

CHAPTER I

THE CONGREGATION spilled out of the sanctuary of the Bixby Knolls Union Church and greeted its new minister. He stood on the church steps, bareheaded in the brilliant October sunshine, and shook hands with his people. You would say, if you were entirely objective, that he was a favorable representative of the modern school of the prophets—poised, personable, intelligent, with a sensitively chiseled profile and a spiritual quality that a church has a right to expect in its pastor.

A middle-aged couple approached him. The lady said, "Good morning, Mr. McAlpine. Welcome to California."

"Thank you. You are—?"

"Excuse me, we're Mr. and Mrs. Trexler."

"How are you, Mr. and Mrs. Trexler? It's good to know you."

"We're driving out to Knott's Berry Farm for dinner," Mrs. Trexler said. "We would love to have you come with us—that is, if you have no other engagement."

"I haven't, and I'd like to come; thanks."

"We'll be back for you in a few minutes," Trexler said.

A young man with red hair and a galaxy of freckles introduced himself to McAlpine. "My name's Sargent," he said. "I've heard about you from your brother Jim." He jerked his head toward the sanctuary. "He's a real great tackle."

"Jim's good, is he?" McAlpine said, pleased and proud.

"He's a sweetheart. Jess Hill says he's the answer to a coach's prayer."

"You are at Southern Cal too?"

"You bet I am."

Others were pressing Sargent from the rear. Before he drifted on he said, "I'm the president of the College League, and we sure need a good shot in the biceps. Hope you can give us one."

"I'll try hard."

"Great."

Gradually the line of people thinned out. McAlpine liked his members. He liked their social graces. He liked the way a number of them paid tribute to his sermon.

He had preached on the theme, "Jesus and the Quest for Truth." He had geared the sermon to challenge the educated class he judged his congregation to be. And he had held it down to eighteen minutes. He resolved from the beginning of his ministry to apply the counsel of his professor of homiletics. "Gentlemen," the professor had stated in class one day, "remember it was when Paul was long preaching that Eutychus sank down with sleep. If you would inoculate your listeners against sleeping sickness, make your sermons brisk, make them bright, and make them brief. Especially make them brief."

As the last of the worshipers trickled out of the church, Richard McAlpine's younger brother Jim, escorting a slip of a girl in a trim suit of saddle brown, stepped up to the minister, moving with a rolling, athletic gait. There was not too much resemblance between the brothers. Richard was dark; Jim fair. Richard's jaw was straight; Jim's jutted. Richard's black hair was parted far over on the side; Jim was a blond and sported a flattop. He was the taller of the two, and the more muscular. He towered at least a foot above the girl at his side.

He stood before McAlpine and touched his forehead in salute. "Rick, this is Winter Scott. Winter, Rick."

"Hello, Winter."

"Hi."

She said it pertly, as he was sure she would. Large, U-turn lashes curled over eyes of the rich hazel of autumn

leaves. When they fell on him, they danced and flickered like northern lights.

"Winter," said Richard thoughtfully. "Hm, it's the first time I ever heard the name. I suppose you were born in January?"

"Wrong."

"February?"

"July," she said, making a face.

"July? Why, that's crazy."

"It figures," said Jim, and ducked a playful blow from her.

Richard said, "You see, I just got in yesterday so I haven't had time to pry much information out of my kid brother here. Is Long Beach your home?"

She shook her head. "I'm at S.C. My home's in Carmel."

"Ah, beautiful Carmel: Seventeen-Mile Drive, Pebble Beach Golf Course, cypress trees, sapphire sea—"

"You've been there?"

"No, just heard about it."

"It's paradise unlimited," she sighed.

"So I understand," said Richard. "Tell me, how come you're in Long Beach, if it's not out of line to ask?"

"My aunt and uncle live here. I usually spend my week ends with them."

"A break for me, what?" Jim grinned as he captured Winter's hand. "Look, Rick, we're going to Eaton's for dinner. Why don't you join us?"

"A Mr. and Mrs. Trexler invited me to Knott's Berry Farm with them."

"Lucky boy."

"By the way," Richard said, "I haven't heard how you two met."

"It was the first day of classes," Winter said, viewing Jim sideways. "I was toddling out of Student Union minding my own business and Man Mountain here crashed into me like—like a big startled gnu. Did I go down for the count? I did, but quick."

Jim squeezed her fingers. "'Into each life some rain must fall.' The upshot of the gory incident," he said to

Richard, "was a string of apologies, a request for a date, a trembling yes, and there you have the flowering of a beautiful romance. Nice, huh?"

While they clowned, Richard studied the girl dreamily. She was spirited, vibrant. She exuded animation even when still. "I'd be willing to bet she takes drama," McAlpine thought. A dimple creased a surprisingly firm chin. Actually, the firmness of the chin saved her from what might otherwise have answered to the charge of dollishness. "She's exactly what Jim needs after Korea."

A blue Lincoln Capri slid up to the curb in front of the church.

"I think somebody's looking for you," Winter announced.

Richard glanced around. "It's the Trexlers," he said. "Sorry I've got to run. Nice to know you, Winter. See you later, Jim."

The Capri cruised east on Carson Boulevard in the direction of the Berry Farm. Richard McAlpine sat on the front seat next to Mrs. Trexler. She and her husband were obviously persons of property.

Mrs. Trexler particularly attracted McAlpine. She was calm, genteel, winsome. He was not so sure about Trexler. He hung over the wheel smoking one cigarette after another, staring morosely at the highway before him and saying little.

"Do you like California?" Mrs. Trexler said.

"I like it a lot," McAlpine answered. "I'd never been on the Coast before I came here this summer to preach."

"What a hotbox!" Mr. Trexler grumbled. "It must be over ninety in the shade today."

"It is a bit unseasonable," Mrs. Trexler said cheerfully. "Were you born in Detroit, Mr. McAlpine?"

"Yes, Jim and I both were."

"Are your parents living there?"

"They were killed in a car accident while Jim and I were in high school."

"I'm sorry."

They were in the country now, speeding east between strips of flat, sunbaked field. McAlpine looked vainly

for orange trees. Mr. Trexler appeared to read his thoughts, for he remarked, "The orange groves are out farther."

"Oh."

"It's so nice your brother can be with you," Mrs. Trexler said. "We've heard he is a fine football player."

"He played back east before the Korean blowup."

"When did he come home?"

"Early in the summer. When I received the call to the church, I got him to transfer to the University of Southern California. He's taking up civil engineering."

"Is Miss Scott his fiancée?"

"I don't believe so. He met her only last month. She's also at the university."

"They seem quite fond of each other."

"I noticed that too," said McAlpine.

They swung north and arrived at Knott's Berry Farm—a sprawling, single-storied structure hemmed in by countless rows of cars. Mr. Trexler nosed the Lincoln into a space far down the street from the restaurant.

"I'll have to register for dinner," he said. "They have a jam on Sundays. We'll probably have to wait a few minutes." He started toward a booth near the restaurant marked "Information."

A few minutes later he stormed back. "A forty-minute wait!" he snorted. "It's an outrage!"

They strolled about the grounds, inspected the stump of a seven-hundred-year-old redwood tree, visited a genuine gold mine in operation, a tiny church designated "The Little Chapel by the Lake," and the Wagon Camp, an outdoor amphitheater circled by stately elms and covered wagons.

"Tex Williams broadcasts from here every week," Mrs. Trexler said.

"I've heard the program," said McAlpine. "So this is the place."

"Quite a corny program, if you ask me," Trexler muttered, lighting a cigarette.

They wandered through Ghost Town, a replica of the Old West with dusty gambling den, saloon, Chinese

laundry, a steak house and a town jail. McAlpine was fascinated by the single occupant of the jail, a hatchet-faced talking dummy, one Sad-eye Joe, who, a signboard informed the public, had been imprisoned for stealing horses. He sat in the shadows of the cell and hurled insults at the tourists who poked their heads through the window to peer at him.

A voice buzzed over the public address system, "L. C. Trexler's party of three. L. C. Trexler's party of three."

"At last," said Trexler. "It's about time."

They made their way to the restaurant and were shown to a table beside a window overlooking the grounds.

"What is your business, Mr. Trexler?" McAlpine asked as they sat waiting to be served.

"Oil tools."

"I'm not sure what that means."

"Long Beach is an oil town," Trexler said. "You've noticed the wells on Signal Hill, no doubt. I manufacture tools to take the stuff out of the earth."

"I see."

A waitress brought their dinners, platters of delectable-looking fried chicken and mashed potatoes.

"Tell us more about your training, Mr. McAlpine," Mrs. Trexler urged.

"I attended the University of Michigan and took my seminary work in Central Theological Seminary in New York. I was graduated in May."

"Dr. Martin was a Central graduate as well."

Dr. Martin, McAlpine's predecessor at the church, had retired from the ministry in April.

"I've been told so," said McAlpine, launching an assault on the chicken.

"Young man," Mr. Trexler said, "you have really inherited something to overcome."

"Lorimer!" Mrs. Trexler said reproachfully.

"Well, he has."

"What Mr. Trexler means is that the church has some peculiar problems."

"We were told in seminary that no church is without problems," said McAlpine.

"Not like ours." Trexler addressed himself to his salad. "You never saw such a run-down outfit in your life."

Mrs. Trexler flushed with embarrassment. "Mr. McAlpine has broad shoulders," she said, smiling. "I think they're qualified to carry a good many loads."

The dining room was filled to capacity. Customers kept flowing in and out endlessly, like tides of the ocean. McAlpine marveled at the efficiency with which the management operated the place. There was not a hitch at a single point, as far as he could see.

"Say, there's Harry." Mr. Trexler pushed back his chair and rose. "Pardon me, I have to talk to him."

He started across the room toward a gentleman, who, with his family, was about to leave the restaurant.

"Harry is one of his associates," Mrs. Trexler said. "Mr. McAlpine," she went on earnestly, putting her fork down, "may I take you into my confidence?"

"Of course."

"Mr. Trexler may seem unpardonably gloomy or stern to you. He doesn't mean to be. This—this negative attitude of his toward life and everything in life—it's not my husband as he was before Korea."

"War always sobers thinking people."

"It's not only that," she said. "You see—we lost our only son at Heartbreak Ridge."

"I'm terribly sorry. I didn't know."

"I wanted to tell you this before Mr. Trexler comes back. In our crisis, just when he needed strength and comfort most, he received nothing from our minister. Nothing. It is my almost fanatical hope that you may be able to do for him what the minister you are succeeding didn't—or couldn't do."

McAlpine was by nature a sympathetic man. While Mrs. Trexler talked, he felt a constriction form in his throat. He was quiet for a long moment. When he did speak, he said, "I'm glad you told me. And I promise you I'll do everything to help I possibly can."

CHAPTER II

JIM," RICHARD SAID, "nobody can ever accuse you of not having twenty-twenty vision."

It was Sunday night. The McAlpines relaxed in the tastily furnished living room of the church manse in Bixby Knolls and refreshed themselves before a cool east wind that whipped in through the open windows. Jim had just come in from his date with Winter. He lay stretched out on his back on the floor, coatless, with his head pillowed against a cushion he had plundered from the Chesterfield next to him.

"Winter clicked with you, did she?"

"She's got the personality of an airline hostess. Has real verve too, hasn't she?"

"You know it. She's usually a couple of jumps ahead of me."

"I can see that you register with her too."

"Even pretty girls are dumb about some things." Jim raised a leg, contemplated his Scotch grain shoe, lowered the leg. "We all have our blind spots."

"I don't know." Richard, seated in an easy chair under a reading lamp, rustled the copy of *The Christian Century* he had been reading before Jim walked in. "I imagine most coeds would go for an ex-marine lieutenant and a football star."

"Star!" Jim sniffed. "Are you kidding? You should've seen the plays I goofed in the Indiana game Friday night."

"Sargent says your stock is pretty good with Jess Hill."

"Ha!"

Richard regarded his brother with affection. "Boy, it's great to have you here. You'll have to come down week ends."

"Whenever I can," said Jim, raising and lowering his other leg. "We'll be playing Washington at Seattle this Saturday, so that's out."

"When are you going to be playing in Los Angeles again?"

"We're in the Coliseum a week from Saturday. Oregon State."

"I'll be there."

Jim looked around the living room approvingly. "Say, this setup of yours is real salty," he said. "Helen'll like it."

Richard tossed the magazine on a reading table beside his chair. "Helen isn't going to see it."

"What?"

"That's right," said Richard, swallowing. "She's called everything off."

Jim swore softly.

"Jim!" Richard said.

"I'm sorry," said Jim, not looking at him. "It's a habit I picked up in the Corps. Look, let me have it straight. What happened to Helen?"

"She decided she couldn't go through with it, that's all."

Underneath Richard's composure, Jim detected a deep, deep hurt.

"Too much pressure from her folks?"

"No. The prospect of marrying a minister scared her, I guess."

"Well, I'd sure like to take *her* apart, the—."

"Watch it!" Richard warned.

"Well, I would."

"I'll survive. If you can go through a year of hot combat in Korea, I should be able to absorb a little beating."

"Won't it be hard on your church work? I mean—."

"Paul was a bachelor. It didn't hurt his church work."

"Just the same it's rough on you. Real rough."

Richard stood up. "Someone in the church was thoughtful enough to stock the refrigerator with gingerale. Have a spot with me?"

"Why not?"

Richard retired to the kitchen and presently returned with two glasses of iced gingerale. He handed one to Jim and resumed his chair.

"Look, Rick," Jim said, after a long sip, "mind if I ask a question about your sermon?"

"Not at all."

"Didn't you say something about life being a continuous search for truth?"

"Yes."

"Well, Winter and I were talking about it this evening. We were wondering if you ever find it."

"Find truth?"

"Yeah."

"Provided you look in the right place, yes," said Richard, jingling the ice in his glass.

"Which is where, the Bible?"

"That's one place, yes."

"Look, let's face it." Jim took another drink, then slowly rolled the half-empty glass between his palms. "Dad raised us on the Bible. We were taught it in Sunday school when we were kids. We went to college and we learned there were a lot of things we'd been mighty naïve about. We learned—or I did—that you couldn't hold on to a lot of that stuff we'd had put into us at home and in Sunday school. It wasn't scientific."

Richard was watching the pieces of ice in his glass melt down to tiny chips.

"Now," Jim went on, "you tell me we can find truth in the Book we both discarded."

Richard raised his glass and took a few swallows of gingerale. "What you say is right," he said, putting the glass down on the table. "Try to follow me. It's true the Bible is a jumble when it comes to scientific inaccuracies and historical contradictions. In spite of that, God does speak through it in a kind of still, small voice—if we make ourselves willing to listen."

Jim pondered his words with a wrinkled forehead. Still rolling the tumbler, he said, "That just doesn't add up. If the Bible is full of mistakes, like you say, how in

the—well, how do we know what parts to believe? Don't you have to take all of it or nothing?"

"Why?"

"Well—because you do, that's why."

A plane from the Dougherty Field Airport flew low over the parsonage, creating a deafening roar. Richard waited until it had passed before continuing the discussion.

"Cicero," he said, "wrote a good many factual statements. But Cicero once referred to the lush vegetation that grew along the banks of the Tiber in Rome."

"So?"

"He was wrong. Roman historians tell us there was nothing but clay along the Tiber in Cicero's time. Does that inaccuracy make us throw out everything Cicero said? Of course it doesn't. It's that way with the Bible. You can let the myths and legends go and still keep a hard core of truth."

Jim finished his drink, set his glass down on the rug, and raised himself on his elbow. "Look," he said irritably, "how can you stop at any halfway house? Dad used to tell us the Bible was all true. We believed him. Our Sunday school teachers told us it was all true. We believed them. At college we had our eyes opened, or we were supposed to have had our eyes opened. So we scrapped the whole deal. Now you come along and tell me the Bible isn't true and at the same time it is true. That's plain double talk."

"You don't follow me," said Richard patiently. "It's like this: you pick up the Bible and read it. I don't care what version you use. All of a sudden you receive an impression. You're lifted out of your own world of sense, you might say. It's the impression you get when, for instance, you hear ravishing music or watch a gorgeous sunset. That part of Scripture right then and there becomes the Word of God to you."

Jim sank back on the floor, still frowning. "I'm not a theologian," he said, "and I've forgotten plenty of what I used to know about the Bible. But I never can believe like you do. With me it's everything or nothing. And

I'm afraid at this point in my loused-up thinking, it's nothing."

"Does it give you any satisfaction?"

"Satisfaction?" Jim's laugh tingled with bitterness. "How can there be any satisfaction living in a house walled in with question marks? I used to be like Philip Carey in *Of Human Bondage*. I believed the Bible. So along comes the great vanguard of higher learning and shears all that off. No immortality. No Hell. Probably no Heaven. A mechanical universe." He sat up, threw his arms around his knees and went on savagely. "Know what I think? I think I gave up more than I gained. Just like Philip Carey."

"Listen, Jim." Richard leaned forward in his chair and spoke with feeling. "You don't have to sabotage your faith. There's a simple solution to the whole problem."

Jim's head moved from side to side. "Not if you wreck your foundation, there isn't. The illustration you used in your sermon this morning proves that. You said the search for truth is like climbing a mountain. You reach the top of a range and you think you're on the summit, but you look up and see a second and higher range. You get up that one, but you haven't reached the summit. There's always another range, and another, and another. So where are you? Exactly nowhere, that's where."

"Mount Everest was conquered at last," Richard said. "You're bound to make the summit unless you stop trying. It's giving up the fight that's wrong."

"Giving up the fight?" Jim adopted a grimness that startled his brother. "Look here, when we moved up Reno Hill and Vegas Hill and those—those graveyards, what were we? Just a bunch of simple-minded men and kids walking into death and hating it. There was a horrible, Hellish gnawing in us." Jim pounded his stomach. "We only wanted one thing: we wanted security. What did we get? We got killed. We got killed—."

His voice broke. He rubbed his forehead with the heels of his hands and said, "Oh, a few of us made the top, all right. Sure, we made it. But if the other jokers who made it are anything like this one, we're still look-

ing for that summit you preachers talk about. Tell me, where did you soak up this true-and-false religion?"

Richard got up and took himself out of the circle of light. He didn't want Jim to see how upset he was over the turn of the conversation.

He sat down at the Baldwin piano and let his fingers roam over the keyboard. He started to pick out *Liebestraum*, playing softly.

He heard Jim cross the room and felt a powerful hand on his shoulder. Jim's voice was husky as he said, "Forgive me, Rick."

"It's perfectly all right, Jim. We all have to work these things out ourselves. I was only trying to help."

"I know you were, and I appreciate it; believe me, I do. Look, mind if I hit the sack? Coach always says get lots of sleep."

Rick stopped his playing. He turned and grinned at Jim over his shoulder. "He's absolutely right. Get lots of sleep. What time shall we have breakfast?"

"Let's see, I promised to pick up Winter at eight. We both have a nine-o'clock class. The crate needs oil and gas, and it's about a half-hour trip to L.A. What about seven o'clock? Too early?"

"Not at all. We'll have to eat out. I didn't have time to lay in any food Saturday."

"See you around 6:30?"

"Fine."

"Good night, Rick."

"Good night, boy."

After Jim had gone to the guest room, Richard remained at the Baldwin and went back to *Liebestraum*. It had been Helen's favorite number.

As he played, he thought of her as he had last seen her in Detroit—her proud head held high, her brittle, Junoesque beauty so dazzling that it was, as it had always been, frustrating. What a contrast, say, to Winter's warmth and color! Winter!

Guilt grooved his conscience, and without realizing it, he speeded up his playing. He wrenched his thoughts from Winter to Jim.