

The Fields Are Ripe for the Harvest

“LET ME BE HEARING WHEN WE’LL BE GATHERING.” The preacher’s voice boomed throughout the tent.

“Amen, brother.”

“Amen.”

“Hallelujah!”

The cries of the congregation were full of conviction, but sounded muffled in the hot, still air of the tent. Sweat poured down the preacher’s brow and dripped from his chin. A small puddle had formed at his feet where he stood, Bible in hand. He had no pulpit in front of him, and stood open to his audience. He continued on in his loud, thundering voice that somehow managed to penetrate the stifling heat around him.

“Let me be hearing when we’ll be gathering!”

The replies came again.

“Soon, brother.”

“Soon and very soon!”

“Now, brothers!”

The preacher went on.

“And the Lord hath said, through his prophet Isaiah, ‘And my hand hath found as a nest the riches of the people: and as one gathereth eggs that are left, have I gathered all the earth.’”

Here he paused, and fixed his gaze intently on the crowd before him, letting his eyes wander slowly back and forth, back and forth. An almost preternatural fire seemed to burn inside his eyes.

“The Lord hath spoken. He has found the riches of the people, His people, *you!*”

The congregation was almost in a frenzy. Fevered, muffled shouts of *amen* and *hallelujah* continued.

“And He is gathering the eggs that are His people unto Himself, for the harvest. The Lord saith, ‘The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that He will send forth laborers into his harvest.’”

“My children and brothers, the harvest is *now!* Follow me down to the river for the baptism! If you are already a believer and have already been baptized, never you mind! Come and rededicate your life to the Lord, or come support your newly saved brothers! Come, little ones, come!”

Throughout the tent, all was chaos as spiritual fervor sprang the people into action.

Outside, the last light of the hot summer evening turned the bright yellow of the tent into a somber, moody bronze. Around it, for miles and as far as the eye could see, stretched endless lines of Iowa

corn, laid out in neat row upon row. Despite the burning summer heat, the corn had grown up healthy and strong, and would soon be ready to be harvested and gathered in. The only interruption to this pattern of order was the tent and the narrow dirt road that led off in both directions away from the tent, in one direction to the main road a mile away, in the other down to the riverbank less than a quarter of a mile away. The river was overhung by strong, thick oak and elm trees, and their shade kept it from drying out during even the hottest summer months.

A slight breeze had picked up as the preacher's congregation started to emerge from the tent. The entrance and the ceiling cover flapped gently in the wind, lapping at the air as if they were waves lapping at a shore. The preacher marched out in front, Bible in one hand, white baptismal robe draped across his other arm, with the same intense fire burning from deep within his eye sockets. He was so possessed of the Spirit and the moment, he looked almost inhuman.

Behind him, the congregation marched single file down the dirt path, kicking up small explosions of dust here and there, creating a haze along their feet that mirrored the haze of heat hanging in the sky. Their buzz and excitement was audible and charged the air with electricity. It was tangible, palpable. Suddenly one man started singing, and was soon joined by the rest.

*Shall we gather at the river,
Where bright angel feet have trod,
With its crystal tide forever
Flowing by the throne of God?*

By the refrain, all were singing with the same fervor and intensity they had exhibited inside the tent.

*Yes, we'll gather at the river,
The beautiful, the beautiful river;
Gather with the saints at the river
That flows by the throne of God.*

The preacher did not join in the singing. He kept his eyes fixed straight ahead, burning, burning, still burning.

When they arrived at the riverbank, the preacher set his Bible down on a rock, donned his white robe, and picked up the Bible again. The congregation had just finished its last refrain and was standing, quietly, gathering and spreading out behind him along the banks of the river, the beautiful river. The preacher looked out across

the waters of the river, clutching his Bible tightly in his hands.

He spread out his arms, keeping the Bible in his right hand, and raised his arms over his head. He stood like this for a long minute, then, as the crowd's anticipation grew and grew, finally stepped out into the water. As he did so, his thumb worked itself quickly and subtly across the Bible's cover, barely noticeable even if one had been watching. He tucked the Bible under his shoulder and purposefully turned to face his flock. He looked out at them in silence. The fire was gone from his eyes. Finally he spoke, softly.

"My children, the fields are ripe for the harvest. Let me be hearing when we'll be gathering."

There was no reply, and the preacher repeated himself.

A few murmurs of "Now" rippled through the crowd and across the river. The trees above were silent, unshaken and unstirred by even the slightest breeze. It was nearly dark.

"Who will be the first to experience the Lord's grace this evening, to be gathered into His nest?"

No one moved, no one replied. Again the preacher repeated himself. Finally a young boy stepped forward and into the water. The preacher took him in his arms with a quick "Bless you, my son," and laid the boy's head back into the water, pinching his nostrils with his free hand. The Bible under his arm vibrated and hummed slightly. The preacher kept the boy's head under the water.

Ten seconds. Twenty. Thirty.

The congregation remained silent, but a nervousness crept up among them, a nervousness they had felt all along but had not been consciously aware of until now.

Forty-five seconds.

Still the preacher kept the boy's head under the water. The boy did not struggle at all.

Sixty seconds.

Finally the preacher raised the boy's head out of the water. He held him for a few seconds longer, then let him go. The boy looked up at the preacher, then out at the people along the river. Fire burned in his eyes. He had been harvested. He was the Lord's.

Late into the night the harvest continued. All the congregation were baptized, one by one, joining the Lord's nest. When the preacher had slid his thumb across his Bible, he had sent a signal to the mother ship that the harvesting was ready to begin. It moved into position and waited. One by one, as each human was brought under the water, the alien cocoon would envelop him inside the river and "harvest" him, quickly removing all internal organs of interest to the aliens, trawling his brain for all its memories and experiences, relaying these to the mother ship, and replacing his organs with a syn-

thetic alien brand. The memories were left inside, to allow the alien-human hybrid to continue functioning, to all outward appearances, as a normal human being, or, in this case, a normal human being harvested.

“Let me be hearing when we’ll be gathering.” The preacher continued, softly, quietly, speaking to his congregation as its faithful shepherd. He had almost finished the baptisms; his work with this congregation was nearly complete. The congregation continued replying “Now” in its hushed, subdued tone.

“The fields are ripe for the harvest,” the preacher repeated. “Amen,” came the soft replies. The preacher baptized the last of his flock, and looked out once more over them. The fire was back in his eyes, burning brightly, yet almost, it seemed, twinged by sadness. He quoted the rest of the Lord’s words through Isaiah.

“And there was none that moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or peeped.”