left her the big house they were so proud of—free from debt—along with a comfortable and reliable income, the years following his death had not been easy ones. God had given her a great responsibility (little Jimmy); but the years had passed, and her greatest comfort was that the Lord would soon come and take her to her Jimford.

Many men had looked upon Mother Collins with admiration, but she had not desired the company of any of them. Her concern for Jimmy's happiness and welfare was greater than any other interests.

When she had dressed Jim for his first day of school, she had been proud of him. If Jimford could have seen him, he would have admired his son also; but she would not have called him back if she could. No! a thousand times no! He was much better off, and she and little Jim would go to meet him some day.

She had always taken Jimmy to Sunday School, had a family altar, read the Bible to him each night, instructed him in the ways of God, and brought him up in the fear of the Lord.

When Jim had finished high school and gone away to college, it had been hard to see him leave, but she could not afford to be selfish because she knew he needed to be given a chance to become a success in life.

During Jim's third year of college he had met the girl of his dreams, Lucille. Mother Collins did not want Jim to go through life without a helpmate, but she was very apprehensive because Lucille was not a Christian, had not benefited from the teaching that her Jim had received. From what Mother Collins had been told, Lucille was reared in a home that did not even believe in God. Mother Collins had tried to talk to Jim and tell him that his marriage would not be successful, but Jim was young and in love and felt that he could make anything work.

"Jimmy, you need to seek God and let Him direct your steps. He surely has a mate for you somewhere who has been brought up to fear God."

"Oh, Mom, now don't you worry your pretty little head about me. I'm going to live for the Lord some day. You'll see. A woman will follow her husband every time. You just wait. Some day you'll be glad that I married Lucille."

Mother Collins knew it was no use to say more, so with a heavy heart she had tried to smile and bear the news with cheerfulness.

Jim and Lucille were married; Mother Collins did what she could to help them make their married life a happy one. She moved out of the big stone house that had been her home for so many years to a little white cottage a few blocks down the street. Over Jim's protests, she had given the old home-place to him and Lucille for a wedding present. She did not need a big house just for herself.

Things did not work out as Jim had anticipated concerning the church. He and Lucille seemed to get along splendidly except for that one thing; and, to Mother Collins, that was the most important.

Lucille had been to Jim's mother's church only twice, but she had laughed and made so much fun that Jim vowed he would never take her there again. Lucille did not believe in the power of God and was offended by people shouting. Mother Collins and the saints shouted at her church because they believed in old-time salvation. Jim went to Sunday School awhile without Lucille and occasionally to Sunday evening worship, but soon he ceased to go.

When Sue came along, Mother Collins got out her sewing basket and began to make dainty clothes for her first grandchild. The baby had brightened up her life a great deal, but still that longing for Jim and Lucille to find the Lord was a great weight upon her heart.

At the age of three, Baby Sue had never been to Sunday School except for the few times Mother Collins had taken her. Baby Sue enjoyed it very much and she was thrilled to get the little Sunday School card with the colored picture on it. Mother Collins recalled the first time Sue's little chubby hand held her Sunday School card.

The tears rolled down her cheeks as she prayed, "Oh, God, please save Sue's mother and

daddy so she can be in Sunday School every Sunday and be taught about you. Your coming seems so near. Help Jim and Lucille to realize you are coming and to make preparations.”

Mother Collins finished her meal, washed the dishes, swept the crumbs away, and left the kitchen spic-and-span as usual. She went to the living room and sat in her favorite armchair by the double window. The cool breeze from the lake a short distance away caressed her face. She could hear the bees buzzing as they worked making honey. How busy, she thought, are we? Are we making honey for the Master? How many people have I talked to about the coming of God’s Son? She decided she would go to Lucille and Jim’s and tell them about the message that morning. Lucille would not care to hear, but she must tell them and give them warning.

For a few minutes she bowed before the Lord, asking Him to put the right words in her mouth to say.

With the glory of the Lord on her countenance and prayer on her lips, she started for the old stone house that was so familiar to her.

When Mother Collins arrived, Lucille had not started preparing luncheon. They always slept late on Sundays and ate breakfast about eleven o’clock.

“How are my children today?” Mother Collins asked as she entered the house.

“I feel fine, but Lucille has a headache,” Jim answered with a yawn. “I suppose she slept too late.”

Baby Sue saw her coming and clapped her hands with delight. Mother Collins wrapped her up in a big hug and planted kisses on her rosy cheeks.

“Oh, I wish you two could have been at the morning service and heard the evangelist deliver the most wonderful message I have ever heard on the coming of the Lord.”

Lucille’s eyes narrowed and her mouth curled up at each corner. “Who cares to hear fairy tales? I can read them in a book and sleep late on Sunday morning.”

Mother Collins’ cheeks flushed, and Jim gave Lucille a stern look. Mother Collins had come for a purpose, and she did not intend to be confounded by Lucille’s sarcasm.

“It was so wonderful,” she went on as if nothing had ever happened. “It looks as if our Lord will soon come for His own.”

On and on she told about the message, not letting up a second to take a deep breath for fear she would be interrupted by Lucille. Lucille could be very unpleasant when she wanted; and if one talked to her about the coming of the Lord, she was as arrogant as possible.

When Mother Collins finished, Jim sat in silence; his cheeks had become very pale. Lucille glared a minute at Mother Collins and then burst forth with a hideous laugh. She laughed until she almost became hysterical.

“Stop it you fool! I said stop!” Jim shouted, but Lucille laughed all the harder.

Jim took her by the shoulders and shook her until her teeth chattered, and finally she became silent.

Lucille stood, glared at Mother Collins with hard eyes flashing like fire and said, “Of all the rot and inconceivable things I ever heard, that wins the medal. You don’t need to think you can come over here and scare me into going to your old fanatical church! I’m not interested! Do you hear? Once and for all, I am not concerned whatsoever about anything that goes on over there. If I were going to church, I would not go where a group of irrational people like you go. Not on your life, would I go!

“You let that runt of a so-called preacher make you think you might go sailing through the air almost any time just like that, eh? Of all the nonsense! I thought you were more intelligent than that. I knew you were a religious fanatic, but I certainly didn’t think my husband’s own mother

would be so foolish!”

“Lucille,” Jim spoke sharply, “you’re speaking to my mother! I’ll not stand for your insulting her like this in my own home!”

Mother Collins broke in with her gentle voice; a voice, Jim thought, filled with a sweetness that no one else possessed but his own dear mother. “Leave her alone, Son. I understand. She hasn’t had the training in God’s truth as you and I have. She just doesn’t realize what the Bible has to say about these things. After she unloads and gets all those thoughts out of her system, I think she will feel better.”

“Indeed!” blazed Lucille, “not had the training Jim has had! If that’s what you call training, I haven’t missed a thing. My mother and dad are sensible people, too well educated ever to believe such a fantastic tale as that. You couldn’t make me believe it if I woke up some morning and everybody was gone but me. People missing! The Rapture!” she sneered. “I suppose your disappearance would make front page news. I can see the headlines now.”

Mother Collins watched Lucille and listened with a heart full of pity for the girl so unfortunate to have been raised by a mother and father who did not believe God’s Word. If there were only something she could say to break down her unbelief; but she had tried and failed. What else could she do? There was nothing.

“The discussion of God and of people being caught away is closed now and forever!” Lucille said in a commanding tone. “I don’t want you to ever mention the Rapture to me again. Do you understand? Furthermore, I wish you would stop talking to others about your absurd beliefs. I should dislike for my friends to hear that my own mother-in-law believes in ignorant childishness. They would never cease to tease me. I couldn’t bear that. You are welcome to come to our house any time; but for pity’s sake, please ditch those notions before you come in. Just don’t talk the Bible and God to me at all. I seem to be getting along all right the way I am.”

As Lucille rambled on, tears slipped out and rolled down Mother Collins’ tender wrinkled cheeks in spite of the desperate effort she put forth to hold them back.

After Lucille calmed down, they sat in silence for a while; then Mother Collins arose to go. Jim and Baby Sue followed her to the door.

“I’m sorry, Mother. Lucille just gets beside herself when someone talks church and God to her.”

“I understand, Son,” Mother Collins answered in a weary tone as if all her strength were about gone.

It seemed to Jim that she had aged years since she had arrived.

“I’ll try never again to mention the subject in her presence. I will just tell my heavenly Father about her when I am on my knees.

“Jim,” she whispered, “don’t let her influence you. Believe me, Child, the coming of the Lord is so very near. I know a lot of people are like Lucille. They don’t believe it, but the Bible said in the last days there would come scoffers walking after their own lusts, saying, ‘Where is the sign of His coming?’ Wouldn’t it be sad, Jim, to wake up some morning and find this precious darling of yours gone and then go over to my house and I’m gone, too? That is what will happen if the Rapture takes place and you haven’t been born again. You will surely be left behind.”

“Don’t, Mother,” Jim choked as he placed a gentle hand over hers. “I know you taught me the right way, and I am going to start attending church and give my heart to God. Honest I am.”

“That’s fine, Son, and then maybe you can win Lucille for the Master.” Mother Collins bent down so Baby Sue could kiss her goodbye.

Jim and Lucille quarreled bitterly after Mother Collins left; it ended with Jim sitting in the

living room staring at the pages of the newspaper and Lucille in the bedroom, sobbing quietly.

As Mother Collins walked slowly down the street, she thought of her many friends and loved ones that were out of the ark of safety. She must do her best to live a life of influence and win them for the Master.

## Chapter 2

As Hester ran down the back alley toward Nancy's house, she kept repeating over and over again, "He might come today. He might come today." The more she said it, the greater was the reality that Jesus would soon come.

She rushed past Henry Sawyer without so much as a nod. Henry turned and looked after her in mild amazement.

"Now, I wonder what's eatin' her? It's not like Hester to act like that," he growled.

Hester had been to Nancy's house so many times it never occurred to her to knock. She just opened the door, rushed in, and blurted out, "The Lord's coming!"

"Hester Bell Wilson, what on earth has happened to you? What are you talking about?" Nancy exclaimed.

By this time, Hester had worked herself into an emotional state. Dramatically, with eyes wide as saucers, she delivered her message to Nancy about the Lord's coming. Nancy, who had been washing dishes, dropped a plate with a crash, shattering it into a dozen pieces. By the time Hester finished, tears were blinding Nancy's eyes.

"Why Nancy, what's the matter?" Hester asked, a little surprised by the intensity of her reaction.

"I...I'm not...ready...to go," she stammered.

"But you can get ready," Hester replied, amazed at herself for saying such a thing. She began to tell Nancy all the preparations she could think of. Nancy decided then and there to go to church with Hester in the evening.

When Hester had left home after lunch, Susan tried to still the fear in her heart. She told herself she had heard that story years ago, and it had not happened yet, so she had nothing to fear; but the uneasy feeling kept lingering. Beginning to cry, she couldn't stop. She tried to convince herself that she was just nervous and it did not take much to upset her. Finally calming down, she splashed cold water on her face and applied fresh makeup. The door bell rang. She hurried to let in the first guest to enjoy what she hoped would be a very pleasant afternoon.

When the gang had all arrived and started playing cards, Susan tried desperately to be gay and lighthearted, to chatter and laugh at nothing; but in spite of all she did, she could not completely hide her emotion.

"Want a cigarette, Susan?" asked Wilma Barnes.

"No, thank you."

"Well, what about a drink? I brought a bottle from my husband's liquor cabinet. I bet he'll throw a fit when he finds out! Ha, ha! Here—have some."

"No, I don't want any," she said nervously, looking toward the windows and doors as if someone who did not approve might see her.

"Maybe she's gone religious on us, eh, girls?" Joyce Mason chimed in from across the room.

Susan blushed deeply. She had always been considered a good sport by her friends, and now she was spoiling her "reputation" all because Hester had gone to church and heard that message on the Rapture. Susan felt as if she could spank the very daylights out of her only child for coming home and reminding her of what her mother had taught her during childhood, for causing such fear to seize her heart; it seemed the judgment were just about to catch up with her. Sunday afternoon was the time for revelry; and here she was, Susan Wilson, the life of a party, acting like a softy. Try as she might, she could not dismiss that statement Hester made: "Mom, the

Lord's coming." It kept hammering over and over in her brain until she felt she would surely go insane.

Wilma leaned forward, peered closely at Susan and said, "Susan Wilson, you're actually pale. You look as if you might fall over any moment. Maybe a drink of water would help you."

As Wilma started for the water, Susan lifted her hand in protest and motioned for her to be seated. "I don't need any water! There's nothing wrong with me. Just because I don't want a cigarette or a drink, is that a sign I must be about dead? Now once and for all, please leave me alone! Do you understand?" Her voice was lifted to a high, nervous pitch by this time, and Wilma's cheeks flushed crimson.

"Well, you don't need to be so nasty about it," she sniffed. "I just wanted to be kind, but some people don't appreciate kindness nowadays."

"Girls! girls!" Mildred Wineheart interrupted. "Let's not ruin the afternoon by being at each other's throats all the time! Come on, Susan, relax and take a hand in this game."

"No, I don't want to play another game. If you girls must know, there is something wrong with me—I am sorry, Wilma, if I offended you. I know you all will laugh when I tell you what it is and say it's all a lot of nonsense. I have tried to tell myself that it's my nerves, but I can't get rid of it."

The gang was all ears. If anyone liked a bit of gossip better than they, one would not know where to start to find him.

"Go on, Susan," Mildred encouraged when she hesitated. "Tell us all about it. You know we're your best friends; you can confide in us."

"Yes," chimed in Wilma who was, by this time, feeling better toward Susan.

"Well, it was like this: I was feeling just fine this morning until Hester came home from church."

"So it's Hester," interrupted Willie Mae Lamb. "I declare, children this day and time are nothing but trouble."

"Oh, it isn't anything Hester has done—that is, not exactly." She remembered she did hold Hester responsible for part of it.

"Hester rushed in while I was preparing lunch, and the first thing she said was, 'Mom, the Lord's coming!' It made me so weak you could have knocked me over with a feather. Of course, I told her to hush such nonsense; but she was so full of that message she heard this morning on the coming of the Lord that I couldn't stop her. She just had to tell me all about it. I wish she were here and could tell you as she told me, but I would hate to have to listen to her excited voice telling it again and making it seem so real that you could almost imagine it could happen just any moment. I'll tell you all that I can remember."

While the women sat there with mouths agape, ears alert and eyes wide, Susan told the simple message of the coming of the Son of God. As she approached the conclusion, she paused a moment and looked from one to another. To some this was an entirely new story—it sounded like a fairy tale. To others, it stirred old memories of childhood training to respect and believe God's Word. Great fear seized them; they began to breathe faster, their hearts pounding madly within.

"As you are all aware, the Jews are in possession of the Holy Land. God had promised that He would some day gather them back, and He has done just that."

When Susan finished, they sat dumbfounded, staring at one another. A minute seemed eternity as the swinging of the clock's pendulum on the mantel shouted, "The Lord is coming! The Lord is coming! The Lord is coming! The Lord is coming! The Lord is coming!"

“Now, tell me I’m crazy,” Susan exclaimed, “but I can’t get it off my mind! I’m scared to be alone, and it seems I’m expecting someone all the time.”

About that time, footsteps fell on the front porch. A deathly stillness came over the girls as they sat expecting—they knew not what. It was like a tomb.

The knob on the front door turned slowly, and the door was thrown open. Everyone jumped, then settled back in her chair, embarrassed and confused as Frank Wilson came into the room.

“What’s going on around here? You women act as if I were someone back from the dead.”

“Why, there’s nothing wrong with us,” Susan answered, trying to hide her emotion. “It startled us when you opened the door so quickly. We were not expecting anyone. Why don’t you learn to come in more quietly?”

Frank merely grunted as he climbed the stairs and disappeared into his bedroom.

“Now, Susan,” Wilma said, “I’ve been thinking about what you just told us, and I don’t believe a word of it. It isn’t because it’s true that this is weighing so heavily on your mind, but because your nerves are shot. Sometimes when I watch a murder story on television I feel as if somebody is lurking in every nook and cranny to grab me, but the feeling gradually wears off. This is just the same. It’s only a horrible story somebody made up working on your nerves. I wouldn’t give it another thought.” Wilma made a gesture of dismissal with her hand and shrugged her shoulders as if it were all settled.

The party broke up. A few tried to be light, but somehow the spirit of gaiety had flown, and no one was able to recapture it.

When the last guest had gone, Susan looked all around her, tiptoed over to the foot of the stairs and listened. She could hear Frank’s deep breathing and knew he was sleeping soundly. With a sigh of relief, she moved slowly toward the desk and pulled out from the bottom drawer an old worn Bible with yellowed pages. It had been a long time since she had read her mother’s precious Bible. Every scripture on the coming of the Lord was marked, and Susan turned from one chapter to another, reading every one of them. Her heart became heavier and heavier. Indeed, the Spirit of the Almighty was dealing with her. As she turned to the Book of Revelation and began to read, a greater fear possessed her. The dreadful things that would happen after the Church, the Bride of Christ, was taken were horrible to think about, much less experience.

“It isn’t a fairy tale,” Susan spoke aloud. “I don’t care what Wilma has to say about it. I am sure it is God’s own Word.”

For a long time Susan sat misty-eyed, staring down into the pages of Revelation, thinking. She knew she should be living for Him; and, by all means, she should have brought Hester Bell up to fear the Lord as her mother had trained her. Hester had never heard her pray and had not known what a home was like with a family altar. Susan resolved that she would start going to church in the near future.

At six-thirty Hester came in, her face still flushed with excitement. She had told more than one about the wonderful message she had heard at Fairview Church that morning. Fairview was not a popular church with some of the townspeople; they thought that it was too old-fashioned in its ways, preaching that people had to be saved by the blood.

“The very idea,” Pat Loveman scoffed. “This fanatical preaching is nothing but bloody slaughterpen religion!”

Some of the other churches in Alabesta used to preach and sing about the blood of Jesus, but no longer. They thought they had learned a more “enlightened” way, and they belittled those who believed the whole Word of God.

Fairview Church was persecuted by many, but God had blessed and prospered it. Although

some called the members “a group of fanatics,” they still held to the fundamental teachings of the Word of God, and most of the members lived pure, clean lives. Oh, yes, there were some claiming to “live right” who did things they should not, but that was to be expected. In every church one usually finds those kind; the fact that there are a few hypocrites in the church does not excuse others for not living for God and serving Him in the beauty of holiness.

Hester was not ashamed of the church she attended; and nobody had better say anything against the Fairview Church in her presence, or she would give them “a piece of her mind.” Hester was not a member of Fairview, but she intended to be some day.

“Are you going with me to church this evening to hear that wonderful preacher, Mom?” asked Hester Bell.

Susan fixed her mouth to say, “I believe I will,” but something within her was fighting with all the voices of darkness, saying she would not go tonight. Some other time would do; there was plenty of time for her to start going to church. She had a slight headache—that was enough excuse.

“I don’t believe I’ll go this time,” she answered quickly, “but you can tell me all about it when you come home.”

“But, I thought you didn’t want me to tell you about it at lunch today.”

“Well, maybe I didn’t, but I can change my mind, can’t I?”

At last Hester was ready. As she glanced down at her watch, wondering if Nancy were really going with her, she heard Nancy coming in the door.

“I’m here, Hester Bell. Are you ready?”

“Sure. We’d better hurry or we won’t get a seat.” Side by side they headed for Fairview Church. Susan stood at the window and watched them go, wishing she dared go, too.

The church was almost full when Hester and Nancy arrived. Nancy was surprised to see so many people at a church; the church she attended dismissed services on Sunday evenings so the members and the pastor could spend time with the family.

“They always have a large crowd here on Sunday,” Hester remarked. “We’d better find a seat before they’re all taken. Many always have to stand on Sunday evenings.”

Nancy looked out over the congregation and wished Fairview were her church. The people were all so open and friendly.

Soon every seat was taken, and chairs were being brought out of the Sunday School Department.

When the first song began, Nancy realized more than ever that this church was drastically different from the one she attended. Never in all her life had she heard such moving and wonderful singing. It sounded like a heavenly chorus. The singers actually looked holy. Their faces, lit with the glory of God, had a saintly appearance; but Nancy did not call it the glory of God because she did not know much about God’s glory. As the choir burst forth with, “This is Like Heaven to Me,” Nancy took a long, deep breath. For the first time, she learned the real meaning of the song.

After the singing, praying and testimonies were over, Leo Maspero stood in the pulpit and announced his subject: “Great Tribulation.” Hester Bell and Nancy sat frozen in their seats as the minister proclaimed from the Book of Revelation the horrible things people who missed the Rapture would have to go through. Nancy could hardly believe what she was hearing; she hadn’t known such things were in the Bible. Her pastor never preached a message like that, nor did he talk about the Rapture.

An iciness enveloped her heart as she wondered if her pastor were really saved, if he had a

“born-again” experience like Hester had told her about that afternoon. He never invited people down to the altar to pray as Hester said they did here. He always said if anyone desired to take fellowship with the church, he could come forward and take a front seat; but Hester said that would not save anybody. If Reverend Maspero had not read passages of scripture from the Bible, Nancy would not have believed all he said was in the Bible—it sounded too fantastic.

At last the message came to an end, and the altar invitation was given. Scores of people, it seemed to Nancy, were almost running for the altar. Great fear gripped the entire congregation; people were crying. Nancy began to tremble; hot tears blurred her vision as she thought about the Lord’s coming and she was not ready.

A small, still voice whispered to her to go to the altar. She gave Hester Bell a furtive glance. Hester was standing like a statue of marble; little did Nancy realize the great battle that was raging on the inside.

“Let’s go down there,” Nancy choked, hardly above a whisper.

Hester continued to stare into space with unseeing eyes. She heard what Nancy had said; but, fighting hard to keep from going to the altar, she acted as if she hadn’t. She was not ready to change her way of living tonight; she intended to go to the altar some other time.

Nancy waited as long as she could, until it seemed that if she did not go, she would die. With all the strength she could gather, she broke away from the clutches of the devil, ran down the aisle to the altar, lifted her hands and head toward heaven, and poured her heart out to God.

Hester Bell looked after her and tried to make a move in her direction, but she just couldn’t—not tonight.

The saints gathered in the altar; someone knelt beside Nancy, giving her instructions on how to become saved. With tears streaming down her cheeks, Nancy cried out to the God of Heaven for Christ’s sake to wash away her sins. At last she felt the burden of sin roll away. Never in all her life had she felt so happy and free at heart as she shouted the praises of God for saving her soul.

Hester and Nancy walked home almost in silence. Hester Bell was filled with heaviness, thinking she should have given God her heart; but Nancy was floating on a cloud because she had just entered God’s great sanctuary a short while ago. It was all strange, new and wonderful. She felt so sacred and holy it did not matter if no one spoke to her. In fact, just now she wanted to savor her experience and not talk to anyone at all.

At the gate in front of Hester’s house they parted—one with a heart of pure joy, and the other with a heart of lead.

Hester watched Nancy as she seemed to glide down the street; neither realized what tomorrow would bring. Hester never once thought that she would live this night over in her mind a thousand times before she died.

As Hester moved slowly up the steps and on into the house, the face of Mary Conway haunted her. Mary attended Fairview Church long before Hester ever knew there was such a place. No one could exceed Mary in living a good, moral life, but she was not a Christian. Her mother and father were both wonderful saints of God. Hester thought if she had a good Christian mother and father like Mary, she would surely live for the Lord.

Mary had stood back as Hester had done that night, thinking someday she would seek the Lord, but not tonight.

At last Hester went to bed, her thoughts on how she must soon make preparation for the Lord’s coming. After tossing restlessly for what seemed hours, she finally drifted off to dream of green pastures and beautiful trees. It was the last bit of peace she was to find on planet earth, for her dreams would soon turn to chaos.

## Chapter 3

Lucille was sick during the night, and Baby Sue restless, crying frequently; Jim, too, lay awake for hours. Lucille suffered intensely at times, and Jim tried various home remedies to relieve her discomfort. Occasionally he went to the nursery to look in on Baby Sue.

The night seemed endless, but at last the dawn came. About six o'clock, Baby Sue stopped crying. Jim was so busy trying to comfort Lucille that he did not check on Baby Sue after her fretful crying had subsided.

Lucille's pain had become more severe as the hours passed. Jim would have gone for his mother during the early part of the night, but he hated to waken her, especially after Lucille had talked so disrespectfully to her Sunday afternoon. Of course his mother would have come; he was sure she held nothing in her heart against Lucille; nevertheless, he would not go for her until Lucille asked him to. She always wanted his mother when she became ill, and he felt Lucille would call for her soon. She had told Jim more than once that his mother knew just what to do to help someone in pain.

"What time is it, Jim?"

"Almost seven o'clock," he answered as he came closer to the bed.

"I wish you would go get your mother. I'm in a great deal of pain," she said in a low voice. At last Lucille was saying what Jim had been listening for.

"All right, Sweetheart; I'll go."

As he went for his hat, Lucille called after him, "Hurry, Jim. I'm so sick. Maybe she'll know how to help me."

Jim passed by the closed nursery door without stopping to look in on Baby Sue. He would have, but Lucille was in such pain that he wanted to hurry.

Had Jim's mind not been so preoccupied, he would have listened to the excited newsboy on the opposite corner, but he passed without giving him so much as a glance.

Mother would be up by this time, and the house spic-and-span with everything in its place. Mother would be at the double window in the old armchair reading the Bible—the Book that had been so familiar to him during his childhood. Yes, Mother would have already prayed her early morning prayer. He was so glad he had a mother who knew how to pray. He could see her in his imagination with her silvery head bent over the Holy Book.

As he came within sight of the house, he did not see her at the window. He hoped his mother were not sick, too, especially with Lucille so ill.

As his foot touched the porch he began to call, "Mother!"

It was not unusual for Jim to call his mother before he got inside the house. That was one of his old boyhood habits. Lucille had scolded him often and told him it was not good manners, but Jim continued to do as he had always done since he could remember.

This morning there was an urgency in his voice as he threw open the front door and called, "Mother! Mother!"

All was quiet. If Jim had not been in such a hurry and so concerned about whether his mother were sick, too, he would have noticed the peculiar atmosphere in the room.

On into the dining room and kitchen he went, calling, "Mother, where are you?"

As he strained his eyes looking out the kitchen door, trying to see if she were in the garden, it came to him like a flash: if she were sick, the bedroom was where she would be. Why hadn't he thought of that sooner?

He made a dash for the bedroom. Mother was not there! It looked as if someone had begun making the bed but had only put on the sheets; the quilt was dropped about halfway to the floor.

Jim's frantic eyes searched the room but without consolation. It seemed as if someone plunged a dagger into his heart as the words his mother spoke yesterday came back to him: "...go over to my house and find me gone."

"Oh, no!" he cried. "Please, God! Not that! I couldn't bear it!" Then, trying to fight the rising panic, he said aloud, "My nerves must be about shot from lack of sleep." However, he couldn't convince himself, for the words, "The Rapture has taken place! The Rapture has taken place!" kept hammering in his brain until Jim thought if it did not stop, he would lose his mind.

Suddenly, for the first time Jim noticed the strangeness in the room; and, as he looked down beside the bed, he saw his mother's clothes and glasses lying on the floor. A death-like chill spread up his spine until it seemed to be choking him.

"No! No! It can't be," he rasped. "I won't believe it! My mother can't be gone! Please, God," he begged, "if the Rapture hasn't taken place, I'll get right with you. I make a vow," he continued, tears blinding his view of the room. "If the Rapture hasn't taken place, I'll go to the next service and surrender my life to you."

Some powerful magnetic force seemed to draw Jim to the living room. On the table lay Mother's black Bible. It was open; and, as Jim stared at the page, the underlined scripture leaped to his eyes: "Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh," Matthew 24:44.

Cold sweat beaded his forehead. He cried, "It's happened! It's happened! My God, the Rapture has taken place, and I've been left behind! My mother is gone!"

With tears flowing down his cheeks, he collapsed on the floor and wept bitterly before the Lord. How long Jim cried and prayed, he never knew.

Butch, his mother's dog, scratching and whimpering at the front door, at last brought Jim to his feet.

Slowly he opened the door, fell on his knees, threw his arms around Butch's neck and wailed, "She's gone, Butch! She's gone!"

Butch nestled a cold nose to Jim's face as if he understood. Suddenly Jim thought of something which brought him to his feet with a jerk. He dashed down the walk and out the front gate like a madman.

"No! No!" he kept saying. "I pray God you haven't taken my baby! It's enough that my mother is gone, but you can't have Sue. She's mine, I tell you! She's mine!"

His feet just would not move fast enough. Was he dreaming? He had nightmares of trying to run but being unable to move. Could this be one of those dreadful dreams? He had not heard Baby Sue cry since six o'clock. A great storm of thoughts rushed through his mind as his feet pounded on the pavement. The wind blew his hair into his eyes, stinging them dreadfully; but he barely noticed.

He burst into the front door as if pursued by a legion of devils. Not giving Lucille a thought, he ran to the nursery door and threw it open. The crib was empty! He stood speechless, riveted to the spot. He tried to move his lips, but words would not come. He tried to go toward the crib, but he did not have the strength. Lucille called frantically from the bedroom; for the moment it did not seem to matter. Mother was gone and now his precious baby had disappeared. He would give anything in all the world to wake up and find that he had been dreaming; but it was not a dream. The Rapture had really taken place. Never again would he tiptoe to the nursery door and peep in at a mass of golden curls lying on a soft white pillow.

“My God!” he murmured, “why didn’t I make preparation to meet you? What a fool I have been!”

Lucille kept calling, “Jim! Jim! Is that you?” She wondered who could have rushed into their house with such slam-bang, wild thumping footsteps. Surely Jim would not come into the house in such a rage—especially when she was sick—unless something terrible had happened. What could have happened?...or was it someone else? Could her child be in danger?

The thought of her child being threatened renewed her strength. Although in great pain and weak from suffering, she managed to slide out of bed. Step by step she crept breathlessly, making as little noise as possible. Each step sent fiery pains through her body. After what seemed hours, she reached the nursery door. A man standing in the room with his back to the door startled her—then she recognized him to be her husband.

“Jim!” she gasped, a shrill edge to her voice. Every nerve in her body was screaming.

Hearing his name brought Jim back to the reality of his surroundings, and whirling around, he simply groaned.

When Lucille saw Jim’s pale, drawn face and his glassy eyes, she was sure that something horrible had happened...but what was it?

“What is wrong, Jim?” she demanded.

“They’re gone! They’re gone!” and the tears began to flow again.

He had wanted to spare her from learning about the baby until she was well, but two shocks so close together were more than he was able to master. He just blurted out the news, and then stood there and cried and cried as if he had no power to stop. He was unable to speak further for some time.

“Who’s gone, Jim? Tell me! Get control of yourself. I’ve never seen you like this!”

“Our baby is gone, Lucille! Can’t you understand? Our own precious darling is gone!” he was finally able to tell her.

Lucille was so weak she had sat down on a stool at the side of the door, but panic brought her back to her feet.

“Gone!” she cried wildly. “Where is she, Jim! Oh, Jim, call the police. Our baby has been kidnapped! I told you I was afraid for her to sleep in here by herself, but you said it wasn’t good for a child to sleep with its parents. Now you see what has happened?” she sobbed.

Jim stood without saying a word. Nothing seemed to matter—not even an outburst from Lucille.

“Jim, call the police!” she cried again, but Jim did not move. Lucille staggered to the telephone just outside the nursery door and dialed police headquarters.

“Lucille, the Rapture has taken place,” Jim stated, controlling his voice with great effort, for his brain was going in wild circles; only the world had stopped turning as far as Jim was concerned.

“What do you mean?” Lucille cried, as great fear began closing in.

“Lucille, do you not understand? The Lord has come! Mother is gone! Our baby is gone! Thousands of others have disappeared, and you and I have been left behind,” he choked. “You remember, Lucille, you told Mother yesterday never to mention the Rapture to you again? Well, she won’t ever trouble you now!”

The word Rapture loosed his tears again, but he went on. “Maybe you’ll be satisfied now! She’s gone! She has been caught away to be forever with the Lord, and Baby Sue is with her. Do you understand?” Harshly he continued, “You said you didn’t believe in the Rapture; you made light of the whole idea; but it has happened, and they are gone!”

Things grew dark before Lucille; her head began to whirl around and around. She tried to sit down, but instead collapsed, falling at Jim's feet. He stared down at the crumpled heap without moving, his brain so numb from shock that he couldn't think of anything to do to help her.

The woman from the house behind them began to scream, "My children are gone! Help! Help! Something dreadful has happened to my children! Please, somebody help me!"

Jim was too absorbed in his own trouble to be of any help to anybody. "Oh, if only I had made the Rapture!" he said aloud. "I had so many opportunities to get right with God, but I put them all off. I thought I had plenty of time."

As he stood numbly over Lucille, thinking of his past, he was reminded of the many times his mother had given him warning. Only yesterday she had warned him. He always put her off until a future date, and now the Rapture had taken place. He never thought it would come in his day. People had talked about it for generations, but it had not happened until today; and he and Lucille had not been ready.

Lucille moaned softly as she regained consciousness. At last Jim went to the bathroom and came back with a glass of water and a wet towel. He lifted her head off the floor, bathed her face with the cool towel, and pressed the glass to her feverish lips. Then he picked her up and carried her back to bed as if she were a young child. He tried to console her as she came back to the realization of what had happened.

"I want my baby! Please, Jim, find my baby!" she cried.

Jim tried to tell her they could get right with God and go to be with Mother and Baby Sue one day, but Lucille seemed not to hear.

Jim called the doctor's office, but no one answered. Then he remembered that office hours had not yet begun, so he dialed the doctor's home. No one answered. What an awful uproar the world must be in, Jim thought.

He decided to go to the drugstore and buy some sleeping tablets. It was not good for Lucille to be in a constant state of hysteria like this.

Jim felt he would welcome death. What had he to live for with his mother and baby gone?

The radio in the kitchen was playing soft music; then like a bolt of lightning, the program was interrupted, and a highly agitated voice began to speak:

"We bring you a further update on the catastrophic event that took place about six o'clock this morning. Thousands have disappeared from all over the nation and other countries, too. Reports are still filtering in."

Wide-eyed and breathless, Jim listened as the newscaster continued: "One man said he and his wife awoke about five o'clock and everything was normal. He heard his wife praying about five-thirty, as was her custom; and around six o'clock, she put breakfast on the table. He was sitting at the table, waiting for her to pour the coffee, when suddenly an eerie feeling came over him. He glanced down at his watch; and as he did, he felt a sweeping wind. When he looked up, the chair was empty and his wife gone. He could scarcely believe his eyes. She had been there just a moment before. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, but his wife was still gone. She could not have gotten out that quickly without his seeing her. He sat there puzzled, trying to figure it all out. She had disappeared as if by some kind of magic. He called her name and searched the house inside and out, but he could not find her. He thought maybe she was playing a joke on him, and so he went back to the table and tried to eat; but the feeling of uneasiness still lingered.

"He said it came over him like a flash what had happened: the Son of God had come and taken His Bride, the Children of God!"

There were many other similar experiences described, but Jim didn't listen; he hurried out to

the drugstore. His morning copy of *The Alabesta Tribune* lay on the porch, and with it, a hastily printed additional front page. Jim picked it up, unrolled it. The words **“THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE HAVE MYSTERIOUSLY DISAPPEARED!”** danced before his eyes in screaming banner headlines. It somehow seemed unnatural to Jim for the birds still to be singing, the sun shining today. There was nothing to be happy about. Why shouldn't the whole world be dark and weeping with great sorrow?

Just then the front door of Alma Wilcox's house across the street opened and there stood Alma, wild-eyed and shaking.

“Jim!” she shrieked hysterically, “Come here at once! My daughter's twin boys are missing—I can't find them anywhere! They stayed with me last night, and around five o'clock when I was up to check on them, they were sleeping peacefully; but now they're gone! I've searched the house and I can't find a trace of them anywhere! The doors were bolted last night and the children are too small to have climbed out a window. Their clothes are still in the bedroom. I just tried to get the police, but the line is busy. Won't you please come and help me?”

Jim stood still as a statue. Not a muscle twitched. After he recovered from the first moment of surprise that Alma Wilcox had been left behind—she was a churchgoing woman, one who surely would have been ready for the Rapture—thoughts of her life began to pass through his mind as she rushed wildly on with her story.

Alma Wilcox belonged to the same church Jim's mother had belonged to, but she never was the devout Christian his mother had been. If an evangelist would come to town for a revival campaign, she never had time to attend. When the ladies of the church met for prayer, she always had other plans. So it was for the midweek prayer service. When she did go to church, she didn't show much zeal for the lost. While the saints of God at the altar pointed the way of salvation to the lost, she usually sat and looked on. Now the Rapture had taken place and Alma Wilcox, in a lukewarm condition, had been left behind.

“My God, woman, don't you know what has happened? The Lord has come!”

Alma's hands and arms shook, and her knees began to buckle beneath her. “No! It can't be true! Stop trying to fool me!” she cried. “I'm still here. Wouldn't I be gone, too?”

As Jim saw the fear mingled with unbelief, he held up the paper he had been carrying so she could read the bold headlines covering three-fourths of the page: **“THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE HAVE MYSTERIOUSLY DISAPPEARED!”**

From her lips came the most pitiful wail Jim had ever heard from a human being. “My Lord! It's true! He has come and I've been left behind!”

She fell down to her knees, crying and praying as she had never prayed before. “Oh, God, how foolish I have been. Halfheartedly I've served you. Like Peter of old, I followed afar off. Why, oh why did I let the devil deceive me so? Now it's happened! I'm left! I'm left!”

Then, desperately clutching at straws, she thought: Maybe it was not true after all. If she could find real saints of God who were not gone, then she would know.

Rising to her feet in great haste, she rushed through the gate and down the back alley to a little cabin where old Lily, the scrub woman, lived. Alma felt in her heart if there ever were a true saint of God, surely Lily was one. The old cabin, neat as a pin but unpainted, looked lonely and deserted this morning.

Alma's heart pounded with fear as she approached the closed door. She rapped loudly, then waited anxiously. Everything was still. She could hear the loud ticking of the clock on the dresser inside; it seemed to be saying, “You've been left behind! You've been left behind!” Oh, if only Lily would open the door and say, “Howdy, Mrs. Wilcox,” in her deep Scottish voice...

but there was no answer. She almost imagined she heard a noise on the inside, but the door did not open. Lily was gone! Tears blinded her vision as she stumbled down the steps and back up the alley again.

As she came around the side of her house, she saw Jim standing just where she had left him, staring into space. It seemed as if he had aged fifteen years since yesterday. His shoulders, which had always been held straight, were stooped now in despair. His hair was tousled and he looked extremely haggard.

As she approached him, she tried to sound calm: “Jim, I just went over to Lily’s cabin, and she must have stepped out somewhere. She was not there.”

With this, she burst into tears, Jim just kept staring into space as if he had not heard.

As reality began to penetrate through his daze, Jim took notice of his surroundings. He heard a loud knocking on a door down the street; turning to see who it was, he saw Alma standing at the open door of Zelma Prick’s. Jim knew the story of the Rapture was being told to someone else. A scream pierced the air. Another soul had realized Jesus had come, and she had been left behind.

Jim’s mind was numb; he felt cold all over. Beads of icy sweat covered his forehead.

As he approached Zelma’s gate, she and Alma dashed out and down the sidewalk in front of him. They were clinging to each other as if the other meant life itself. Tortured eyes gleamed unbelievably out from horrified faces.

Jim passed by houses with blinds still drawn and wondered if anyone had gone from them. What sadness there will be for those who still sleep, he thought, when they awake and discover what has taken place.

Jim was so deep in thought that he did not notice the figure of a woman hurrying up the street toward him; and before he realized it, he had bumped into her. Startled, he looked down into eyes that seemed as if they had been to hell and back; great agony was stamped upon the soul.

“Have you seen my husband and baby? I can’t find them anywhere,” she wept. “I awoke this morning and they were both gone. My David is such a good boy—something dreadful must have happened to him!”

Jim looked at her with eyes of pity. He knew what she must be suffering. Must he tell her the truth? He tried to move his lips and speak the word Rapture, but it wouldn’t come. He unfolded his newspaper; and without a word, he held the bold headline before her eyes. She stared at it, read it over several times before it seemed to penetrate her mind; then suddenly a strangled scream bubbled from her lips and she stumbled to the sidewalk.

Jim rushed on blindly, trying to fight back the tears. He had heard people try to tell what it would be like just after the Rapture took place, but no one had ever been able to describe the helpless horror he was experiencing.

Jim saw Alma and Zelma hurrying up the steps of Reverend Hilary’s home—the pastor of Fairview Church where Mother Collins attended. Both pounded frantically on the door. Jim waited, hoping against hope that the door would open and the dear old saint of God appear. He knew if Reverend Hilary were there, the Rapture would not have taken place. After waiting at the gate for what seemed an eternity, Jim continued on down the street. There was no use in waiting any longer—Reverend Hilary was gone.

At last, Jim came to the drugstore. No one was in except Bill, the druggist, who lived in a small apartment behind the store. Jim was his first customer. His grave face brightened as Jim walked in.

“Morning, Jim,” he said cheerfully. “How are you feeling this morning?”

“Terrible,” Jim managed to answer. What was wrong with Bill? How could anyone ask how a

person was feeling on a morning like this?

Bill noticed Jim's drawn face and his haunted eyes and asked, "Jim Collins, what on earth has happened to you? You look as if you are about ready to collapse!"

"My baby and my mother have disappeared," Jim replied.

Bill stared goggle-eyed and asked, "Your what—?"

Jim held up the newspaper he was still carrying; and as Bill read the headlines, the bottle of medicine fell from his hands and crashed to the floor.

"You...you...don't mean your baby...and mother...were in that number!"

"Yes, that is exactly what I mean. Lucille is in a terrible condition, and I want some sleeping tablets to get her quieted."

With trembling hands, Bill managed somehow to lift the sleeping tablets from the shelf.

He, too, had been reared in a home where there was a family altar and a silver-haired mother who read God's Word and possessed the blessed hope. She had died years ago, but he remembered one of her favorite scriptures from Paul's writings:

"Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" I Corinthians 15:51-55.

He felt just as surely as if he had been there and seen it happen, that his mother's grave had burst open when the Son of God made His appearance in midair and her body came forth a new body to be reunited with the soul. If only he had been ready and could have been caught up with her.

"My God," he choked, "I have strayed so far from Mother's teachings that I've become like many others; I did not believe the Lord was really coming." Bill ran blindly out the door, leaving his store unattended—and not caring.

Gone! That word carried greater meaning than ever before. Bill tried to pray, but it was hard because he had not prayed in a long time, and the devil was there to taunt him for being left behind. After many futile efforts to pray, he finally gave up.

The people in Noah's day who refused to heed the call and take refuge in the ark found themselves outside the closed door where the judgments of God poured down upon them. Now, like the people in Noah's day, the saints of God had been saved from destruction and those left behind were in the Tribulation Period.

Bill rushed through the town to the cemetery to his mother's last resting place. Breathless, he reached her grave; and, with tears streaming down his cheeks like a river, he looked into an open grave. Mother had been resurrected, and he had failed to keep his promise.

People passed Bill on the left and right as he walked back to the main part of town. Some of them he knew, but he did not bother to speak. There wasn't anything to say. Men, women, boys and girls, astonishment written on their countenances and fear in red-rimmed eyes, were talking frantically to each other. Some stubbornly declared that they did not believe the Son of God had come, that somebody was trying to play a prank; but facts were facts, and could not long be denied. Too many loved ones had disappeared for anyone to do away with the reality that something drastic had happened.

Buses sped cheerlessly on their way. Horns honked as people rushed madly, hurrying, but

going nowhere in particular. No one really cared whether they reached work that morning or not. Why should they? The luxuries of life, all they had counted dear and had worked willingly for was worthless, their zeal and enthusiasm gone. How disquieting it would be trying to work while thinking about coming home to an empty house where the children would be gone.

Bill had forgotten all about his store. Nothing seemed to matter now except that he had missed the Rapture. He had never imagined it would be like this just after the Rapture took place.

A woman talking to the policeman on the corner lifted pleading eyes, begging him to help her find her husband. For once Bill was glad he had no close loved ones. He used to become lonely, and many times had wished he had someone he could go home to after the day's work was done; but now he thought how sad it would be to have had someone so dear snatched from him as this woman's husband was snatched from her.

Bill thought back to the terrible war days when the boys had to go away. He had gone to the station to see close friends off, and had consoled many a loved one's heart as the train pulled out; but this morning he had no consolation to give his friends and neighbors who were left behind. If only he could walk up to those mothers in great distress and give them hope that their loved ones would come back; but he knew he could not do that. They were gone—caught away to be with the Lord forever.

## Chapter 4

Mother Collins had left Jim's house with a heavy heart Sunday afternoon. She had tried hard to rescue Jim and Lucille, but she had failed.

"Oh God," she prayed as she walked home, "is it my fault? Have I fallen short? Dear Father, show me the way to take. Lucille is so bitter against you, but please, God, forgive her. She doesn't realize what she is doing by rejecting you and putting a wonderful Redeemer like your Son to scorn. Dear Father, give me words that will persuade her to seek you. Help Jim to be strong and break away from the chains of the enemy."

She looked round about her and thought how good it was to know the Lord and not be in darkness as some were.

Every now and then a child passing greeted her with a cheery, "Hello, Mother Collins."

All the children in the neighborhood for blocks knew her as Mother Collins. Their little voices were a consolation that afternoon and warmed her burdened heart. It would have been a great day for her if Jim and Lucille had been saved.

Old Butch waited anxiously for her, wagging his tail. She took time to give him a gentle pat on the head before going into the house.

It was almost dinner time, but she did not want anything to eat; she sat down at her reading table, opened God's Holy Word and began to read. Her thoughts still on the morning message, she turned to different passages of scripture on the coming of the Lord:

"But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words," I Thessalonians 4:13,14,16-18.

What a wonderful feeling to know that Jesus would come one day and take away His own! As she turned the pages and read, she felt that the Lord must surely be coming soon.

"But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness," I Thessalonians 5:4,5.

Yes, watch. That was what she had been trying to do. Maybe in the near future her waiting and watching would be over, and then she would see Jesus.

Before closing the Bible, she turned to Luke 21:36 and read: "Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man."

With these words in her heart, she bowed before the Lord and asked God to save Jim and Lucille. She arose realizing that she must hurry because it would soon be time for the evening service. After quickly washing up, fixing her hair and putting on her best dress, she left for church, not knowing that it was to be the last time she would go to the house of God for service before Jesus came.

Someone stopped her outside the church and wanted to talk, but she excused herself as quickly as she dared without insulting her friend, and made her way to the prayer room to kneel in the presence of the Creator of mankind. The minister had asked each one to go to the prayer room

and pray before the evening service. You could always expect those in a lukewarm condition to neglect prayer. How could people have the Spirit of God and be so unconcerned about the lost?

As she watched the crowd gathering, she breathed a prayer to God that the Holy Spirit would have His way in the service that night. Some were standing on the outside laughing and talking, but on the inside shouts of victory and petitions were going up by some of the dear old saints in the prayer room.

Soon it was time for the service to begin. The singers filled the choir loft; they did not know it was for the last time before the Rapture. It seemed to Mother Collins that she could feel the presence of the Lord in a greater way than she had ever felt Him before. A holy atmosphere filled the building as the saints of God shouted the praises of God. They were not ashamed of their Lord.

What precious testimonies were given! Everyone had been stirred by the message that morning, and each testimony was centered around the second coming of the Lord.

The messenger, Leo Maspero, arose. Before beginning the sermon, he directed a congregational song, "Our Lord is Coming Back to Earth Again." Verse after verse was sung; the words seemed to be lifted by angels and carried to the throne of God. The chorus echoed and re-echoed with joy as the people earnestly sang.

After the congregational song, Leo Maspero began to read: "Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame," Revelation 16:15.

Then he began another one of his great messages to warn the people that they were living in the last days and that the Rapture could take place at any time.

At this same hour in another section of the city, Dr. Morehead stood behind the sacred pulpit of a large cathedral, speaking on the same subject—but from a different angle. The group to whom he spoke was quite different from the group that was gathered at Fairview Church. The Spirit of God was not prevalent, and the joy that comes from Above was not in their midst. It was unusual for the house to be packed, for seldom could Dr. Morehead get his congregation to attend services on Sunday evenings. His members wanted to play bridge, go to the movies or dances, or just stay home and watch television. They enjoyed these things more than going to church. The pastor did not care too much that they wanted to come only on Sunday mornings; it gave him more time to play golf, and he didn't have to think about some old stuffy, musty sermon that he must preach. His pay came in just the same, and that was what he was there for.

Tonight it was different. He really wanted to preach. That fanatical evangelist, Leo Maspero, at Fairview had advertised in the paper that he would be speaking on the second coming of the Lord. Dr. Morehead had been asked by some of his members what he thought about it, so he had decided to announce that he would preach on the second coming, also. Dr. Morehead's members had never heard him speak on the second coming of the Lord, and for a change, they were eager for the evening service. Bridge parties were postponed, dances called off, and many other regular Sunday evening entertainments cancelled so they could hear what he had to say. They had heard unsettling rumors about the sermon that had been preached at Fairview Church in the morning service, and they were alarmed.

The robed choir began to sing in their same uninspired spirit and the congregation wriggled impatiently, waiting for them to finish. After all, they were interested in the message of the evening. Some came for curiosity's sake, but others felt a fear in their hearts from which they wanted to be free.

When the minister was ready to speak, many sat expectantly in their seats; some leaned a little

forward. This was the most attention he had been given since he had come there more than twenty years ago to take over the pastorate after the death of Reverend Thomas.

Dr. Morehead was thinking, as he stepped up to the pulpit, of the condition of the church when he took over. Reverend Thomas was a good man, but he had never had an opportunity to have a proper education. In “ignorance,” he had taught the people “nonsense.” After Dr. Morehead came along, he had erased a lot of that out of their minds. Some of the congregation would not believe him no matter how much he talked and pointed out what the philosophers said, so they had gone to Fairview Church to be with that “noisy” crowd. Oh well, if they wanted to be narrow-minded and foolish, let them go. His church would get along better without them.

Tonight he was very much annoyed to think his people, after sitting under his ministry all these years, could be stirred beyond words by some little upstart of a preacher who did not know what he was talking about. Some had even joined that crowd and embraced their doctrine on the second coming. Surely this little preacher had not been away to college and studied under the great minds of today!

He stuck his chest out a little farther as he thought, “I’ll fix this crowd so they will feel foolish they ever considered the idea that the Lord would come to catch people away—rapture them, as that group at Fairview calls it.”

With a sneer on his lips and a hard gleam in his eyes, he began to speak. Everything was quiet; the audience listened attentively. Some sat with a look of satisfaction, confident that their minister was wise, knew the ways of God and could tell them that the doctrine of the Rapture was false; others felt great fear clutching their hearts and wished the minister would say he believed the Lord was coming one day and they would have a chance to seek the Lord. Dr. Morehead had no such idea in mind.

As he opened his message he said, “I am glad for the privilege to stand before this fine group of people tonight and tell you how damnable I think the doctrine on the second coming of the Lord is.”

The old deacon Edward Abbey nodded his head in triumph and looked at his friend Jake, with whom he had discussed the subject before service.

“I feel that God would have me to put your minds at ease, as you are His children and He does not want you to have unnecessary worries from believing a doctrine the Bible does not teach. The Bible said false prophets would come, and that is surely what we have in a pulpit not so far from here.

“You may ask, ‘Dr. Morehead, what about those scriptures concerning His coming?’

“Well, many people do not realize that most of those scriptures refer to the spiritual man, and are not to be used in a literal sense at all. To tell you the truth, most Scripture is written only to the Jews; therefore, we Gentiles do not have to worry about it at all. I will admit that many of our ministers used to believe this doctrine, but that was when they did not have the education or opportunity of learning that we have today. This is a day of enlightenment, and no one should be in darkness.

“Now, do you think God would have us to be sad all the time? If I believed this doctrine that the Lord might come at just any time, I could not be happy; I would have great fear in my heart all the time. Intelligent people never believe such doctrine—only the feeble-minded.”

Dr. Morehead smiled broadly when he said this, for out of the corner of his eye he was watching Vance Day. He had heard him express his belief just before the service began, and he knew Vance believed the Lord would come some day.

Vance and his wife, sitting in their regular pew, did not receive the statement as their pastor

had intended. They did not seem embarrassed over the sarcastic remark that only the feeble-minded believed the Lord was coming; they knew the doctrine of the coming of the Son of God was scriptural. He looked at his pastor with eyes of pity, and really deep down in his heart he felt sorry for him.

Vance had sat in this pew as long as he could remember; in fact, this was his grandmother's pew on his mother's side, and her mother's before that. There had been Days in this church ever since it was built.

As Vance sat there, his mind wandered back to his former pastor, Reverend Thomas, who never tired of talking about the coming of his Lord. One day he passed away, and Vance had stood by his bed just a few hours before the soul took its departure. Those precious lips that had given out God's Word so many times quoted these scriptures for the last time in this life:

"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord," I Thessalonians 4:16,17.

As he breathed these scriptures, one could see the glory of God shining on his face.

Tonight Vance Day realized why he had sat back and not objected to Dr. Morehead's false doctrine against the second coming of the Lord. Vance had not rebuked him because he dreaded to have him turn scornful eyes upon him and count him among the fanatics.

Vance wondered how he could have denied his Lord and allowed his children and wife to hear such false teaching. His mother had died embracing the blessed hope. It was true: Jesus was really coming for His saints.

The words that were falling from the minister's lips jolted like blasphemy. Vance Day felt the time had come for him to take a stand for his Lord; it was now or never. He did something he had never done the many times he had attended services at his church. With determination written on their faces, he and his wife arose to leave before the message was finished. People looked at them in amazement. They had never seen a Day act that way—they had always seemed so conservative. The whole congregation turned, looked after them and began nudging one another.

Dr. Morehead was bewildered, almost forgetting what he was going to say next. Four or five others arose to follow the Days because they knew where they were going: the Fairview Church!

Dr. Morehead tried to gather his wits enough to finish the message. He wanted so much to pretend that he had not noticed, but somehow he could not manage to get himself under control and feel the self-assurance he had felt during the first part of the message.

Finally the service was dismissed. The outcome of the meeting left some with a greater feeling of uneasiness.

The Days made a straight path to the Fairview Church. They could hear the singing, shouting and praises going up to God before they arrived.

The place was crowded, but they managed to squeeze inside the door. The scene that met their eyes was different from the one they had just left. It brought memories of the times when they used to enjoy the blessings of the Lord in their church before Dr. Morehead came to be their pastor. Their eyes filled with tears as they beheld the glory of God shining on the faces of the saints as they sang praises to God.

They arrived at the service in time to hear the last song before the messenger arose to speak. Vance Day noticed the same calm, sweet expression on the young man's face that he used to see on Reverend Thomas's face who taught him about the blessed hope. He spoke with assurance,

and his dark brown eyes sparkled with the glory of the God of mankind.

“I am happy to speak to this group on the coming of our Lord in these last days. It is nearer than ever before; and as we notice the signs of the times, we know that it is near, even at the door. I am aware of the fact that many are not looking for Him. Some who claim to be His are not really expecting Him to come.

“The Bible tells us: ‘Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame,’ Revelation 16:15.

“Many are walking without the fear of God upon their lives. They are indulging in worldly pleasures of all kinds, seeking the amusements of this life, and not laying up treasures for the hereafter.

“I have been preaching the last few nights from the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation. I hope these messages have stirred you Christian friends and given you a desire for a closer walk with the Master.”

On and on the messenger of God spoke as if he had much to tell the people and not much time in which to tell it. He gave scripture after scripture and did not fear or shun any of God’s Word.

Leo Maspero closed his message with: “Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man,” Luke 21:36.

Tonight was the first time Vance Day had witnessed an old-time altar service in years. He felt the urge to run for the altar of prayer and renew his covenant with the Lord.

The devil whispered, “What will the people think about you? You have been a church member all your life. You’re just excited and worked up; you’ll be all right tomorrow. You have your job to consider; what will the members of your church and your pastor think?”

Vance Day did not wait to hear anymore. He rushed for the altar of prayer and his wife followed him.

Hester Bell was astonished when she recognized Vance and his wife walking down the aisle, for she knew they were Dr. Morehead’s members. Four or five others from their church hurried past her on their way to the altar. Hester looked after them with fear and trembling, and wished she dared do what they and Nancy had done; but she decided she could wait until another time.

That night, after Hester went home, she lay awake a long time thinking about the many things she had learned that day. It was wonderful to know that Jesus was coming if one were ready, but it was an awful feeling when one was not.

As Hester tossed sleeplessly to and fro, her mother lay wide awake meditating upon the coming of the Lord. She had not answered when Hester tiptoed to her door and gently called to her after returning from church; she did not feel that she could stand to hear more about the coming of the Lord. Frank Wilson lay by her side, sleeping soundly. She tried to breathe a prayer as she lay there in the dark, but couldn’t put words together to make sentences. Finally she decided she would go to the next church service and get right with the Lord. Surely the Lord would not come before then.

## Chapter 5

Hester awoke with a start. The sun was beaming in her window and all seemed strangely quiet. Cold sweat lay on her brow. Her dreams of sweet serenity earlier had just turned into a horrible nightmare. She had dreamed she was in the Tribulation Period; the bottomless pit was opened and those horrible animals the preacher told about in the Book of Revelation came forth. They had faces as faces of men, hair as hair of women and teeth as teeth of lions, just as the preacher had said. One of those terrible-looking locusts had just about overtaken her when she woke up.

She lay still a moment, so thankful to be awake and know that it was only a dream. She could hear the birds singing in the Australian pines just outside the window.

Then it happened! Like a thunderbolt from the skies, Hester's bedside clock radio came on with the stunning news: "Thousands have mysteriously disappeared! The city is in complete chaos as people are running everywhere, searching for family members."

Hester almost lost consciousness. The bed seemed to be going around and around; then the room joined in as the whirl became darker and darker. She fought desperately to keep from fainting. The Lord had come! It was not a dream but a dreadful reality—and she had been left behind!

"My God! No, I just can't be left behind!"

Only last night she had been in church with Nancy. At the thought of Nancy her heart almost stopped. Nancy just couldn't be gone! Nancy was her closest friend and had always stood up for her when others failed. She walked to school with her every morning and they were in the same classes. She could not bear to go to the classroom ever again and look across at an empty seat where Nancy used to sit. She could see her blond hair, pink cheeks and the wonderful smile on her face after God had saved her last night. A dear friend like that just could not be gone!

She was barely aware of the newscaster as he continued broadcasting the dreadful news of the missing. Hester tried shaking herself to make sure that she was not dreaming. Oh, if she would only wake up and find it to be a bad dream, she would give everything she owned. In her heart, she felt if the Rapture had not really taken place, she would get Nancy and they would go to Mother Collins' house to ask her help in finding the Lord. If anyone ever knew the Lord, Mother Collins did.

Shaking as Belshazzar had when the hand wrote on the wall in Old Testament days, she managed to get out of bed. How she got into her robe she never knew. A lump was in her throat and she couldn't swallow. She wanted to cry, but not one tear would come. She was as one in a trance. Her hands moved, but they felt as if they were not a part of her.

Her mother and daddy's room was at the head of the stairs. She pounded frantically on the door, but before her mother awoke enough to answer, she threw the door wide open and jumped into bed with them, much too agitated to speak. Susan sat up, rubbing her eyes in confusion, and Frank awoke with a start. They knew something dreadful had happened.

Many things flashed through the minds of Susan and Frank as Hester stared wild-eyed, trembling from head to toe. They thought maybe the house was on fire, a burglar had gotten in; but neither of them gave a thought to what had really happened.

As Hester lay there, she felt she must be dying. Her hands were numb and clammy, and her tongue seemed twice its normal thickness.

At last, she was able to speak. "It's happened! It's happened! The Lord's come! The Lord's come! They're gone! Thousands of people are gone! I tell you, the Rapture has taken place!"

Susan Wilson stared at her daughter in disbelief; and, with a gentle pat on the shoulder, tried to quiet her. She attempted to laugh, but the muscles in her face froze. Frank thought it was some fantastic thing Hester had dreamed up. She was good at creating excitement.

Becoming more annoyed by the minute, he said, "Hester, I just feel like spanking the daylights out of you for coming in here disturbing my rest like this. Your mother will be upset the rest of the day. I know where you heard that nonsense. I've been hearing the fellows down at the pool room telling about some of the unheard-of things that evangelist at Fairview Church is preaching. They think he should be run out of town; and I, for one, am ready to help do it. I forbid you to go back to that church again. Do you understand?" he thundered.

"Frank, you're beside yourself. You've never spoken to Hester like this before. She didn't mean any harm I'm sure. It's not a fantastic story; the Lord is really coming some day...but He has not come yet. Hester has just been dreaming," she said, trying to calm both of them. "After listening to the messages on the coming of the Lord, she thought it was real. I'll admit she gave me an awful scare for a moment, but I'll be all right now.

"Hester, darling," Susan continued, "go on back to your room and get dressed. This is a school morning you know."

Hester had not expected this reaction from her parents, and the shock of hearing the news of the Rapture and now this angry outburst from her father left her dumbfounded. Finally, she managed to speak again; and this time the tears that had refused to come began to flow. As a dam holds the waters back until the floodgate is opened, so it was with Hester. This was unusual for Hester and alarming to her parents. She was shaking all over like a leaf in a mighty storm.

"I tell you it is so! Oh, how I wish it were a fancy of mine, but it has really happened! I heard it over the radio just a few minutes ago. I know it's so—we've been left behind!"

Hester threw her hands in the air and gave in to hysterical sobbing. Susan Wilson began to tremble all over. Her face paled. With pleading eyes, she looked at her daughter and then at her husband.

"Frank," she choked, "you don't suppose the child is right, do you?"

"Of course not," he answered impatiently. "Don't tell me you, too, are getting a crazy notion like that! We'll all be in an asylum if this keeps up. Turn on your radio. It's about time for the seven o'clock news, and I want you both to get yourselves under control."

With an unsteady hand, Susan reached out and turned the button on the little white radio beside her bed.

**"FLASH! THE GREATEST SHOCK AND TRAGEDY EVER TO REACH THE AMERICAN SHORES OCCURRED THIS MORNING ABOUT SIX O'CLOCK. THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE DISAPPEARED WITHOUT A TRACE. IT IS THE MOST UNBELIEVABLE INCIDENT MANKIND HAS EVER HAD TO FACE. ALL THE SMALL CHILDREN ARE GONE IN THIS CITY; MANY ADULTS ARE ALSO MISSING. CALLS ARE COMING IN FROM OTHER CITIES; IT'S THE SAME EVERYWHERE.**

**"IN SOME HOMES A FATHER, A MOTHER, A DAUGHTER OR A SON IS GONE; IN SOME, ENTIRE FAMILIES ARE GONE. WE ARE BAFFLED BY THIS GREAT MYSTERY. SOME ARE SAYING THE LORD HAS COME TO CATCH AWAY HIS SAINTS. WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAS REALLY HAPPENED, BUT THE FACT REMAINS THAT MULTITUDES OF PEOPLE ARE REALLY GONE. STAY TUNED TO THIS STATION AS WE BRING YOU THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THIS**

## **TRAGIC STORY.”**

The Wilsons were petrified, unable to move until the news commentator finished. Susan’s eyes were glued to the radio, and at the close of the news, she let out a doleful cry and buried her face in the pillow.

Frank Wilson pulled himself out of the bed and fell down on his knees, his head in his hands. He began to pray for the first time in his life. He had always thought he couldn’t pray if he had to; he didn’t think he would know how to talk to a being like God, but now he found no difficulty in forming a prayer.

“My God, my God, this incredible thing just can’t be so. Please have mercy on us and don’t let it be! I have sinned against you, and I know I have no right to ask this of you, but please don’t let it be. Oh, God, it just can’t be! It just can’t be!” he pleaded. “Don’t forget us! Oh, God, please don’t forget us!”

It was odd to see Frank Wilson act in this manner. He was never one to recognize God. He had spent each day as if there were no God who had made the universe in which he lived.

Hester’s body still shook with sobs, and it did not help to see her father cry and pray to God as he was doing. Oh, if he would have sought the face of God like this before the Christ of God had come, it might have been a different story for all of them! Now it was too late. It had really happened and they had all been left behind. Why didn’t she get ready last night! She would not be here this morning, but hidden away with the Lord somewhere. How foolish she had been. She had gambled with her soul and lost. The passage of escape from the Tribulation Period was closed. Only last night it was open; but she had turned it down not realizing what it would mean to have no way out.

The messenger who preached last night on the blessed hope was gone. Mother Collins was gone, and all those other saints were gone, too. Never could she go to a service like she was in last night and hear the songs of Zion, the testimonies of God’s people and listen to them tell about the blessed hope.

An empty feeling filled her heart as she thought of the people she counted dearest in all the world who were no longer here. She had never known how much she loved the people at Fairview Church until now. Now they were gone and Nancy with them—or was Nancy gone?

A desire seized her to rush to Nancy’s house and find out whether Nancy were really gone. Hester felt she could bear it much better if Nancy were still here.

After hurriedly changing from her nightgown, she ran out the back door, not bothering to close it. Down the street she raced toward Nancy’s house.

The trees, with their beautiful branches making a green canopy over her head, did not attract her attention today as they usually did. When she finally came within sight of Nancy’s house, sitting back from the road, tall and white, surrounded by well-kept shrubbery and flower beds, it did not give Hester a thrill as it always had. This morning all the beauty was gone.

All the sunshine in her life had vanished, and one thought stood utmost in her mind: the Rapture had taken place around six o’clock; while she slept it had happened.

Nancy’s mother was in the kitchen. This was unusual, for Kate Cline seldom did any cooking. Why was she in the kitchen and where was Hannah, the maid?

Mrs. Cline looked very much annoyed when Hester almost ran into her in the rush. Hester was panting for breath, and one could scarcely understand what she was saying.

“Wh-where is N-Nancy?” she stammered.

Mrs. Cline started to rebuke her for rushing into the house with such disrespect, but stopped short as she saw a look on Hester’s face she had never witnessed before.

“Nancy is still in bed. Land’s sake, Hester, what has happened to you, Child? I have never seen you so upset.”

Hester tried hard to control herself and speak with calmness, but it was impossible with the strain she was under.

“Mrs. Cline, don’t you know what has happened? The Lord came about six o’clock and caught people away.”

Mrs. Cline stared incredulously. She knew something dreadful must have happened because of Hester’s discomposure. Great fear seized her heart.

Then she thought of Hannah, her maid. She had not come to work. Hannah was always on time or else let her know why she would be late; but there had not been a call, and she had not shown up for work.

Hannah was a great one to believe that someday the Lord would come as a thief in the night to take away His jewels. Many times she had told Mrs. Cline about it, over her protests. It was just as natural for Hannah to talk about her Lord as it was for water to run downhill.

She always ended the conversation after they had talked about the Lord with: “You better get ready. It will be too late after it has happened.”

Hester did not wait for more. She rushed up the stairs and knocked on Nancy’s door. She listened, scarcely daring to breathe, hoping against hope that she would hear Nancy’s sleepy hello.

Just then, Nancy’s mother, out of breath from climbing the stairs, said, “Open the door and see if she’s all right.”

Hester opened the door and stared at an empty bed. Nancy was gone! Mrs. Cline could not believe her eyes as she looked over Hester’s shoulder. Nancy could not be gone! Why should Nancy be gone and Hester left behind if the Lord had come?

“Hester,” Kate nervously spoke, “where do you suppose she is? She has never done anything like this before.”

Hester turned tortured eyes upon her and said, “She is hidden away somewhere with the Lord just as the minister told us it would be last night. Nancy took the message to heart; now she is with the Lord. I waited, thinking I had plenty of time, and now I have been left behind!”

“What do you mean?” Kate questioned anxiously.

Hester realized for the first time that Kate had probably already gone to bed when Nancy came in last night, and that Nancy had not told the great news of her conversion to her mother; now she would never tell her.

“Mrs. Cline, Nancy found the Lord last night. She tried to get me to go to the altar with her, but something seemed to hold me back; I thought I would wait and think it over a little longer. My God, how I wish I had gone! I know it must have been a wonderful feeling to be caught away to be with the Lord. It’s all over the news this morning.”

Kate clicked on the radio in time to hear the words: “Thousands of people disappeared around six o’clock this morning!”

Kate pulled the curtain back and stared blankly through the sparkling windowpane to the street. She was not crying. She was too shocked to cry. If only she could cry it would be a great relief. The facts were hammering like madness in her brain: the Lord had come and Nancy was gone with Him.

“What a fool I have been. Many times Hannah talked with me and showed me scriptures to prove what she said, but I hardened my heart against it. I tried to make myself believe that Hannah did not have much education and did not understand the scriptures. Now Hannah is

gone!”

Hannah had a hard time in life; she was forced to earn her living as a servant. Kate had always pitied Hannah before, but this morning she would have given a million dollars if she could change places with her. After all, Hannah had been far richer than she; and she, Kate Cline, had known it not.

To look at the trees and the birds fluttering in the warm spring sunshine, one would think all was peaceful, but the peace and happiness had fled leaving only disaster.

Kate Cline thought of the times she could have gone to the house of God, but was always too busy. She made a pathetic picture as she stood there reminiscing about her past, not moving a muscle or saying a word.

Hester started to say something to Kate, but changed her mind. She turned suddenly and hurried from the room. She must get away from this terrifying scene.

As she rushed through the kitchen, an icy hand seemed to press against her throat at the idea of Hannah being gone. Could she never forget that the Rapture had taken place? Everywhere she looked there was something to remind her that the Lord had come.

## Chapter 6

When Jim came in from the drugstore with the sleeping tablets, he stopped by the empty nursery. As he viewed the room, he had to choke back tears. It was just as Baby Sue had left it the night before. Toys were scattered here and there, and a teddy bear was snuggled in the pillow. A little arm had been lying across it when the Lord came. Sue always had to have her teddy bear before she would go to sleep.

“My God, why weren’t Lucille and I ready to go? We should all be together this morning.”

Jim closed the nursery door to shut out the scene that had always been so dear. This morning it sent pains through his heart. It hurt like nothing had ever hurt before.

He heard Lucille moaning in their bedroom. He must forget his sorrow for the time being and try to comfort his wife.

Again and again she would look up at Jim with tortured eyes and beg pitifully for her baby. No matter how he tried, he could not comfort her. He would have surrendered his life if he could give her baby to her, but he knew he could never bring their child back. God had given her to them, and the Lord had a right to take her if He wanted to.

It seemed to Jim a long time before he finally got Lucille to sleep. Their friends had been calling; just about the time she was almost asleep, the telephone would ring, rousing her. The callers were humble now; and men that Jim had never been able to feature crying had broken down and cried as if their hearts would shatter. It was maddening! If they would only stop calling...Didn’t people understand they had enough sorrow?

After what seemed like an eternity, the telephone ceased ringing, and Lucille was sleeping the sleep of the weary and exhausted. Jim stared down at her; she looked like a child as she lay there with a tear on each cheek. Those tears reminded him of the many that had been shed by his mother for her lost boy, but they had fallen in vain; he was left behind in the Tribulation Period.

He tiptoed softly from the room, choking back the tears, went into the living room and turned the television on low to one of the local stations. The usual program was not on; all program time had been given to reports concerning the Rapture. It was strange to sit there and listen to the Rapture being talked about as already having taken place. Jim had heard it discussed all his life as a future event, but now the news was showing eyewitnesses who were with their loved ones and friends and saw them disappear. There were reports of train wrecks, ships at sea left without captains, airplanes crashing because pilots had disappeared—and there was no end of bus and car wrecks.

Jim flipped the TV off, walked slowly to the door, opened it as one in a trance, and stepped out onto the front porch. The street looked painfully familiar and yet strange. People were milling here and there. Jim could detect the desperation on their faces from a distance. Some were running, some walking fast, and others wandering very slowly as in a daze. Men and women with tears streaming down their cheeks, apparently unashamed, blindly made their way down the street. Looking upon them, he forgot his own sorrow and yearned to comfort these people that were in such great distress.

Just then, a group of people passed and someone was shouting, “Let’s go to Fairview Church! Their minister is one of those who disappeared, and so they got Dr. Morehead from the big cathedral to come over and explain what happened!”

Jim did not need anyone to explain to him what had happened...he knew. It would have been bad enough being left behind, not having known the right way; but to be left behind after having

been taught the right way and what to expect was almost more than Jim could bear. He decided to follow the crowd and see what Dr. Morehead would have to say. He had not believed nor preached the Lord's return, so what would be his theory now?

When Jim reached the church that he had attended so many times with his mother, the Rapture became a greater reality. He had seen his mother sit in the second pew on the right for many years, but a stranger was sitting there this morning.

Jim's eyes scrutinized the faces of the crowd. Some he knew; others he did not. Many had been scornful of his mother's church and its way of worship. They had persecuted the church, but now they were there with pale, drawn faces, like doomed men waiting for the death sentence.

A hush came over the audience as the speaker took his place behind the sacred desk. He stood pale, haggard, looking as if he had been on a drunk. His eyes were red-rimmed; anyone could see that he had been crying. He had cried until he could not cry anymore.

Dr. Morehead's wife had discovered about eight o'clock that their child was missing and called the police; they informed her that hundreds of babies were missing, as well as adults. He could not believe it at first; but facts were facts: the Rapture had become a reality.

Previous to this time, he could stand in the pulpit and tell people that the Rapture was a fanatical idea someone had dreamed up and that the Bible did not mean the Lord would actually come one day. Now it was different. His own child was gone; he and the people he had deceived were left behind.

The eyes of Dr. Morehead's congregation seemed to burn his flesh. He started to speak; but his voice choked, and he burst into tears. This brought fresh tears to the eyes of many that were suffering from the loss of a loved one. Finally, he managed to speak in a weak, trembling voice. A tomb-like quietness fell over the huge crowd as he began to confess.

"Men and brethren: I have been a fool. Yes, I have been a blind fool. The Bible tells us if the blind lead the blind they will all fall into the ditch. I never realized what this statement meant until this morning. Had it not been for me, some of you would be out of the hell of torture you are in right now. Believe me, friends—" he paused for a moment, "if I might call you my friends..."

Just then Jane Sloan stood to her feet toward the back of the building and shouted at the speaker, "Friends—indeed! After all the lies you told us! You were supposed to be a spiritual leader we could depend on to lead us and instruct us in the ways of the Lord. We believed you when you said it was nonsense to think the Lord was soon coming, but it has happened!" she screamed hysterically. "Our children are gone and we have been left behind. You deceiver! You blasphemer! Maybe you are satisfied since you've damned our souls! You are no friend of ours; you have been used as an instrument of the devil to rob us of our souls!"

Someone took hold of Jane's arm and pulled her back down into the seat before she had a chance to say more. If only he could have shouted to this crowd of people and told them it was a false accusation that the woman was making; but she was one of his members, and he had led her wrongly. What Jane said was true, so what could he do?

"My God! Have mercy!" he cried. "I know what has been said is true. I see it all now. Believe me when I say I would give my life if I could right this wrong that I've done. I had a good Christian mother who told me this would happen someday. When I went away to college, I drank in their rotten doctrine, ate their disbelief of the Bible and the Virgin Birth, and here I am—left behind. I thought it was logical, sophisticated; and I went back home feeling that I knew more than my old-fashioned mother. I tried to tell her, but she would not listen; and thank God she didn't because she would be left behind as I am. I stopped going to visit her because I was

ashamed of her 'ignorance,' as I called it. Now, she is gone. I just left her house before coming here, and I know she is gone."

The tears were blinding his vision; the sea of faces before him seemed to swim, but he must go on. There was so much to say.

"One of my members, Vance Day, walked out during my message last night because I was denying the second coming of the Lord. This morning, when I realized my child was gone, I rushed over to his house to try to rectify myself. I discovered he and his wife were both gone.

"We may just as well face the facts. The Lord has come, just as the Bible said He would. There are different theories about all these thousands of people disappearing, but don't be deceived any longer. The Lord has really come and taken His children away.

"I allowed the devil to deceive me. There were times it worried me, and I couldn't get away from the thought that Jesus was coming; but I kept telling myself that it was just uneducated people who believed such a story and that the scholarly men who had taught me in college could not be wrong. Finally, after many days of struggling with this, I convinced myself that the doctrine of the coming of the Son of God was all wrong, and my mind was set free.

"This morning, I am reminded of II Thessalonians 2:11,12: 'And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.'

"It does not matter what anyone might try to tell me; I know now that the Bible means just what it says. My God! Why did I let the devil deceive me as I did?" he continued mournfully.

Many of his members wept with him. They could not blame him altogether, because they had been taught by their previous pastor that the coming of the Lord would take place sometime. They did not have to believe otherwise. They could have left their church and gone to Fairview as others from their congregation had done.

Those who had not been taught the second coming of Jesus looked at Dr. Morehead with hatred in their eyes, feeling that a great favor would be done if their city were rid of a man like this.

He started to say more, then paused. After all, what could he say now to make amends to those whom he had deceived? He stumbled blindly out of the pulpit from which so many of God's ministers had heralded the blessed hope of the second coming of Jesus. Today they were not here because they had been caught away to be with their Lord.

As he moved down the aisle, insulting words floated to his ears. Weak and trembling, he finally reached the door and headed down the street. How he got home he never knew, but he fell on his face in the living room and wept. "My God, if only I had believed thy Word! Thousands have lived in darkness and are left behind because of ministers like me."

In the midst of the crowd at Fairview Church sat Mary Conway, a blue-eyed girl about seventeen years of age. This was not a strange place to her. She had attended this church all her life and had been taught the second coming of the Lord, but never did she think she would come here under these circumstances.

Mary's mother and father had been faithful members of the church and had won many souls for the Lord. Mary believed that the Lord would come sometime; but, although she had heard the second coming preached all her life, she never thought it would happen in her day. She intended to "get right" with the Lord, but she felt she was young and had a lot of time before she started serving Him. The second coming of the Lord had been preached for years; she thought this doctrine would, no doubt, be preached many more years before the Lord would actually come.

On Sunday night, Mary felt the Spirit of the Lord dealing with her heart as He had never dealt

before. Once, conviction was so strong she almost yielded, but she kept waiting until finally the altar invitation came to a close; and there she was, still standing back. Mary lived all this over again as she sat in the house of God.

Strangers were in the pews that had long been occupied by dear old saints of God who loved the Lord with all their hearts. Sitting beside these strangers were some of the members and friends of Fairview.

Mary would have given everything if she could only have lived over the night before. Instead of being here, she would be hidden away with the Lord. Why should this catastrophe be hers?

As Mary sat in the dimly-lit building, it seemed she had lived years since the night before. Scenes of the family altar, her father reading from the soft, black leather-covered Bible, and her mother placing a warm kiss on her cheek before turning out the light were vivid now.

Monday morning Mary had awakened with a start and sat up in bed. All was tranquil and still. She glanced at the clock to see that it was half past eight.

“Why, this is a school morning! I wonder why Mother hasn’t called? She never lets me oversleep. This is my last year in high school, and if I miss a day I’ll...”

She slid out of bed and hurried into her clothes. There must be something wrong, she thought, as she rushed to the kitchen almost shouting, “Mother! Mother!”

There was no sound of dishes rattling. A strangeness filled the house. Standing at the kitchen door, she glanced from one side of the room to the other; her mother was not there. The burners on the stove were red hot, but nothing was cooking. There was oil in the pan, and yes, the pancake batter was partly made.

Mother never leaves things like this, she thought. Maybe she’s left a note in the living room.

She looked on top of the radio where her mother always left notes when necessary, but there was no sign of one.

Maybe Mother and Daddy have been called out to pray for someone sick. Why didn’t I think of that before and save myself all this worry?

Her mother and father were called out many times in the early morning hours to pray and minister to the sick, but they had always called her before leaving or left a note.

Probably they left in such a hurry they forgot, or else they planned to be back by now, she reasoned.

There was nothing for Mary to do but wait; it was too late to try to get to school on time. She switched the radio on to her favorite station. Then, picking up a magazine, she sat down to read.

Suddenly, it came like a bomb burst, “At six o’clock this morning, thousands of people disappeared,” the news reporter was saying. “It is a great mystery. Numerous speculations are flying, but it seems that no one theory will satisfy. The latest news bulletin that the Lord has come and caught people away is the opinion heard most often.”

The color drained from Mary’s face; she began to breathe rapidly and unevenly.

Could this be a story, she thought, or was this a news report? Had thousands of people really disappeared? Dozens of thoughts penetrated her mind.

“It can’t be!” she said aloud sharply. “But it still makes me jittery. It must be an introduction to a story.”

The news reporter was going on, giving more detailed reports and reading a list of names of some who had disappeared. When he read Marion Stelson’s and Mother Collins’ names, she became panicky, and things began to get black before her. This was no time to faint—was she going to?

Only last night Mary had seen these dear old saints of God shouting and praising God. If they

were gone, surely the Rapture must have taken place.

How she ever made it to the front door she never knew. She stared wildly up and down the street, watching people running in all directions. Some were hysterically crying as they passed the house; others were praying. “Thousands of people disappeared around six o’clock this morning!” shouted one of the neighbors across the street.

“That’s where Mother and Daddy are! The Lord has come!” she cried, as she felt herself being caught up in a whirlwind of horror, and the world grew black before her eyes. Suddenly, as the full impact of this truth dawned on her, she screamed, “Oh, my Lord! You’ve come and left me behind! What shall I do? My mother and daddy are gone, and I’m all alone!”

It just did not seem that it could be true. Only last night she was at church with all the saints, and the messenger had talked about the coming of the Lord as a future event; now it was a thing of the past.

Swiftly she walked into the street, joining the footsteps of the hundreds of remorseful souls. Going where? They did not exactly know. They were going anywhere to keep on the move and ease their torture.

Mary wanted to see if the saints were really gone. Oh, if it could only be a mistake! Mary knocked on door after door, trying to find just one church member she thought would have been ready if the Lord had come. There was not a true saint of God to be found.

Hot tears blinded her eyes until she could not see where she was going, the heavy load upon her heart almost more than she could bear. It seemed she was in a mighty hurricane and all her loved ones had been swept away. It would be a relief for death to come and take her.

As the crowd surged desperately toward the Fairview Church, Mary followed. Could Dr. Morehead give her any hope at all? Would he still maintain that teachings about the coming of the Lord were hatched up by a group of fanatics, or would he be honest and admit that the Bible is true?

Dr. Morehead was a different man as he stood before the great throng of people. He used to fight God’s people and still claim to be on the Lord’s side. Mary always felt that people of that kind were the greatest hurt to the Kingdom of God.

This morning she listened attentively to his speech. He formed a pathetic picture as he stood before that great crowd making his confession. Yes, that was really what it was. At last, this man realized the truth of God’s Word, and knew he had been deceived. Mary felt sorry for him. He had been wrong, terribly wrong and deceived; but now he was confessing his wrong. She knew his confession would not help her.

As she observed the faces of the people, she saw torture and pain in their eyes. They were asking themselves why he had not preached the whole truth instead of keeping them in darkness. Now he wanted forgiveness!

At last, all the people were gone and Mary was left to herself and her thoughts. Life did not seem worth living. In her imagination she could visualize the saints of God gathered for service and hear them shouting and singing praises to God. If only they were here today, she would gladly rush to the altar of prayer and get saved; but it was too late now. She never dreamed she would miss them as she did then.

Jim left the church with a heavy heart. He had not been told anything new; he knew that the Lord had come. It did not matter what anyone might say. He knew beyond a doubt that the Rapture had taken place.

He walked along the street thinking of how happy his mother and father must be this morning after having been separated so long. His mother had always longed for this time; at last it had

come. He could have been with them, but he had failed to heed the call of the Spirit.

Jim passed by Joe's grocery; it was closed. Joe had been a real soldier of the cross; he did not let business come before the work of the Lord. He remembered how Joe would tell the customers to hurry because it was Wednesday service night and he wanted to get to church on time. He had not become wrapped up in the material things of life; he sought a city whose builder and maker is God, so he was ready when the Lord came.

Bread had been left at the door by the breadman, but Joe had sold his last loaf of bread on Saturday. Milk and vegetables were stacked beside the bread, but Joe had no use for them now.

Hot, salty tears flooded Jim's eyes as he remembered the many times Joe had tried to persuade him to surrender to the Lord. Now, he knew Joe would never mention the name of the Lord to him again. How could he have passed up so many opportunities to prepare?

## Chapter 7

When Hester arrived back home from Nancy's house, she found her mother hysterical and her daddy still praying and crying. She longed to tell them that Nancy was gone; but they were so upset, she knew it would be some time before she could mention it.

How fortunate Nancy was to have gotten ready to meet the Lord the night before He came! Hester could have gotten ready, too, for the Spirit had dealt forcefully with her heart; but she had rejected Him.

What about all those people who were in that service and had rejected the Lord just as she had done? Hester knew some of them had once known the Lord; but they had let the devil cheat them out of their experience, and now they were left behind.

It was bad enough for anyone to be left behind, Hester thought, but for someone who once knew the Lord to be left behind must be horrifying. How she wished she had gone to the altar last night; but now it was too late. The regrets were there just as the minister had said, only many times worse. No one could describe her feelings of devastation and remorse. Missing the Rapture was so terrible it did not seem real, but she knew it was; the news not only was being broadcast constantly, but Nancy was gone and Hannah had not shown up for work.

Was Mother Collins gone? Hester had to know for sure. Racing up the street, she passed people with haggard, drawn faces. Some were weeping, some hysterical, some sat dejectedly on the edge of the sidewalk with unseeing stares. She tried to ignore these poignant scenes, but the heartbreaking cries could not be blocked out.

It seemed ages before she reached Mother Collins' home, but at last she came to the white picket fence surrounding the little bungalow. Butch met her at the gate with a bark, wagging his bushy tail. Sorrow was written in his eyes as if he were deeply worried.

The door was standing open. Maybe Mother Collins was there after all and it was a mistake about the Rapture! She called loudly, "Mother Collins! Mother Collins!" but all was still.

From the front porch she heard the clock ticking on the mantel in the living room. There was something unreal about it. Butch nestled close to her legs and then suddenly bounded into the house, looking behind him as if he were bidding her to follow. Trembling, she stepped inside the door, into the same eerie atmosphere she had felt in Nancy's room. She stood in the middle of the living room and looked around. Everything was spic-and-span just like Mother Collins always kept it. How long she stood there she did not know.

Butch, barking furiously from Mother Collins' bedroom, brought her to her senses. Maybe she was just sick. It's strange how people will try to have hope when really there is none.

What she saw as she entered the bedroom almost took her breath away. Viewing the same scene Jim had witnessed only a few hours before, she knew without a doubt that the Rapture had surely taken place. Her eyes took in the order of the room: there were Mother Collins' shoes, clothes, glasses lying on the floor by the side of the bed. The tears began to roll slowly down her cheeks as she remembered the conversation she had with Mother Collins yesterday afternoon, walking home together from church. It had been only a matter of hours from that time until the Rapture had really taken place.

Hester stood there realizing she would never know the wonderful experience Mother Collins had passed through in that room around six o'clock that morning. About five-thirty she had arisen, unknowingly for the last time. The burden for Jim and Lucille was heavy on her heart, and the coming of the Lord seemed very near. After praying and pouring her heart out to God,

she rejoiced with a song in her heart as she thought of the great number of souls that had found the Lord in the Sunday night service.

As she was making up the bed, her thoughts returned to the joys and the heartaches of life and how the Lord had always stood by His people. She began to sing the old hymn, "I'm in the Glory Land Way," when all of a sudden, the room was lit with the glory of God, and a loud voice cried, "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet Him!" Her heart leaped with joy as she heard the shout of her Lord. Then something touched her body, and the most soothing feeling she had ever experienced ran through her: the change had come; in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, she was changed. She felt herself being lifted through the air, and heard the cries of saints of God praising their Redeemer as they were caught up. Their voices sounded like the rushing of many waters: "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

With the thousands of others, she cried, "Oh glorious morn! Oh grave, where is thy victory? Oh death, where is thy sting?" Death had been swallowed up in victory. They were caught away to be with their Lord forever.

Hester turned and left the room hurriedly. She wanted to get away from the heart-rending scene. It would haunt her the rest of her life.

As she entered the living room, she spied the open Bible on the reading desk, and she seemed to be drawn to it. She read the same verse of Scripture that Jim had read. "Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh," Matthew 24:44. Cold sweat covered her body. That was a message straight from Heaven warning people to get ready. Now it had happened, and thousands like herself had been left behind.

Butch nestled up close to Hester; she stooped down and patted him gently, speaking to him as if he were human, "She's gone, old boy. I know it's hard to believe and hard to understand, but it's so. Don't sorrow for her, Butch. She lived and waited for this time. That was the main theme of her conversation. I'm sure she's happy with Him this morning."

Stepping outside, Hester looked up into the blue and tried to visualize the joy and peace Mother Collins was surely experiencing at that moment, but tears filled her eyes and shut out the view of the sky above. Blindly she stumbled down the steps. It seemed she would die if she stayed there another minute.

As she walked up the street, she heard someone crying. It was a woman's voice, but whose was it? Hysterical crying was a familiar sound now; however, this person's crying was unusually loud. Just then she saw someone sprawled on the front steps of Mrs. Pickett's house, sobbing. Hester rushed up the walk to the figure. As she drew near, she saw that it was Mrs. Pickett. Hester spoke to her, but the only reply was more sobs. After Hester's many attempts to calm her down, Mrs. Pickett began to regain control. Looking up, she cried, "You blessed child! You, too, have been left behind."

"Oh Mrs. Pickett, are some of your loved ones gone?" Hester asked anxiously.

"No. None of my loved ones were taken away; but you remember my daughter Hazel that nurses in the Rheims Hospital?"

"Uh-huh," Hester answered.

"She was taking care of the nursery when the Rapture took place. They said she was standing in the middle of the room when it happened. She looked around, and there wasn't a cry from any of the cribs; every baby in the nursery had vanished. She didn't know what to make of it. She knew no one could have come in and gotten the babies. They had disappeared into thin air.

"She became hysterical and began screaming for dear life. Some of the nurses rushed to her. They knew something dreadful had happened to make Hazel like that because she was always so

calm in time of emergencies. They tried to settle her down; and, after working with her some time, she was able to tell them how the babies had vanished into thin air. At first they didn't believe her, and they began to wink at each other as if she had lost her mind. When she insisted it was so, they began to search for the babies; sure enough they were all gone! Great fear must have seized their hearts.

"At the same time the babies disappeared, there was a scream down the hall from another nurse. One of her patients who was in a cast and could not possibly have gotten off the bed was gone, the cast left behind. It would have taken doctors hours to have removed it. The nurse had gone to get the patient some ice; when she returned, just as she entered the door, he disappeared right before her eyes. It was incredible!

"Other nurses discovered that some of their patients were gone, too. Although they were well-trained to handle emergency situations, it was such a shock that they became hysterical.

"One of the patients had his television on when the news about the terrible tragedy of thousands of people disappearing was aired, and he began screaming uncontrollably. He had been saved once and knew the teaching of the second coming of the Lord, so he knew right off what had happened.

"He made so much noise that all the nurses on the second floor rushed to his room; he told them that the Lord had come because it had just been announced over the television. Some of the nurses fainted, others became hysterical. When Hazel heard that the Lord had come and caught people away, it was too much for her mind.

"Oh, Hester," Mrs. Pickett wailed, "it's so terrible—my Hazel has gone insane. They called me from the hospital. They had to put her in a straitjacket. I just can't bear it! She was so intelligent!

"I don't know about all those people disappearing. I haven't had time to think much about it. Do you really think, Hester, that the Lord has come?" She looked as if she were waiting for a sentence of death.

"Yes, it's true, Mrs. Pickett. The Lord has caught His people away." Hester told her about Nancy going to church the night before and finding the Lord; also, how she had discovered Nancy's and Mother Collins' disappearances and what she had found in Mother Collins' bedroom.

To Mrs. Pickett it seemed fantastic; she had never believed that the Lord was really coming for His people. She did not want to believe it now, so she tried to convince herself that it was not true. She really wanted Hester to say it was not true, but Hester had emphatically stated the fact without hesitance.

"The Lord would not bring all this sorrow upon mankind. He is a just God and He is too honorable to do such a thing," Mrs. Pickett reasoned. "Why should He come and steal people away from earth?"

"The Lord Jesus has not stolen anyone from the earth. He came for what was rightfully His. You knew we could have been ready, Mrs. Pickett. You knew the teaching of His second coming, didn't you?" Hester asked accusingly.

"I heard about it all my life, but I didn't really think it could be so. I haven't heard it preached in a long time, because I haven't been to church in years; I've had too many things to do. I work during the week, and then we usually go fishing on Sunday or do something else that is a lot more enjoyable than going to church. My husband never cared much for church. His theory has always been: 'What is to be will be; we have no control over it.'"

"That is not true! The Lord gave every one of us our own free choice to get ready to go with

Him. Through His blood, all mankind could have been ready this morning. By rejecting His blood, we have been left behind.”

“I don’t believe it,” Mrs. Pickett interrupted; “it just cannot be true. I refuse to believe such an idle tale.”

That remark stirred Hester’s indignation. “Well, believe what you will, Mrs. Pickett. People like you are the cause of many of us being left behind. You are just too stubborn to believe God’s Word.”

By this time, Hester was boiling with anger on the inside. All the pity she had felt for Mrs. Pickett when she found her crying was gone.

Looking Mrs. Pickett straight in the face accusingly, she said, “You are the cause of your daughter’s insanity. If you had taught her the right way, she might have been caught away with the Lord.”

Tears were rolling down Hester’s cheeks. She was thinking that if her mother had taken her to church and taught her the right way, she might not have been left behind either; but she had no encouragement. “Mothers like you have a lot to think about this morning,” she cried.

With this, she turned on her heels and rushed disgustedly away as if Mrs. Pickett were a poisonous viper.

The truth deeply offended Mrs. Pickett. She opened her mouth to give Hester a good tongue-lashing, but before she had time to say one word Hester was racing down the street. However, even as she looked at Hester’s back in anger, she began to feel cold fear gripping her heart.

Mrs. Pickett tried hard not to believe that the Lord had come and all those people were really with Him. She had momentarily accepted the fact when Hester first came, but had tried to steel her heart against it before she left.

“I refuse to believe that nonsense! What is to be will be,” she muttered, “and we have nothing to do with it.”

Deep down in her heart she knew that what Hester had said was true. She had not been the right kind of mother to her daughter, but she would not admit it.

There were many distressing scenes for Hester to witness as a result of the coming of the Lord. No one individual could see all of them nor describe the horrors. Everywhere one turned was evidence that the Rapture had really taken place. If only there were still some hope that one could get ready and make the Rapture yet...but all hope was gone. Hester was in the Tribulation Period with thousands of others. It just did not seem real, but she knew by now that it could not be a dream.

Yesterday when she heard the message about the coming of the Lord and the Tribulation, it seemed far in the future; but now it had happened. If she could have looked into the morrow, things would have been different; but that is the way of life—today belongs to man, tomorrow belongs to God. Only God had known what the morrow would bring. Warning had been given for people to get ready; He had told them that His Son would come at an unexpected time.

A large crowd was gathered in front of the Epworth Funeral Home. What would a crowd be interested in at a funeral home on a morning like this?

Wesley Bertram, the undertaker, was saying excitedly: “I tell you, I just don’t know! In all the years that I have been in business, nothing like this has ever happened before. I have looked and looked, but I cannot find it. I have done all that I can do. I have called and called the police, but the line has been busy, and I cannot get them.”

Hester pushed forward in the crowd until she could see to whom the words were being addressed. A well-dressed man in a grey suit and hat, with a large diamond ring that sparkled in

the sunlight as he moved his left hand, stood directly in front of Wesley Bertram.

“This is the limit! It’s absurd to think that last night you brought the body of my wife here to prepare it for burial; and now, this morning, you tell me it’s gone.

“If you think you can pull a stunt like this to get me to give an enormous reward for the return of her body, you have another thought coming! I’ll sue you, that’s what I’ll do! I’ll sue you for every penny you have! I’ll give you until twelve o’clock noon; if the body is not here at that time, I have no more to say. I will let my lawyer do the rest. Remember, old man, with the influence that I have, you will never be able to build up another business.”

Wesley Bertram shook his head helplessly; he was at his wit’s end. What was there left for him to do? For hours he had searched for the missing body, unable to solve this perplexing problem. Unless someone had stolen the body because they knew this man was a man of wealth, there was no other answer. That must be it. Surely no one would play a prank like this—but who would do such a thing? All the years he had been in business, he had never heard of anyone stealing a body. It never entered his mind that he should hire a guard for the body.

The man with the big diamond on his finger started to turn away, but Hester clutched his sleeve. “Sir,” she said.

John Dresden whirled around and looked down into her face. Her big, dark eyes were pools of torture. Because he was very much annoyed, he started to speak roughly. He was used to having his way, and he was very upset. Storming and threatening Wesley Bertram had not seemed to help matters any because the undertaker still stubbornly contended that he did not know what to do. “What is it?” he managed to say.

“Was your wife a Christian?” Something in Hester’s manner caught his attention.

“Why, come to think of it, she was,” he said, stroking his chin with his left hand. “She was always talking religion, but I never paid her much mind. I let her do whatever made her happy. I had my work, and she had plenty of time to do anything she wanted to.

“But what would the disappearance of my wife’s body have to do with her being a Christian?”

John Dresden was surprised at himself for listening to this young lady. Any other time, he would have brushed her aside and gone on his way without giving her a second thought.

The excited crowd moved in a little closer to hear what Hester was saying. Maybe she had some valuable information that would help solve this great mystery of the missing body.

“If she was a true child of God, she had the blessed hope.”

“What do you mean, girl? Don’t talk in riddles. I’m anxious for this mystery to be cleared up. If you are able to help us, speak at once.”

“The Lord came for His own around six o’clock this morning. Because your wife was a Christian, her body was changed and caught up to be reunited with the soul the same as the other dead in Christ. The resurrection of the saints of God took place this morning when those many thousands disappeared from the earth.”

Awe-stricken, John Dresden stared in disbelief.

“If you will go to the graveyard, I’m sure you will find that many of the graves have been disturbed,” Hester continued.

John Dresden rushed away, the crowd at his heels, heading for the cemetery. Hester stood alone gazing after them for a moment, and then she, too, followed. Even before she arrived she could hear the cries of the people, and knew they were witnessing the unbelievable results of the resurrection.

In front of an open grave, about twenty feet from the gate, stood the well-dressed man she had talked to at the funeral home, a handkerchief in his hand, crying and looking down into the

emptiness below. For a moment she stood by his side, but he did not seem to notice her.

The scripture, I Corinthians 15:42-44, came to Hester's mind: "So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body."

"It's terrible, isn't it?" John said tremulously.

"Yes, it is," she answered. "Now you understand what I was telling you about the disappearance of your wife's body, don't you?"

"Yes," he answered with a choked voice, "I understand now. It's so hard to have to face it though."

His face reflected his deep suffering; the muscles in his jaw twitched. The agony he felt was almost more than he could bear.

Hester hastily made her way through the cemetery, pausing only a few seconds here and there before an open grave, and soon she was back on the street.

When Hester passed Widow Blandon's home, five blocks from the cemetery, all was quiet. Two years ago when her husband had been killed in an automobile accident, she was left with five small children. The road of life had been rugged; she had worried from one day to the next about what she would do for food, but the Lord had always provided.

Sunday night the load had been especially heavy. There was no bread for them to eat, no money; and the baby was sick. Finally, after getting the sick child to sleep, she had cried and prayed until after midnight, and then fallen into a deep sleep. God's tomorrow could not be seen, and she could not know that in a few more hours all her troubles would be over.

At ten minutes before six the alarm went off, and she dragged her weary body out of bed. Every muscle was tired and strained; it seemed she had no more than closed her eyes before it was time to get up. The burden upon her heart was almost more than she could bear, but she couldn't afford to miss a day's work; the children had to have something to eat.

All of a sudden the room was lit up with the glory of God. She, too, heard the cry: "Behold the Bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet Him!" Something like liquid fire poured over her body. The change had come. She was changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and her little ones who slept were caught up with her. The glorious morn had come!

Linda Jordan lived two doors down from Widow Blandon. Linda had been saved for a number of years, and had suffered many cruel tortures from a sadistic husband who wanted to make her backslide. Sometimes he tried to make her blaspheme the name of her Lord by holding her and twisting her arm until it was almost unbearable. He abused her in every way he could think of, but she always came out victorious. He would even tell lies about her to the pastor and the members of her church; but no one believed him; they knew the kind of man he was and the great persecutions she received from him.

He was standing by her bed when the Rapture took place. She had been to the revival the night before—he was always unreasonable and angry when a revival was in progress. A little before six, he called her. With many obscenities he ordered her to get up and cook his breakfast.

Sleepily, she raised up and looked at the clock. Was it possible that she had overslept? "Why Honey, it's an hour before breakfast time. You must have looked at the clock wrong."

With this he went into a rage. "Don't talk back to me! You stay out every night at that stupid church of yours, then you don't want to get up and cook my breakfast. That religion has ruined our home! At this rate our marriage will soon be in divorce court." His face darkened with fury.

Dumbfounded, Linda stared at him with surprise. He had done many unheard-of things, but

this was the first time he had tried a stunt like this.

“Don’t just sit there like an idiot! I mean get up! I want you to stop going to that old church. I forbid you to go anymore! If you have to go to church, why don’t you act sensibly about it and go to one that is respected in this town? I’m ashamed of you!”

“All I ever hear about in the pool room and everywhere else I go is what that preacher down there is preaching,” he said scornfully. “Some of the men have heard just about enough of it.” Tears filled her eyes.

“You don’t need to cry and think you can get my sympathy. Get up!” he said with a curse. “Maybe if you get up an hour or so earlier, you won’t be so anxious to go to church every night.”

All of a sudden, a bright light illuminated the room. One moment Jordan’s wife was there, and the next moment she was gone. She, too, heard the cry, “Behold, the Bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet Him!” She was changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and was caught up to be with her Lord forever! The glorious morn had come!

Henry Jordan could not believe his eyes. It was incredible! His wife had vanished into thin air.

An oath was about to escape his lips, but great fear seized his heart and checked him. He did not know what to make of it. He looked all around, but he could not find a trace of her. Madness overcame him, and he rushed from the house, screaming and pulling his hair.

Hester heard a chilling scream pierce the air as she walked slowly down the street. It was the most blood-curdling sound she had ever heard; she almost froze in her tracks. Another scream reached her ears, as the door of a small yellow house down the street was thrown open and Betty Wren rushed out.

Betty was the sister of Bob Wren; and Bob was the husband of a quiet mere wisp of a girl, and the father of two children. Through the grapevine, Hester knew the history of their family. Bob had never settled down; and, to tell the truth, he had just been a good-for-nothing all his life. He would not work half the time, and the neighbors said he was just a shiftless no-good. He would leave his wife and children alone all hours of the night while he ran around drinking and flirting with other women.

Hester was not acquainted with his wife, but she had heard many good things about her. She was a fine Christian girl and a wonderful, precious mother to her children. According to the reports of the neighbors, she really had a hard time. Not only did she keep house, care for the children and hold down a full-time job, she also took in laundry to help support the children and herself. What a cruel fate to have befallen such a wonderful girl who would have made some boy a devoted wife!

All this and more rushed through Hester’s mind as she made her way across the street and up the walk to the house. Betty was so overwrought she had lost her power of speech. She seized Hester wildly by the arm and almost dragged her into the house. An unexpected scream escaped Hester’s lips as Betty pulled her through the door into the bedroom and pointed to the horrible tragedy. Hester thought she was prepared for anything, but the scene she saw in Bob Wren’s bedroom was one she would never be able to erase from her mind. Her eyes focused on one thing: the body of Bob Wren dangling from the ceiling. His eyes bulged from their sockets, and his tongue lolled out with blood running down the corners of his mouth.

Hester looked with dismay and unbelief at the hideous sight. The unfaithful, drunkard husband of a Christian wife had committed suicide!

Betty moved closer to the corpse and made a desperate attempt to pull it down, but in vain. Beside herself, she did not realize what she was doing.

Hester took control of her horror, and commanded: “Betty, it’s too late! Don’t do that! It won’t

help matters.”

Hester’s voice brought her back to rationality; slowly Betty turned and faced Hester pleadingly, “But, he can’t be dead! Please tell me my brother is not dead!”

Hester took her by the shoulders and pushed her toward the door. After trying to make her comfortable in a big armchair in the living room, she softly closed the door to the death room.

Betty made a desperate attempt to talk, but for a moment only a groan from her devastated heart came forth. Her face contorted in agony as she finally managed to say, “I don’t know what made him do it.”

Suddenly, she sat up straight in her chair and sighed deeply, drawing in her breath. Where were her sister-in-law and the children? Had Jenny left him? Was that the cause? Had he come home and found a note telling him she was through?

She stood to her feet, determination written on her countenance as if she felt Hester would try to stop her from doing what she was about to do. Rushing toward the closed door, she turned the knob, entered the room, and looked at the beds. Yes, they had been slept in. If Jenny had left, it had to have been after she went to bed last night. Examining every nook and corner in search of a note, she dared not get close enough to the body to touch it again, nor would she look at it.

There was no note to be found, but her bewildered eyes fell upon a newspaper lying on the floor. With a trembling hand, she stooped to pick it up. She took in the headlines at once: **“THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE HAVE MYSTERIOUSLY DISAPPEARED!”** Blinking her eyes, she re-read it; but she did not understand what it meant. Then, for the first time, Hester realized that Betty did not know that the Lord had come. Where had she been all morning?

She was pale as death as she walked over to Hester and showed her the paper. With quivering lips she asked, “Do you know what this means?”

“Yes,” Hester softly answered. “The Lord came this morning and took everybody away that was saved and prepared for His return.”

Betty listened, dumbfounded. Her fists clenched and unclenched as she stood staring incredulously at Hester.

“It just can’t be possible! It just can’t be! I heard it would happen some day, but I never gave it much thought. In fact,” she faltered, “Jenny often spoke of the coming of the Lord. I thought Jenny always looked her prettiest when she talked about Him; it was all she really seemed to be living for. It was absurd to me, but I never told her so because His soon return meant so much to her.

“Although Bob is my brother and he is d-d-dead,” she stammered, blinking back the tears, “he never gave her much happiness; in fact, he caused her a great deal of heartache. But she took it better than anyone I have ever seen. I told her many times if I were she, I would leave and never let Bob know where I had gone; but she kept praying and expecting God’s deliverance.”

God had delivered Jenny, but not in the way Betty expected.

“I wonder where she is?” Betty went on. “It’s strange that she isn’t home. She seldom ever went anywhere. This is going to be a terrible shock to her.”

Bewildered, Hester looked at her and said, “Betty, isn’t it clear in your mind yet what has happened? Jenny is gone! She has been carried away to be with her Lord forever.”

Betty looked as if she were going to faint as the real truth dawned upon her. “It just can’t be! Poor little Jenny’s not gone!” she exclaimed, flinging herself into Hester’s arms. Then, she raised her head from Hester’s shoulder and looking into her eyes she said: “Now it’s all plain—I mean Bob’s death. He must have awakened, missed Jenny and the children, and gone to search for them. When he found this paper, he realized that what Jenny had warned him about so many

times had really taken place. Poor Bob,” she sighed.

Betty was still talking as Hester backed away hastily, remembering that she had wanted to see some of her mother’s friends to find out if they realized that the Lord had really come. She knew without a doubt that they had been left behind.

Hester tried to shut out the horrible scene of Bob dangling at the end of a rope from the ceiling, but it was impossible. In hell, no doubt, he lifted up his eyes, in worse trouble than when he lived. Had he been living for the Lord, this never would have happened.

At last Hester approached a large apartment building almost hidden by shrubbery and trees, sitting back from the road. She did not wait for the elevator, but took the steps two at a time; soon she was standing at the door of Martha and Wilma’s apartment on the second floor. She rapped loudly and waited impatiently, shifting from one foot to the other.

“Why doesn’t someone answer?” Just as she started to knock again, Wilma cautiously cracked the door and peered into the dimly lit hall.

Hester stared with astonishment. It was a different Wilma from what she had always seen. Her hair had not been combed, her lips were purple; her eyes, red-rimmed from crying, looked as if they had sunken into her head. Between nervous fingers, she held a half-smoked cigarette.

When Wilma saw Hester, she gave a shaky sigh of relief and threw the door wide open.

“Come in, Hester,” she said tremulously.

Hester took the room in at a glance, and her searching eyes rested upon the special edition of the paper lying on the footstool. She was convinced that Wilma knew the Lord had come. She sat down.

After what seemed like an eternity, Wilma broke the stony silence with a cheery, “What is your mother doing today?”

It was strange to hear someone speak casually when so much had happened. Hester started to speak, but Wilma interrupted, “Oh, you need not answer my question. Why should we pretend? I know what has happened. The Lord has come! Why don’t you say it? You might just as well say it as sit there and look like that,” she said bitterly.

“I wish I were dead! I loathe this day! I never thought I would ever live to see a day like this. It’s enough to drive me mad! I feel so sorry for Martha. She became hysterical.”

“Where is Martha?” Hester asked, glancing through the open door into the next room.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “The poor kid rushed out of the house when she heard about it. I have been so worried; I’m afraid something has happened to her. She was wild with fear!”

“Why God would do us like this is more than I can understand. It’s terrible the way people are so upset today. I had big plans for today and now everything’s ruined. All because...”

Hester stood to her feet suddenly and interrupted Wilma. “Don’t say it!” she shouted. “You talk as if you blame God for all of this! It’s not God that you should blame. You should blame yourself! You could have been ready. After all, God went to a lot of trouble that mankind could escape this horrible thing. Think of the many thousands that took the passage of escape that was offered them through Calvary. You know Jesus died for you as well as for those people who were caught away!”

“Who said they wanted to be caught away?” Wilma jeered. “Don’t you dare talk to me in that tone of voice! If I want to be preached to, I’ll go to church! It’s no one’s business but my own if I didn’t accept the Lord, now is it?” she demanded scornfully, her piercing eyes flashing like a viper ready to strike.

Wilma was a shrewd woman. Hester had always resented her being a special friend of her mother; but Mother thought Wilma was a “good sport.”

Meekly, Hester apologized, "Wilma, I am sorry. I didn't mean to preach or be abrupt. I realize everyone has a free choice to do as he wants in this old world. We can accept the Lord or reject Him.

"If we reject Him, we will have to suffer the consequences," she added under her breath, because she knew it would not do for Wilma to hear her last remark.

Extremely agitated, Wilma would not calm down until she had said many ruthless things about God and His work. Hester's cheeks flushed a deep pink as this woman of the world irreverently spoke of the Lord to whom Hester paid honor and tribute.

"You are the dumbest person I have ever met, Hester. What do you mean upholding a God who has left you in a predicament like this?"

Hester's clenched fists were cold and clammy, and her heart pounded madly in her bosom; but she did not attempt to say more to Wilma. When Wilma went into the next room to answer the telephone, Hester crept softly from the apartment like a wounded animal.

Approaching the street again, Hester was overwhelmed by scenes of tragedy which still prevailed as a result of the coming of the Lord.

"My God!" she groaned, "this is the horror of being left behind!"

## Chapter 8

In great agony Jim lived through the period of time immediately following the Rapture. The days were long, but the nights were longer. The awful catastrophe he found himself in was almost more than his mind could comprehend. He felt, at times, that he would surely wake up from this nightmare and find it to be just another dream; but deep within he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was true.

Although the remorse he felt was indescribable, he realized it was too late for regrets. They would not help now. If only he had heeded the many warnings given by his precious mother! She had seen this day through the reading of God's Word and had been ready to escape. Had he only known it would happen in his day, he, too, would have gotten ready. Why hadn't he believed the Bible? It had been his passage of escape, but now it was closed. He was in the Tribulation Period.

Jim often visited Mother Collins' little bungalow. He walked from room to room and tried to imagine that his mother were still there. He could see her, with her silvery locks, bent over reading the great Book and praying. He could hear her in the kitchen singing a blessed old hymn with the fervor of a youngster, just as she used to do when he was a child.

Then, suddenly, he would be brought back to the realization that this would never be. She was gone! She would never pray for him again. Pray! My God, what would he do now with no mother to pray for him? How could he go on living? Sobbing, he would rush from the house not caring, for the moment, where he was going. If only he could drop into a pool of forgetfulness, never to remember or be remembered anymore; but Jim had to go on living.

When he was home, life was almost unbearable because Lucille had not been well since Baby Sue disappeared. She would cry over and over, hour after hour, with a voice driven by a mother's tortured heart, "I want my baby! I want my baby, Jim! Please bring her to me. Can't you find her anywhere? I can't go on living like this!"

Months passed, and Jim watched the change of world events with great anxiety. Mother's Bible made him feel closer to her than anything else, so he took it home with him, reading and re-reading the Books of Daniel and Revelation. At one time these prophecies had seemed complicated and unreal, but it was all clear to him now. Living in a nation of peace and prosperity, one could not easily conceive all the events prophesied in these books coming to pass.

It was amazing how things had changed: the Man of Sin had brought peace to the whole earth; distressed nations with war clouds hanging low and nations actually at war had been anxious to accept a man of his ability and profound knowledge. In the eyes of many, he was just the man the world had needed for a long time. Jim knew it was a false peace that would not last because in the Book of Daniel he had read that by peace he would destroy many.

The perplexities of the nations were apparently solved. Problems that great statesmen had struggled with for years without success had now been solved in a few moments by this "wondrous superman" that had "dropped down from Heaven" saying he was the very Son of God. Why, he had performed the miraculous! The Jews were ready to die for him. They had looked for their Redeemer for many years and now they were sure he had come.

No one dared criticize him on the street; anything might happen to those who did. Houses were being burned nightly, people disappearing from the face of the earth—loved ones never knowing their fate—just because they had dared voice their opinion in public that this man could not be

the Son of God.

The Jews were the happiest people in the world. Their temple was rebuilt; they worshiped in it and offered their sacrifices as in days of old. They were in the height of their glory. This great man of power favored the Jews above all peoples of the earth. He did not want anything for himself; he divided the spoil among the people. Why should he want anything? He was the Son of God.

After a few months, many people forgot that there had been a Rapture—but not Jim. The gnawing, aching pain was ever with him to remind him what a fool he had been to reject the Christ of Calvary.

Lucille awoke late one morning and said, “Honey, call Doctor Wilson. I’m having another relapse. I don’t feel like I can live much longer if I don’t get a doctor at once.”

Jim sighed deeply, and with a heavy heart he hurried to the telephone. He just couldn’t lose Lucille; she was all he had left. What would life be like if she should die?

With trembling hands, Jim picked up the receiver and dialed Doctor Wilson. He waited as the telephone continued for twelve long rings; and just as he was about to give up in despair, the receiver was lifted from its cradle at the other end of the line, and a gruff voice said, “Hello.”

“Is this Doctor Wilson’s office?” Jim asked in a business-like tone.

“This is he speaking,” the coarse voice answered.

For a moment Jim was startled, but he managed to collect his wits and say, “Doctor, you must have a terrible cold. You don’t sound like yourself. What has happened to you?”

“Nothing has happened to me,” he replied sternly. “I feel better than I’ve ever felt in my life.”

“Listen, Doctor, I need you to come at once. Lucille is having another bad spell. Could you please hurry?”

The doctor bluntly asked, “Jim, do you have the Mark?”

With that question, Jim almost dropped the receiver. The Mark! My God! The Mark of the Beast? His heart started pounding, his tongue felt an inch thick, and his lips were numb.

There was silence for the space of a minute, and then the doctor asked, “Jim, are you there?”

“Yes, I am here,” Jim managed to groan weakly.

“Well, speak up, Boy. Do you have the Mark of security?”

“Doctor, you don’t mean the Mark of the Beast?” Jim asked breathlessly. Time seemed to stand still, and the clock on the mantel ticked loudly. Would it drown out the doctor’s voice?

“Yes, some call it that.”

“No, Doctor Wilson!” Jim cried. “Don’t you take that Mark! It’s the Mark of doom! If you take that Mark, you can never get right with God! You’ll be like a demon from hell.”

“What do you mean, Jim!” the doctor interrupted harshly. “Don’t you realize it’s dangerous for you to talk that way? It’s blasphemy! I could have you put to death for making remarks like that, so let this be a warning to you. Of course, I have the Mark that you think is so terrible,” he boasted.

“Didn’t you see the evening paper or hear the reports over television that everything would be frozen after twelve o’clock last night? You cannot buy or sell unless you have this Mark. I couldn’t open my office this morning unless I took the Mark first. My nurse cannot assist me until she takes the Mark. She has gone now to take it.

“Don’t be foolish, Jim. I have always considered you a sensible boy. You know, Fella, I wouldn’t give you bad advice. I have known you all your life. I was there and helped bring you into the world. Have I ever steered you wrong?

“It’s the greatest tonic I have ever found for nerve trouble. I don’t feel jittery at all as I usually

do this time of morning.

“It’s like back in the days of World War II. People used rationing books then, but now it’s the Mark of the Beast. It’s less complicated this way. You can’t draw your money out of the bank without this Mark or get groceries. You know you can’t hold out against all of this. It’s the most popular thing of the day, and you don’t want to be behind the times. Why, you’re a nobody with the people that really count if you do not take the Mark. There’s nothing to be alarmed about. Of course, some will be hysterical over the matter for a while, but they’ll get over it.

“They’re setting up offices throughout the city. I saw one two blocks from your house as I came downtown this morning.

“I’ll be glad to come once you’ve taken the Mark; but I could have my license revoked, I might even lose my life if I should come without your taking the Mark. We have been given strict orders to minister to no one who does not have the Mark. This is the situation as it stands at the moment.

“Don’t be stupid. When you and Lucille both take the Mark, then give me a ring and I’ll be on my way. You know you love your wife enough to do a simple thing like this in order to get her medical aid.”

With a cold goodbye, Doctor Wilson slammed down the receiver. Jim stood before the telephone in a daze. Did he hear correctly? Had the doctor really said those things? Clenching and unclenching his fists, he sighed deeply. The glaring truth of the works of the devil had just come over the line. What could he do? How could he manage to get medical aid for Lucille without taking the Mark? He must find a way. Surely there was a way—if he could only find it!

The conversation left Jim unnerved, and he forgot he must hurry back to the sickroom of his suffering wife. He felt great remorse. If only he had gotten right with the Lord before it was too late, he would not be going through all this. Suddenly, he was brought to his senses by a piercing cry from Lucille’s room. He hurried to the bedside of his wife who was in great agony. Cold beads of perspiration covered her forehead, and her lips were turning purple. She was struggling to hold back the groans, but to no avail. At once Jim knew if he were going to do anything for her, he would have to do it quickly. If only he had time to reason this thing out...His brain felt numb; his mind refused to function.

“My God! Won’t you have mercy upon me?” he choked. The tears gathered in his eyes and he tried to pray just as he had tried so many other times since God’s people had been taken out; but he could not pray. The demon powers of darkness had him surrounded; he was as one being mocked.

The earth had been turned over into the hands of the devil. He had been told this time would come; but like many others, he had never considered it seriously.

“Jim,” Lucille moaned, “is the doctor coming?”

Jim’s heart beat faster. How could he tell her; how would she take the shock? She was so helpless, so pathetic. He couldn’t help crying as he answered, “No he is not coming.”

“What do you mean he is not coming? Wasn’t he there?” she cried.

“Yes...he was...there,” Jim stammered: “but, Honey, things have changed overnight. People have to have something besides money now to get medical aid.”

That kind of strange talk was a puzzle to Lucille, and Jim could see she did not understand.

“Remember stories of what it was like during World War II? How certain items such as canned goods, meats, sugar, tires, automobiles, building materials were frozen? Well, Honey, now you don’t need a rationing book, but you have to have the Mark of the Beast.” Jim winced as if he had been given a great blow when he said those words, but Lucille did not seem alarmed

at all.

Tortured eyes were turned upon Jim with the pleading look of a small, helpless child.

“Don’t we have the money to take it, Jim? We have saved for a rainy day. Remember? Jim, I need the doctor as I have never needed him before.”

Two big tears rolled down her cheeks and soaked into the white sheet. “I must have a doctor!” she pleaded.

Jim agonized within himself. This could not be real. This could not be the Jim Collins who had a Christian mother, who had been taught the ways of the Lord. Ministers had tried to describe what a time of horror the Tribulation Period would be, but no one had ever been able to come close to telling the horrendous reality of it.

“No, Honey, it does not cost money,” he faltered. “It’s free!” Free? The doctor had said it was free, but how free is it? All it costs is your soul!

Jim bent a little closer to her and said, “Listen, Honey, you have to sell your soul to take this Mark. We will never see Mother or our baby again. We would have to give up all chance of finding God, of being delivered from this world of hatred and turmoil.”

He thought surely this would help her to realize the seriousness of taking the Mark; but Lucille did not understand. She was racked with continuous hot, piercing pains shooting through a weak body, crying to be delivered from the awful suffering.

“Honey, I would gladly give all we have saved to get you medical aid, but we cannot sell our souls and become like demons from hell. Oh, Darling, we have suffered so much; if we take this Mark, all hope will be gone forever. We will never be happy again. Think how lonely we have been without little Sue and Mother. The price is too great. We cannot afford to pay it. I feel sure there will be some way if we will just wait awhile and think things through.”

“Jim,” she barely gasped out, “haven’t I been a good wife to you? Wasn’t I a good mother to your baby? Jim, if this were you,” she pleaded, “I would gladly do anything for you. Don’t you believe that, Jim?”

She struggled to raise herself on an elbow. Her black hair glistened in the dim light. A curl fell down over one eye; she looked weak and helpless. How could he refuse her? He loved her so much. She had been a good wife. She had not been a Christian wife, but neither had he been a Christian husband. He could not blame her for his being left behind. He should have been the one to lead her. Maybe he could have saved her from all this heartache if he had gotten right with the Lord and lived a devout Christian life before her.

He was agonizing over the greatest decision he had ever had to make in his life. There seemed no other way but for him to take the Mark.

“All right, Honey,” he finally said in a tender, trembling voice, “I’ll be back in a little while. Try to keep your mind off your suffering as much as you can. I’ll get help as soon as possible.”

Jim bent low and gently kissed her on the brow. A tear rolled down his cheek and fell onto her face.

Jim picked up his mother’s Bible and began to leaf through it. Every scripture on the second coming of the Lord was marked, and he observed a blot here and there where a precious tear had fallen as she read the promises and prayed that he would get ready before it was too late.

Time had passed by; the Rapture had taken place just as his mother believed it would; and there he stood...left behind and about to sell his soul.

“My God,” he prayed, “do come to my rescue. Please, God, do help me.”

He hugged his mother’s Bible close to him and placed a last goodbye kiss upon the soft, black cover. If Mother were here she would know just what to do. She always knew what to do in hard

places.

Finally he tore himself away from the Bible with its memories of yesterday, picked up his jacket, opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch. His mind was made up. He would have to take the Mark. What a horrible thing to be on your way to sell your soul—not an arm, a leg or an eye. If it were both feet, eyes, and hands, it would not be so terrible—but his very soul! All Jim's life he had planned to go to Heaven someday; now he was about to determine his destiny forever in hell.

Slowly walking down the street, Jim in his imagination could hear his own mother praying just as she used to. His heart was filled with remorse; it was too late to recall those many opportunities to escape this hour he was now facing.

An approaching figure drew Jim's attention. As the man came nearer, Jim looked into a countenance such as he had never seen on a human being. Eyes like fiery darts looked directly at Jim. A strange mark stood out in his forehead. He was carrying the Mark of the Beast! As the man passed him, Jim felt the very presence of the devil. He drew a long, shaky breath as he remembered he was on his way to do the same thing that man had done. What an awful feeling to look at someone, to know he was doomed for all eternity! Jim shuddered as he turned and stared after the disappearing figure.

When he passed by Fairview Church, he felt an urge to stop in one more time. The building, with its stained-glass windows bidding a warm welcome, reminded him of the Rock of Ages. He reverently pushed the door open and stepped into the main auditorium. Slowly he walked down the aisle—the aisle he had walked down hundreds of times. His tenderness toward this precious building was greater this morning than ever before.

He paused for a few moments at his mother's well-used pew, the tears again trickling down his haggard, drawn face. How his heart ached for God's people who used to worship here!

Hundreds had wept their way through to victory at that altar; how many of those people had stood true and were caught away? He knelt at the altar, but could not feel any spirit of prayer. The powers of darkness were pressing so heavily, he was unable to put words together to form a prayer.

The depression over what he was about to do was almost unbearable. He paused on the threshold of the church door and gave one last lingering look, tears blurring his vision. Then he turned quickly and ran down the church steps toward the office to sell his soul.

Nick, the operator of Jake's Station, was filling Burt Mill's gas tank. Jim gasped when he saw the Mark of the Beast in Nick's forehead. Burt, he thought, doesn't seem to have the Mark. Why should he be getting gas if everything were frozen like the doctor had said? Just then Burt stretched forth his hand to pay for the service rendered, and Jim saw the Mark of the Beast in the palm of his right hand. The gnawing remembrance of his mother and the church rolled over and over in his mind as he walked the rest of the way to a small portable white building with a large sign in big, bold black letters—**TAKE THE MARK HERE**—hanging over the door.

Jim stood perfectly rigid from head to toe just outside the door for a few minutes. Did he dare turn and run? That was what he felt like doing. The Spirit of God was dealing with his heart; must he go through with this for Lucille's sake?

The sun was shining from the blue above, and the birds were singing, hopping from limb to limb; but all the sunshine, joy and happiness had fled from Jim.

Trembling all over, he finally gained enough courage to step through the door into the small office. The room was simple with a large, dark desk and a shining instrument on top. A man with a fierce expression sat in a squeaky chair behind the desk. His eyes were like fiery darts, and his

features reminded Jim of the Beast. The demon powers of darkness were so thick, Jim's knees buckled and he almost fell to the hard floor. Invisible hands seemed to reach for him. Once he started to turn and flee; but then, in his imagination, he could hear Lucille saying, "Honey, if this were you, you know I would do anything for you." He had promised her that he would get her medical aid, and he could not let her down. How could he go back and break the news to her that he had decided not to take the Mark and there would be no doctor?

"No, I can't do that," he choked under his breath. "This is the price I will have to pay. There is no alternative."

The man behind the desk looked at Jim with penetrating eyes and said with a sneer: "You have nothing to fear. I was nervous before I took it, but all the fear left me. I know you're trembling because of that old Book called the Bible, but it's nothing but a bunch of rotten superstition. You'll find out I'm telling you the truth after you've taken the Mark. You will never again have respect for that Book. In fact, you'll hate it for the fear it has caused you all your life and for keeping you from having good times."

"Don't say anymore!" Jim cried. "Don't torture me like this! Hurry and get it over with!"

While Jim stood in the little office about to take the Mark of the Beast, the death angel entered Lucille's bedroom.

"I don't want to die!" she cried in terror. "Please, God! Don't let me die! I have lived a wicked life. I said I did not believe you existed, but I knew you did all the time. Oh, God, I cannot die like this."

She searched wildly around the room. "Mother Collins," she shrieked, "please, please come here and pray for me. I am dying. In a few more minutes I will be in eternity without God! I said I did not believe in your salvation, but I knew it was right because God's Bible teaches it. I wanted to be sophisticated—that's why I put on such a bold front. Please, Mother Collins, forgive me and come pray that my soul may find God!"

There was no answer except the echo of her own cries. If it had been possible, Mother Collins would have gladly come to Lucille's rescue; but she had waited too long to cry for help. Mother Collins was gone to be with the Lord forever.

"Someone help me! The demons of hell are here to usher my soul into that terrible place called hell! I'm lost!" she shrieked. "I feel the flames of hell! I'm lost!" Then she started to shout it again, but the words choked in her throat as her soul lifted up its eyes in hell to suffer the pangs of torment forever.

The only sign of life in the room was a breeze gently blowing the curtains in and out. Lucille's body lay motionless.

At that moment, Jim stood before the man with the devilish sneer, the shining instrument in his hand. Had Jim only known that Lucille was dead, he might have run from the room; but it was too late now. He stretched forth his right hand and said, "I'm ready."

Looking Jim straight in the eye, the man asked, "Why don't you take it in the forehead where it will be easily seen? That will help encourage others to take it."

Jim, gritting his teeth, replied, "Go on, I tell you, and get it over with! I don't want it in my forehead. It's not a mark to be proud of! I am taking it because I have to. I had the dearest Christian mother a boy ever had," he sobbed. "She told me about this time and warned me to get ready to meet the Lord." With quivering lips he went on to say, "I know you're making light of this, but it is true anyway. I am not in darkness. I know the Lord came and caught God's people away. You can look at me as if I've lost my mind, but I know what I say is the truth. Hurry now, give me the Mark so I can get a doctor for my wife!"

Tears rolled down his pale cheeks from under closed eyelids. He was selling his soul. Mother Collins' prayers would never be answered, and the Lord's death was in vain for him.

The man raised the shining instrument, then brought it down toward Jim's hand. Closer and closer it came until it touched the center of his palm. It was colder than any ice Jim had ever felt. Something shot up his arm and traveled on to his heart. It was amazing how his countenance suddenly changed. Like magic he had been turned into a different man. His eyes glittered and his lips curled into a sneer. Jim had never been one to swear, but now blasphemies began to roll from his lips in a great torrent. What a great change had come over him!

After telling the man to send someone to 305 North Main Street to give his wife the Mark, Jim dashed out the door into the sunlight like a madman. He looked up into the heavens and dared God—if such a being existed—to come down. He called God every rotten, filthy name he could think of, and there were many. He had sold himself wholly to the devil. He was an instrument in the hands of the devil to be used as the demons of hell. His heart was filled with hatred for the Bible and God's people.

"What an ignorant mother I had," he murmured as he strolled up the street, "to teach me such hellish rot and try to make me think there was One who died for my sins and would save my soul. Of all the nonsense, that was the limit. Now she has stooped so low that she's hidden herself away somewhere with all those others who are trying to convince the world that their Lord has come and caught them away. Why, no such thing has happened! It's just a bunch of lies!

"She brought me up in a cloud of superstition," he said bitterly, "but now I am free. I'm free!" he shouted.

He threw his head back and gave a hideous laugh. "I'm glad freedom has come to me at last. I don't fear that horrible Book any longer. Think how I used to fear it..."

A great love had been born in his heart for the Man of Sin. He had hated him with every ounce of his strength, but now he loved and worshiped him. The doctor had said the Mark was a real "tonic" and so had the man at the office.

"Yes, they were right!" Jim exclaimed. "I feel calmer than I have felt in many, many days. This Mark will probably cure Lucille."

He kept looking at the Mark in his hand and admiring it. "I wish I had let him put it in my forehead," he said aloud as he walked on up the street. "Everybody could see it then."

The spark of hope and love for mankind was missing from Jim's eyes. He passed many people on their way to take the Mark, and he could pick out each one that had made up his mind to take it. Everyone he passed who had rebellion in his heart against the Beast and the Mark made hatred boil within him; he desired to put them to death. He did not think they were worthy to live if they would not accept the true and only god—his god—the Beast.

Finally Jim reached home, his heart full of bitterness toward all of God's people and those who paid tribute to the Lord. He opened the front door with a rough kick; and as he entered the living room, the first thing his eyes fell upon was his mother's Bible. This brought another flood of blasphemies from his lips. He glared at the Bible and, trembling with hatred, he snatched it up and threw it into the fireplace.

With a smirk of satisfaction on his lips, he quickly went to Lucille's bedroom. All was quiet. He paused for a moment, then in a husky voice he called, "Lucille!"

Not realizing that she was dead, he gently shook her. "Honey, you're going to be all right. I am glad you insisted on my taking the Mark. It's the most wonderful experience I have ever had. I feel like a new man. Your worries will soon be over," he said lovingly. "I don't imagine Doctor

Wilson will have to come after you take the Mark; it's the best medicine you will ever take!"

Then he noticed how cold she felt and bent a little closer to her. "Lucille!" he cried. "Lucille!" But there was no answer. "You can't leave me now—I've found something to make you well!" In his desperation and grief, he shook her roughly; but there was no response.

"She's dead!" he said aloud so bitterly it would have made any normal person tremble. Looking up toward the ceiling as if he were looking into the face of God, shaking his fists and swearing violently, he cried, "You did this! You call yourself God! You are not the God of the universe! There is only one god and I have found him! We will conquer you!" Forcefully he continued, "You have caused mankind to suffer! You have deceived many and made people pay tribute to you! At last the true god has moved upon the scene and unveiled you before the world. You are being stripped of all your honor and glory! Do you understand?"

Throwing himself back into a chair, he continued cursing God until the doorbell rang. He stomped to the door, and there stood Sam Fergus with the Mark of the Beast in his forehead and a shining instrument clutched in his hand. He had come to give Lucille the Mark.

"It's too late," Jim said, full of rage. "She's dead!"

The man asked gruffly, "Where's the body?"

Jim motioned toward the bedroom and stalked over to dial the funeral home to ask them to come pick up Lucille's body. To Jim's surprise, the funeral director wanted to know if the body had the Mark on it.

"No, I'm afraid not," Jim answered, embarrassment beginning to override his anger. "Mr. Fergus was going to give her the Mark, but he arrived too late. I only wish she could have lived long enough to have had that glorious experience!"

"I am not allowed to pick up the body and give it a decent burial unless it has the Mark on it. I have been notified that bodies without the Mark will be picked up in trucks and buried like dogs. If you ask me, that's plenty good enough for anyone who refused to take the Mark of our god. You say you're her husband and you're sure she wanted the Mark?"

"That's right," Jim answered shortly. He was annoyed at the man for being so cautious.

"Well, in that case, if you have the Mark of our god placed on the body, I'll come and pick it up."

Just then, Sam Fergus, his eyes glittering with demon power like Jim's, stepped through the door from the room where Lucille's body lay.

"You're right," he spoke roughly. "She is dead." He cursed the God of Heaven for taking her life before he got there. Then, as he started to leave, Jim stopped him.

"I want you to go ahead and place the Mark on her anyway. I just called the funeral home to pick up the body and they won't do it unless it has the Mark."

Sam walked back to the room with great satisfaction; he would get to give her the Mark anyway. The Mark was placed on the cold forehead, but it meant nothing to Lucille because her soul was already in eternity without God.

After Sam Fergus had gone, Jim sat down before the fireplace and fished out his mother's precious old Bible from where he had thrown it. Prompted by demon power, he began to tear the pages out of the Bible, one by one, then ignite them with a match. Jim shouted with devilish glee as the flames leaped up to devour the Holy Word of God.

"This damnable Book will never deceive anyone else as it has me." Jim did not realize that although he could burn the pages of the Bible, he could never purge himself of the Word that had been planted in his heart by a loving mother. God had spoken those words, and they had life. Man speaks and many times his words die within a few moments of when they are spoken; but

God speaks and His words live on forever.

Amid many blasphemous oaths, Jim burned every page of his mother's Bible—the Bible that had been her road-map to Heaven. It had solved many of her problems of life and had showed her the passage of escape from the horrible Tribulation Period.

Just as Jim finished destroying the last pages of the Word of God, he heard a terrible noise down the street. His heart beat wildly as the screams of many people rose above the clamor. Racing to the window, he pulled back the curtain, his eyes searching for the meaning of all the excitement.

Suddenly, the most beautiful blood-red horse came into sight. The rider wore black and carried a long, shining sword in his right hand, waving it furiously. As suddenly as he had come, he was gone, dashing madly down the street.

Breathlessly Jim stood waiting and wondering what would happen next; then, quickly he turned from the window and ran to the front porch. As far up and down the street as he could see, people were fighting among themselves. Everywhere the red horse went, people were stirred to war. It was a horrible scene to behold.

As the days passed, Jim realized the full meaning of the red horse and its rider. War had come to the nation. It was not a fairy tale; it was real.

Great hatred raged in the hearts of those who had the Mark; they were obsessed with forcing everybody else to take the Mark or be put to death. Now the days of persecution began for those who would not take the Mark of the Beast or worship him. Notices were tacked up throughout the city soliciting men for the Beast Regime to help rid the world of traitors and set up a lasting government of peace.

Jim read the poster and hurried to Calvin Heights to register. A number of men, all with the Mark of the Beast, had already arrived. They were ushered into a large room and seated around tables. The speaker, Launcelot Browning, was a swarthy, arrogantly boisterous man with two long, deep scars on his right cheek. His eyes glittered and danced with demon power.

"Men," he announced, "you have been called here for one main purpose: to help rid the world of impostors and traitors, as I am sure, you have read on the posters. Our aim is to control the world under one government, and make them like it. All people who call themselves Christians or who pray to any other god besides the Beast will be arrested and given a chance to recant. Everyone we can get to surrender and become one of us will make us stronger. We will stand for no foolishness on their part. Do you understand?" he snarled.

"There are ways to make people change their minds—or wish they had. No means of torture will be considered too cruel by this regime. The more extreme, the better. We want these heretics to suffer without mercy. You'll be generously rewarded for your trouble, but if you let one person go free without taking the Mark, whether it be friend or loved one, you will be put to death. We cannot let personal feelings stand in our way of doing this work as the Beast demands it done, so empty yourselves of all love and sympathy for any of your friends who might hold out on us.

"Now, men, you'll find your uniforms in the next room. We want you to begin at once to round up everyone who doesn't have the Mark. They have had plenty of time to take it voluntarily if they wanted it. Now we must use force. You'll be paid a bonus for every person you turn in, plus a regular salary.

"That is all. Go get your uniforms," Launcelot commanded, whirling on his heels and leaving the room.

Jim followed the rest of the men to the next room to receive his uniform. He felt proud of

himself as he put it on with its gold buttons and bright polished ensigns of the Mark of the Beast on the cap and sleeves. A silver badge was prominently pinned on the left lapel of his coat, authorizing him to be a part of the regime of the Beast.

After all the men were dressed, they were told to go back to the room where they had received their first orders and line up to take the oath of the Beast Regime.

When all the men had lined up, Launcelot Browning stood in front of them rigidly, looking straight ahead. "Attention!" he cried. "Keep your eyes on the image of our god; raise your right hand and repeat after me..."

Each man solemnly and obediently did as he was commanded. With a smirk on his lips Launcelot began, and they all followed in unison:

"I swear, by the Beast, that I will do all that is within my power to rid the world of impostors and traitors. I will spill my own blood, if necessary, to convert everyone who prays to or worships any other god besides the Beast; and, if they will not accept the Beast, I will put them to death. I will show no mercy, but will, with the authority vested in me, imprison and torture them until they surrender or die."

"Lower your hands," he said sternly. "Now we come to the last step." From a golden pitcher on a nearby table, he poured some red liquid into a golden goblet overlaid with diamonds, sapphires, jaspers, and other precious stones.

"This is the blood of a Christian who was killed yesterday because he would not give up his faith in his so-called God and worship the Beast," he said proudly. "As this is passed around, each man will take a sip; and in the name of the Beast, we pray that you will be thirsty for the blood of all Christians and sympathizers."

A gun strapped on one hip, a shining sword on the other, and a whistle hanging from a gold chain attached to a buttonhole in the shirt completed each one's outfit. They were now ready to shout the blood-curdling cry of honor and glory to the Beast.

They hurried from the room, anxious to do the Beast service; and they went from house to house, searching diligently for those who did not have the Mark or were making no effort to get it. The period of mercy determined by the Beast was now up.

Many men and women were imprisoned and given a chance to recant and take the Mark; but if they refused, the torturers began their bloody work. People without the Mark, standing back in the shadows of a building in a secluded spot, were petrified at the scenes of horror they witnessed.

Many who had been in a lukewarm condition at the time of the Rapture fell down before God and confessed they had failed Him and wanted to receive forgiveness. Backsliders sought the face of God and prayed until the blood of the Son of God covered their souls. Sinners, stirred by the coming of the Son of God, found forgiveness for their sins; now all of them would have to seal their testimonies with their own blood.

It was a pathetic scene as audacious men led the helpless to their deaths of torture. Iron posts with chains attached were erected for the purpose of burning heretics. One could not help being seized by unshakable terror while watching a saint of God led to the stake, his face aglow, and hearing his defiant, "No! I will never worship the Beast or his image! The God of Heaven and Him only will I worship!"

Chained to the stake, wood piled around him, he would be asked again, "Will you take the Mark?"

The answer without a flinch: "No!"

Then gas would be poured on the wood until it was soaked, and the victim was asked for the

last time if he would renounce his faith in his God.

Again the answer would come emphatically, “No! Never!”

With a ferocious oath from the murderers, the fire would be ignited, the red flames licking hungrily around the victim. The saint, bewildered, frightened, might try to keep from crying out, but uncontrollable screams of agony soon would escape blistered lips.

While men full of the devil gathered around, giving honor and glory to the Beast, souls were lifted and carried by angelic beings to that Celestial City whose builder and maker is God.

Juliana Ketner, a young girl about seventeen years of age, was brought out and given a chance to save herself by falling down and worshiping the image of the Beast. Sobbing, she said, “No, I won’t! I won’t!”

She was strapped around a pole with a heavy wire, like a hog about to be barbecued. The fire was kindled, the blaze soared high, and then she was held over the flames until all the life was gone from her body. She fought and tried to free herself, but it was no use. Her screams echoed and re-echoed. Those watching from the shadows could hardly keep from running to her rescue, realizing that they could not free her because she was surrounded by guards.

Many helpless Christians were thrown to the lions. People watched in horror from their places of hiding while the cruel members of the Beast Regime led men and women toward a den of ferocious, roaring lions waiting impatiently for their prey. The soldiers always paused at the door of the den and asked their victims if they would renounce their God. Most of the answers received were No! Ruthless hands would then open the door to the den and throw the helpless Christians in. Just one pitiful, heart-rending scream would come forth, and then all would be quiet except for the sounds of the vicious lions fighting over their meal.

The red-horse rider, representing war, brought about the appearance of the black-horse rider of famine.

As the rider on the beautiful black horse traveled the earth, famine settled down upon it. People were starving by the thousands. Streets were littered with dead bodies of those who had died of starvation during the night, a sickening sight early each day before the corpses were picked up and hauled away.

Mother Collins had told Jim the story in the Book of Kings about how Samaria was shut in; no one could go outside the walls of the city and no one could come in. The enemy, Syria, had them surrounded and the people in the city were starving to death.

There were two women who each had a son. One woman said to the other, “Give thy son, that we may eat him today and we will eat my son tomorrow”; so they boiled and ate that woman’s son. The next day, however, the other woman, not willing to keep her end of the bargain, had hidden her son away. The woman who had killed her own son the day before went to the king and told him her story, but the old king was not able to help her.

“Jim,” his mother had said, “that is a terrible story, but there is coming a time worse than that. The Bible tells us there has never been a time such as the Tribulation Period.”

Jim saw people so hungry they ate human flesh, bugs, worms, snakes, rats—anything edible they could find.

The powers of the Beast were so strong it seemed that God did not care what happened to them. Many who could not get food gave up and walked into one of the little offices to take the Mark.

## Chapter 9

Hester went through much during the first few months of the Tribulation. Disaster was everywhere and fear clutched her heart each moment. The first days after the Rapture were almost more than she could bear. Nancy, the best friend she had ever had, and most of her dearest friends had been caught away. The gnawing thought that she could have gotten ready to meet the Lord and missed all of this heartache was constantly hammering in her brain. Somehow the long, dreary days passed into weeks.

At night, when she would lie down to sleep, it would be hours before she would fall into a deep slumber; and, when she did, it was a troublesome rest because she continually dreamed about the Rapture and being left behind.

When *The Alabasta Tribune* came out with a picture of the Antichrist, Hester looked at it and shuddered. She stared into the face of a man of such fierce countenance that it seemed to come to life. She trembled from head to toe as she looked into those eyes and felt the influence of his picture.

The terrifying thought came to her that one day he would reveal himself for who he really was. What would she do when she was led to a place of punishment and asked if she would take the Mark of the Beast? If she took it she would be doomed, and if she refused it would mean death.

Death! That was such a horrible word to those who were not ready to meet the Lord. Hester knew she was not ready to die and that she could never take the Mark of doom.

With strong determination in her heart, she walked down the street to the church she loved so dearly. Tears stung her eyes as she entered the building. She looked around anxiously for just one person to pray for her, but there was no one.

“To think,” she sobbed, “people were so interested in my finding the Lord, and I thought I had plenty of time. How the devil deceived me! Oh, why, why didn’t I believe God’s Word?” she groaned.

Hester stood behind the sacred pulpit and thought of the many sermons of warning from God that had been proclaimed to mankind from here. She opened the big Bible on the pulpit and began to read passage after passage of scripture. She tried to imagine that a song was being sung for an altar invitation. With tears flowing down her cheeks, she humbly knelt at the altar.

“Oh, God,” she cried, “I know I have sinned against thee. I realize I did wrong in not getting ready to meet your Son, Jesus. Please,” she said falteringly, “I just read in your Word that you are a merciful God. Please, God, save my soul!”

The enemy of her soul stood by and whispered the Lord did not care for her anymore and she could not be saved, but she prayed on. She must find Him! She could not live any longer without Him.

Then, out of the darkness came at last a glimmer of light. The burden lifted, and she felt as light as a feather on the inside. She shouted glory, for truly it was glory to find the Lord. She was so unworthy, yet He had forgiven her.

Brushing the tears from her eyes, she walked out of God’s house feeling better than she had ever felt in her life. There was fear, trouble and suffering on every hand, but in her heart she had a deep-settled peace.

Frank and Susan were completely broken up over the saints of God being gone. Frank continued to attend his clubs, trying to ignore the misery and terrifying dread clutching his heart. After leaving the club he would go home, slip away to his room, lock the door and read God’s

Word. After reading about the terrible judgments that were to be sent upon the earth, as recorded by John in the Book of Revelation, he would kneel and try to pray. Worse things were to come upon the earth; he was just entering the beginning of sorrows. He must find God!

Susan's gang gathered and tried to go on with life as if nothing had ever happened, but things just did not run as smoothly. Some of the girls could not forget the coming of the Lord; others hardened their hearts against it by trying to convince themselves that there was nothing to it. When the Rapture was mentioned, it always made trouble; often they had parted after many sharp words. The gang finally broke up, and for Susan it was a relief.

One evening Frank and Susan came home late after attending a lecture. Hester was in the living room praying for the salvation of her mother and daddy when they opened the door softly, intending to tiptoe through the room without disturbing her. Just as they stepped into the room, the Spirit of the Lord moved upon them; they fell upon their knees and began to pray to the God of Heaven for mercy. Their cloak of pretense was shed, and as Hester prayed for them, the victory came. They arose with all doubts gone, filled with the joy of salvation because they had found the Lord.

The daily papers were full of the fantastic exploits of the Beast. He had great power and performed many wonderful miracles which brought him more and more followers. Thousands who at first had scoffed at the statement that he was the Son of God were now convinced and became Beast followers. The Jews knew that the Redeemer of Israel would have great power, but not once did they think he would become as great as this.

It was a terrifying time to Hester when the headlines of the paper screamed that the covenant had been broken with the Jews. The great superman who had amazed the world with his miracles had now claimed to be God of the Jews and of all peoples of the world, not the Christ, the Redeemer of Israel.

The Jews forsook him after all the many things he had done for them. He had done more for them than anyone else. He had made it possible for them to erect the magnificent temple in Jerusalem and offer sacrifices as their forefathers had done in days of old. A news reporter, writing in sympathy toward the Beast, said the Jews were dissatisfied because they did not get their way in everything, and the Beast said they would come back because he was God and they could not get along without him.

Hester knew the truth was that the Jews had been deceived in the beginning by thinking he was the Son of God. Now their eyes were open and they were no longer in darkness. They recognized him to be exactly what he was: the Wicked One, the Son of Perdition.

There were pictures of the Jews with torture and fear on their faces fleeing from the Antichrist. Oh, the horror they must have felt when the Antichrist unveiled himself and they realized that the real Christ had been crucified by their forefathers! In that hour they got a glimpse of Calvary—Calvary with all its suffering, reproach and shame, Calvary with its glory, honor and redemption. All these horrors they were going through now could have been avoided if they had only known that the lowly Nazarene was the Son of God.

As Hester glanced at the different pictures, she thought of the one hundred forty-four thousand Jews who were to be caught away to be with the Lord during the Tribulation Period. She knew the woman spoken of in the twelfth chapter of Revelation was Israel, and the Man-Child consisted of twelve thousand men from each of the twelve tribes of Israel chosen by God to make up the one hundred forty-four thousand. In the fourteenth chapter of Revelation, the Scriptures say that they were all virgins because they had not been defiled by women, so Hester knew that they would have to be men. They were to be caught up during the Tribulation because

John saw them in Heaven while the Tribulation was still going on. They were known as the firstfruits unto God. Surely, she thought, they had been caught away by this time.

“How wonderful,” she said, “to have been caught up to Heaven out of this terrible time that is upon the earth! If only I can stand true to the Lord, one day my troubles will be over, too.”

After the Mark of the Beast was introduced, images were set up in Alabesta. Hester was startled beyond words the first time she saw the image of the Beast. It was just an image, but it had power to speak. Nervously she watched as the people gathered around and worshiped the image. Heart pounding, she was panting for breath as she watched the unbelievable scene. Appalled at the power of the image, she could hardly keep from bowing down and worshiping it. She had to continually plead the blood of Jesus. Hester and others standing back without the Mark formed a poignant scene as they watched the image worshipers.

The sky was a beautiful blue with fluffy pink-rimmed clouds, and the sun was shining; but there was nothing warm or beautiful to Hester. Her world had been turned upside down.

The Mark of the Beast was being discussed on every street corner. “I will never take the Mark even if I die,” one said.

Another said, “I don’t know yet just what I am going to do. We will have to do something to get food; we can’t just starve.”

Hester stood at the entrance of the largest supermarket in the city and carefully observed all that was going on. Sure enough, as people passed the cashier, each one had to show the Mark before the groceries were checked.

She became rigid from the top of her head to the soles of her feet as she watched a mere wisp of a lady struggling down the aisle to the cashier. From under her hat, silvery curls glistened in the warm rays of light. Her face was lined with wrinkles, but a light shone in her eyes. She set her groceries down on the counter, but made no move to show the Mark.

Zandra, the cashier, carried the Mark in her forehead. She glared at the little old lady suspiciously. Hester could tell from where she was standing that she was hard-hearted and would show no mercy.

“Come! Come!” Zandra snarled. “I don’t have all day to wait on you. Where is the Mark?”

The little old lady gave her a bewildered stare and did not make a move to show the Mark. The line behind her was growing longer, and there was a restlessness in the air as they waited impatiently to have their groceries checked.

“Do you or do you not have the Mark?” Zandra asked sharply. “If you do, let me see it; and if you don’t, get out of the way.”

The eyes of everyone within earshot rested upon the little lady as she lifted her head with a sad, troubled stare.

“No,” she said in a faint whisper, “but please,” she rushed on, “let me buy just this once.”

The answer came harsh and belligerent. “Indeed! I should say not! And just who do you think you are? Can’t you read? Can’t you see all the signs and notices tacked up around here telling you that you need not select groceries unless you have the Mark? Now beat it!” she said with an oath, “before I call the police.”

The old lady did not move. Her shoulders began to shake as she drew out a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her eyes. “Please don’t send me away without food. We don’t have anything at home.”

With this, Zandra went into a rage. “You’re just a half-witted old fool who cannot read or understand plain English! We have another remedy to use on ignorant people like you!” she fumed.

By this time an officer had arrived with cruel eyes like all of those who had the Mark. The officer had the Mark in his forehead and the ensign of the Mark on his sleeve and cap. Roughly he seized the old lady by the arm and pulled her toward the door. She was petrified with horror and began to call on God to help her as the merciless officer took her away.

Hester turned and fled from the store, wiping away the tears; she realized the little old lady was a Child of God. What a pity the old lady had not been ready when the Lord came! She would have been saved all these heartaches.

Groping and stumbling, tears blurring her vision, Hester came to a crowd gathered in front of the bank door. Patrol cars were parked at the curb in front. Just as Hester arrived, the officers were dragging a man, dressed in bloody, torn clothes, to the car. He had been beaten terribly.

"It's my money!" he cried, "and I intend to get it!"

"Oh, no you won't unless you take the Mark!" one officer declared vehemently.

Hester gasped. Her hand flew to her mouth to stifle a scream. One of the officers was Mother Collins' Jim, and he had the Mark of the Beast!

"Oh, no!" she choked under her breath. "It can't be Mother Collins' son!"

Then before realizing what she was doing, she cried out, "Jim! Jim Collins!"

The officer, with a mop of black wavy hair, big broad shoulders and features that would have been handsome had it not been for the sneer on his lips and the glitter of demon power in his dark eyes, whirled and glared down into Hester's eyes.

"Who are you?" he commanded.

Hester had lost her power of speech for the moment, but finally managed to stammer, "I...I... am...Hester...Bell...Wilson."

She froze on the inside. Was she going to die? She must get hold of herself, she thought. This would never do.

"I...I...went...to the same church...your mother went to. She was a dear...dear...friend of mine. The best friend I ever had." She stopped with a sob.

When she mentioned Jim's mother's name, he began to seethe and his body shook with hatred.

"Don't!" he cried, gritting his teeth and letting out a terrible oath. "Don't you ever dare mention her name to me again!" His fists were clenched as if he were going to strike her. "I have shut her out of my mind completely and now you are reminding me of her! I hate her! I hate her! Do you understand?" he shouted. "I loathe the ground she walked on!"

He cursed his fate of being brought up by a Christian mother. "I despise her for the rotten superstition she taught me. Now she has foolishly hidden herself away trying to make me believe she has been caught away by her God. It's all a damnable lie."

"Stop!" Hester shouted, forgetting the danger she was putting herself in. "You cannot talk about Mother Collins like that! I won't let you," she cried hysterically.

By this time she was blocking his path and pulling him frantically by his coat. Jim shook her off and gave her a brutal kick.

"Away with you, you dog!" he exclaimed.

He started to strike her again, but she fled and was lost in the crowd. She heard him shout, "Stop that girl! She is mad!" and that was all she remembered. Amazingly she got away from that scene of anguish, but she never knew how.

When she came to herself, she was in the park behind thick shrubbery, sobbing her heart out. At first, she thought she had fallen asleep and dreamed what had happened. She started to stand to her feet, wondering how she had gotten there and why she had decided to take a nap; then she fell back on the grass with a low moan. Her leg was hurt badly; it throbbed miserably.

Her mind was clear. This was not a dream but dreadful reality. Mother Collins' Jim had sold his soul to the devil and had said all those horrible things about his wonderful mother, and had kicked her. Mother Collins would never see her Jim again. He had no chance of Heaven now. He was like a demon from hell. Why did he do it?

Hester shuddered, more determined than ever to resist taking the Mark, even if she starved or was tortured to death.

The days that followed were days of uncertainty for those who did not have the Mark of the Beast. They had to be very cautious; at any moment they might be asked to open their right hand and produce the Mark. More and more, people were being put to death because they would not renounce the Christ of God and take the Mark. Hester often wondered how much longer her family would be able to escape. Officers of the Beast Regime were going from house to house, arresting men and women. If they took the Mark, they were released; but if not, they were taken to a place of torture.

Lying along the streets, dead bodies of people who had starved to death without taking the Mark sent a feeling of triumph through Hester because she knew that there were a few more souls the Beast could not make recant and take his Mark. Death was not an unwelcome visitor to Hester anymore. She felt it would be a relief to lie down and die. Many times she had prayed to die, but God had not seen fit to grant her petition.

One day while Hester was at home alone, there came a loud rap on the door. Breathlessly she waited. What would be the best thing to do? Her mother and father had gone out to find food. Getting food was a real problem because neither of them had taken the Mark of the Beast.

There was another loud knocking and a gruff voice said, "Open up in the name of the Beast!"

The blood drained from Hester's face; she looked around for a place to hide, but there was none. What could she do?

The commanding voice came again. "Open up or we'll break the door down!"

Quickly snatching up the Bible, she hid it under one of the cushions on the sofa and prayed, "Dear God, help me to be calm and direct my words." Then she opened the door.

"It's about time," said the officer with the gruff voice. "What kept you so long?" he demanded, giving her a searching look.

"Won't you please come in," she said politely.

The three officers did not wait for further invitation, but stomped into the house as if it were a barn.

"Sit down," Hester invited graciously. A great storm was going on inside her body. Would her mother and daddy come before these men left; and, if so, what would they do to them? What could she tell them when they asked about the Mark? Many pressing questions stampeded her brain for an answer. Frantically, she tried to think of appropriate answers for the questions she felt certain were about to be asked.

"Who lives here besides you?" the shortest of the three sharply asked.

"My mother and daddy," she replied, lifting her chin.

"Do all of you have the Mark?" he asked, his eyes resting upon her.

She did not flinch, but with a clear, steady voice answered, "I don't."

In her heart she prayed, "God, let this throw them off the track so they will not ask if mother and daddy have the Mark."

"Why don't you?" he questioned, coming closer to her.

"Because it is not right for me to take it," she said, looking straight into his eyes.

"What do you mean it is not right for you to take the Mark?" he asked, annoyed at her innocent

stare.

“I mean I am a Christian,” she boldly replied. Her face glowed with the ardent love of her Redeemer. All the fear was gone from her heart.

“I have been bought with a great price—something more precious than silver or gold.”

“What could that be?” one interrupted with a snap. “Don’t speak in riddles, my fair lady. Tell us so we can understand.”

“Indeed, I will tell you,” Hester humbly said. “It is the blood of the Son of God.”

Immediately, all the pity for her was gone from their eyes. It was true she made a beautiful picture as she stood before them, but when she proclaimed her faith in another God besides the Beast, they forgot everything but their love and loyalty for the god they served.

Blaspheming the name of the God of Heaven, they swore they would take that silly notion out of her head. Raging with anger they began pulling open the desk drawers and throwing things on the floor. Storming upstairs, they kicked open the bedroom door and began yanking out the dresser drawers. Hester followed them and watched with despair as they tossed her mother’s things all over the floor.

When they started to overturn the bed, Hester stopped them by saying, “I guess you are looking for the Word of God.”

The men looked amazed and one answered abruptly, “We are looking for that damnable Book called the Bible. You might call it the Word of God, but we don’t. If there is one of those Books here, we’ll find it or tear up the entire place.”

“There is not a Bible up here. I put my Bible under one of the sofa cushions in the parlor.”

They stared at her incredulously. They had never met a girl like her. What a blessing she would be to the Beast Regime if they could change her belief. That was what they needed—people who were not afraid of anything; this girl was not. From the first moment they laid eyes on her, she had been composed.

Eyes filled with hatred for God’s Word, one officer rushed to the place of hiding and with a rough hand pulled it irreverently from underneath the cushion. To Hester’s surprise, they did not tear it to shreds as she had thought they would do.

With a cunning look, one of the men told Hester to hold out her hands. She willingly obeyed. As she held out two milky white hands, a pair of shining handcuffs were snapped onto her wrists, but she did not show any emotion.

“Come with us.” The command was given with a cold smile by the one who seemed to be the leader of the three.

Hester walked out of her home, not expecting ever to be back again; she was seeking a city whose builder and maker is God. She glanced around hurriedly, imprinting the familiar scenes in her mind.

She held her head high as she walked down the street between two guards, one following. She knew she was going to her death, but one day Jesus had started on the death march to Calvary for her. What a privilege it was to die for His sake! He had done so much for her.

No one spoke until they were halfway down the block; then Hester broke the silence when she noticed how her Bible was being treated by the insolent man who carried it.

With a sweet mellow voice she pleaded, “Will you please let me carry my Bible until we get there?”

“Indeed not!” one of the officers blazed, giving her a rough shove.

The one who carried it was eager to please Hester, for he was determined to win her for the Beast Regime. He had no intentions of putting her to death unless she continued to be stubborn.

She was so young he did not feel he would have much trouble with her.

“I don’t see why she shouldn’t since we have to take it in, and I am sure I do not care to carry the filthy thing. It makes me break out in cold sweat. I was just thinking of having one of you fellows carry it.”

That was enough to settle the argument. Neither of the other two had any desire to carry the horrible old Book. No matter how calm they tried to be, it always unnerved them.

The Bible with its soft, flexible covers was placed under Hester’s arm; she hugged it to her heart. It was warm and she could feel its strength flowing into her body. She felt calmer on the inside, because she had the assurance that God would be with her, even in death.

Finally they came to a red brick building. In the yard were devices used to torture Christians. Someone was being burned at the stake just as Hester and the officers entered, and a crowd had gathered around to watch. The foul odor of burning human flesh filled her nostrils, and she became nauseated. One glance, and she knew the soul had already taken its flight from the body.

The officers ushered her into a large room before a desk where a man sat with wicked eyes that made her want to draw back in horror.

“Will you take the Mark?” asked the man behind the desk. “It will save you a lot of trouble; you can walk out free if you will take it. It’s such a simple act,” he continued with deceit playing in his eyes, “and you’re too young to die.”

He gave her a pat on the hand, but she drew back as if a snake had struck at her.

“We can use a girl like you in the Beast Regime. We need sensible people who know how to be calm in the midst of trouble,” he said with mock kindness, hoping to win her for the Beast. “I am sure you saw the unpleasant scene outside. It’s regrettable, but people must be made to realize that the Beast is not one to play with. He means business. Shall we give you the Mark, or would you prefer the same fate?”

Hester lifted her head with dignity, and her answer came in a frank, clear tone, “No! I will never take the Mark.”

The three officers stared in disbelief. Had their ears heard right? What kind of supernatural power had charge of this girl that caused her to fear nothing—not even death?

The face of the man behind the desk became livid with rage; he commanded in a harsh voice, “Take her away! I think we have a few ‘experiments’ that will help her change her mind.” He scrawled an order and handed it to an aide.

Rough hands seized her and she was marched through the back door and down a narrow, dingy hall with cells on either side.

“This order says put her in one of the front cells where she will have a nice view of the scenery,” said the guard with a mocking laugh that made Hester’s blood run cold.

She was pushed through the archway of a huge steel door; the door slammed, and the key turned in the lock. For a moment she stood staring at the closed door, then she turned and looked around. There was only one piece of furniture: a dirty old cot with a couple of filthy blankets thrown carelessly across it. The cell had one small window with heavy bars. Peering between the bars into the courtyard where people who would not worship the Beast were being tortured, she saw the charred and smoking body of the dear old saint of God who had just sealed his testimony with his blood. Hester trembled as she viewed the nauseating scene, clinging to the bars of the window for support.

“My God!” she prayed, “help me to be strong and die the victorious death.”

Hester heard noises and was aware that other people were locked in the cells beside her. She was not able to see them, because the door was a solid piece of steel, and the cement walls

reached within two feet of the ceiling with steel bars extending upward to the top. Eagerly, she listened for a familiar voice, but moans and cries of different ones praying were all she could hear.

Hester still clutched her Bible under her arm. Surely it was a miracle of God that they hadn't noticed the Bible before they locked her up.

Hastily, she hid it under the dirty cot, thanking God that He had been so thoughtful as to let her keep her precious Bible. It was more than she could have ever hoped for. How terrible to be in a place like this, but what a wonderful consolation to know that the Lord was mindful of her.

Over the moans and cries from other prisoners, she heard the huge bell in the courtyard dolefully ringing. She knew what that meant, because she had heard it many times before and witnessed the aftereffects. They were going to send another "heretic" to a martyr's grave. Her heart hammered wildly. Was she the one that was about to die?

Then she heard footsteps. Her hand flew to her mouth to stop the scream about to escape her frightened lips. There was a swift rustle of garments outside, then the clattering of a key as it was thrust into the lock of her door. She stood deathly pale. She knew her time had come. The door was cautiously opened and a man stood there with a sword in his hand as if he were ready to take her life right then. For a moment he glared at her, his piercing black eyes lit like coals of fire. Hester was petrified with fear; she tried to move forward and say, "I am ready," but not a sound would come.

The man broke the silence, saying in a furious tone which no one would dare disobey, "You are to go over and stand at the window. Under no circumstances are you to move. Do you understand? There is a beautiful scene that we want you to see. Go! Do as you are commanded!" he shouted with an oath.

Hester moved as one in a trance. It did not seem real. This could not be happening to her. Stumbling blindly to the window, she looked out into the courtyard; then the door was shut with a bang, and the key turned in the lock. Sobs coming from a short distance away reached her ear, and she knew she was not the only one that was being forced to watch the death of a saint.

Many shouts went up to the Beast from the crowd gathered in the courtyard; then suddenly everything became quiet, and a few moments of tense waiting followed. Footsteps echoed outside her cell door. She listened. On down the hall they tramped; then a pause, a rattling of keys, and the big, squeaky steel gate leading to the courtyard was opened.

In a few moments the captain of the guards cried, "Attention!" with a loud, rough voice. The guards made a double line on each side of a large, circular iron lid. That must be a new way of torture, she thought. Her knuckles turned a pale blue from the strain of clinging to the bars.

A beautiful, frail young woman was pushed savagely down between two lines of soldiers by a crude giant of a man. Her golden blond hair glistened in the sunlight, making a beautiful background for her milky complexion. Her eyes had the glow of divine glory. Her lips quivered slightly, but that was the only sign of fear. Her shoulders were held erect with a sweet dignity that no one watching could help but admire. The cruel guard did not push her the last few yards, and she walked slowly. How were they going to kill her, or would they kill her at all? Would she recant at the last moment and renounce her faith in God?

"Oh, merciful God," Hester prayed, "please give her strength to give her life for your sake."

Just then, two men raised the lid from a large deep pit. From the window Hester could see far enough down into the pit to view the hundreds of poisonous, slimy snakes of different kinds crawling over each other. Her eyes flew wide, and she cringed in sheer terror as she saw what the young woman's fate was going to be. Cold sweat formed on her brow while icy chills ran up and

down her spine. The lady was made to stand at the side of the pit so the prisoners could see the horror on her face when she perceived her destiny.

The young lady's eyes were wide with panic as she was forced to look down into the den of snakes. Their heads were lifted to the victim, their forked tongues furiously darting out of their mouths.

Hester felt a scream swelling in her throat, but she knew she must control herself. Like a shadow, she vanished from the barred window and fell upon the floor, shaking with sobs.

Immediately a guard was at the window saying with an oath, "Hey, you in there, get yourself back up to this window like you were commanded. Who do you think you are anyway? Take it from me, lady, if you're smart you'll obey orders; and they won't be given the second time either," he snarled.

With trembling, weak legs that did not seem sufficient to stand on, Hester dragged herself back to the window just in time to hear a guard ask the young woman, "Will you renounce your faith and take the Mark of the Beast, declaring from this day on that he is the true and only god?"

The woman stood like marble without lowering an eyelid. Everything was quiet as a graveyard. All eyes were focused on her, waiting for an answer. The woman did not hesitate to give her desire.

"No!" she said without a flinch. "I will never recant. There is only one God. The God I serve," she said emphatically, "is the God of the universe."

The guard glared at her and slowly began pushing her closer to the edge of the pit, hoping she would recant at the last second. Then with a shout of "Honor to the Beast!" the guard gave the woman a sudden shove, and into the pit she fell, giving the most pitiful scream Hester had ever heard—one that would haunt her as long as she lived.

The woman screamed again and again as the enraged serpents hissed and bit her. A fearsome boa constrictor coiled its huge body around hers, and her last scream was followed by a choking sound as the slimy snake squeezed the life from her body. The noise subsided, the pit lid was lowered, and Beast worshipers fell on their knees giving honor and glory to the Beast.

That was all Hester remembered until hours later when she came to, lying on the floor. Her head felt as if it were bursting. Where was she, and what had happened to her? Then the ghastly death she had witnessed came back to her with maddening force.

"I must have fainted," she murmured, pulling herself to a sitting position. A groan escaped her lips. She was sore and stiff all over as if she had been beaten. For a long time she sat on the floor not caring if she died. Life was not worth living anymore. If only it were all over!

The setting sun brought deepening shadows to Hester's cell. The key turned in the lock, and the door was opened revealing the same guard with the wicked "twinkle" in his eyes.

"Here," he grunted, handing her a tin pan with some cold beans and a stale piece of bread. Then he gave her a tin cup filled with water; and, warning her, he said, "You had better eat all of this; you will be given just a small amount each day."

Before Hester had time to say anything, he turned and marched toward the door with an air of importance. As an afterthought he suddenly turned to face her and asked with a mocking voice, "By the way, how did you like the wonderful service we had this afternoon?" His eyes glittered with demon power as he watched her intently. Then with a sneer he added, "You had better change your mind before a worse thing happens to you," and walked out, locking the door behind him.

It was hard to swallow any of the meager allowance of food, but she knew it would be better for her physical condition if she could eat something.

That night, as she lay on the rickety old cot under a filthy blanket, many images crowded her mind. Tears filled her eyes as she thought of her mother and daddy. What would be their fate? Did they know by now where she was? She knew her daddy would try to rescue her even at the risk of his own life. Humbly she prayed God to help him not do anything drastic.

Through the darkness, she could see the white face of the woman, her eyes wide with fright as she was forced into the pit of snakes. Those screams rang over and over in her mind. Oh, the spasms of horror she felt, and how she tried to blot them out of her mind!

Finally, after many hours of tossing from one side of the cot to the other, she fell asleep, only to dream of snakes coiling around her body and bloodcurdling screams.

What a relief it was when the night had passed and another day had dawned. What the day held for her she did not know, but at least the dark night with its hideous blackness had vanished.

# Chapter 10

Frank and Susan came home shortly after the three officers had left with Hester. They were shocked beyond words to find the house topsy-turvy and Hester gone. The thing they had feared for so long had come. What could they do? Hester was young, and they might persuade her or trick her into taking the Mark. Both of them were wild with anxiety. There was no doubt in their minds that Hester had been taken by the Beast Regime. If they only knew what to do... They agreed it would be better to wait until after dark before they went in search of her.

As they were about to sit down to eat a few bites of some cold leftover food, there came a light knock at the back door. Susan's heart missed a beat.

She looked at her husband, and with trembling lips she whispered in a low, shaky voice, "Who do you suppose it is?"

"I don't know," Frank answered huskily, staring at the door as the knocking continued to get louder.

Paralyzed with horror, Susan watched as her husband cautiously opened the door a few inches and peered into the darkness.

"Frank!" called Jack Rand.

The door was swung wide. With a sigh of relief Susan sat back in her chair. Jack was a close friend whom they had helped to find the Lord the day before.

Breathlessly he told them he had seen three officers of the Beast Regime take Hester up the street that afternoon. Susan wept aloud as he shared how boldly she had walked with her Bible under her arm.

Revenge sprang up in Frank's heart. He felt like taking his gun and murdering every person he could find who had the Mark. Susan was alarmed by the dreadful look on his face. Frank must not lose his head and do something drastic. They must be guided by the Spirit and do the right thing.

"Frank, let's kneel and take it to our heavenly Father. He will know what we should do."

On the kitchen floor the three knelt before the Lord and poured out their hearts, asking for wisdom and strength to do the will of the Almighty. They arose with renewed hope and courage after some time had passed, and the kind visitor left after promising he would earnestly pray for Hester to be delivered or stand true to God until the end.

As night settled down like a thick black blanket, Frank Wilson stood outside the gate which led to the courtyard of the prison, watching furtively for a chance to pass the guards. He must get by, even at the risk of his own life. Hester was locked in that prison somewhere—if they had not killed her already. The thought of Hester being put to death by cruel hands spurred him on to take a greater chance. Love for her and concern for her well-being drove away the fear for his own life.

After what seemed an hour, he saw his chance to sneak through. The two guards at the gate had been arguing, when, suddenly, arms and fists began to fly. In their fury they forgot their duty, allowing Frank to slip through the gate unnoticed.

Trying to stay out of the sight of anyone who might be in the courtyard or come through the prison door, he moved silently forward along the shadowed wall until he passed the front part of the building and came within sight of the cells with their barred windows. Looking all around and seeing no one, he made a dash for the cells. He was panting loudly from exertion by the time he reached the building. Crouching in the shadows, again he waited; there was not a sound

except for the moans of suffering humanity on the other side of the barred windows.

Moving like a shadow, his body hugging the wall, he came to the first window. Sheltering his eyes with his hand, he peered into the cell. There were a number of prisoners in that cell. Some were sprawled on the floor, some sitting, and others standing.

Looking all around him, he called softly, "Hester, honey, are you in there?"

Every muscle in his body was tense as he waited and wondered if anyone were going to answer him. A number of faces appeared at the window trying to see out.

"Is my daughter, Hester, in there?" he asked anxiously.

A woman turned from the window and asked with a sweet, mellow voice, "Is anyone in here named Hester? If so, someone out there wants to see you."

All shook their heads and the woman turned back toward the window and answered, "No."

With a heavy heart, he moved on to the next window. His eyes searched the cell but there were no women in that cell at all.

Frantically he searched out still another window. He heard a groan and his heart leaped with excitement. It was Hester! He looked through the steel bars into the narrow cell. A ray of light from the dingy hall fell upon her tormented face as she lay upon the cot under the dirty blankets, dreaming of snakes and people being put to death.

Just as he started to call her, he heard footsteps. He listened. His rapid breathing could be heard for some distance in the stillness as he huddled against the wall, frightened—not for his own safety as much as for Hester's. What would become of Hester if he were taken?

The footsteps were growing louder, which meant the night watchman was getting closer and coming in this direction. Then, around the corner came a guard carrying a large flashlight, shining it in all directions. His light moved slowly down the wall of the building until it rested on Frank. He froze with fear as the light was shined into his face and a gruff voice spoke.

"Come out from there before I blow you to smithereens!"

Numbly, Frank staggered toward the belligerent guard who held a gun in one hand and a light in the other.

"So you have come to take the Mark, eh?" the man grunted with a sneer. "That's just dandy. It will save us the trouble of going out and bringing you in."

Giving Frank a vicious kick, he pushed him ahead with the muzzle of the gun pressed against his back. When they reached the front door, he bade Frank open it. The light that flooded the darkness through the doorway blinded Frank, and for a moment he hesitated. The guard gave him another violent kick which sent him staggering into the room.

"Just look what I found in our own backyard," the guard remarked with a jubilant chuckle. "A lover, I guess, who came to keep a date with his best girl, but was interrupted by a cruel papa before he got gone."

The man behind the desk glared at Frank. "What were you doing outside that cell window?" he asked acidly. "We don't like lovers around here."

Frank's blood boiled with indignation and before he thought he blurted out, "That happens to be my daughter!"

"Oh?" said one of them, winking at the guard who had brought Frank in. "This is interesting. So papa tells daughter to take the Mark."

"I will never advise my daughter to take the Mark and sell her soul to the devil," Frank replied boldly. "I pray to God that she will be strong enough to withstand all your brutal tortures and die a victorious death, embracing the true faith."

The man behind the desk went almost insane with rage. "Stop it, you fool!" he shouted with

glittering eyes. "That is blasphemy! Any more of that kind of talk and I will have you killed tonight! If this girl is your daughter, where is your wife?"

"My wife is not with me," Frank replied quickly to avoid telling the whereabouts of his wife.

"I'm no fool," the man said with a dark frown. "I can see she is not with you, but you're going to tell us where she is. You may just as well start now before we have to put you through the third degree. We have ways of making smart guys like you talk. The Beast is the true god of the universe, and you will obey him. Do you understand?" he asked scornfully.

"I will obey God," Frank answered without flinching.

He was led away to a room of torture, and the punishment began. They tortured him in many ways; and although he would not tell where his wife was, somehow they learned the location of his home. Frank never knew how they secured the information.

After they had tortured him many hours, Susan was brought in. When she saw her husband, she gave a scream of horror.

"What have you done to him?" she gasped, rushing to his side, sobbing. His face was swollen, both eyes black, his shirt torn from his back. Merciless hands had beaten him until they tired.

"Oh, we've just been giving him a little beauty treatment," one guard laughed, amused at his own joke.

Then a frown came over his face, and he looked straight at Susan with wicked eyes that seemed to drain the very life out of her. "We are going to give him worse than that if he doesn't get some sense in his head and learn to take orders," he said. "If you're wise, you'll do as you're told. Let your husband's misfortune be a lesson to you."

They were led away to a musty cell; and as the guard locked the door, he said with a pitiless voice, "The lady who occupied this cell won't need it any longer. Not only did they roast her alive, she was burnt to a crisp."

Seeing their agony, he gave a hideous laugh as he slammed and locked the door.

The sun was shining through Hester's cell window when she awoke the next morning, and her heart rejoiced because the long, dreadful night had ended. Then came the rattling of a key in the lock, and her face paled. With trembling hands, she hurriedly tucked her Bible under the thin mattress.

When the guard entered the room, he found her with her back turned to the door; she was looking out of the small window. The guard spoke to her with mock kindness in his voice. She whirled around suddenly as if she had not been aware of his presence in the room until he spoke. He acted rather friendly as he set her breakfast on the floor and asked if she had rested well, along with some other questions; but Hester was in no mood to talk. When she did answer, she spoke in a crisp, uninterested manner.

The breakfast was warm and very appetizing. Why had they suddenly changed their attitude toward her? She felt sure that it was not for the sake of love or sympathy; nevertheless, she ate ravenously. The guard did not make a move to leave, so Hester just ignored him and went on eating.

Just as she had about finished, there were footsteps. She looked up into the face of the captain of the guards. Like a flash, the guard who had brought her breakfast stood at attention with his hand raised to his head, making the salute of the Beast Regime.

"The Beast live forever!"

"How is my young lady today?" the captain asked kindly, coming closer to Hester.

"I am very well, thank you," Hester answered serenely.

"I would delight in giving the order to have you released from this unpleasant place. Such a

sweet girl like you has no business being locked up in prison. If you will just do one little thing, which is very simple, I can order your freedom at once.”

Hester did not respond to his flattery. She sat composed and gave him an uninterested stare. The captain frowned. This was not working as he had anticipated. He thought surely by this time Hester would be anxious to get out of this hole and jump at his offer.

“Now, young lassie, all you have to do is take a simple little Mark that doesn’t hurt at all and it will be quickly over with.”

He saw the strong resentment written on her face as she said calmly, “I will never take the Mark. Do to me whatever you will. My Bible tells me not to fear the one who can destroy the body, but the One who can destroy both soul and body. I am not interested in your offers now or later. The answer will always be the same: No.”

For a moment, the captain stared at her in disbelief. Could he have heard right? Surely this helpless girl could not have turned down his offer so quickly! He had been confident that he could get her to change her mind with a little kindness and sympathy. He had showed her kindness by having her served a nice warm breakfast of the best food he could get, and she had returned his kindness like an ungrateful enemy. How the boys would laugh at him. Oh, they would not dare laugh in front of him; but when he had his back turned, they would wink at each other and laugh gleefully because this young girl had not bowed to his will.

That thought drove him into a fit of blasphemies. His hands itched to take her white, creamy throat into their strong grip and choke the life from her body. A plan came to him while he was pacing with rage from one end of the narrow cell to the other. The more he thought about it, the calmer he became; self-assurance was his again.

“Maybe it would be of interest to you to know that your mother and daddy were brought in last night.”

Hester’s eyes flew wide with dismay; her cold lips parted.

“I thought you might be interested,” he said mockingly.

The guard followed the captain, and they left her alone in the dreary, cold cell. Hester felt like a caged animal as she stood at the window, gripping the bars and looking into the distance. Mother and Daddy had been brought in! What would their fate be? If only there were something she could do to help them escape. It did not matter about her, but the thought of her own sweet mother and daddy being in the hands of those cruel men was frightening. What if they should be made to recant for her sake?

“Please, God, help them to be strong,” she prayed earnestly while tears spilled down her rose-petal cheeks.

The next few hours were torment as she waited anxiously for more word about her mother and daddy. Thousands of dark thoughts passed through her mind as the morning slowly dragged on. She listened intently whenever she heard footsteps, but each time they would die away. No one came to the cell.

About noon, heavy footsteps sounded on the cement floor of the hall, and then paused in front of her cell. The door was opened; the same guard who had brought her breakfast came in.

“Your father asked me to give this to you,” he said with a friendly smile, handing her a note.

“Thank you,” she said, quickly grasping the thin piece of paper. With trembling hands she hurriedly unfolded the note and read the startling contents:

*My dear Child,*

*I imagine you have been very anxious about your mother and me, but you need not be troubled*

*any longer. We are all right; in fact, we are happier than we have ever been in all our lives. We have taken the Mark of the Beast. We had been deceived, but now we have found the true light. Your mother and I are anxiously awaiting for the news that you have taken the Mark, too. Please don't disappoint us, and then we can all be together again. Remember, we both love you dearly.*

*Affectionately,  
Daddy*

Her mother and daddy had taken the Mark of the Beast, and now they wanted her to take it. "No! No!" she shrieked hysterically. "It can't be! It can't be!" She looked up into the guard's eyes, tears rolling down her cheeks, and pleaded like a small child, "Please tell me it is not true! Tell me my daddy didn't write this!"

The guard looked at her sadly and said with a helpless gesture, "I'm afraid it's true. Your daddy gave me that note himself. You can see that it's in his own handwriting."

She glanced down at the note. Yes, it was her daddy's writing. "How could they have done it?" she lamented. "I have prayed so many times for them not to fail."

The guard remained in the cell, but Hester did not care what she said. It did not matter to her if he did have the Mark. She was beyond caring. Oh, the thought that her mother and daddy had become weak and sold their souls to the devil made her want to scream as loud as she could and never cease.

Her daddy's request was that she take the Mark also. The thought made Hester shudder. Take the Mark? No! She would never take the Mark. Not even...no, not even at the bidding of her own parents.

"My God," she cried, "now we will never be a happy family because Mother and Daddy are denied Heaven!"

The ordeal was too much for Hester; she gave a pitiful cry like a wounded animal and collapsed. The guard picked her up and carried her to the office. When Hester came to, the captain was bending over her.

"Everything will be all right now," he whispered in her ear.

Hester struggled to her feet and stood wringing her hands in despair as cruel reality came rushing over her like a mighty wave in the deep.

The captain said, "Now I feel sure you are ready to take the Mark because you want to make your mother and daddy happy. Take the Mark, and you will be free. You will not have to go back to that old cell another time," he said tenderly, placing his hand on her shoulder.

Hester withdrew from him. "No! No! I will never take the Mark! I'm sorry that my mother and daddy have taken the Mark, but I cannot fail my God just because they have," she said humbly.

She looked straight into the captain's eyes, her eyes shining with the glory of God, and continued, "No matter what you do to me, I will never take the Mark."

"Very well," he said roughly. "If this is the way you want it, we will see. You have not been tortured yet. People can talk plenty pretty when they're not in any pain. I thought you could be changed through your parents, but you don't have that much love for them. You're not human," he said with an oath.

He motioned two guards, and they disappeared. Hester waited breathlessly, wondering what they were going to do to her. Then the door through which the two guards had disappeared opened, and there stood her mother and daddy.

"Mother! Daddy!" she cried, pulling away from the guard and rushing over to them. "Why did you take the Mark?" she asked pleadingly.

Her parents were aghast. "We haven't taken the Mark, Child," they both said, puzzled. "What

do you mean?"

"Daddy didn't you write me a note saying you and Mother had taken the Mark and wanted me to take it?" she asked, looking up into his face questioningly.

"No, Child," he answered through swollen lips. "I haven't written you a note. They've tried to trick you into taking the Mark."

Before more could be said, Hester was pulled away from her parents. Although they stood in peril of their lives, Hester felt light as a feather. She felt like shouting from the hilltops that her mother and daddy had not taken the Mark.

"Thank you, Lord," she said over again and again in a low whisper.

The captain gave a command for Frank and Susan to be led out to the courtyard. Hester knew the time had come for the three of them to seal their testimonies with their own blood. They were led out to a large block three feet high with a man standing by holding a glistening sword. To the right of the block was a large, deep vat of boiling oil. The three—mother, father and daughter—formed a pathetic scene as they stood close to the block, clasping hands. Just how they were to die they did not know; but no matter how cruel, it would soon be over and the victory would be won.

Frank kissed his wife and daughter goodbye when he was commanded to come to the block and place his hands on it. Susan was ordered to take her place by her husband and do likewise. Hester clung to her mother as she took her in her arms and hugged her desperately to her bosom. The guards shouted at them with oaths; but still they clung to each other until the guards tore them apart.

"Be strong, Child," she choked. "Don't recant. We'll all meet over on the other side."

Hester was handcuffed to a nearby stake because they thought she would become hysterical. From where she stood, she could see all that was happening.

Susan and Frank were pale but calm as they stood waiting for death. A large number of people who had the Mark were gathering to watch them die, and they were giving honor and glory to the Beast. A shrill whistle sounded, and all became silent. The captain, his eyes glittering and his lips curled into a sneer, drew near the block; the swordsman stood on the opposite side.

"Frank Wilson, will you renounce your faith in your God and serve the Beast, the true god?"

"No," he said without flinching.

"Then in the name of the Beast, I command that your hands be cut off."

Frank closed his eyes and ground his teeth together as the swordsman raised his weapon and brought it down with great force, cutting off both of Frank's hands with one blow and throwing them into the boiling vat of oil. Hester and Susan gave hideous screams of terror. They could hear his hands sizzling and frying as they stood at the mercy of evil men.

Susan was asked if she would renounce her faith and take the Mark. With trembling lips she answered, "No." The swordsman forcefully brought the sharp blade down, taking both of her hands off; she shrieked in agony. A guard picked them up and threw them into the vat of boiling oil also.

Frank and Susan were again asked if they would recant and take the Mark, but the answer was the same: "No." Next, their ears were cut off and thrown into the boiling oil.

Hester felt light-headed and nauseated. "Oh, God, why did we miss the Rapture? Why were we so foolish when your Word told us these times would come? Please, God, help us to be strong. Oh, God," she pleaded, "we need your help now as we have never needed it before."

After they had again refused to worship the Beast, the guard commanded Frank and Susan to stick their tongues out; and their tongues were cut out.

Hester began to scream hysterically. She wanted to stop screaming, but she did not have the power. A guard shouted for her to shut up, but his command went unheeded. Another guard ran up and thrust a gag in her mouth; the only noise she could make then was a gurgling sound. They were possessed with the devil; therefore nothing was too cruel for them to do to a Child of God.

Tears blurred Frank and Susan's vision as they endured these beastly tortures. Hester watched as a guard walked up to them with a pointed object and gouged their eyes from their sockets. Blood streamed down their faces from the empty sockets, and gushed from the places where portions of their bodies had been cut off. Hester thanked God when she saw that her mother had lost consciousness.

They laid her mother on the block, cut her legs off and cast them into the vat of oil. Then her arms were cut off at the shoulders and cast into the sizzling liquid. Finally, her head was cut off and thrown, with the remainder of the body, into the boiling oil.

Hester could see and hear her mother's body frying and smell the nauseating odor as it came up to her nostrils. She wanted to close her eyes to shut out the excruciating scene, but when she closed her eyes, a guard, standing by to keep an eye on her, would stab her with the end of his sword.

Twice during the ordeal she fainted. Each time, the sadistic captain ordered the guards to cease the torture of her parents until she was revived; he wanted her to see it all well done. He was determined to break her spirit. She could not hold out indefinitely. She would have to give in sometime.

Frank was placed on the block. Groans of agony fell from his lips as hot, racking pains shot through his body. Then his arms, legs and head were cut off and all cast into the boiling vat of oil. Shouts of praise went up in honor of the Beast, but a great calm came over Hester. Her mother and daddy were not suffering any longer.

The gag was removed from her mouth, and her face lit up with the glory of God. She shouted in a loud clear voice, startling those standing nearby, "Thank God, the victory is won! Mother and Daddy are safe with the Lord!"

The outburst had come so suddenly and unexpectedly from the frail girl's lips, inspired by the Spirit of God, that many of those with the Mark feared and trembled. The dirty hand of a guard was pressed over her mouth so she could say no more, and the handcuffs were removed from her wrists, leaving red circles where the steel had cut into tender flesh.

As she stood facing the block where her mother and daddy had just died, she felt the victory was almost there for her, too. The captain's cruel, penetrating eyes rested upon her, but she stood composed. Her heart ceased its racing; her fear of death was gone. Her beautiful dark eyes, with their soft glow, gazed searchingly into his evil ones; he became ill at ease as she continued looking at him unafraid.

"I am ready to die," she said humbly. "Why do you wait?"

That was too much for the exasperated captain; it brought a flood of blasphemies from his lips. "Take her away!" he shouted with a curse. "I am not ready for her to die yet. By the name of the Beast I will break her spirit."

A guard stuck a sword to her back and ordered her to march toward the prison. Disappointed, she did as she was told. She had wanted to die so very much, but her desire had been refused. She had nothing to live for, but everything to die for. The guard locked her in the same cell where she had been before and stomped away.

As soon as his footsteps died out, she drew her Bible from its secret hiding place. With tear-dimmed eyes, she read verse after verse from the Word of God. Why hadn't they killed her? She

had not doubted for a moment that they would. Maybe God had spared her for a purpose and she would understand it clearly a little later. The thought cheered her heart and made her feel warm on the inside.

That evening the guard opened her door and pushed a well-dressed woman of about thirty into the cell with her. She was trembling all over and gasping for breath.

“My name is Hester Bell Wilson. Most people call me Hester,” she spoke up brightly.

“My...name...is...Silvia...Matthews,” the woman stammered in a low voice. “Do they...are they...going...to put you...to death, too? Are you...a Christian?”

“Yes, I am,” Hester replied proudly.

The woman moved close to her. She was not afraid of her any longer. “Maybe you can help me find the Lord. I have tried so hard. You see, my people are prominent in society, and they have all taken the Mark but me. I would have taken it, too, if it had not been for my nurse, Ophelia, who was a wonderful Child of God. She told me all about this time and the coming of the Lord. It made a good imaginary story, but I never gave it too much thought beyond its just being like any other fairy tale.

“The morning the Rapture took place, Ophelia was caught away to be with the Lord; I realized, for the first time, that the things she had told me all my life were not made-up stories. You see,” she continued in a low tone, “my mother and father never thought much of church and the Bible.

“My life has never been the same since Ophelia disappeared. I am not interested in the crowd I used to run with; they have all taken the Mark. They think I have lost my mind because I refuse to take the Mark and I talk about nurse Ophelia and God so much.

“Rather than have me disgrace the family name, they turned me over to the Beast Regime. I heard one of the guards say I would be put to death at sunrise. It’s awful,” she choked with tears rushing down her cheeks.

“I know,” Hester said with a voice of sympathy. “My mother and daddy were put to death today, and sooner or later I will follow them. I wish it had been today.”

The woman stared at her with a strange gaze. What kind of girl was this who could be so brave about facing death?

“You mean you are not afraid to die?” she asked in astonishment.

“Well,” Hester answered meekly, “the flesh shrinks from thoughts of suffering and death, but I felt the Spirit of God in such a marvelous way today. I would have welcomed death so that I could have gone and been with the Lord.”

“Then, if you are that close to God,” Silvia spoke with great hope in her eyes, “surely you can help me find the Lord. You believe He will save me?” she asked earnestly.

“Yes, Honey, by all means I know He will,” Hester answered, looking straight into Silvia’s eyes.

Hester pulled the Bible from its hiding place and Silvia’s eyes lit up when she saw it; she knew that this was the same Book from which Ophelia had read all those things she told her about. Hester read scripture after scripture while Silvia listened, drinking in each word.

When Hester had finished, she looked up from the pages of God’s Holy Writ and asked, “Do you believe what I have been reading to you?”

“Yes,” Silvia answered without hesitation, nodding her head.

“Then let us pray that God will save you for Christ’s sake.” The two knelt in the musty cell, sheltered from the eyes of those who hated God’s people, and Silvia wept her way through to victory. She arose with her face aglow, amazed at the wonderful strange feeling. The thought of dying tomorrow did not take the joy out of her heart. She had found the Savior!

The next morning, as the guard stood there ready to take Silvia away, the two new friends clasped hands and promised they would meet on the shore of sweet deliverance.

“Goodbye. Thank you for helping me find the Lord,” Silvia said, as she was led away to her death.

With misty eyes Hester watched from her cell window as Silvia marched bravely to the den of lions. Silvia stood there, seemingly without fear, and she shook her head quickly when asked if she would recant before being fed to the hungry lions. Her face lit up with the glory of God as she raised her hands toward Heaven, giving glorious praise to the living God, and walked blissfully into the den of lions. The angels in Heaven on the streets of gold hushed their singing and gave praise to God because another soul had defeated the Beast and made it through.

Hester’s heart was sad, yet it rejoiced at Silvia’s glorious death because she had died in the faith. Had it not been for Hester, she would not have experienced a glorious death. Now she knew why they had not killed her with her parents.

# Chapter 11

Jim heard a noise like thunder. It was so loud it made the earth rock. Fear clutched his heart as he stood in the open, looking up at the sky. What did it mean? He had never heard a noise like that before.

If Jim could have looked behind the cloud hanging overhead, he would have seen a shining angel with a trumpet pressed to his lips. Jim waited tensely. What was going to happen?

“Haven’t we suffered enough?” Jim choked in his fear. He looked up into the heaven and blasphemed the name of God.

Suddenly hail and fire mingled with blood began to rain from the skies. It was the most fearful thing Jim had ever seen. He rushed toward a large nearby building as other people were running, screaming, pushing, trying to get out of the way of the judgment that was falling from Heaven.

Watching from a window, Jim saw all the green grass burned and a third part of the trees destroyed. Some of the people had not made it to shelter in time, and their dead bodies were lying in the street. What was this all about? Jim frantically searched his memory for an answer. Then he remembered his mother’s black Book; the eighth chapter of Revelation foretold this terror.

“No, it can’t be!” he shouted. “It can’t be! I burned that Book! Why should its contents keep coming back to me? I despise it with all my strength! I won’t listen to it,” he cried; but Jim could not get the scripture out of his mind. It still lingered to haunt him.

When the storm was over, there was another terrible blast; a second angel from Heaven sounded a trumpet, and Jim saw a ball of fire, which looked like a great mountain, fall from the skies into the sea. Immediately the redness of the sea, which had turned into blood, became visible. Jim’s heart began to pound furiously as he and others raced for the beach to get a closer view of the sea. It was absurd for the sea to turn into blood; but their eyes were not deceived. It was a fact. As far as Jim could see, it was blood. A third part of living creatures in the sea died, and a third part of the ships were destroyed. The people stood there awe-stricken as they watched a sick sea vomiting its dead upon the beaches. It was the wrath of God being rained down upon sinful humanity; but the people repented not of their deeds. They blasphemed the name of God.

“And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from Heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; and the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter,” Revelation 8:10,11.

For a number of days now, the city of Alabesta had been without water. What a sickening feeling to go for a drink of water and find it blood. Jim’s thirst became unbearable; people were actually dying of thirst. The entire city cried for water, water. They tried to substitute other liquids, but nothing would quench their thirst and take the place of cool water.

Someone cried, “There is water over yonder!” and people went into a wild stampede to get to the place where he had said water could be found.

Jim’s parched lips ached for good, cold water. He was desperate enough to kill as he rushed madly for the water hole. People, lying along the sidewalks, too weak to go on, pleaded to those hurrying by to bring them some water; but Jim cursed them and kicked those in his path out of his way. He cared nothing for them. The only person he thought about was himself.

When he got to the water hole, it was surrounded by people down on their knees drinking. The only thing that saved Jim’s life was that someone else was in front of him. Jim stood behind a

man, waiting impatiently for him to finish. The man did not stir.

Jim waited a few moments more then he snarled, "Get up from there, you fool! Don't you know someone else wants water besides you?"

Still the man did not move. Jim gave him a furious kick with his foot and turned the man face-up. He was dead! Then the words came to him, "Many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter."

"That Bible!" he blazed with fury. "I burned that rotten Book! Why should those words come to me? I burned it," he cried, "and it can't do this to me!"

Jim had burned the pages of God's Word, but he could not erase its message from his heart. Man speaks and his words die, but God speaks and His words live forever. His words are words of life. There is no death in them.

In a fit of insane rage, Jim rushed away from the water hole which was surrounded by bodies of people who had died drinking the bitter water. The blasphemies poured from his lips in a mad torrent as he cursed God for sending all those plagues upon them. They had not done anything wrong, so why should He torture them? He was just a cruel being that was trying to run the universe, but it would not be long before the true god, the Beast, would conquer Him and cast Him down forever!

There was a startling interruption to Jim's thoughts as another great noise rent the air.

"And the fourth angel sounded, and the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars; so as the third part of them was darkened, and the day shone not for a third part of it, and the night likewise," Revelation 8:12.

The fear that settled in the hearts of mankind when they saw the elements affected in such a catastrophic manner was indescribable. Day and night the people were reminded of the wrath of God being poured out upon the earth.

Suddenly it began to get dark. Jim stared at his watch and looked around in disbelief. "It can't be getting dark!" he cried. "It's only noon. My eyes must be playing tricks on me," he muttered as the darkness continued to get thicker and thicker.

Jim heard a terrific blast just before the darkness began to close in, but he did not see an angel fall from Heaven with the key to the bottomless pit and open it. When the pit was opened, it was as if a large furnace had been opened, spewing forth great darkness.

About the time Jim decided that night had really settled down upon the earth, the smoke began to clear away, revealing the most horrible sight he had ever seen in his life. It made the blood run cold in his veins; he felt frozen all over. He wanted to scream, but his lips were numb and his tongue thick. For a few moments, he just stood there and shook with fear.

"And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power as the scorpions of the earth have power. And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads. And to them it was given that they should not kill them, but that they should be tormented five months: and their torment was as the torment of a scorpion, when he striketh a man. And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them. And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold, and their faces were as the faces of men. And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions. And they had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle. And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails: and their power was to hurt men five months," Revelation

9:3-10.

There was a wild stampede of people trampling each other, trying to get out of the path of the ferocious, tormenting animals of judgment. Those who were attacked screamed pitifully for help, but no one could help them. The locusts stung those who had the Mark; they could not get away.

Jim for a time was petrified with fear; but finally movement began to return. He lunged drunkenly down the street, then across to another street and through an alley. His only thought was to get those terrible animals off his trail. Faster and faster he ran, his breath coming in hard gasps as he heard the shouts and screams of people he had left behind.

After running many blocks, dodging back and forth hoping to shake the creatures off his trail, he stopped and listened. The cries of the people had almost faded out; he felt he was far enough away to rest a little. His chest hurt from the hard breathing and exertion. He sat down on the steps of a brick house and blasphemed the name of God for sending those terrible plagues.

As Jim sat there, his sharp hearing picked up a faint sound. It was getting louder. His pulse quickened again as he waited, fearful of what the noise might be. Suddenly, around a corner about a block away, the locusts came thundering with mighty speed. The sight of them almost frightened Jim out of his wits. Man had never witnessed such animals on the earth. Their faces were as faces of men, they had hair as the hair of women, their teeth were as the teeth of lions, their wings flapped madly, and the crowns on their heads glittered like gold.

Jim struggled to his feet. He was weak all over with fear, but the thought of being attacked by the pursuing creatures drove him on with unexpected speed. He could hear the roar of them getting closer and closer. Oh, if he could only run faster! On they came. It seemed to Jim he could feel their hot breath on the back of his neck; he was perspiring freely. Turning his head to one side and glancing back, he saw them several yards away. In a few moments they would have him; there was no way of escape.

Stumbling over a stone, he fell, letting out a piercing scream. The ferocious animals were upon him like a lion on its prey. Jim closed his eyes to shut out the horrible sight of them. Frantically he prayed for the Beast to come to his rescue, but there was no answer. The locusts began to sting him with dreadful stings in their tails, and searing pain shot through his body as he was stung again and again. He was afire all over inside. Never in all his life had he felt such pain, nor dreamed anything could be so excruciating. Blackness was closing in on him; he thought he was dying, but he did not care. It would be a relief to die and get away from these hideous animals. The last thing Jim remembered was scratching and clawing at the locusts with all his might and blaspheming the name of God.

Hours later he came to, surprised to find himself still alive after the awful ordeal he had gone through. Every nerve on fire, Jim experienced untold agony when he tried to move his body. For awhile he lay there, too sick to sit up. What torture!

The days passed by filled with intense suffering. About the time those who carried the Mark recovered from an attack of the locusts, they would be attacked again and the suffering would start all over. Jim suffered night and day for about five months. When he thought he was getting well from the stings of the dreadful locusts, they would assault him again.

People sought to take their own lives but could not because they were in the five months of the Tribulation Period of which the Bible said: "And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them," Revelation 9:6.

Some climbed to the tops of tall buildings and tried to jump off to end their lives; but when they reached the top, they found they did not have power to jump. The tortured tried every imaginable way to take their lives, but death would flee from them.

“What’s the use of living and being tortured all the time? I will end it all!” Jim shouted with an oath.

He felt the revolver in his pocket, but decided it would be easier to jump off the bridge over the river. He had always heard it said that drowning was an easy death, so he started for the river. How the hatred boiled in his heart for the God who had sent all those plagues upon them; one day, he thought, He would be defeated by the Beast!

After what seemed an eternity, he came to the bridge. Looking down into the rushing water, he thought it would not be long until it would all be over. He stood at the edge and tried to jump but, to his amazement, he was not able. He tried again and again, but each time without success. Then the words came to him: “And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them.”

Jim whirled around in a rage. “Who said that?” he blazed. “Who said I can’t die!”

Suddenly, it dawned on him where those words came from. “That damnable Book called the Bible! I wish it would leave me alone! What right does it have to tell a person what he can and cannot do? Down through the ages man has taken his life if he wanted to,” he said scornfully.

With his hand raised toward Heaven, he swore with an oath that he would take his life. Jerking his small revolver from his pocket, he held it to the side of his head and put pressure on the trigger; but try as he could, to his astonishment, he did not have power to pull the trigger. He fell down on the bridge blaspheming the name of God.

From the same direction Jim had come, there appeared a frail figure hurrying to get across the bridge. The girl was haggard and very frightened. It was Mary Conway who attended the same church Hester and Mother Collins had attended.

Mary had been through many things, but she had not taken the Mark. She never would have dared to cross the bridge in daylight had her life not been in great danger. Some men of the Beast Regime had almost caught her, so she had to take her only hope. Gasping for breath, she hurried along casting a furtive glance backward every few yards.

She would welcome death if she were a Christian, but she had not been able to find the Lord. If only she could believe; but it was so hard to believe. The earth had been turned over into the hands of the devil; and when she had tried to pray, she seemed as one mocked.

When she got to the edge of the bridge, she stopped and looked all around; then, holding her breath, she stepped onto it. In her fright of the men pursuing her, she did not notice Jim until she was almost upon him.

Hearing her footsteps Jim cried, “Help! Help!”

Mary started to rush on, but then she thought it might be a Child of God, and he could help her find the Lord; so against her better judgment, she went to the pathetic figure.

At first, Mary did not recognize Jim. His hair was long and uncombed; he had not shaved in days and his clothes were filthy and torn. Her heart beat faster. There was something strangely familiar about him. It was as if she knew him, yet he was drastically different from the person she had known. He moved his head with agony to one side so he could see her better; then she recognized him.

“Jim!” she cried, falling down on her hands and knees, forgetting about the danger of her own life, and lifting his head from the hard surface with her worn hands, which had once been soft and pretty.

“Jim, don’t you know me?” she asked with great joy. There were tears of gladness in her eyes, because she had found Jim.

“Jim, this is Mary,” she went on with a trembling voice.

Jim had known Mary all her life. They had grown up together. Mary did not have a brother, so Jim had been her big brother; she idolized him. Jim was older than Mary, and while she was still in the lower grades, he finished school and went away to college.

“Jim!” she cried, “you missed the Rapture! Your mother was under such a burden for you that last night before—before she went away,” she choked. “I thought surely you had gotten saved and had made the Rapture. Jim, have you found the Lord?” she asked anxiously, holding her ear a little closer.

“What do you mean, found the Lord?” Jim snarled bitterly. “You see that gun over there? Pick it up and take my life.”

“Oh, no! Jim!” she exclaimed. “I could not do a thing like that. Let’s try to pray. God can help us.”

With this, Jim went into a rage. “Away with God!” he shouted, raising his right hand.

Mary stared in overwhelming wonder. Jim had the Mark of the Beast! She seemed to be smothering on the inside. Trembling uncontrollably, she finally managed to get to her feet. The friend she had regarded with such fervent devotion and affection for so many years was now her enemy.

Jim glared at her as she began to back away and said, “You see that gun over there? Pick it up and take my life! It is your only way out because if you don’t I will blow this whistle, and you know what that will mean for you.”

“No, Jim!” she cried hysterically. “I can’t! I can’t!” Turning away from him, she ran for the other side of the bridge.

“Come back!” Jim shouted, “Come back, you fool!”

A shrill whistle pierced the air, sending chills through Mary’s body. She knew members of the Beast Regime would be after her at once. Before she reached the end of the bridge, she heard footsteps running behind her and men’s voices shouting, “Stop! Stop!”

On she ran, praying: “Oh God, don’t let them take me. Don’t let them take me. I am not saved!”

She made a desperate attempt to run faster, but her weary legs, weak from fear and hunger, would not cooperate. The men were getting closer and closer; then rough hands reached out and grabbed her, and she found herself staring into the eyes of devil-possessed men. They gave honor and glory to the Beast as they dragged her along.

“Please, God,” she prayed, fear enveloping her heart, almost smothering the life from her body, “don’t let them kill me before I find you.”

They led her through the gate to the courtyard of torture; instead of taking her to the prison, they took her straight to the block to take her life.

“Please don’t kill me!” she cried. “I am not saved! Please let me have a little while to pray”; but they paid her no attention.

The guard stepped forward with a shining sword in his hand. She stood there bewildered, helpless and, it seemed, God-forsaken.

“Oh God, save my soul!” she cried, but all was dark, and she could not contact God.

She was asked, “Will you take the Mark?”

She was trembling all over. How sad to die without hope and without God. Mary was aware that if she gave her life it would not save her. She must have a “born-again” experience through the blood of the Son of God.

Determined not to take the Mark, she shook her head and said, “No! I won’t take the Mark, but please, please don’t kill me.”

Merciless hands laid her on the block, and the swordsman drew back the glistening weapon to take her head from her shoulders. The sudden distraction of a soldier rushing forward interrupted him. Giving the salute of the Beast Regime the soldier cried: "The Beast live forever!"

The swordsman dropped the sword as if it were a hot iron and returned the salute: "The Beast live forever!"

"The Beast has come to the city and will pass this way in a few minutes," the soldier said with excited gestures. "Open the gates; he wants to pass through the torturing grounds."

They did not wait for more. Many rushed out of the gate and down the street in the direction the messenger had come. Mary was cruelly jerked from the block and rushed to a prison cell. What a relief it was to know that she would be spared a little longer. Maybe she could find the Lord.

She crept to the tiny barred window and timidly looked out. She could see through the open gate down the street. The sight almost took her breath. Thousands of people lined the street as far as her eyes could see. Many of them were down on their knees with their faces buried in the ground. Shouts of "Long live the Beast!" with hallelujahs, honors and glories went up to him, causing bloodcurdling horror in those who did not have the Mark.

Just then a chariot appeared, drawn by six gorgeous white horses. Its beauty was breathtaking. The chariot was overlaid with all manner of precious stones—sapphire, jasper, emerald, chalcedony, amethyst, chrysoprasus, and jacinth. The wheels sparkled with diamonds as they slowly turned around and around. The horses' gear was gold, studded with diamonds. It was the most beautiful sight Mary had ever seen.

The man who rode in the chariot was horrifying. He had a fierce countenance with eyes as flames of fire. He wore a white robe dotted with large sparkling diamonds and a gold sash tied around his waist. The tassel of his exquisite turban swayed and glittered with tiny precious stones.

Suddenly the procession stopped. The Antichrist sat in his chariot while the Antispirit, dressed in a similar garment, stood in front of him; and, looking into the heaven, commanded fire to come down. Immediately the sky lit up and fire fell before the eyes of the people. Some without the Mark, watching from the shadows, came rushing out; and, falling down on their faces, declared that the Beast was God when they saw the miracle.

Mary felt a great spirit of worship come over her as she watched from her cell window. A powerful and penetrating force sought to pull her to her knees, but she knew that this was not the true God. She must not be deceived and bow down to him.

The procession started moving again, and the people shouted with one voice which sounded like the voice of many waters, "The Beast is the true God! The Beast live forever!"

The chariot passed through the gate and moved on toward the prison. The Beast was looking straight ahead; then his penetrating eyes, suddenly focused on Mary, burned into her flesh. She never thought anyone could have so much power over her. She felt as if she must bow down and worship.

"Please God, I plead the blood. I plead the blood of Jesus," she choked. Her face was turning the color of paste as the Beast's piercing eyes seemed to look right into her soul and read every thought of her heart. Mary was weak all over, but she clung to the bars of the window to keep from bowing down. There was a look of triumph on the Beast's face as he saw the agony he was putting her through. If he had stared at her one minute longer, she would have fallen down and worshiped him, his power was so great over her. His eyes turned from her, as the chariot slowly moved on up the street. She sank to the floor, and her body shook with uncontrollable sobs.

“Oh God,” she cried in desperation, “please help me to believe!” As Mary lay on the hard floor of the cell, she heard a noise like thunder. She listened. The shrieks and screams of many people out in the street were going up. What could have brought such a sudden change over them? There were no more praises going up in honor of the Beast. Her pulse quickened.

She got to the window just in time to see the chariot in all its glory being lifted by unseen power into the air. The six horses, the chariot, the Antichrist and the Antispirit arose like a great bird and disappeared into the clouds. Mary stood appalled at the sight. It was like magic.

Screams of terror from the people caused her to look anxiously down the street in search of the cause of the distress. Suddenly her eyes went wide in horror; coming down the street were many hundreds of lions with men riding on their backs. No, they were not exactly lions. They had heads like lions, but they had bodies like horses, tails like serpents with heads; and they were biting the people. The riders on the odd-looking animals had breastplates of fire, jacinth, and brimstone; and out of the mouths of the horses boiled fire, smoke, and brimstone. They were devouring many of the people who got in their path. It was horrifying to watch them. They were the lion-headed horses that John told about in the ninth chapter of Revelation: “And the number of the army of the horsemen were two hundred thousand thousand: and I heard the number of them. And thus I saw the horses in the vision, and them that sat on them, having breastplates of fire, and of jacinth, and brimstone: and the heads of the horses were as the heads of lions; and out of their mouths issued fire and smoke and brimstone. For their power is in their mouth, and in their tails: for their tails were like unto serpents, and had heads, and with them they do hurt,” Revelation 9:16,17,19.

It was like a nightmare to Mary as she stared with bewilderment at the horses of destruction and their riders. People ran for weapons to protect themselves, and many shots were fired; but nothing had any power over the riders. They rode straight through the city, leaving many dead in their path. The roar of them sounded like thunder in the distance as they galloped on through the city, leaving the street covered with dead, dying, wounded, and bleeding people. It looked like a great battlefield. The people who were left alive did not honor the God of Heaven or repent of their wicked deeds, but blasphemed His Holy Name; and God rained more plagues from Heaven.

The first angel in the sixteenth chapter of Revelation poured out his vial upon the earth, and grievous sores broke out on those who had the Mark of the Beast or had worshiped his image. Jim broke out all over with horrible sores. What pain and agony they caused! He could find no relief from them.

When a second angel poured out his vial upon the sea, it became as the blood of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea died.

The third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of waters, and they became blood, and the angel of the waters said: “Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be, because thou hast judged thus. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy,” Revelation 16:5,6.

Another out of the altar said, “Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments.”

The sun began to get brighter and brighter. People sought refuge from its rays, but there was no place they could find to escape the heat. It became so hot that men were scorched; and yet they did not repent, for they hated God and His judgments.

Suddenly the sun began to get dimmer and dimmer until it refused to shine at all because an angel had poured out a vial upon the seat of the Beast. A thick darkness began to settle down. Thicker and thicker it became. Jim, along with others who had the Mark, gnawed his tongue for

pain.

## Chapter 12

The day Mary was brought in by the Beast Regime, Hester was standing at her cell window. She saw the guards dragging someone into the courtyard; as they drew closer with their prisoner, her heart missed a beat. It was Mary Conway, the girl from Fairview Church, whom Hester had always admired. She heard Mary cry for mercy, begging them not to kill her.

“My God,” Hester prayed, “don’t let them put Mary to death before she finds you. Please, God, make the way for me to talk to her and help her get saved.”

Through her tears, she saw the guard lay Mary on the block. She was frantic with anxiety as she watched; it looked as if the Lord were not going to answer her prayer. All hope of Mary’s being rescued from death vanished.

Hester closed her eyes; her lips moved in prayer as the swordsman drew back his weapon to take Mary’s head from her shoulders. When she opened her eyes again, she was shocked to see that he had dropped the sword and was talking to someone; then she saw Mary being taken up from the death block and dragged toward the prison.

In a few minutes she heard footsteps coming down the hall. She listened, holding her breath. That was probably Mary, and she was anxious to know where they would put her. They stopped just before they got to her cell. She heard the key rattle in the lock of the cell next to hers.

“Oh, God,” she prayed, “let it be Mary being locked in that cell so I can talk to her.” Her eyes glistening with tears, she fell down on her knees, humbly thanking the Lord for sparing Mary.

Hearing more commotion and moving to her cell window, she saw the procession of the Beast pass through the prison gates.

Later, after most of the excitement had quieted around the prison, she went to the wall between her cell and the one next to it.

“Mary,” she whispered. Her heart beat faster as she listened, but no one answered.

Then she called again, a little louder. Her heart leaped with joy as she heard Mary’s voice on the other side of the wall saying, “Who is it? Who is calling my name?”

In her great excitement, Hester forgot all about the guards. “It’s Hester,” she cried joyfully, “Hester Bell Wilson. Don’t you remember the girl with black hair who used to go to the same church that you and Mother Collins went to?”

Mary’s heart leaped with such joy, it felt as if it were going to burst out of her bosom. “Oh, Hester, are you saved?” she asked with great anxiety. She held her breath until the blessed answer came back.

“Yes, Mary. Thank God, I have found Him!”

“Hester, I’m so glad you have found the Lord. I have sought Him so hard, but it is so difficult for me to believe. I wish I could believe. I would if I could, but I can’t.”

“Listen, Mary,” Hester spoke breathlessly, “do you have a Bible?”

“Yes, I have a New Testament.” It was such a small one, she was able to conceal it in her waistband.

“Well, that is all right. I have a Bible, too. Wait a minute until I get it.” Like a flash she was back at the stone wall with the Bible.

“Now, Mary, turn with me to the passages of scripture that I tell you and read them.”

Mary did as she was told. Verse after verse she read; then each girl knelt on her side of the wall as they prayed for Mary’s salvation; but Mary could not believe.

The days passed by. Hester continued praying and reading the Word of God with her;

however, as she sank deeper into the dungeon of despair and doubt, Mary sometimes felt it was no use. She was surrounded by the demon powers of darkness; her cell seemed to be infested with them.

One morning the key rattled in the lock of Hester's door and a guard stood there saying with a voice of contempt, "Hester Bell Wilson, your final chance has come. You'll either take the Mark this day or we are prepared to take your life. You'll be burned as a heretic at the stake."

For a moment Hester was startled. Although she had been expecting this time to come, it was shocking when it finally arrived; but she soon gained her composure.

"Wait just one moment. I have something I want to take with me, because I'll not be coming back any more." She reached under the dirty mattress of her cot and pulled out the black Book. The guard stared at it incredulously. It could not be possible that she had kept the Book concealed in her cell. He was seized with anger as he stood watching the girl hug the Bible to her bosom.

"You know what we do with Books like that?" he demanded.

Hester nodded her head sadly. She had seen the guards of the Beast Regime pile Bibles in stacks, pour gasoline on them and set them on fire, blaspheming God's name while they burned. Sometimes Bibles were stacked around a "heretic" and burned along with the Child of God.

"Give me that Book!" he said furiously, snatching at the Bible. As he touched the Book, he swore and drew his hand back quickly. It was as if he had taken hold of a hot iron.

"What have you done to that cursed Book?" he snarled angrily.

"I haven't done anything," Hester said in surprise. "It's just as it has always been."

"Well, come on and carry it yourself," he ordered.

Mary heard every word from her cell. Hester was going to be put to death! Now there would be no one to help her find the Lord. Hester had been such a blessing to her. It would soon be her time to die, too, and she did not know the Lord.

"Mary," Hester called just as the guard led her out of the cell, "the victory has come. It's time for me to go home. Mary, Honey, believe the Lord as I told you, and He will save you." Her voice breaking with emotion, she continued, "This is farewell, until we meet around the throne of God. I will pray for you until the last."

"Oh, no! Hester!" Mary screamed hysterically, "They can't put you to death! They can't!"

With tears rolling down her cheeks as Hester was marched on up the hall, she called, "Goodbye Hester"; and then in a low quivering murmur she added, "until we meet around the throne of God." Why had she said that? She had no hope. She could not believe.

Mary crept over to the window and looked out. A crowd had gathered to watch Hester die. She walked between two guards, her face lit up with the glory of God. In her hand was clutched her precious Bible. Several guards reached for it, but had the same experience as the one who had taken her from the cell. After watching a number of guards suddenly jerk their hands back, the infuriated captain grabbed it only to let it go as quickly as the others.

With an oath he commanded, "Burn that damnable Book with her. She has bewitched it."

Hester walked straight as a soldier, her head and shoulders held erect. A great calm had come over her; she was not afraid any longer. Her lips moved in prayer as she was chained to the stake; and Mary, watching from her cell window with tear-dimmed eyes, knew that Hester was praying for her.

The guards piled wood around her, and then she was asked if she would recant and take the Mark. A graveyard quietness settled down over the crowd as they watched and waited breathlessly for the decision of this beautiful girl. Her eyes sparkled like diamonds, and there

was a halo of glory about her head. She did not hesitate to give her answer.

In a sweet voice which sounded like heavenly music she said, "No! Ten thousand times no! Soon I will be with Him who died for me. Thank God for His wonderful Son, Jesus, who bled and died on Calvary that I might live!"

For a moment the crowd was awe-stricken. Then, as one person, their voices were lifted in blasphemies toward the God to whom Hester had given honor and glory; and the command was given.

Mary stood at the window, her breath coming in hard, short gasps, and her fingernails digging into flesh as she clenched her fists.

The fire was kindled, and the yellow flames began to lick hungrily around Hester's body. She stood chained to the stake, her Bible held to her heart with both hands, and her lips still moving in prayer as she looked up to Heaven. The flames mounted higher and higher until she was surrounded by the red, searing flames; but she did not seem to feel the pain.

Just before she died, her voice rang out with the power of God, "Tis so sweet to trust Him"; then one last shout, "Thank God, the victory has come!"

"How could she be so bold and happy even in death?" Mary wondered. Suddenly, through the flames, she saw two shining angels whose garments shone brighter than the fire standing on each side of Hester and bracing her. God had sent His ministering spirits to strengthen her and help her die the victorious death.

Mary fell on her face to the cell floor, her body shaking with sobs.

"My God," she cried bitterly, "why didn't I make the Rapture? I heard about it all my life. I have been such a fool."

As she lay there sobbing, the steel door opened and a guard shouted at her harshly, "Get up from there and stop acting like a fool! I have come for you. It's time for you to die!"

Mary froze. They were going to put her to death, and she had not found the Lord. She looked wildly around her cold cell with the pile of straw in the corner which had been her bed. It was so terrible to die without God.

"Please," she said in a pleading voice, "give me just a little longer."

"You have had plenty of time to make your decision," he answered. "Come!" he ordered, roughly taking hold of her and jerking her toward the door.

She walked down the hall with trembling limbs. Somehow the guard had overlooked her little Testament she held so tightly to her body, as she prayed frantically, "Oh God, please help! I am about to be put to death! Oh...God..." she choked, "I just can't die without you!"

Although she cried again and again, there did not seem to be a God to hear. Mary's face was haggard and drawn, her eyes tortured. She saw the death block ahead of her, and the swordsman standing sword in hand, waiting to take her life. Her knees felt so weak she did not know if she could make it the rest of the way. Her eyes met Jim's and he gave a hideous laugh which made her heart stop for a moment.

Finally, she stood before the block. "God, please help me!" she prayed, "Help me, God!" but there was no answer.

Mary was asked by the impudent captain, "Will you take the Mark?" Now her heart pounded madly. The time she had dreaded for so long had come; and, although God had not saved her, she would not take the Mark.

"No," she cried, shaking like a leaf and staring into space. "I cannot take the Mark! He has not saved me; it seems that I cannot touch Him, but I know that Jesus died for me!"

For the first time, there was a glimmer of real faith. She repeated the words again as one in a

daze. The veil of doubt and darkness was moved aside by the Holy Spirit of God. She began to see Calvary in all its shame and suffering, Calvary in all its power and glory. She saw the Son of God hanging on the cross, blood running from His pierced hands. She saw Him look at her and His lips moved as He said to her: "Child, I died for you. My blood still has power to wash away your sins if you will only believe."

Her face lit up with the glory of God, and her eyes began to shine like two stars as she shouted triumphantly, "I do believe! I do believe! I have found Him! I have found the Christ of God!" Then she began to sing:

What can wash away my sin?  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;  
What can make me whole again?  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Amidst her glorious bliss she lost sight of those who had gathered to watch her die. The guards shouted for her to hush, but as one in a trance she sang on. Great fear seized those that stood by.

"Put her to death! Quick! She has gone insane!" the captain shouted with trembling lips.

They laid her down on the block, but she did not feel their rough hands at all; she sang on. The singing was so beautiful that even the angels in Heaven set aside their harps and hushed their singing to listen. The swordsman drew back his weapon bringing it down with mighty force, but Mary did not feel the pain. On the shore of sweet deliverance she lifted her eyes, and an angel put a shining white robe on her. She picked up a palm and stood before the throne, praising her God and shouting, "Holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!"

Mary was one in that great multitude that John saw in the seventh chapter of Revelation:

"I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.

"And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshiped God, Saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.

"And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?

"And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes," Revelation 7:9-17.

Jim stood watching Mary die. He detested the sight of her, and he was glad that she was being put to death. Her head rolled down into the gutter; Jim picked it up by the hair, and like a maniac he slung it around and around, shouting honor and glory to the Beast.

Just as Jim threw the bloody head down, an excited messenger rushed up to tell him that parts of the world were having terrible hailstorms; hailstones were falling out of the skies weighing almost a hundred pounds. They were destroying everything in their path.

Suddenly the earth began to shake with mighty force. The sun became black as sackcloth of

hair, and the moon became as blood. The stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs when she is shaken of a mighty wind. The heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island was moved out of its place.

The stars fell from heaven, the sun refused to shine, the moon turned into blood, the mountains and islands moved; people were more frightened than they had been at any time since God started raining judgment down upon sinful humanity.

Jim and all the people, looking up into the sky with great fear, saw the heavens open and the Son of God appear on a white horse. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no man knew but He Himself. He was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood, and His name was called The Word of God. The armies of Heaven followed Him upon white horses. They were clothed in fine linen, white and clean.

As Jim looked in horror, he saw a two-edged sword go out of His mouth with great fierceness. On His vesture and on His thigh a name was written: **KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS**. He was coming as a roaring lion to rain vengeance upon those on the earth who had the Mark.

Those who had the Mark went into a wild frenzy, running for the rocks and mountains. All Jim's boldness was gone now; he fell at the foot of the huge rocks and mountains and pleaded for them to fall on him.

"Fall on me!" he cried frantically. "I can't ever face Him! Rocks be merciful! Fall on me and bury me so deep beneath your gigantic weight that I will never have to face Him! I have taken the Mark! I have sold my soul to the devil and there is no forgiveness for me! I am denied Heaven," he groaned. "He died for me, but I did not appreciate His sacrifice. I trampled His blood underfoot as if it were unholy. There is no mercy for me. I rejected the nail-riven hands that were pierced for me.

"I shall stand at the white throne of judgment, and the Judge of all the earth shall say, 'Depart from me ye cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels which burneth with fire and brimstone forever and ever.'

"Fall on me! Fall on me rocks and mountains! The day of His wrath has come! I would repent, but there is no repentance for me. I am lost! I am eternally lost!" he wailed with a voice which sounded like one from the bottomless pit of hell.

## About the Author

Reverend Ernest Angley is the pastor and founder of Ernest Angley Ministries with churches in two locations: Ernest Angley's Grace Cathedral in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio and Grace Cathedral in Akron, Ohio. This Jesus ministry is in the midst of a tremendous worldwide outreach which is spreading the Gospel into many nations by way of crusades, television and the printed page. God has endowed Reverend Angley with special gifts to bring healing for soul, mind and body to people all over the world. He does not claim to be a healer but a witness to the marvelous healing power of Christ. His television programs—"The Ernest Angley Hour" (aired weekly) and "The Ninety and Nine Club" (aired daily)—present the fullness of God's Word and teach the truth about salvation, healing and the baptism in the Holy Ghost.

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