

Point of Return

by Merlin L. Neff

INTRODUCTION

This is a page from modern life, a true experience disguised just enough to protect all parties concerned. In the hectic, materialistic age in which we live man seeks security. He buys fire insurance, accident insurance, health insurance, life insurance, and he longs for insurance against war and atom bombs.

With all of his attempts to find secure living he has lost his greatest - faith in a personal God.

In this story we see Roderick Mason at an impasse, or dead-end street, in his life. He is trapped by forces that have possessed him and almost ruined his life and the life of Agnes, his wife.

The answer to their dilemma is the answer millions of sincere men and women are seeking today. May their experience be an inspiration to the reader is the wish of -

THE AUTHOR

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CHAPTER ONE

Beyond the Stars

TELEVISION cameras, appearing like weird robots, rolled back and forth across the stage as the director signalled for final shots of the chorus. A brilliant spotlight caught the male quartet as it harmonised on the theme song of the hour-long, coast-to-coast programme. Then the music faded and the lights dimmed. From the make-believe world of television, Rod Mason, well-known New York producer and director, returned to bleak reality. He slumped uncomfortably in his chair and reached for a cigarette.

"It's over for another week," he sighed, wiping the perspiration from his forehead, "and I'm tired."

"You should be, Mason," said the head cameraman soothingly. "Grinding twelve hours a day for almost six months, with not one, but three productions - when are you going to relax and take time off?"

"I'm weary of it all; I guess I'm losing my grip. Everything seems flat and tasteless. I don't even get a kick out of doing a top programme any more," admitted the thirty-two-year-old director, who gave everything he had to his work. He arose from his chair as the performers, technicians, and orchestra players gravitated toward the exits.

"A great show, Rod," called the petite soloist, the star of the show, as she waved a cheery farewell from the door.

Mason nodded and smiled. He stood for a moment as if trying to decide what to do, when suddenly he tottered. As he slumped into the arms of the cameraman, Rod seemed to hear words miles away echoing in his brain, "Come help me, Bill. Mason has passed out."

In a quiet hospital room a nurse bent over the television director counting his pulse. After a pause the patient's eyes opened; he blinked, and then protested weakly, "Don't tell me I blacked out."

"I guess you did, sir; but don't let that worry you," the girl in white uniform assured him. "You're on the way back."

"How long have I been here?"

"About four hours, Mr. Mason. Here is your doctor now."

Dr. Dwight Reynolds stood at the director's bedside, smiling grimly at his patient. "So you've been burning the candle at both ends until it scorched you, eh? It's about time you took my advice, Rod."

"You sound as stuffy as any family doctor," Mason growled, trying to put on a bold front. He felt more alert each minute, yet he didn't think he could be more tired if he lived to be a hundred. "I feel washed up, doc."

"You should at the pace you've been going, young fellow. Now I'll have my say. Three months of rest are coming up for you, son." The gray-haired physician clipped his words emphatically. "Your vacation begins as of *now*."

"But the programme -"

"I've already called the president of your company, and he's concerned about you, too. He agrees with me that the prescription should call for a real vacation. So next week you leave for the West. I have a friend who owns a lodge in the high Sierras of Northern California - an ideal place for you. In fact, it's all arranged, so arguments will do you no good."

"You feel pretty smug, don't you, Dr. Reynolds." Rod smiled weakly and closed his eyes to hide his emotions. "You brought me into the world, and you've tried to boss me ever since that first day."

"When folks haven't enough sense to care for themselves, it's my business to help them. What's wrong, Rod? It isn't all work that is eating on your nerves." The doctor's steel-gray eyes seemed to probe into the sick man's soul in much the same way he would perform an exploratory operation.

"I don't really know, doc, except that it's more than mere physical weariness. I'm in a sort of daze - " Mason's voice died out as he turned his head away.

"You've had a brilliant career in these last ten years," the physician went on in an easy tone, hoping to find the real Mason behind the barrier. "Success came almost at once for you after you finished the university."

"It hasn't made me happy." The patient spoke from his heart. "When our home cracked up two years ago, and Agnes left me - that took a lot out of me."

"The scars are still fresh," commented the doctor knowingly. "You haven't forgotten, have you, Rod?"

"Should I forget, doc? You know I've been on the loose ever since."

"It's time you tied up some of the frazzled ends, Rod. You aren't a child any longer." Then taking his patient's hand, the doctor added, "You'll have something to relax you for a good night's sleep, and tomorrow we'll start on the knots."

The airliner cruising at three hundred and sixty miles an hour on the flight between New York and San Francisco seemed poised over the Continental Divide of Wyoming as Rod mason glanced out the window. When he travelled by air he did not enjoy reading, and he seldom could sleep in the daytime, so the hours of flight gave him time to think. Looking down on the world from 21,000 feet makes a person feel puny and insignificant, Mason thought. It makes one realise there must be a God. This idea struck the young man's mind with a start. It had been a long time since he had seriously thought about God. In fact, the last time must have been two years before when Agnes, his charming wife, walked out of the apartment after calling the marriage quits. Then Rod had cursed God, declaring that there wasn't such a Being, and if there was, all He did was torture his helpless creatures with pain and suffering. He actually wondered if God had deserted him or if he had failed God.

As the plane's four motors droned steadily, Rod's mind slipped back to memories of this tenth birthday when he had been baptised in the little church in the Bronx. Happiness had wreathed his mother's face when she met him in the pastor's study after the service and gripped her son's right arm. "How God much love you," she had whispered. Yes, he'd never forget the exact words! There had been Bible reading and family worship in the home every day. His mother had wanted him to go to a small Christian college in New England when he finished high school; but, no, he had been determined to take a special course at the university. The church was beginning to fade from his life by the time he was a sophomore, and there seemed to be no point of return for him.

Mason reviewed his university years. He had been popular, for dramatics and music were his major interests. He was better than average in both arts, and he determined to use them to enter the radio field. Before he was graduated, at the age of twenty-two, he had made contacts that assured him a good position. From radio it was a natural jump into television; but the change took something out of Mason. The new medium was more exacting, and it required many tension-filled hours of rehearsal.

He married Agnes Loretnz, a girl whose practical ability blended with delicate taste and tenderness. The Lorentz's and Masons had been friends for years, and it was natural for the two young people to be drawn to each other, especially since they attended the university together.

The wedding had been solemnised in the church that both families attended - the church where Rod had been baptised. He remembered the moment eight years ago as if it were yesterday. Agnes walked down the aisle in a shimmering white satin gown trimmed with misty lace. She had looked into his eyes with devotion as she said, "To love and to cherish till death us do part." He thought, too, of the moment in the pastor's study when Dr. Lovelace had urged the young couple to build a home upon the solid foundation of religious faith. "Build with God, Agnes and Rod, and you'll be happy," the minister had counselled as he shook their hands in a warm farewell.

"It's strange," said Mason half aloud, "but we never followed that advice." He remembered how Agnes became involved in a social whirl and he had stepped on the treadmill of work that seemed to move faster and faster as the months went by. He became the leading director of the television network, but something happened at the three-room apartment on East Sixtieth. "We didn't seem to have time for each other after the first year," Mason mused, "and never a moment for religion. I guess we moved into a world where God simply didn't exist."

The mountains that loomed over the wing of the plane were tinged with cerise and purple from the light of the setting sun. The plane was passing over the Great Salt Lake, and lights of cities were already

twinkling in the semi-darkness some three miles below. When the stewardess served his dinner, Rod ate with a zest. It was the first time he had actually noticed the taste of food in many a day, and he thoroughly enjoyed it.

Less than three hours later Roderick Mason stepped from the plane at the San Francisco airport. As he entered the gate to the covered runway a tall, slender man in the middle forties addressed him. "Mr Mason?"

"That's right. You should be Morton Hastings from the description given to me," said Rod, shaking hands with the new acquaintance. The New Yorker noticed the garb of the West - wool shirt, gabardine slacks, and stout shoes.

"You fit the description they sent me, Mr. Mason. This is my daughter, Karen Sue. We've been taking advantage of the trip to the city to do some shopping, and now we're a sort of welcoming committee."

"She's the charming part, I would say," the traveller returned with a smile. "I'm glad you came, Karen Sue."

"It's always exciting to meet the planes, Mr Mason. You came straight from New York today?" The teenage girl spoke easily, and her blonde wavy hair framed a delicately formed face.

"That's right. I left there this forenoon, so I'm over three thousand miles from home right now."

"We'll make you feel at home out here," the girl promised, as the three waited by the station wagon for the luggage to arrive. "You are the director of the television programme, 'The Enchanted Mirror'?"

"That's right."

"I saw it once at a friend's home when I was in Sacramento," the girl explained half apologetically. "We don't have a TV set at Cragmont Lodge."

"Perhaps that's good for me, Karen Sue," Mason returned. "It may make it easier for me to forget my work."

Through the city traffic and across the Bay Bridge the station wagon made its way, with Morton Hastings driving with experienced ease. "We won't be home until about two-thirty in the morning, Mr. Mason," Hastings explained. "Do you feel up to the drive?"

"I've been so busy thinking today I couldn't sleep for a while if I went to bed now. Let's get to Cragmont Lodge, for I can do plenty of resting there, from what I hear."

It was almost three o'clock when Hastings stopped the car in front of Cragmont Lodge, where lights were shining a welcome. While he unloaded the luggage, Karen Sue took Rod Mason into the spacious main room, where a log fire crackled merrily in a mammoth stone fireplace. "Mother won't be over tonight, Mr. Mason. We didn't want her to stay up after her day's work," the girl explained. "Your rooms are this way."

At the end of a redwood-panelled hall Mason entered a suite of rooms decorated in ranch style. "Here is a private balcony overlooking the lake," Karen Sue continued, opening a door. "You'll enjoy it in the morning when the lake is like a mirror."

"I can tell that you love nature, don't you, Karen Sue?"

"Of course, don't you?"

"I suppose so; but to tell you the truth I've been in a big city so long I've almost forgotten," the man admitted wearily.

"God made everything so beautiful in the great outdoors. Look up at the stars; they seem so near on a clear night. After I look at them I can pray to my heavenly Father who made them."

"They are breathtaking," said Rod in a whisper. Then he added, "I haven't realised how tired I'm getting until now, Karen Sue, so I'll say 'Good night,' if you don't mind."

After Mason had closed the door he turned and faced the mirror over the oak chest of drawers. he knew he looked more than thirty-two years old tonight, or rather, this morning. "What's coming over me?" he said to the face in the mirror. "I've been thinking about God today, and now the Hastings girls talk about prayer."

A Rod Mason that had long been hidden seemed to find his reflection, at least momentarily, in the mirror. With a faraway look the director whispered, "What's it all about?"

Then walking out on the balcony once more, the man looked up into the darkness and said, "I wonder what's beyond those stars."

CHAPTER TWO

A Long Distance Call

"I'll be stiff after this ride, Hastings; but I'm getting a kick out of it, just the same." Roderick Mason spoke while he sat gingerly upon Tony, a beautiful palomino. The caretaker of Cragmont Lodge rode beside the visitor on a black stallion. The mountain road rose sharply, winding through a forest of firs, pines, and cedars.

"You were mighty careful the way you eased yourself into that saddle. I imagine Tony thinks you've never ridden a horse before," chuckled Morton Hastings with a sidelong glance at his companion.

"It Tony knows that, then he's a smart horse," admitted the New Yorker, leaning forward to pat the animal's neck. "It's the truth, too, for I've never been in a saddle before. If I keep this up, you'll soon have me singing 'Home on the Range.'"

"Hardly seems possible that a fellow your age has never ridden horses," said the caretaker, grinning. "Of course, we get a few like you at the lodge; but when you've grown up on a ranch as I did, you naturally think of horses. Mason, a ride every day would do you good. Get good and tired in the outdoors, riding, swimming, and hiking. Then you'll sleep like a baby."

"Sounds like a sensible suggestion, all right," agreed the visitor. "I'll have to see how long I have to eat my meals off the mantel after this jaunt before I try another."

The riders were on a narrower trail now, with frequent switchbacks that helped them gain altitude rapidly. At a wide turn on the path Morton Hastings reined up his horse and signalled a halt. It was a welcome stop for the television director, for the motion of horseback riding was new to his tense muscles.

Roderick Mason was more enthusiastic about his enforced vacation at Cragmont Lodge as he became better acquainted with his surroundings. Nervous exhaustion had so sapped his physical resources that the first days after his arrival he scarcely ventured out of his room. But the crisp mountain air and sunshine, along with rest, sound sleep, and good food, were beginning to have a positive effect on his outlook on life.

On this particular morning Mason had been sitting at the breakfast table consuming generous portions of fresh strawberries, hot cakes, and scrambled eggs, when Hastings noticed an expression of nervous restlessness on his guest's face. He decided it was time to act. "I'm riding up to the station on Craggy Point Lookout after breakfast," began the caretaker. "There's a college student on duty there for the summer, the son of an old friend of the family. A couple of times a week we take him eggs, milk, and fresh vegetables. Would you like to go with me?"

"Delighted," Rod replied, before learning that the trip would be made on horseback. However, he was too proud to back out, so he had cautiously mounted Tony, after getting a few pointers from Hastings. The ride had been under way now for almost an hour, and the men now had less than a mile to ride to the lookout tower.

"I wish I had a s much pep as Tony has," mason declared, giving the horse an admiring glance.

"We all have our ups and downs," Hastings replied gently.

"Mine seem to have been mostly downs lately."

"I guess the good Lord lets troubles get mixed with ours joys, Mason, to help us keep humble. If we were riding high all the time we'd never stop to thank God for His blessings."

"I suppose you're right. It's been a long time since I've actually thanked God for anything." Mason admitted ruefully.

"We all get too busy and overconfident. I've seen visitors at the lodge who were so wrapped up in themselves they hardly knew anyone else existed. You know, Mason," Hastings continued, "when a fellow gets wrapped up in himself he makes a pretty small package. What he needs in his soul is the greatness of the mountains, the stillness of a night in the forest, and the friendliness of the will creatures."

"I'm cynical about human nature, Hastings," the visitor said after a few moments of silence. "Where I've been it's a tough, cruel fight with no holds barred. We city folks live inside a coat of armour to protect us from getting hurt by those who prove false."

Instead of answering Mason, the caretaker turned his horse onto the trail and started on the upgrade. Only the clip clop of horses' hoofs was heard for several minutes. Then Hastings turned and spoke to his friend. "It's time for you to take a can opener and cut yourself out of that armour, Mason. If you'll pardon me for saying so, I think there is an honest, sincere man inside if you'll only let him out. Put God in the frame of your life, and you'll get a different picture of the world."

Ahead of the riders loomed a breathtaking view of snow-capped peaks rising to the south and east. Far below were a half dozen lakes, whose waters flashed reflections of the morning sun.

"How can a person put God in the frame when you've lost faith? I'm about ready to say God is a mirage," Rod Mason said bitterly. "When you need Him most, He's not there."

"You've been hurt pretty deep, haven't you, Mason?" Hastings asked gently.

"I'm a realist, that's all," the visitor replied cryptically, evading a straight answer. "I know how to make money. I can compete with the best in my field, and I ask no favours and expect none." The words were clipped and almost sharp, the nervous reaction of the man who felt himself concerned.

"But you aren't happy, are you? Have you found peach in your heart?"

"How can you have peach when the one you love walks out on you?"

"Maybe you aren't the same man she fell in love with and married," philosophised Hastings. "We all change, you know, for better or worse. When you lost faith in God, perhaps you lost faith in your home - and love for your wife sort of got mislaid."

"Agnes - that's my wife's name - couldn't seem to understand I was under pressure. We quarrelled, and she said I was hard and bitter. I guess when I started drinking that was the last straw. Love doesn't make much headway when that goes on and on," the younger man confessed.

"Even when we slide down to the end of the rope we find God waiting to help us, Mason. I know we ought to listen to Him sooner, but often we don't. Hold on hard, and a way will open for you. God never lets you down; I know from experience."

Hastings' words had a ring of conviction that Mason could not refute. Suddenly he remember a sentence that Dr. Lovelace, the pastor of the church in the Bronx, had spoken years before. The minister had said, "When a person begins to tell what God has actually done for him, nobody has a right to argue or dispute it." Deep down inside Mason wished he could say, "I know God has been with me."

In another minute the horses rounded a hairpin turn, and ahead Mason saw what seemed to be a glass box perched on top of a fifty-foot steel tower. Steps went up and around the sides of the tower to a catwalk that extended out from each side of the lookout. A young man was standing by the railing waving to the riders.

"Hello, George. How's life in the Craggy Point eagle's nest this morning?" called Morton Hastings.

"Couldn't be better," shouted the young man. "Come on up, Uncle Mort, and bring your friend with you."

After the men dismounted and unfastened the supplies from the saddlebags, they began the climb up the rocky path. Hastings explained to Mason, "George Coleman always calls me Uncle Mort, though we're not related. I've known his family since he was a baby."

Climbing the steep stairway caused Mason's breath to come hard, and he was soon puffing. "I guess I'm a novice at this," he apologised between gasps.

"Don't worry; we all puff at this altitude," said Hastings.

Soon the visitors were through the trapdoor and on the catwalk, where Mason received a handshake of welcome from George Coleman. After the introductions, Hastings entered the room to put on the table the food he had been carrying.

"What a magnificent view you have here. You're literally on top of the world," exclaimed Mason, as he attempted to take in the panorama before him.

"That's why the lookout is located here. A person can see from seventy to ninety miles over the ridges and down into the valleys," the college man explained. "Some of the snow-capped peaks are more than a hundred miles away."

"This beats the view from the Empire State Building," Mason said enthusiastically. "I could watch this for hours."

"You're from the East, I believe. Uncle Mort told me you were coming," said the six-foot youth, whose slender, muscular body and tanned skin made the city dweller wince with envy.

"Yes, I arrived four days ago. The doctor thinks the mountain air and a change of scenery will do me good."

"It's an old prescription and a good one, all right," Coleman replied. "Long ago King David said, 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.'" There was a friendly warmth in the young man's voice as he added, "Come on inside and see my quarters. They're not elaborate, but they're clean and comfortable."

Mason surveyed the room, noticing the telephone, the two-way official radio, a small commercial set for ordinary broadcasts, a small stove, table, cupboards, a comfortable-looking bed, three chairs, and a bookcase filled with interesting volumes.

"Were you busy, George, after that thunderstorm the other day?" asked Hastings, noting the charts filled with jottings.

"Yes, Uncle Mort, and I'm not through checking where some of the lightning hit. We keep watching those spots for days. There's always the danger that a tree that has been hit may smoulder until a wind fans it into a fire." As George spoke Mason was studying him closely. He would judge that this clean-cut college man was at least twenty-five years old. There was an openness about the youth that was as wide as the horizon, and it made the executive want to know him better.

For a half hour the men chatted, looked through the powerful binoculars, and listened to reports on the radio. Finally, Morton Hastings glanced at his wrist watch and said, "It's about eleven o'clock, Mason. If we're getting back to the lodge in time for lunch we'll have to start riding."

"Come and visit me often, Mason," invited the lookout, as the men started down the stairs.

"I'll be up again soon, George," the New Yorker promised. "Tony will bring me up the trail if I can climb on him. I'm beginning to feel stiff and sore already."

When the trail widened to a road about a mile from the lookout tower, Mason rode up beside his friend. "George Coleman seems to be a nice young fellow, isn't he older than the average college student, Hastings?"

"Yes, he is. Two and a half years in the Army delayed his graduation," the caretaker explained. "He'll be graduating next spring - a senior student in theology."

"Theology, eh?" Mason returned quizzically.

"He knows the Bible, too," Hastings replied. "He's not one of these fussy religious fellows, though. Fifteen months in Korea put plenty of stamina into that boy, let me tell you. He's been through the hell of war, and he knows what he believes."

"I'll have to get better acquainted with Coleman," Mason promised himself aloud. "I like the flash of his eyes."

When the two men reached the corral at the lodge, Karen Sue was perched on the fence waiting for them. The girl jumped down, opened the gate, and called gaily, "How did you like Tony, Mr. Mason?"

"He's a wonderful horse, Karen Sue," the visitor answered, dismounting with caution. Then he added jokingly, "I think he needs a few more shock absorbers or a little more spring in his knee action. You see, I didn't grow up in the saddle as you and your father did."

"Never mind," said the girl encouragingly. "We'll make a cowboy out of you yet."

"Not the way I feel now." The visitor tried taking a few steps, but every move was a strain on some muscle that hadn't been used recently.

"Don't worry about Mr. Mason," Hastings chimed in. "He's had a six-mile horseback ride today that is only the first of many. Is lunch ready, Karen Sue?"

"Yes, mother's waiting for you men, daddy. I'll tell her you're here." The girl hurried toward the house, but she stopped suddenly and called back, "Oh, Mr. Mason, the telephone operator has been trying to reach you with a long-distance call."

"Thanks, Karen Sue. I'll be right in. It's probably my office in New York starting to bother me," the man replied, a note of boredom in his voice.

"It's not New York, though," the girl exclaimed, as she waited for the men to catch up to where she stood on the path from the stable to the lodge. "The operator said, 'Ann Arbor, Michigan, is calling.'"

At these words Mason almost stumbled forward in eagerness. "Where's the phone, Karen Sue?" he demanded. "I must called the operator at once." The man's words tumbled out nervously, and when he finished speaking he bit his lips from anxiety.

The girl recognised the sudden change in the visitor, and after a quick glance at her father she led Rod Mason to the library, where there was a telephone extension. Karen Sue said nothing as the man seated himself at the desk and lifted the receiver from the base. He was so preoccupied with his thoughts he did not see the girl step out into the hall and close the door quietly behind her.

Roderick Mason's hand was trembling as he held the receiver and informed the operator he was ready to take the call. The minute of waiting seemed like an eternity.

"It's the first time - " he started to say to himself, but he broke off as he heard a feminine voice. "Hello, Agnes, it's really you?" Rod asked eagerly.

CHAPTER THREE

A Decision to Act

IT WAS nine o'clock in the morning the day after Roderick Mason received the telephone call from Ann Arbor, Michigan, before he left his rooms at the lodge. The man had shut himself in his quarters the previous afternoon, telling Karen Sue he felt miserable. He tried to pray, but his faith was weak. "If there is a God," Mason said to himself, "why does He let things get tangled so badly in the corners of my life? Can He give me peace and help me in this crisis?"

Karen Sue had brought lunch and dinner to Mason's rooms. "But he scarcely nibbled a cracker or sipped his soup," complained Mrs. Hastings, when the trays were returned to the kitchen.

On this bright morning Rod Mason made his way to the patio, where Mrs. Hastings was sewing. The woman looked up from her work and with a smile said, "It's good to see you, Mr. Mason. You're probably ready for a good breakfast."

To tell you the truth, I'd like a glass of orange juice, and nothing more. I've been eating too much. Your meals are so tempting, Mrs. Hastings, I've stuffed myself."

The woman looked at her guest with a puzzled expression, and Mason, noting the questioning look on her face, went on quickly, "That is, I ate well until yesterday."

"Karen Sue," called the mother to her fifteen-year-old daughter, who was in the kitchen, "Mr. Mason would like a large glass of cool, fresh orange juice."

The girl came to the patio door with a look of pleased surprise. "Look who's up this morning," she said, radiating a smile. "Your breakfast will be served at once."

"Nothing but orange juice, remember," the man called cheerily.

"These mornings are too wonderful to waste indoors," Mrs. Hastings spoke as the visitor settled himself in an easy chair. "That's why I try to do some of my work here in the patio."

"The air and sunshine are like a tonic."

"Sometimes rest and quiet are the best healers. Time does a lot, too, I suppose." The woman rocked in her chair and watched the guest as she sewed.

Mason was silent for a few moments, his eyes on a saucy blue jay in a nearly Douglas fir. "If we didn't have memories, time could heal things a lot faster."

"That may be true sometimes," admitted Mrs. Hastings; "but then again what would life be like without the memories of happy days?"

Karen Sue appeared with a frosty glass of juice. "Have some California liquid sunshine, sir. It's the best ever squeezed." There was a sparkle in the girl's eyes as she put on airs for the visitor she had learned to admire.

"Thank you, Karen Sue. A charming picture if I ever saw one," said the television director, sipping his drink.

"You have an appointment with me at ten o'clock," chided the girl in a mock-serious manner.

"I've not forgotten it either. We are to set out upon a bold adventure in a rowboat," Mason returned in the same vein. "You're the 'Lady of the Lake.'"

"Not the one Sir Walter Scott wrote about," returned the girl, tossing her blonde curls and laughing.

"Perhaps Mr. Mason doesn't want to go boating today, Karen Sue," interposed Mrs. Hastings.

"Oh, but I do. It's exactly what I need."

"I'll hurry and finish the breakfast dishes so we can start," Karen Sue said over her shoulder as she turned toward the kitchen.

"We must not impose on you," said the mother gently. "We want you to be happy here."

"You're doing everything you can, Mrs. Hastings. I'm afraid I'm something of a problem guest." Rod Mason arose as he spoke. Then looking at the snow-capped mountains to the south, he added, "I'll try to mend my ways."

The blue-green waters of the lake were a mirror framed in a border of pines and firs until the boat cut a pattern of ripples that widened and sparkled in the sunlight. As Rod Mason pulled on the oars, Karen Sue looked out across the water. The vivacious girl was bursting with curiosity and she could not repress her questions. "Was the news bad, Mr. Mason? I mean the phone call."

"Why do you ask?"

"I know I shouldn't, but we wondered why you changed so quickly. Did we do something to hurt your feelings?"

The clank of an oar and the splash of water was all that followed that question. Then Mason spoke. "I'm sorry, Karen Sue, to be such a spoiled person. It looks as if I didn't appreciate what your family is doing for me; but that isn't true. The long distance call was from Agnes, my wife. She's coming out West."

"That's wonderful!" the girl exclaimed quickly. "I'd like - "

"Wait," the man continued, pulling hard on the oars. "She's coming to Reno next week to get a divorce."

"Oh, no! That can't be right, can it?"

The man did not answer. Instead he paused in his rowing and let the boat drift. "Karen Sue, I tried to pray last night. You have told me how God answers your prayers. It doesn't seem that He hears me."

"Do you believe God loves you?"

"I guess so, but I can't seem to feel Him near me. My life has been a blank for so long."

"If God loves you, don't you think He listens when you talk to Him as to a friend?" the girl suggested. "The Bible says God's ear is open to our cry if we do right. I learned the exact words for a memory verse: 'The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears are open unto their cry.' But it isn't easy to pray about one's own problems, Mr. Mason, especially when we want our way."

"Why not, Karen Sue?"

"I used to think that all we had to do was ask and we'd get what we wanted if we loved God. It seemed that simple."

"Isn't that just about it?" the man questioned, a new interest showing in his face.

The finely moulded young face was earnest as she said, "We forget we must say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and mean it. Most of us want our own way, no matter what is best for us."

"What is God's will?" Mason asked sceptically. "How do I know what is best?"

"Sometimes we have to believe God when the way ahead is dark," said the girl. "For example, I wanted to go to a boarding academy last fall, and I prayed and prayed and prayed for it to come true. The folks didn't have the money, and everything closed in, so the answer was No. Of course, I was disappointed, but I believe God will guide me and show me the best way."

"Sometimes that takes a lot of courage and faith," said Mason, squinting his eyes in the sunlight. "Go on talking, Karen Sue. You're making me think."

"We can't understand why trouble comes to us. If we did, I suppose we'd know as much as God does. Some troubles may be our own fault. I know George Coleman, the fire watcher at the lookout, said a lot of his trouble in the Army came because of his own mistakes."

"I'm sure most of my troubles are of my own making." agreed the television director.

"God may let some trouble come to help us remember Him," suggested the girl. "Maybe God wants to see how much we really love Him."

"But where does His will come in?"

"We can't always know, Mr. Mason, right at the time; but if we pray and trust, God will give us the answer. Sometimes when we want our own way and it isn't best for us, God has to show us how wrong we are."

"Should I simply pray, 'Thy will be done, Lord,' and do nothing about my problems?" asked the visitor, still on his oars.

"Wouldn't that sort of be like wishing and praying to get to shore from here, and never rowing the boat?" Karen Sue suggested in a practical vein. "Don't you think we should work as well as pray? In that way we can sometimes help answer our own prayers."

"That sounds like down-to-earth religion."

"If you want your wife to come back to you, Mr. Mason, ask God to show you what to do and say. Then go into action." The girl leaned forward as she spoke, her eyes flashing with enthusiasm.

"You're very wise for your fifteen years, Karen Sue."

"George Coleman has helped answer some of my questions. He's a Bible student, and he's faced plenty of heartache and disappointment himself."

"I believe I'll ride up to the lookout station sometime this week and have a chat with Coleman," said Mason, gazing across the water.

By this time the boat was nearing the landing, and Karen Sue helped guide it to the dock and make it fast. Jumping out agilely, the girl gave her friend a helping hand. "Wasn't that fun?" she asked.

"Boating and horseback riding! The fellows at the New York studio should see me now - the outdoor man."

As the boaters left the landing and climbed the gravel path toward the lodge. Roderick Mason asked, "Do you suppose you could lend me a Bible, Karen Sue? It's been a long time since I've looked inside the Book, but I'd like to do some reading now."

"Of course, you may have my Bible. We have several extra copies," the girl returned, almost skipping along the path from happiness.

"By the way, there's one other thing I want, but I suppose I'll have to use the telephone to find out," Mason explained.

"If we can help you, let us know," said Karen Sue, determined not to pry any further into the guest's plans.

"It's no secret. Ask your father if he knows what time the Overland Limited arrives in Reno from Chicago. You see, Karen Sue, I've decided to be at the station when that train pulls in next Monday.

CHAPTER FOUR

Storms on the Horizon

FROM the lookout, George Coleman and his visitor, Roderick Mason, watched the symphony of thunderstorms. Giant thunderheads had piled up in the north during the warm afternoon, and, here and there, streaks of lightning blazed from the purple clouds.

"Those strikes are at least forty miles away," explained Coleman, turning from his binoculars as he spoke to his guest. "It looks as if the storm will move east without coming into this district. If it does it will ease my worries.

"These summer storms breaking over the mountains keep the rangers and lookout stations busy, I can see that. It never occurred to me before what our Government is doing to protect the nation's forests." Mason spoke with appreciation. "This would make a good story on television."

There is an army of men and women fighting the red demon that destroys our forests," Coleman explained modestly. "When we get a fire we have plenty of modern equipment to fight it - trucks, bulldozers, airplanes, smoke jumpers, and many other scientific aids."

"Science has done a lot for our generation," Mason replied, looking at the clouds that were beginning to lose their threatening shades of blue and dark green. "It's done some things that may drive us to ruin, too."

"You mean atom and hydrogen bombs, bacterial warfare, and the like?" queried the younger man.

"Yes, and also what science seems to have done to our faith in God. I'm here for some help, Coleman, if you can give it to me. I want to believe something. I need faith in God, but what can a man believe today? Evolution makes God a mockery, and the glory of material things is destroying spiritual values. I've come to a crisis, and I don't know how to face it."

On this day, shortly after lunch, Roderick Mason had ventured on another horseback ride - this time alone. He mounted the palomino and rode up the trail to the Craggy Point Lookout to visit George Coleman. The visitor remembered the words of Morton Hastings describing Coleman: "He's been through plenty, and he knows what he believes." The television director, in the depths of discouragement, knew that he was in need of help. He hoped that here on the rugged mountaintop, Coleman could give him some practical advice. For the past hour the two men had chatted casually as the lookout checked the progress of the storm, swinging the alidade of his fire finder toward each far-off lightning strike. Now as they sat on a bench on the narrow catwalk, Mason gave his friend a brief picture of the disaster he faced as the result of his nervous breakdown and his wife's decision. He ended by saying, "Next Monday she arrives in Reno to start divorce proceedings."

"I can't help you in your special problem. Mine hasn't been exactly the same, for no two of us are alike; but I have known the loss of all I loved," said Coleman quietly. "The same power that helped me through a crisis can sustain you, Mason; I know that."

"If God loves His children, why does He allow such heartaches and trouble to come to them?" asked Mason, with a tinge of bitterness in his voice.

"Many times we blame God for the things that He never caused. Remember, we live in an imperfect world, since the Creator's original plan was marred by man's disobedience. When Adam and Eve refused to build their lives with God's blueprint and went their own selfish way, they had to accept the consequences - sin and death." Coleman looked into the steady blue eyes of Mason as he talked. Since the visitor seemed to be listening intently, George went on. "It is the same selfish spirit that pulls us down and destroys much of our happiness. We want our own way; we want happiness and security without accepting God's plan for our life. Then when we get into a tight corner because of our headstrong actions, we blame God or say that He does not exist."

"I fear that you've analysed my condition all too well; but how can I find the way back and regain my faith?" asked the television director, gripping his hands together until his knuckles were almost white.

"I believe it was the poet, Edwin A. Robinson, who said, 'The world is ... a kind of spiritual kindergarten, where millions of infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks.' We can't prove the existence of God through the blocks of science, although there are some wonderful things in that field. For example, the study of astronomy helps us to see something of the greatness of God's universe, but science in itself cannot prove that God exists. We will never find Him by reasoning or through textbooks and encyclopedias. We will find Him by our response - that is, faith - and by studying His word - the Bible - and by prayer. First of all we must be willing to believe, for as the writer of the book of Hebrews says in the eleventh chapter, the sixth verse: 'He that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a

rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.' God will never disappoint us if we seek Him, opening our heart to His love and standing ready to do His will."

"Wasn't it Augustine who said: 'God made us for Himself, and we are restless until we find our rest in Him?'" asked Mason. "It seems to me I remember that quotation from my college days, and it haunted me when I forgot to trust in God."

"Yes, that goes along with the words of Job: 'Acquaint now thyself with Him, and be at peace: thereby good shall come unto thee.' When we become acquainted with God, walk with Him, and accept His will, then we are at peace with ourselves and the universe, for we are not fighting against truth."

"Tell me, George, why do disappointments and trials come to us?" asked Mason. "Doesn't God take these things away from us when we are close to Him?"

George Coleman shook his head as he looked at his recently made friend. "If all of our trials and troubles ended when we accepted God's way, wouldn't everyone follow God because it would end all of his suffering and sorrow?"

"I suppose you are right. Then how does the way of a Christian differ from that of others?"

"I can best explain it, Mason, if I tell you something of my own experience," said Coleman thoughtfully. "I was a junior in college with plans to get married in my senior year and become a businessman. I had the promise of a good starting position with a San Francisco firm."

"Sounds O.K."

"Then I got the usual letter with the President's 'Greetings,' and I was soon in the Army. After a year of training I was shipped into action overseas in the dead of winter."

"Korea?" asked Mason.

"Yes. The fighting was bitter, and things went from bad to worse. We retreated, and I was wounded. Two months in the hospital didn't help my morale. You see, I was rebellious, for I thought God had give me a raw deal."

"What happened then?" questioned Rod Mason sympathetically.

"To top it off, while I was in my blackest mood I got a letter from home saying my fiancée was getting married," said Coleman bitterly. "Do you wonder then when I was called back into active duty, I didn't care what happened?"

"What snapped you out of that despair?"

"There's no place on earth that a man feels more helpless than in a foxhole during an enemy bombardment. I went through that when things were the darkest, and suddenly I realised how much I needed God."

"You've felt it, too?" asked Mason in amazement, as if he had been the only one to face doubts and despair.

"Yes, I felt the whole world had fallen in on me, and I was facing death with no hope. That night I looked up at the stars and began to pray. I asked God to help me wipe out all my bitterness, hatred, and doubt. I gave myself to God right there."

"What happened, George?"

"I found peace I hadn't known. I put my life in the care of the One who knows best. From that dark night I've gone forward with faith in my heavenly Father. I know He loves me and knows what is best for

me. I've tried to follow His plan for my life. That's why I'm here this summer - to get money and to study so I can finish theology next year and be a minister." Coleman stood up as he finished speaking and walked to the end of the balcony. Coming back to the bench the youth stood looking at the perplexed man who sat before him, silent and motionless.

"It's like this, Mason," Coleman went on. "The heavenly Father doesn't keep us from all the suffering and sorrow that comes in a world of sin; but, when we trust Him, He does give us courage and faith to endure it and see it through. It was the apostle Paul who said something about a comfort. Let me find it in my Bible," said the lookout, picking up the well-worn Book on the bench. After turning several pages, he said: "Here it is in 2 Corinthians 1:4. It says, God 'comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.' Jesus, the Son of God, endured more suffering and pain than anyone else in this world. Thus He is able to be the Consoler and Helper of all men. Jesus not only knew the agony of physical pain, but He went through the greatest mental anguish because He suffered for the sins of men. Why did He do this? Because He loved us. The Father did not keep Jesus from suffering, but in the suffering he sustained and comforted His Son."

"Then if we trust Him and accept His way, His love and mercy will hold us up no matter what comes?" asked Mason.

"That's it. And I can tell you it works, for I've proved it in my own life," Coleman said with confidence as he put a hand on Mason's shoulder.

"Thanks for your help, George," said the visitor, rising and preparing to leave. "I hope it will work for me."

"You put it to the test," called the lookout, waving Good-bye as Mason made his way down the path.

The New Yorker mounted his horse and muttered to himself, "Don't worry, I've got the best test in the world ahead of me - next Monday."

CHAPTER FIVE

Surrender Means Victory

SUNDAY morning found Roderick Mason restless and at war with himself. There was no need for him to try to stay around the lodge today, for he realised he would be pretty poor company. Therefore, after a hearty breakfast, Mason approached Morton Hastings with his request. "I would enjoy taking the station wagon and driving awhile this morning, if you don't mind, Morton," began the visitor. "You mentioned that the car was for the use of guests of the lodge."

"That's right, Mason," said the caretaker cordially. "It's all yours. Do you feel up to par to go alone?"

"Yes, I'm O.K., and I'd like to get off to myself for a few hours," Mason said candidly, yet at the same time hiding the chief motive that was lurking in his mind.

"God right ahead, then. The station wagon is checked for gas and oil, and the tyres are almost new." Hastings smiled as he handed the guest the keys to the car. "Excuse me, Rod, if you will. I hear Tony whinnying for his breakfast down at the corral."

As Mason turned the station wagon onto the main highway from the private road, he realised how good it was to be at the wheel again. The broad stretch of concrete seemed like a challenge and the warm, sunny day an invitation to travel. The man tried to analyse himself as he drove along. He was nervous

over the thought of meeting his estranged wife in less than twenty-four hours, and furthermore, he was bewildered as he struggled between faith and doubt.

Rod flicked on the switch of the car radio, hoping to find a programme that would help him forget. "- introducing The Voice of Prophecy," came an announcer's statement. Rod reached out to turn the knob to another station, when the voice of the speaker caught his attention. "Men in the armed forces have found God under fire. Sailors have been converted on rafts in mid-ocean. All sorts of people have found their way back to a loving heavenly Father; yet you can hardly find two who will describe their experience alike. The real proof of conversion is the actual change of life that is seen by everyone. It's the orchard test - as the Bible says, 'Ye shall know them by their fruits.' Matthew 7:16

"Jesus once said, 'Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.' Matthew 18:3. We need the new-birth experience, and by it we receive a change of nature - a new heart from God."

In irritation Rod Mason snapped off the radio. "I'm sick of it all. Seems as if I can't get away from God," he muttered in disgust. Ahead on the right he saw a store and filling station, and he decided to stop. "Haven't had a cigarette for almost two weeks. That's what's wrong," Mason argued with himself. "Even though the doctor told me to stop smoking, he doesn't know everything."

Upon entering the store, Mason found a young man ready to serve him. "All I need is a package of cigarettes," said the New Yorker casually, throwing a half dollar on the counter and pointing to his favourite brand.

"Good day to be on the highway," said the proprietor, ringing up the sale on the cash register and giving Mason his change.

"That's the way I feel," he agreed, "so I guess I'll get going. Thanks."

Mason ripped open the corner of the package and extracted a cigarette as he got into the station wagon. He lighted it with the car's cigar lighter and inhaled the smoke. Somehow it had a flat, almost nauseating taste. After a second pull, the man started to throw the cigarette out the window. He thought of the signs he had seen along the highway warning of forest fires that resulted from carelessness, so he crumpled the cigarette and dumped it in the ash tray.

"Nothing seems the same, I'm in a awful mess," the struggling man admitted aloud. "Wonder what that man's saying on the radio," he added, turning the switch once more.

"- is what we need today," The Voice of Prophecy speaker was saying. "We need new hearts. Culture, education, science - these are good, but not good enough. The selfish heart of man must be changed, and only God can do this. We are helpless in our lost condition."

Mason looked ahead as the car rolled between forests that formed a cathedral in nature, arched by a dome of blue. He saw snow-capped peaks far ahead which reminded him of the verse in the Bible that tells how God makes a sinful life as white as snow.

Again the lonely man caught the words on the radio: "When we accept God by faith we are adopted into His family, and we become sons of God. We obey our heavenly Father and accept his plan for us. This is the way of eternal life."

Mason shook his head. "There's the rub," he confessed. "I can't start over with Agnes, and what will the fellows in the television business think if I become 'religious'? I'm caught in a web of materialism and doubt; it's too tight to break. Yet I know that no matter what comes, I should give myself to God. Is the cost too great?"

Once more the man slowed the car as he approached a roadside restaurant. "Guess I'll get a bite to eat here," he said almost automatically.

A jukebox was blaring raucous music as the perplexed man entered the dimly lighted room and found a seat at a table. The luncheon menu was put in his hands by a tired-looking woman whom Mason guessed to be about thirty years of age. "Will you have a cocktail?" she recited monotonously, as if the proprietor had pushed a button to make her ask the question that reaped revenue for the shoddy cafe.

Mason hadn't given a thought to drinking, but when it was mentioned he grasped at it as a drowning man reaches for a life preserver. "Sure," he replied, "I'll have a Scotch and soda."

He began reading the headlines of the Sunday newspaper spread out before him and scarcely noticed the front door opening. Then he was brought to reality by a familiar voice. "Hello, Mr. Mason, I was looking for you."

With surprise the New Yorker glanced up to see George Coleman standing by the table.

"Of all the pleasant surprises," said Mason with genuine enthusiasm. "How did you get here?"

"I went to Cragmont Lodge this morning. Got a relief man to come to the lookout for the day. After our visit the other afternoon, I thought I should see you once more - before tomorrow," explained Coleman.

"Good for you, George. Sit down."

At that moment the waitress brought the drink to Mason. In an apologetic tone the man said, "Will you have something, Coleman?"

"No thanks, Rod. I never use it."

Mason looked straight at his friend. "I haven't touched the stuff for some time. I know I shouldn't, too; but I was feeling desperate, George. You've helped me by-pass this one by coming in right now," said the man, setting it aside untouched. "Let's order something to eat."

After the waitress had taken their order, Coleman went on with his explanation. "I started out hoping to find you. At the store and filling station the attendant said the Cragmont Lodge car had stopped there and that you had driven this way, so I followed. Then I saw the station wagon here."

The two men chatted about various topics, including the lookout, going to college, and the summer weather, until the lunch was finished. "Leave your car here, Coleman, and ride with me so we talk awhile," suggested Mason. "I have a fight on my hands."

"What's up?" asked the college man as he got into the station wagon beside his friend.

"I'm between faith and doubt, hope and despair, happiness and - I don't know what," Mason admitted in a husky voice.

"There's a state park about a mile up the road," said Coleman. "Why not drive in and talk this over? We can get out and walk a bit."

For the next few minutes there was silence between the men, each seeming to wait for the other to start the conversation. The car rolled to a stop in a shady dell, and the two men got out.

"I think better in the company of trees and running brooks," Coleman declared, walking over to the stump of a tree that had recently been felled. "When I'm out in nature like this I'm reminded of Henry Van Dyke's poem that says:

"Thou who hast made Thy dwelling fair
With flowers below, above with starry lights,
And set Thine altars everywhere -
On mountain heights.

.

"To Thee I turn, to Thee I make my prayers,
God of the open air."

"That's about the way the out-of-doors makes me feel, thought I could never say it in such language," mused Rod Mason. "I've never been close to the wonders of creation before."

"Some men have a way with words as God touches their hearts. I presume that's how they become poets. The same poem also says:

"For men have dulled their eyes with sin,
And dimmed the light of heaven with doubt,
And built their temple walls to shut Thee in,
And formed their iron creeds to shut Thee out."

"That's it George. How easy it is to shut God out! I feel shut out, too."

"But you're not, man, you're not. God's love is as wide as the blue sky, and He is as faithful as the rising sun."

"I can't go back on my business friends and acquaintances," argued Mason, picking up a pine cone from the shiny matting of pine needles.

"They'll admire your faith and your decision, Mason," urged Coleman. "What about it if you go back on God and desert Him?"

"There's where I'm caught in a struggle."

"Then let go of self and let God have your life," said Coleman. "Can't you see, Mason, that in these experiences God is trying to pull you back to Him? He doesn't want you to have suffering or tragedy. These did not come because He willed them; but when they come He wants them to reveal your helplessness without His everlasting love."

"Where do I find the way back?" asked Rod Mason.

"It starts with the Man Jesus Christ. He is the Way, and He has power to take you out of sin. Remember, Mason, Jesus endured all we have to suffer, yet His worst enemies could find no fault in Him. Jesus is the Truth; He has the answer to all our problems."

"I've been so weak and helpless," admitted the television director. "When I lost my faith I also lost my will power. That caused my wife to lose all respect for me."

Coleman nodded agreement with what his friend was saying. "I once read that 'the cost of a thing is the amount of what we call life that is required in exchange for it,'" said the college student. "Wrongdoing blots a lot of the true worth from life. That's why we have remorse, Mason. We know we should rise above all that is cheap and low, and our better self calls for help."

George Coleman was thumbing through a little volume he had pulled from his pocket while he was talking. "Here's a book called *Steps to Christ* that has been a help to me. I'm looking for a paragraph I've underlined that may help you, too, Mason. Here it is on page 47."

The man began to read: "'You desire to give yourself to Him, but you are weak in moral power, in slavery to doubt, and controlled by habits of your life of sin. your promises and resolutions are like ropes of sand. You cannot control your thoughts, your impulses, your affections. The knowledge of your broken promises and forfeited pledges weakens your confidence in your own sincerity, and causes you to feel that God cannot accept you; but you need not despair.'"

"That certainly describes what I've been through," said Rod Mason. "Does it give me an answer, - a way out?"

"Yes, it goes son to say: "What you need to understand is the true force of the will. . . . Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can *choose* to serve Him."

"There's real encouragement in those words, George. See how weak I was an hour ago. I was back in the old rut." Mason shook his head, expressing his dismal outlook on life.

"We all sin, but God offers us forgiveness. 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' Christ died to deliver us from sin. When we accept God's pardon and make all wrongs right with our fellow men, we then have a new lease on life - God's love comes into the heart."

"How do I take the steps forward, George? I really want to make the break with the past and start over - right now," said Mason, clenching his fists as he spoke.

"Then tell God what you want to do," Coleman urged quietly. "Let's kneel here in this secluded spot and talk to our heavenly Father as to a friend."

The two strong men dropped on their knees, and Mason began a halting, broken prayer. Finally he said, "Dear God, I surrender myself. Take me and help me start on the right road. Have Your way with my life and with Agnes, for I love her. Amen."

The westering sun was dropping behind the rugged mountain peaks as Mason and Coleman walked back to the car. A new peace and assurance could be noticed on Rod Mason's face as the tension began to lessen. "I'm beginning to believe," the man said bravely. "The mystery is beginning to unravel as I have more faith."

"That's the point of return, Mason, for when we reach out and say, 'I believe, God; help me never to doubt Your promises and Your power,' then we have started on the road back. You must have your own faith, and God must speak to your heart."

"Let's drive back to where we left your car, George, and then we can head for the lodge," suggested the New Yorker. "We should visit with the Hastings."

"You'll be going to bed fairly early, I imagine," said Coleman. "You have to drive to Reno to meet the early train."

"That's right. And, you know, George, one victory may lead to another." The man smiled hopefully.

CHAPTER SIX

The Meeting

THERE are moments in life that seem like an eternity and nothing can speed the hands of the clock. The soldier awaits the "zero hour" when his company will push an all-out attack against the enemy. The doctor stands at the bedside of the patient, knowing the crisis is near. A group of scientists lie on the desert sands while the loud speaker amplifies the tick, tick, tick of the final seconds before a test bomb goes off.

It was such a moment for Roderick Mason as he stood on the station platform Monday morning awaiting the arrival of the streamlined train from Chicago. His mind took a backward skip to the varied high lights in his life: the day that Agnes and he were married, their honeymoon in the Canadian Rockies, the apartment on East Sixtieth in New York, his first television programme, the quarrels with his wife over his drinking, the day Agnes walked out of their apartment - forever!

"No wonder she left me," the television director muttered, as he walked to and fro in front of the station. "When I look back on the miserable, self-centered cad I've been, I'm ashamed of myself."

"Pardon me, suh," came the soft voice of a red-cap porter, interrupting Mason's thoughts. "Are you expecting someone on the Overland Limited?"

"That's right"

"If you're expectin' someone in the Pullmans you'd better walk about a block that way," instructed the coloured man, pointing toward the east. "I'll be down there when the train comes in if you needs help with the bags."

"Thanks, we'll be looking for you," returned Mason, striding forward as the horn of the Diesel engine blared a warning for the street crossings by the station. No matter how much he travelled, Rod always thrilled to the roar of a giant locomotive as it thundered into the station. To him it represented power, speed, and faraway places that spelled romance and adventure.

With a grinding of brakes, the wheels eased to a stop, and Mason began to scan the car vestibules as white coated Pullman porters put down their foot stands for their passengers to detrain. At the second car from the rear of the train mason saw luggage being set off that looked much like that he had once given his wife. He hurried forward as a woman stepped down from the car. It was Agnes, and she looked down the platform and saw her husband.

"Agnes," Rod called in restrained tones. The charming traveller was dressed in a well-tailored royal-blue suit with a matching hat that accentuated her light-brown hair and sparkling eyes. Surprise was written on her face as she saw her husband, and for a moment her arms unconsciously started to reach out as if to embrace the man, but then they froze at her side.

"What a surprise to see you here, Rod," Agnes Mason said with dubious lightness. "I didn't suppose you could possibly be up before ten o'clock in the morning."

"I've been up more than two hours, I want you to know," returned the husband proudly. "And I've driven fifty miles besides. Remember I said on the phone I'd see you when you arrived." Mason signalled the redcap to take the luggage to the station wagon.

"To be truthful," Agnes teased, "I imagined you would saunter into the hotel about two o'clock this afternoon, or later."

"That's probably what I'd have done three weeks ago," the man admitted candidly, and at the same time choosing his words carefully. "Things have changed a bit, however."

"Your're looking more rested and relaxed than I've seen you in years. The West must be doing something for you. Is that the change you mean, Rod?"

"Here's the car," Mason answered. "Let me help you in." After closing the door, the New Yorker paid the redcap and walked around to the driver's side of the station wagon.

"I know I should have said it sooner, Agnes, but you look wonderful." The husband spoke with warmth as he started the car.

The young wife shifted her eyes from her husband and changed the subject. "So this is Reno," she said, as the car rolled down one of the main streets that was still half asleep in the morning quietness. "The little city noted for divorces, marriages, and gambling."

"Did you have a pleasant trip, my dear?"

"Yes, but it's long and tiring, as you know. By the way, how did you come out?"

"I flew to San Francisco. The caretaker of the lodge met me there," explained Mason. "Here we are at the hotel. Before we go in, may I ask what your plans are?"

"I have none in particular, except to get settled here for the necessary time to get a divorce, and then go back East." The woman spoke slowly, almost hesitantly, as if she were not too sure of herself.

"I'll get the bellboy to take your bags. After you register, and freshen up, how about having breakfast with me?"

"All right, Rod. I'll meet you in the lobby in about twenty minutes," agreed Agnes, getting out of the car.

Rod Mason put the station wagon in a parking lot and walked along one of the main streets. The gambling casinos were open, - for they never close, - although there were only a few habitués lounging about at this early hour. With his hands in his pockets, Mason moved on until he came to the bridge over the Truckee River. He leaned against the railing and gazed into the swift moving water. His thoughts were racing. How shall I tell Agnes of my changed view of life? Can I ever win her confidence again? Does she still love me, or is there someone else? The man closed his eyes and breathed a prayer for help.

A glance at his wrist watch reminded Mason that it was time for him to be at the hotel. With quickened step he entered the lobby and took a chair where he could see Agnes when she came out of the elevator. He attempted to read the newspaper he had purchased, but the headlines did not hold his attention.

In a few minutes his wife appeared, smiling and refreshed. She had changed into a summery dress to match the warm, sunny morning. "You must be starved, Rod, if you've been up almost three hours."

"I'll admit I'm hungry. The mountain air seems to do it," explained Mason, as he walked beside his wife into the hotel dining room.

When they were seated and breakfast had been ordered, Rod Mason took a deep breath and asked, "Agnes, are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"Sometimes we have to do things we don't like in order to have peace, Rod," she answered evasively. "A divorce has always seemed ugly, and I hate it; but what other way is there? Life became so miserable those last months together, I almost lost my mind. You grew nervous, unreasonable, bitter, and you could think of nothing but more success and more money. We lost everything that was sacred and beautiful in our marriage." The woman stopped with a shrug of her shoulders, an expression of sheer hopelessness.

"What you say is true, every word of it," said Mason, looking down at his plate and fingering the silverware. "You haven't told a tenth of how mean and despicable I was. It was only two weeks ago I began to see myself as a selfish, godless brute. I thought I was smart and riding high on the crest of success; but I see now I was only a husk."

"You'll never know what it means to have the precious thing called 'love' smashed and trampled underfoot. You can't blame me for being bitter when all happiness and companionship disappeared." Agnes brushed aside a tear as she turned to look out the window.

"How much you suffered I'll never know, Agnes. I wish I could take it all from you," Rod whispered.

"Nothing can take away the scars. The wound went deep - clear into my soul."

"Looking back, I think we got off the track when we lost our faith."

"Faith?" queried the wife.

"Yes, faith in spiritual things to begin with. We got so wrapped up in business, the social whirl, money - it was all we thought about in life. We lost our faith, because we had everything we wanted in our dizzy existence."

"You may be right, Rod. I know we were the happiest when our life was simple. We may not have had much money or what is called 'success,' but we had faith in one another - and love." the woman's eyes were misty, as if attempting to relive days that were gone forever.

"We missed the way when we started putting God aside," Mason said with directness.

"You should talk about God when I heard nothing from you but the vilest oaths during the last years of our marriage. You aren't getting pious, are you?" A blaze of anger came into Agnes Mason's eyes that her husband had seen only once before. Her voice trembled as she went on. "Don't you dare talk to me about God when you destroyed all my faith in Him. Many a time I begged you to pray, to go with me to church to see Dr. Lovelace, our pastor; but you ridiculed me and called me crazy."

"I know," admitted the man humbly. "Forgive me."

"Forgive you!" Agnes spit the words out bitterly as if she had eaten evil-tasting fruit. "Ask your God to do that - the God you denied and cursed. The God you blotted from my life!"

The time had come, Roderick Mason decided, when he must tell his estranged wife what had taken place in his life. For the next half hour, as they toyed with the food, - for neither one had much appetite - he related his struggle, despair, and finally, the point of return to God. He went on with his story although unbelief was written on his wife's face. He ended by saying, "Yesterday George Coleman helped me face my rotten self. I had thrown away the glass crutches of tobacco and alcohol - for the doctor told me they would destroy what little health and stamina I had left. But in my weakness and despair I started to lean on them again. Thank God, I didn't give up! Instead, Coleman and I walked through the woods, and we knelt at the foot of a big pine and prayed. I confessed all my sins to God and asked for strength and faith. I prayed that God would have His way in our lives - yours and mine. That's what happened, Agnes, and if you see any change in me at all, it's God's work."

All was quiet between the couple when Rod had finished. The emotional impact of the confession was too great for words. Finally Agnes looked up and said, "I'm weary, Rod. This meeting has taken the starch out of me. Let's call it a day, please."

"You need rest, all right. Agnes, would you go up to Cragmont Lodge for a couple of days? The quietness and beauty of nature has wonderful effects on the soul. The Hastings - they're the caretakers - urged me over and over again to bring you. I'm sure it would do you good, and we could talk things over quietly."

"I don't really know what to do, Rod."

"You believe what I've told you, Agnes?"

"Rod, I've come to the place I don't believe much that you or anyone else says."

"Why don't you rest today, and I'll meet you about four o'clock. We can drive to the lodge before sunset. I'll call the Hastings and tell them we'll arrive in time for dinner." There was a boyish enthusiasm in his manner which his wife could not entirely resist, although she was sceptical about all he had said.

"I'll think about it, and you call me at four o'clock. We can decide then," said the woman as she arose from the table.

Once in her hotel room, Agnes mason threw herself on the bed and attempted to bring order out of her confused thoughts. She had come here to get a divorce from Rod because there seemed to be no other way. She couldn't go on with the miserable existence she had endured - his drinking, his nervous tantrums that bordered on violence, the abuse and cursing he had heaped on her. Yet, Rod seemed to be changing. Was it merely "good behaviour" on his part in an attempt to win her back? There seemed to be something deeper than that; he actually believed in God once more. It might be only a passing mood and he would be gripped by the same vicious evil again.

"If only I could find my way back," she said with a sigh. "How much God meant to me in my childhood days! Yes, even through college," she went on thinking to herself. "Rod and I joined in church activities after we were married, and for a short while we had family worship."

The memories flooded in on Agnes, and tears came to her eyes. "If only I could return to the place where I had faith in God. If only I could trust Him as I once did."

In her perplexity she picked up the Gideon Bible on the lamp stand by the bed and turned to the twenty-third psalm. Through the tears she began to read: "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want . . . Yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me."

Closing her eyes, the perplexed woman began to pray - the first prayer she had uttered in several years. "Give me faith, God; help me to believe You love and are for me. Forgive my bitterness, God. I want to come back, somehow, someday. I'm lost, but I want to come home. Amen."

Exhausted from the tension that had built up in recent weeks and from the wearisome train trip, Agnes breathed deeply and seemed to relax. Soon she drifted into restful sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Beyond Faith

"WHAT shall I do now?" After reading the note the callboy had brought to her hotel room, Agnes Mason asked the question as she tossed the envelope on the dresser. "I was a fool to think Rod meant what he said. He's running away from the truth again." The perplexed wife picked up the note and read: "DEAR AGNES: I called the New York office to get news of how the television programmes were going, and they told me Bill Larson will be in San Francisco tonight. Since he is coming to see me, I decided to fly there at noon. This will give you time to think things over. Here are the keys to the station wagon. It is parked in the hotel parking lot. Please drive up to Cragmont Lodge where you can rest and relax. Directions for getting to the lodge are on the accompanying sheet of paper. It's easy to find. I'll be seeing you tomorrow or Wednesday, I hope. Love, ROD. P.S. I instructed the desk clerk not to have this delivered until three o'clock, as I did not want to break into your rest."

Agnes walked over to the window and looked at the mountains that rose like giants against the skyline. "I'll stay right here in Reno and start the divorce proceedings with a lawyer," she said with determination; yet as she toyed with the car keys she argued with herself. "There isn't any great rush, I guess. Besides, I'd like to talk with George Coleman. He might give me a clue as to whether Rod is serious or not."

She turned from the window and looked in the mirror. Then smiling at her image, she said, "Evidently I talked myself right into the trip, and it wasn't difficult either, was it?"

The next hour was a busy one as she packed a bag and her overnight case, dressed, checked the remaining pieces of luggage, and arranged for a callboy to bring the station wagon to the door. The desk clerk gave her directions as to the best route out of the city, and soon she was driving leisurely on the highway that climbed into the Sierras where the lodge was located.

As she drove, Agnes tried to drink in some of the rich nectar of the summer afternoon, and, at the same time, review her problems. She decided it would be wise to move slowly for the next few days, since her happiness and Rod's were at stake. She remembered the remark of a college chum whose marriage had gone on the rocks. "The worst part about divorce," the divorcee had said, "is the letdown and loneliness afterward."

After almost two hours of driving, the woman stopped at a filling station to replenish the gasoline and check her directions. "Just two miles ahead you turn off the highway to the right, mam. You can't miss it, for you'll see a big sign there." explained the attendant as he wiped the windshield. "The road is good all the way."

Another fifteen minutes brought Agnes to the front door of Cragmont Lodge. The rustic style of the building blended into the setting of nature. A girl in her teens hurried down the broad steps, and from the description Rod had given, Agnes recognised her as Karen Sue.

"You did come Mrs. Mason. I'm so glad!" The girl pulled the car door open and gave a delicious little laugh. "I'm Karen Sue. Maybe your husband mentioned me."

"Hello, my dear. It's sweet to have you welcome me," said Agnes, putting her arm around the girl and glancing with admiration at her complexion that revealed much outdoor living. "Yes, Karen Sue, I've heard so many nice things about you; Rod thinks you have bright sunshine in your heart."

"I wish I did, Mrs. Mason. We worried about your husband when he arrived. We tried to cheer him up because he was sick and pretty blue. This last week he has been so much better. Don't you think he looks good?"

"Bless you, Karen Sue, he almost seemed like his old self when he met me."

"Maybe this trip to the West is doing him good, and, of course, - your coming," added the girl shyly. "Here are my folks."

Morton Hastings and his wife came from the patio to welcome their guest. "Sure glad you could make it, Mrs. Mason. We think a lot of that husband of yours," Morton declared, going to the rear of the car to take out the luggage.

"We want you to feel right at home, my dear," added Mrs. Hastings. "Karen Sue, show Mrs. Mason her rooms and I'll have dinner ready in a jiffy."

Down the redwood-panelled hall the girl led the guest. "I've been riding Tony - that's our palomino - most of the afternoon," chattered Karen Sue. "Do you like to ride horseback, Mrs. Mason? It's really great fun. Your husband enjoyed it after he got used to horses."

"Ten years ago I took my last horseback ride," said Agnes Mason laughingly. "I'd have given a great deal to see Rod on a horse for the first time."

"We'll have to go riding - maybe tomorrow. These are your rooms. You'll want your bags in the bedroom, won't you?" the girl suggested. "My father will put them there."

The sitting room was decorated in ranch style, but with an added touch of femininity to please a woman. Beyond the spacious windows there was a glassed-in-sun porch, where one could catch a view of the lake. While Karen Sue was showing the guest the scenery, Morton Hastings quietly left the room.

"I guess I'd better unpack a few of my things, Karen Sue," Agnes suggested, surveying the sunny bedroom. "Would you like to stay and talk to me?"

"It would be fun, if I won't bother you."

"Of course you won't. Tell me about yourself."

For fifteen minutes Agnes Mason listened to the lively conversation of the teenager, as she interspersed it with exciting phrases to describe the lovely clothes that were unpacked. When Karen Sue mentioned George Coleman and the lookout station, the woman listened carefully. "Could we go for a horseback ride to the lookout?" she asked casually.

"Of course we could," the girl agree. "Tomorrow I take milk and eggs and fresh vegetables up there; we could ride together. I have to go to the Skyview Ranch, a couple of miles beyond."

"If I feel up to it, Karen Sue, I'll take a horseback ride with you, at least to the lookout," promised the visitor.

"You have so many pretty clothes. One of these days when I'm at boarding school I hope to have some, too. There's mother calling me. You'll be down to dinner right away, won't you, Mrs. Mason?"

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The view of the Sierra Nevadas from the lookout platform was breathtaking to Agnes Mason, who had been pent up in the great city most of her life. Before her was a vast panorama of mountains and green-decked vallleys, dotted here and there with lakes of sapphire blue. True to her promise, the visitor had ridden with Karen Sue to the lookout station to meet George Coleman. They stood on the catwalk beside the visitor while she asked many questions.

"If you think this is magnificent, you should fly over the whole area in one of the airplanes that scouts for forest fires," said Coleman. "Then you have a view of the Sierras that's beyond description."

"I think I'd have to take it in easy stages," Agnes said with a sigh; "this almost staggers me. I wish some of the folks in crowded Manhattan could see the wide-open spaces."

"We're so tiny and God's world is so big," observed Karen Sue, resting her elbows on the guard rail in order to get a steady view through the powerful binocuclars.s When she had scanned the horizon for some moments she said, "If you'll excuse me I'll ride on over to Skyview Ranch. In a couple of hours I'll be back for you, Mrs. Mason."

"That's fine Karen Sue. Mr. Coleman can tell me all about Uncle Sam's forests and how the Government fights fires." Agnes Mason watched her young friend go down the tower's steps and skip along the trail that led to the hitching post.

"Here's a chair, Mrs. Masons," said the college man, bringing a rocker from his glassed-in room. "Make yourself comfortable. You have a choice of sunshine or shade."

"Thank you," she answered, relaxing in comfort while she studied the strong face of the young man as he did some checking with the binoculars. "I suppose, Mr. Coleman, you've guessed why I'm here. Rod told me about your visits," she began.

"I had a feeling you might come - and I hoped you would. What did you think of your husband's attitude?"

"It sounded too good to be real, and I doubt if Rod means it."

"If Mason told you how he feels and the victory he gained, that's the main thing. Of course, you know him better than I do, but I think he is sincere." Coleman put the glasses away and leisurely sat down on a bench.

"It takes more than sincerity to have happiness. I've been burned severely, and you know what they say about a burnt child and the fire. Not only did Rod lose his faith in God, but he destroyed most of mine as well. I haven't had any peace of mind for ages, and I know there's an empty place deep down inside my life; but what can I do about it?" There was an earnest tone in the woman's voice which reminded Coleman of the way her husband had described his need.

"Isn't it a bit strange for you to ask me what to do? I'm not a preacher, and you scarcely know me." George Coleman smiled as he spoke.

"That's true, I guess; yet Rod told me you had been through hard experiences yourself, and sometimes that helps more than theory or position."

"I told your husband how I found God. No two of us have identical experiences, but sometimes we can help one another. According to the Bible, when we have lost our way we need to be reconciled to God. Actually we are breaking ourselves when we go our selfish, headstrong way. When we realise our helplessness and are truly sorry for our wrongs, we ask God to forgive us. Jesus Christ, through His perfect life and His death on the cross for our sins, cleanses us and covers all our imperfections. Then we can be brought back to our heavenly Father. Sin separates, but Christ brings us back and 'we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,' Romans 5:1."

"I know I made mistakes and sinned against God; but how can I be sure He forgives?" It was the age-old question that has been asked a million times. "My faith is so weak and I have drifted so far from God."

"It may seem that you're far from God; but he is never far from you, Mrs. Mason. You can be certain that He is as close to you as to any of His dearest saints," Coleman said emphatically. "Now as to your faith. You and I take a great many things by faith - the telephone, our money, the food we eat. Yes, a hundred things a day have to be taken by faith. Then why not take God's promises the same way? If we come to Him and confess our sins and mistakes, He is faithful and just to forgive us and blot out all our sins. That is a fact that has been proved again and again in human experience. If by faith we take one step toward God, then the next step is easier and our faith grows and grows."

"I believe that; but what else must I do?"

"We must make everything right with our fellow men. After we are right with God we must be at peace with those in the human family, since Jesus died for all of us. We cannot hate one member of the family and at the same time love God. A new life opens before us as we follow our Example, Jesus Christ. Hatred and evil 'work like madness in the brain,' but love banishes these evils that destroy the soul. We will come to love our neighbour as ourselves. And, finally, we need peace of mind that frees us from worry and fear."

"It seems as if some good Christians have lots of trouble, Mr. Coleman. How do you account for that if they are serving God and love Him with all their heart?"

"Rod asked the same question. You see, we all have troubles in this imperfect world; we cannot escape them. Jesus warned His followers to expect tribulation; but He also said to be of good cheer for He had overcome the world."

"What did He mean by that?" questioned Agnes Mason.

"Simply that we can rise above our troubles and fears by keeping our eyes upon Jesus Christ and following His example. He proved that He has power to help us gain the victory. Our tragedies will see easier when we realise that this life is not the end of everything. It is a testing time, as it were, and someday we shall understand why trials and sorrows came.

"The apostle Paul suffered all sorts of persecution, pain, sorrow, and disappointment, yet he could declare that he had fought a good fight. Why? Because he saw his Master at the end of the way and looked ahead to the crown of life that awaited him. It is such a faith and hope that gives the Christian an untroubled heart even when he is plunged into a troubled world."

"Then it is possible that some good can come from this trouble?" asked Agnes hopefully.

"In trouble itself there is no good. We sometimes hear people say God sends trials and suffering; but a loving Father doesn't do that. He permits it to come from the evil one to test character, to make us feel our helplessness without Him, and to draw us to His love."

"The ordeal I've been through wouldn't be in vain if it brought me faith in God and a new gleam of happiness." The woman leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. "Do you know, Mr. Coleman, I feel like Christian in *The Pilgrims's Prograss* that I read as a little girl. The burden seems to be slipping off my shoulders."

"You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you," Coleman said encouragingly, paraphrasing the words of Paul the apostle. "Rod reached to point of return, and he surrendered his life and his plans to God."

"Do you really believe he did?"

"Yes, Mrs. Mason, I do."

"I wish I had as much faith. In my opinion, Mr. Coleman, He's slipped away. He was looking for a way out and I don't think - I fear that he's not coming back."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Point of Return

THE storm that brought rain during the night broke away slowly with the dawn, leaving a few clouds snuggled about the mountain peaks and a freshness in the air of clean-washed trees and shrubs. Warm sunshine caused a mist to rise from the little pools of water standing in the yard and soon dried up the tiny drops that clung to the grass on the front lawn of the lodge.

Agnes Mason walked down the path toward the shop and corral where she could hear Morton Hastings hammering. The man looked up and smiled as he saw his visitor in the doorway.

"Looks as if you're busy mending a saddle," Agnes began.

"One of my hobbies is working with leather, so I'm always trying to find something that needs repairing in that line. This saddle has seen its best days, but it can still be used when the fellows come to round up the cattle this fall." As he talked, Morton Hastings went to a cupboard and brought out some of his hand-tooled leather work in the form of wallets and belts. "This is what I do sometimes on long winter evenings," he said, displaying the pieces proudly.

"What beautiful work. I've always wanted to do leather tooling," the woman declared, examining each object carefully.

"If you'll stay long enough, I'll teach you how. By the way, Mrs. Mason, how did you like our rain last night?"

"When I woke up I heard the drops pattering on the roof, and it took me back to my childhood when I slept on the screened-in porch. The rain would sing me to sleep.

"Enjoying your stay with us?"

"Yes, in most ways."

"Worried about Rod?"

"Not exactly, Mr. Hastings; and yet I wonder if he has gone - permanently."

"Can't believe that he has," Hastings said shortly.

"Do you suppose he decided it was the easiest way out of his problem - to slip away?" The young wife revealed in her eyes and voice the emotional strain she had endured in recent months.

"Nonsense," returned the caretaker emphatically. "There's more to Mason than that. All he could think about was meeting you in Reno last Monday."

"But this is Thursday, and it's almost noon. He promised in the note he wrote that he'd be back Tuesday - or Wednesday, at the latest."

"How did he seem when he met you?"

"It wasn't easy for either of us. We were both tense. I told him I didn't have much faith in his promises or in the new leaf he said he was turning over." Agnes Mason was admitting more than she wanted to tell, but it seemed she couldn't hold it back any longer.

Morton Hastings stepped out into the yard and looked at his horses in the corral. "Of course, I'm no authority, Mrs. Mason; but in my opinion Rod will be back," the man said hopefully, although deep inside he, too, began to wonder about the television director. Morton wished he hadn't agreed for his wife and Karen Sue to go to Reno for the day. They could help this woman in her problems. He hoped she wouldn't start crying; that was something he couldn't face - a woman's tears!

While attempting to think of a way to ease the situation, Hastings scarcely realised Agnes Mason was asking a question. "Could I go for a ride on Tony?"

"You certainly may, Mrs. Mason," said the caretaker, breathing easier as he saw his responsibility being lifted. "I'll have the palomino addled and ready in a jiffy."

When the New Yorker was in the saddle and ready to ride, she waved a Good-bye to the man, adding, "I'll follow the road toward the lookout. If I have time I may say Hello to George Coleman."

Hastings watched the horse and its rider disappear around a turn in the road. He scratched his head and squinted his eyes, as he always did when he faced a problem. "Why can't life be more simple for folks these days?" he demanded of the corral gate. "There's a young couple eating their heart out for each other, but they're too proud to admit it. I'm no good as a matchmaker, so I won't interfere. Human nature is a strange and delicate mechanism."

Tony was allowed to set his own pace, for Agnes was preoccupied with a dozen decisions. The horse sensed the rider's mood and took advantage of the situation to move along leisurely, stopping now and again for a mouthful of grass. After more than an hour the road narrowed to a trail and grew steeper. Finally, the rider was aware that Tony had stopped at the hitching post a short distance below the lookout tower. The woman dismounted, tied the palomino, and started the climb toward the small house perched high on the platform.

George Coleman had heard the sound of hoofs on the rock trail, so he was watching from the catwalk for a visitor. "Hello, Mrs. Mason," he called. "Welcome back to Craggy Point."

"Hello," gasped the woman, as she climbed the narrow stairway. I'm puffing too much to -"

"Take it easy," urged the college man. "the altitude plus the steep stairs take your breath away."

Agnes Mason seated herself in a chair on the catwalk and breathed deeply. Coleman brought her a glass of cold spring water. "Um, that tastes wonderful. Thanks."

"I expected to see Rod with you."

"He hasn't come back," admitted the woman. "That's what worries me, although I suppose it shouldn't."

"You've had no word?"

The woman shook her head. "He promised to be back yesterday, at the latest. I felt so miserable last night. I fear that I drove him away."

"Worry won't help, although I know it's hard to push it aside," Coleman spoke encouragingly. "This puts faith to the test; but after all that's what develops our faith."

"It seems that mine has been stretched so far it is at the breaking point. You don't know how hard I've been praying." The woman showed an earnestness that bordered on desperation.

The theology student reached for his Bible that lay on the end of the bench. "I've been reading Paul's experiences lately. He went through almost everything - distress, persecution, loneliness, peril, famine, rejection by friends. Yet in Romans 8:37, after summing up all his hardships, he says, 'In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that love us.' He goes on to say that nothing 'shall be able to separate us from the love of God.' That's the faith we all need."

"My faith still holds," Agnes assured the lookout. "I've read my Bible and prayed and thought these last two days. To find God again is the greatest thrill of my life. I'm worried that it may have been my lack of faith and understanding that sent Rod away." Tears welled up in the woman's eyes and she stood up and gripped the handrail, trying to hide her emotions.

"Mrs. Mason, there's a superb view around that cliff about two hundred years away. The path leads to what is called Inspiration Point. Why don't you take these binoculars and walk over there?" Coleman suggested thoughtfully.

The woman was grateful for an escape, and with an understanding smile she made her way down the steps.

"Watch out for poison oak," the lookout warned.

"Thanks," called Agnes. "I've already been briefed on it."

As the path rounded the cliff, a new horizon opened to the west. Clouds were piling high as they pushed in from the Pacific Ocean, and the sun was beginning to tint them with orange and gold. The path led among small firs that would make beautiful Christmas trees. Ahead arose a rocky promontory some twenty feet above the level path. It was Inspiration Point.

Agnes Mason stood in pensive silence, slowly surveying the scene with the binoculars. She could hear the babble of water in a stream below her, and now and then a bird called to its mate. It was God's world, sublime and enchanting; yes, almost painfully beautiful, the woman thought. She turned toward the east to watch the first crimson tint on the snow capped peaks. She must start back soon to reach the lodge before dark, yet each moment seemed like a precious gem.

Agnes remembered the stanza of a poem by Thomas Clark that described her communion with nature and with God. There was a bigness in her voice as she spoke the word that carried on the breeze:

"God is not far from any one of us:
The wild flower by the wayside speaks His love;
Each blithesome bird bears tidings from above;
Sunshine and shower His tender mercies prove,
And men know not His voice!

"How can we miss Your voice, dear God?" she added softly, as though adding a benediction to the poem.

The she saw the bushes by the path move to and fro; someone was coming. Probably Coleman had left his post to see why she had been so long, she thought. Agnes looked again, and out of the shadows into the full light she saw the figure hurrying toward her, not fifty feet away. It was Rod! Time stopped, and then Agnes felt strong arms around her and she sobbed from happiness. "I thought you'd never come back, Rod," she sighed at last. "I was afraid I had sent you away."

Twilight in the Sierras is a never-to-be-forgotten hour of the day. Nature seems to wait patiently in rich adornment, for night to hide her charms. There is a hush and a solemnity in the mountains - as when a cathedral organ sounds a final chord and the echoes fade away. In these twilight moments Agnes and Rod made their way slowly back along the path toward the lookout.

"You see, Agnes, after talking with Larson, I got an idea," the husband was explaining. "He told me of this religious programme that is to be released on a nation wide network soon. They're looking for a television director. Now I've been thinking if I'm to make a clean break with the past I need work in which I'll be doing something directly for God. So I flew to Los Angeles to see the men sponsoring the programme, and it looks as if it will workout. I'll - or rather we'll - use our talents to help give Christ's message of love. That's why I'm a day late."

"It's worth it, Rod," said Agnes fervently, "even if I was worried." She gripped her husband's hand as she spoke.

When the couple came to the clearing by the lookout they found George Coleman chopping logs at his wood pile. He waited, axe poised, for the visitors to speak.

"I found her, George, as you see."

"I guess we've found each other - and the way back," Agnes added, looking up at her husband.

"That makes me happy." The college youth put down his axe and stepped closer to his friends. "Some prayers have certainly been answered."

"You can say that again," Rod Mason agreed.

"Will you be coming back soon?" asked the lookout.

"If it's O.K. with you, we'll be here tomorrow, George," said Mason. "We want to talk some more about God's plan for our lives and how we can best fact the future with His love in our hearts."

"Rod may be directing a new religious television programme." The wife spoke confidently, and her fact wreathed in smiles.

"That's great news! Let's hear more about it, Rod!"

"We'd better get back down the trail before dark, George. We're not used to roads without street lights," said Mason with a laugh. "So if you don't mind, let's keep it until tomorrow."

The couple unhitched the saddle horses, and the college youth helped Agnes Mason mount Tony. "O.K., I'll be here waiting. By the way, Mrs. Mason, how did you like Inspiration Point?" Coleman asked, a bit of teasing in his voice.

The woman looked at her husband and then at the questioner. "We've decided to give it a new name," she announced happily, as she and Rod turned their horses down the trail toward the lodge. "We're going to call it *Point of Return!*"