

CHAPTER SIX
MISCELLANEA
HELL'S HEROES

Dellie awoke in the middle of the night suddenly aware that the extra warmth had gone out of her bed. The August night was tolerably cooler now but she still found it harder to sleep without Clem beside her. Off in the distance she heard the whistle of the night train approaching the station. She realized that Clem would be there soon claiming another body. Half a block away she could hear the iron tires of Tom Slatter's dray wagon clattering down Forest Street on the way to meet the train. "Clem's no doubt riding down with Tom," she said to herself. "I hope he'll be back soon."

World War I was raging in Europe and America had been involved long enough for the casualty lists to be long and frequent. Many of the dead heroes had succumbed to the dreaded influenza on native or foreign soil without ever having reached the battlefield. But, they were accorded a hero's service and burial nonetheless. Some were buried at sea or overseas in temporary graves until their remains could be shipped home.

With the added responsibility of the Red Cross assignment, Clem was kept busier than ever before. He often assisted in making arrangements for military service leaves in special family emergencies, in tracing down the missing and the dead, and in comforting the living. Sometimes he was the first to obtain the official casualty list, and had the unpleasant task of breaking the tragic news to the families. The saddest chore of all, however, was to officially claim and receive the bodies in the flag-draped boxes.

This night was especially difficult for him. Many things had passed through his mind during the sleepless hours before he got up to go to the depot. After signing for the sealed coffin and helping to load it onto the dray wagon, he started walking back up Forest Street towards home. Tom had a paying passenger to ride up front with him and besides the five-and-a half blocks would give him a little more time to be alone with his thoughts. Tom knew by now what to do about making the delivery to the funeral parlor. It wasn't necessary for him to go along every time.

On a nearby siding he saw a flatcar loaded with scrap farm machinery waiting to be hauled to the steel mills. "How quick we are to beat our plowshares back into swords he thought to himself as he crossed over the tracks. He was finding it more and more difficult to reconcile participation in this devastating war with his understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He questioned whether or not the cruelty, the taking of many lives on both sides, and the interruption of family life all over the world were greater evils than the unrighteous dominion and the injustices against which they were contending.

He was now seriously concerned over recent developments in this once peaceable community. At the outbreak of war it had been necessary for his oldest son, who was serving a mission for the Church in Germany, to leave his field of labor and return home. At the time he harbored very definite sentiments of love and affection for the German people with whom he had been proselyting. He found it very difficult to accept the prevailing feelings of hatred that had been fed deliberately into the minds of the American people and had reached into his own home town even before his return. He had publicly stated that he would not allow himself to be drawn into the propaganda stream of the times. And for this he was not appreciated, nor were his ideas in Brigham City, after he declared himself to be an avowed pacifist.

Before the sentiment against him and his attitude had died down there had been a demonstration that could have turned into violence. He had accepted a position to teach German and art at the local high school. One night some of the local townspeople marched up to the school building and broke into his room. They gathered up everything that had to do with Germany and the German culture, the textbooks and other literary works, and hauled them down to Armory Square and had a book burning.

Clem could understand the bitterness of his son, but the whole matter was now complicated by the feeling he had of being torn between two loyalties. The Church had taken a position in support of the war effort that bordered on strong nationalism. Consistent with the provisions of one of the "Articles of Faith" it was committed to support a duly constituted government as long as its laws were righteous and just.

"We believe in being subject to kings, president, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring and sustaining the law," was repeatedly quoted to encourage young men to respond positively to the conscription law or to volunteer to defend the principles of freedom and justice in whatever way might be required of them by their country.

Now he was bewildered. Nothing like this had ever threatened his peace of mind before with such a sense of overwhelming futility. True, it had taken him fourteen years to get over the death of his first wife before he finally remarried and began a new life with Dellie, but that had been a different kind of anguish. His thoughts were momentarily diverted as he heard the whistle of the train in back of him as it pulled out of the station on its way to a further destination somewhere, possibly taking another body, somebody's son, a "hero" home to grieving loved ones.

Thoughts of his own son forced themselves back into his mind. There was talk among the townspeople. In his own heart he felt that to some degree his son was right, and yet he was obliged to uphold the position of support for the American involvement in the war, not only because he was a patriot at heart,

because the Church encouraged it. Maybe his preoccupation with the problems and tragedies of other peoples' sons represented a conscience balm of some kind without his having realized it before.

As he walked up the hill towards home he kept asking himself, "what can I do about my boy, what will it all come to?" He said a little prayer in his heart. In fact, he found himself blurting out the words into the still of the night, giving voice to thoughts that had been intended for him and God alone. "Oh Lord, when will it all end? When can we have peace again? When can there be happiness again?"

But there was another problem. It wasn't just the devastation of war that was taking its toll. Everywhere people were dying by the thousands from the influenza epidemic which had spread across two continents. What was happening to the world and why was it happening? "I cannot bring myself to believe that all of this is the will of a just and loving God," he said, as though he had someone walking beside him listening to what he was saying. "I must believe that God is not responsible for the wickedness, the evil there is in the world. It must be the man who brings tragedy upon himself. This must be the answer. It must be because we are given free reign, plenty of lead, and we hang ourselves on our own tether. This must be it. I refuse to believe in a God who would cause all of this, and. I don't."

Back home again he got undressed and slipped carefully into bed, hoping not to wake up Dellie, but she had been awake for some time waiting for him to return. "Who was it this time?" she asked.

"The Mason boy.

"It's a shame. He was so young."

"It's more than a shame, it's a damnable thing. He was nothing but a youngster two months shy of being nineteen years old. He's left the young Cheney girl a widow almost before she had a chance to put her wedding things away, and he didn't even get so much as a boat ride over seas. He died of meningitis at Camp Kearney."

"But you mustn't brood over these things, Clem. It won't do anybody a lick of good for you to get down in the dumps. So many of these people look to you for comfort."

"Maybe not so much anymore now that there's talk about this other matter," he said.

Lacking greatness herself, Dellie had, nevertheless, the capacity to instill a sense of personal worth in him when he needed it. Recently he had lapsed occasionally into periods of brooding sadness. She it was, this timid but firm-

willed, practical little spinster, rescued by him in marriage, who now and then delivered him from the brink of melancholy.

"But they're not talking about you. They don't mean to censure you by what they say. Only this afternoon Bishop Blackburn stopped by the front gate and said to tell you that 'no matter what comes of it all the people are still much obliged to Brother Clem for all he's doing.' Besides, everybody says the war will be over soon, and people will forget their contempt and pettiness. America is going to win the war, Clem. That's what matters now."

"America may be winning a war," he replied, "but I'm losing a son, and I'm not sure I know what matters most."

"You've always been stronger than the rest of us, Clem. You've never been a leaner, always a pillar. This is no time to be weak."

"And you're a fountain of strength to me, Della dear," he said, changing the subject. "I'll be hoping our baby is a girl and we'll name her after you. even if it's a boy we will anyhow."

"But how could we do that?" "Oh, we'll find a way."

And it was a boy, and they did.