

Chapter 1

Rays of the setting sun cast long shadows from the eight covered wagons arranged in a circle. For five days the wagon train had stood still, unable to cross the flooding Red River that separated Texas from Indian Territory, which in 1879 was not yet Oklahoma. The mules and horses, tied by long ropes to the motionless wagons, munched on the lush green grass.

Marian Davis, a slender young woman, came toward the back of one of the wagons carrying a stack of clean plates. As she placed them in a box, she glanced toward the west. Behind her two girls hung wet dish towels on the bushes to dry.

“How about picking a pail of wild strawberries before dark?” Marian called to the two girls. “Ettie, you take this pail. Adelia, we’ll fill the larger one. Let’s run to the patch down by the river.”

Marian took the lead, her long brown hair blowing like a banner in the breeze. The girls followed, jumping over the higher clumps of prairie grass.

“Look! Whole fields of wild flowers,” Miss Marian called back as she ran. “So many lupines I keep stepping on them.”

Suddenly she stopped before a mass of purple violets and dropped to her knees.

“Aren’t they lovely! I must pick a bouquet to put in our wagon.”

The girls ran past her to the strawberries. By the time she joined them, their mouths dripped with juicy berries. They ate and picked and talked while the twilight lingered.

“Maybe you girls should wipe your faces where you missed your mouths.” Miss Marian laughed.

“You make work fun.” Ettie smiled at Miss Marian. “I’m so glad you came in time to join our wagon train to Colorado.

“So am I. This prairie looks so beautiful in the spring. Look at that sunset.” Miss Marian stood with hands on hips as she looked at the color-tinted clouds. “Out here we can see it all. Those orange clouds really stand out against the deep blue

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heaven. In Michigan the houses pushed so close to each other that I could see only a little of the sky.”

“How come you left Michigan and took the train all the way to Texas?” Adelia stuffed a strawberry into her mouth as she spoke.

“Because Elder and Mrs. White asked me to come. Mrs. White needs help in preparing her books. How else can others know the wonderful things God tells her in vision? Besides, she has so many letters to answer that she could never do it by herself.”

“But how can you help her write books and answer letters when you spend all day cooking for the ten people in our part of the wagon train?” Ettie wanted to know. “Soon the river will go down. How can you write while we travel?”

“You know, girls, I too have been asking myself these same questions. Why did God call me to leave my work at the Review and Herald just now? I’ve spent most of my life with books, first teaching school, then later carefully checking the books at the publishing house before they were printed to be sure they had no mistakes. To me studying books seems like mining for gold. When I dig deep into them, I find treasure. Maybe that’s why I love books so much!”

“But you like flowers too. Look, your apron pocket is full of violets.” Ettie pointed.

“Aren’t they pretty? After living indoors, I’ve never felt so free. Listen to the night sounds. Do you hear the low coo of the doves getting ready to go to sleep? Isn’t that the sharp call of a killdeer?” Miss Marian smiled as she put her hand behind her ear while listening to the evening sounds.

“But just wait till you hear the coyotes howl. You’ll get shivers down your back.” Ettie shook just thinking about it.

Adelia reached for the pail of berries. “Let’s go to the wagons. You make me scared. Don’t we have enough strawberries now?”

“I think so.” Miss Marian laughed. “Would you girls please take them and these violets to the wagon? I’d like to stay here for a while and watch the rushing water. Tonight the moon is

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full. Maybe the golden glow of the moonrise will reflect on the water. Besides, I need time to think and talk to God. Maybe He'll give me answers to my questions or, better yet, tell me where and how I can find the gold I'm looking for."

Miss Marian started down the path toward the river. The girls watched her for a minute. Without turning she called back.

"I'll join you at camp later. Be careful not to spill the berries."

Though the sky was almost dark, the girls easily found their way back to the wagons, for already the campfire in the circle burned brightly. Halfway to camp they stopped and looked back toward the river. The moon, just rising, looked like a huge golden ball in the sky. The outline of a young woman sitting on a rock, her head bowed, appeared through the early darkness.

"When Miss Marian talks, she makes me feel glad inside, like maybe I'm important to her," said Ettie.

"She talks to us almost as if we were grown up. Until she joined us, I didn't even notice the pretty wild flowers." Adelia paused a moment, then she went on, "This morning at dawn we listened together to the birds singing. When she smiles at me, I feel warm inside."

"She's pretty too," Ettie spoke up. "I wonder why she's not married. Have you noticed that whenever she's not cooking or doing other work, she's always looking in those books she brought with her? Adelia, what do you think she meant about God telling her where and how to search for gold?"

"I was going to ask you that, Ettie. I don't understand either. There seems to be a mystery about Miss Marian. Maybe we can find out when we get to know her better."

Just as the girls put the pails of strawberries in the wagon, Elder James White, the leader of the group of pioneer travelers, called out in his big voice, "Time for evening worship. Everyone, please come."

From each wagon men, women, and children hurried to the campfire.

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Ellen White, Elder White's wife, spread a blanket on the ground. Ettie Cole and Adelia Bears, nieces of Ellen White, pressed close to her, one on each side. She put her arms around both the little girls, who looked to her as a mother and a friend. They joined in singing "Shall We Gather at the River?"

Elder White spoke. "I have important news. As you know, we've waited here for five days. The water in the Red River is still flowing over the ferry dock so it can't operate. This afternoon I rode five miles upriver and found another ferry. The ferryman says he can safely pole our wagons across on his flatboat. We need to be on the trail before dawn.

"But there is still great danger. On the far side before we reach solid ground is a stretch of quicksand. Unless we drive off the flatboat quickly and do not stop, the wagons and mules could sink in deep. Being stuck in quicksand could mean a delay of many days or, worse still, the loss of our wagons and mules.

"Brothers and sisters, we have great need for help from God. Surely David's prayer in Psalm 69, verses 13 and 16, can be ours tonight.

"O God, in the multitude of thy mercy hear me... . Deliver me out of the mire, and let me not sink: let me be delivered ... out of the deep waters. Let not the waterflood overflow me, neither let the deep swallow me up, and let not the pit shut her mouth upon me. Hear me, O Lord; for thy lovingkindness is good."

"Let's kneel and plead with God that the flooding waters of the Red River will not cover us, or the deep quicksand swallow us up."

Ettie and Adelia knelt on the ground and added their simple prayers to those of Elder and Mrs. White. Then they walked quietly to their tent, thinking.

Inside Ettie whispered, "When I hear Mrs. White talk to Jesus, I know she's talking to a close friend - like He's right beside her. Are you afraid, Adelia?"

"No, not really. I'm sure Jesus is lots more powerful than quicksand." Then after a pause she added, "Ettie, do you

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suppose Miss Marian is still sitting out there by the river? I hope Elder White didn't notice that she skipped worship."

"I don't think he did. He's only thinking about the flooding river and the quicksand." Ettie started to get undressed. "At supper tonight Mrs. White said that since God knows the end from the beginning, He sometimes in love answers our prayers with a 'no' instead of a 'yes.' Often, she said, He has an even better plan, a surprise far nicer than anything we could ask or think. Only we must remember that 'wait' means, 'Get ready for the beautiful better plan.'" Ettie paused and looked out the tent door. "I wonder how He is going to answer Miss Marian's prayers or how He'll answer ours tomorrow."

"Well, we haven't long to wait for our answer. Let's go to bed. Morning will come too early," Adelia said as she finished brushing her long hair.

Out by the flooded river Miss Marian's thoughts seemed to go in circles like the floating junk in the whirlpool below the rock, which floated around for a while and then floated out of sight.

"That's like my life," she said to herself. "I had to stop teaching school because of sickness. The Whites asked me to stop my work at the Review to join them. Now I feel like a flunky, going in circles, accomplishing nothing but packing and unpacking, preparing food that's eaten much quicker than I can get it ready."

"Oh, God," she cried out loud, "how long must I wait to do something worthwhile?"

But she heard nothing in answer, only the startled cry of a quail she disturbed as she walked up the trail.

The girls had been asleep for some time before Miss Marian quietly opened the tent flap, went in, and joined them.