Chapter 1

Icy Feet and a Burning Heart

A bitter January wind, mixing ice with occasional squalls of rain, battered the Gulf Coast of northwestern Florida. Sandy beaches, where a few days ago Northerners on holiday had insisted on playing in swimsuits, were deserted, and even the small stores selling bait and tackle had seen little business for several days.

Forty miles' inland at Glendale the dirt road that was the only street in town was quiet too. But here it seemed that the crude wooden tabernacle had swallowed the town's whole population. Outside the sprawling structure crowded nearly every current model of automobile plus a few buggies still hitched to horses, even in 1918.

More than a thousand people filled the tabernacle this Sunday, and it had been a good, meeting, they would assure you if you asked them. A lot of fervent praying had followed good lively preaching and some testimony. Right now few in the congregation noticed how the one wood stove near the platform failed to relieve the coldness of the building. To the congregation a good fire inside each worshiper was about all the heat they needed - even if nearly all of them did have icy feet.

Near the front of the building Esther Harrison sat with her father, a tall, lank man of about 40. Like most children of 10, she listened by spells. When she wasn't paying attention, she was thinking about the hundreds of other meetings she had attended with her father. Whenever a preacher visited the community, she compared him with Daddy. In her opinion, he was about the best she had ever heard, even if nobody paid him a salary. Mr. Harrison was a farmer.

Esther was a frail-looking child, and anyone seeing her might guess that she was either coming down with something or recovering from it most of the time. Hollows shadowed her eyes. Her high cheekbones suggested her Great-grandmother Wilkerson, who was Indian.

The girl's feet were cold, although her winter coat kept the rest of her warm. Her father had found a place near the stove for her sake, she guessed, and she was glad. When she glanced toward the stove, she noticed pulsing waves of heat rising up and spreading outward. The stovepipe glowed all the way up to the high ceiling.

The red-hot stovepipe worried her, because her parents frequently warned her of the danger of fire. But her apprehension was just another distraction to occupy her for a short time. Soon she again listened to Mrs. Bell, who was speaking in tongues.

To be sure, the woman had been talking for more than an hour, and although Esther understood nothing of what she said, her exuberant manner fascinated the child. To the girl it seemed that some strange person was using Mrs. Bell's mouth, sometimes softly, almost in a whisper, then rising to a crescendo of sounds halfway between singing and praying. The child watched her father's face for a while. He also preached with a wild, fiery self-confidence that he said he couldn't help when "the Holy Ghost" filled him. Mr. Harrison was the first to admit, though, that he was no preacher. And Mrs. Bell was an ordinary woman who sometimes "got the Spirit." Most of the people in Mr. Harrison's church were like that.

Esther's mind wandered, thinking about the woman.

It still wasn't easy for her to like Mrs. Bell when she remembered that tent meeting last summer when her little brother Walter was a baby.

That day had also been windy and stormy, Esther remembered, but it was summertime. A young minister and his wife held a three-day revival in a large tent. All the Harrisons' relatives had attended.

For some reason Esther's mother had left the tent for a time, asking Mrs. Bell to hold the baby. "I think 111 stay with Mrs. Bell too," Esther had said.

Rain sheeted off the tent roof. Inside, the revival continued, with the preacher shouting and everyone loudly replying, "Amen!" The noise of the rain on the canvas didn't disturb them at all. At first Walter fussed. Then he began whimpering and looking around for his mother.

"Let me hold him," his sister whispered, but the woman shook her head.

"You're too little."

"No, I'm not."

Walter's whimpering turned to soft crying, and finally he began yelling, until his tiny body shook with sobs. Mrs. Bell worked her way to the edge of the tent, looking for a place where she could dash with the child without getting soaked. "It's no use!" she muttered to herself. "It's just raining too hard."

Esther, standing close by her elbow, felt embarrassed that so many people stared at them. Once the preacher even paused for a moment, as if he expected Mrs. Bell to do something about the crying.

"Hush!" the woman hissed in a loud whisper. "Hush, I say! Hush!" Then she gave Walter a shake, which only made him yell louder. "You be still or 111 drown you!" she threatened, thrusting the infant out the side of the tent, where water from the roof poured over his head.

Gulping and sputtering, Walter paused for an instant. Then he screamed with all his might.

"No!" Esther exploded. "You can t do that! You mustn't do that! Stop her, somebody. She's going to drown my baby brother!"

Grabbing Mrs. Bell's dress, she pulled as hard as she could. The woman gave her and Walter each one hard swat, then ran through the downpour to a nearby building.

Esther felt rage swelling up inside her.

"You must never leave us with Mrs. Bell again, Mamma!" she cried later. Mrs. Harrison cuddled the girl under her arm, with Walter in the other. "She was going to drown Walter!"

"Not really," her mother soothed. "It wasn't the right thing for her to do, but she was only trying to scare him into hushing. There, child! Don't be so upset!"

She took her daughter onto her large lap and stroked her hair. "Walter is all right. The rain wasn't chilly enough to give him a cold."

But somehow Esther thought about the expression on Mrs. Bell's face that day. It wasn't all right, no matter what her mother said. Whenever she saw the woman in church or in town the memory of that look and a strange fear seized the girl. Even when Mrs. Bell "got the Holy Ghost" in meeting, Esther wanted to back away from her just a little.

Again Esther squirmed in her seat in the tabernacle. She wished her mother were here. But Mamma was a Methodist and didn't believe in such meetings. Most of the time she stayed at home. Her husband said that without the baptism of the Holy Ghost she was lost. The girl wriggled her cold toes inside her shoes and wished the meeting would end so she could go home to a hot Sunday dinner. She wondered what Mamma had fixed today. Maybe ham. Maybe chicken. And gravy - Esther loved gravy. Good grease gravy with brown bits of meat swirling around in it.

Just then Mrs. Bell shifted suddenly from speaking in tongues to plain English and Esther caught her breath. High on the platform the

woman kicked off her shoes. Next she peeled off her stockings. Esther glanced around in embarrassment. Others appeared as surprised as she was.

"I will show you the power of the Holy Ghost within me!" the woman exclaimed. She stepped to the edge of the platform. "The Holy Ghost has given me power over fire! Praise the Lord!"

Instantly she leaped to the top of the heating stove. Her bare feet firmly on its lids, she reached up and grasped the stovepipe in both hands. A gasp rippled through the tabernacle. Mrs. Bell held her hands up for the congregation to see.

Esther expected to smell frying flesh, like when her mother dropped meat into a hot skillet to sear it. But Mrs. Bell's hands did not look burned to Esther.

"Praise the Lord!" rose the shout from a dozen voices. Mrs. Bell jumped down lightly, holding her hands and feet out for close inspection. With not a sign of a blister, her hands did not even appear red.

People all over the tabernacle chorused, "Praise the Lord!" Esther stood up and shouted with the rest.

Snuggled next to her mother on the sofa that afternoon, she described the incident to her. "You have been wrong all along," she announced triumphantly. "And Daddy is right. No one could do a thing like that unless he really had the Holy Ghost. Now, could he?" She looked expectantly at her mother.

Mrs. Harrison shook her head. "I don't honestly know, honey. I just don't know."

"Well, I know. And I'm going to pray for the baptism of the Holy Ghost to come on me," the girl stated firmly.

And she did. For hours at a time the slight, sickly child prayed in a secret spot behind the house or in her room. Daily she expected to receive some overpowering revelation. Each time she went to the meetings at church with her father she expected it would be the occasion the Holy Ghost would descend upon her with power in the presence of the whole congregation.

But nothing happened. And as the days went by, she began to feel that nothing ever would.

Maybe she was too wicked, she thought, remembering all her childish sins. Guilt flooded over her as she remembered scaring her cousin Delia with the little green snake in the scuppernong vine. And she had disobeyed Mamma and peered into the well and had fallen in.

Her mother had had to fish her out with the bucket. She had tormented her sister, Iris, and teased and fussed so many times to get her own way, knowing how her parents hated to cross her when she was so sickly.

That was the matter - she was too sinful. The anguish in her heart became overwhelming.

Mrs. Harrison, seeing her daughter in such distress, questioned her.

"God doesn't love me!" Esther sobbed. "I'm too wicked for Him to love. He doesn't hear my prayers at all."

Her mother's arms gathered her into their warm circle. "Don't ever say that. God does love you. Very much."

"Then why doesn't He send the baptism of the Holy Ghost? I've prayed and prayed and confessed my sins and asked forgiveness. But nothing happens. Nothing at all!"

"If you have confessed your sins, God has forgiven you," Mamma said. "Nothing else is necessary. Just believe that. You don't need to speak in tongues" - she paused significantly - "or carry on like you're out of your senses to receive the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Holy Spirit comes very quietly to live within us."

The girl shook her head. "What about Mrs. Bell?"

"I don't know what gets hold of her," her mother admitted. "Something certainly does!"

"I want you to see something, honey," she told her daughter a few days later. "But it will be dangerous for both of us." The statement was so unlike her mother's calm, matter-of-fact manner that it immediately interested the girl. "We will go back through the woods," Mamma said. "But you must promise to do just as I do without a word of explanation. Disobedience might cost us our lives if the men we shall see have their guns."

"You can count on me!" Esther answered with a shiver of excitement.

A short distance from the house they came to a brushy area. Through the tangled briars and weeds the girl followed her mother silently. Finally they reached the brow of a small hill. Mrs. Harrison dropped to her hands and knees, crawling through the brush. Noiselessly Esther followed in the same manner.

Coming to the crest of the hill, Mamma motioned to her daughter to stop and pointed to a spot in a small clearing in the trees below them. Esther had never seen a rum still before, but she had heard people talk about stills, and she knew at once what it was. There beside

it, working with two men, stood Mrs. Bell. Mr. Wood and another man Esther had never seen before seemed to be doing just what the woman said.

For a short time the two watched in silence; then Mamma crept back through the brush the way they had come. Esther crept silently, soberly, behind her.

When they reached their yard, Mrs. Harrison didn't stop to change her soiled clothes. "Come along, honey," she commanded. She took the girl's hand, and they went straight to the Wood home.

"I wanted Esther to know both sides of Mrs. Bell," Mrs. Harrison explained to Mrs. Wood. "We have been back to the still, and it's in full operation today." She brushed some grass from her skirt as she spoke.

Mrs. Wood paled.

"Don't worry. I don't intend to turn them in," Mrs. Harrison hastened to assure her. "But Esther has been impressed by Mrs. Bell's righteousness over at the tabernacle. She has felt that she was such a sinful child that God couldn't love her while He pours out His blessings on such as Mrs. Bell."

"I wish you would turn them in!" Mrs. Wood exploded. Suddenly her face mingled anger, grief, and distress. She shooed the many small children outside, then dropped into a chair, her head in her hands.

"I don't know which way to turn," she sobbed. "There isn't much to eat, and no money to buy clothes. My husband spends all he has on that still and on her. You would think he'd get some returns pretty soon. He's invested everything he owns in that still. We'll probably starve before the thing begins to pay off!"

"Probably not," Mamma comforted her, and Esther guessed that the family wasn't really that hard up from the way things looked around the house, which was much finer than her own home.

But the bubble had burst. Now the girl had nothing to fill that vast inner space that church and religion had occupied. Mamma, in her own way, tried to give Esther the quiet assurance that provided her so much comfort herself, even while her husband declared that she was lost because she had not experienced the baptism of the Holy Ghost, as he believed all true Christians would.

Afraid, Esther held back. What had seemed so real and so wonderful was a fake. Mrs. Bell's holiness was something she put on like children dressing up for a costume party. Was there any real goodness at all? Genuine goodness? Mr. Harrison seemed to sense the difference in her too, but she could not explain to him what she had

seen at the still. Even if he knew, she wondered if he would believe. Or if he believed the evidence, it might not make any difference to him. So often he had said that all the sins of a spirit-filled life were of no consequence, that a person was not guilty of sin after receiving the baptism of the Holy Ghost.

But Esther wanted no part of it. If religion could cover deceit and lawlessness and still claim to be righteous, it was a. Jake.