

THE SECRETARY, THE REPORTER and the HERMIT

By Avery Brooke

IT WAS COMMON KNOWLEDGE among them that everyone who went to see the Hermit in his hut in the forest found God. What amazed the Secretary, as she stopped to think of it, was that so few people took the trip. It seemed practically impossible to find God in the world they lived in and most of her friends had a half-hidden ache for God, just as she did. She asked herself why she had waited so long. But she really knew the answer: It was a very big step into the unknown and she was frightened. In the last few weeks the ache for God had become too large to ignore and she had decided she must go.

They told her it was a two-day journey so she packed her backpack carefully. Yes, she had sandwiches and fruit to get there and back, and plenty of water together with a few extras in case of need. She also had two of those wonderfully light sheets to keep off the cold and damp, a flashlight, matches....She was as ready as she would ever be, and she had a week's vacation.

But before she left she wanted to say good-bye to her friend the Reporter. It was very early in the morning but, when she called last night, he'd said he'd be up. He lived only three blocks away and, as she walked, she reflected on how much more peaceful the city seemed early on Saturday morning with the spring sun shining on the old buildings.

The Reporter opened the door of his apartment and they just looked at each other for a moment and then embraced a bit awkwardly because of the backpack. "Come in, come in! Take that thing off and be comfortable." "I think I'll keep it on," she replied. "I just have a minute but I didn't want to leave without saying good-bye."

The Secretary perched on the edge of a chair and the Reporter looked at her affectionately. "So, you are really going to see the Hermit?" "Yes. I've been thinking about it for a long time as you know and I finally felt I just had to go." "You've always struck me as one of the most spiritual people I know," said the Reporter. "Why do you need to see the Hermit?" "Well, God seems close once in awhile but that's not enough." "Why not?" said the Reporter. "Why doesn't it do to see God just once in awhile? I'd think that was ideal. Who wants a steady diet of God?" "That's just it," replied the friend. "I need something, someone *steady*. Nothing else is steady. Everyone has a different idea. We are all playing the game of life by different rules. And they keep changing." "You don't mean to tell me you want to go back to the religion of our childhood?" asked the Reporter. "Well, not exactly. I mean, I do, but I don't. It's God I want not the trimmings. Some of the trimmings I miss. Some I hate. Some I could put up with if I had to but I want the reality behind the trimmings." "Yeah, but which reality?" "Well, there are lots of ways of looking at reality, but there must be only one Reality behind them," she replied. The Reporter looked at the floor a minute and then looked into his friend's face. "Come and see me when you get back," he said.

SHE HAD EXPECTED the way to the Hermit's hut to be long and tiresome but it wasn't. At the end of the second day she saw the hut ahead of her. "I guess the hard part was deciding to

go,” she said to herself. But almost as she said it the path plunged into one of the darkest parts of the forest and at the same time began to wind uphill. The Hermit’s hut was nowhere in sight. She took a deep breath and trudged on up the hill in the shadows of the forest.

After awhile she could no longer hear the birds that had been her companions earlier. There were unexplained stirrings in the underbrush, frightening sounds as if some beast were following her. She stopped to listen and then decided to speak to the beast. “Whoever you are,” she said firmly, “I mean you no harm. I’m going to the Hermit to ask help in finding God and I’m under God’s protection.”

There was a sound then, as if a large animal had just lain down, and she thought she heard it yawn. She smiled, adjusted her backpack, and went on. It was, after all, not much farther before the trees began to thin and she found herself at the edge of a meadow with the hut ahead of her. She felt suddenly shy and stopped to run her hand through her hair. She’d forgotten to bring a comb.

“*Come on!*” she said to herself in exasperation. “This is no time to worry about how I look.” She walked on and soon came to a well-weathered and unpainted door. She knocked and waited, knocked again more loudly, and soon the door was opened.

“Is this the right place?” she asked. “I mean, are you the Hermit?”

The Hermit smiled at her and said, “Yes I am. Come in! You are welcome.

THE HERMIT looked neither as old nor as strange as she had expected. He had a short beard and wore a work shirt and blue jeans. His face was----well, “comfortable.” She thought he would be easy to talk to. And so he proved.

She was soon sitting down in what seemed to be an all-purpose room. One corner had an old wood stove; and a sink with a pump was nearby. A table was obviously for preparing food as well as eating it and served also as a writing table. She was seated just beyond that area in one of two big rustic wood chairs, well pillowed with cushions.

The Hermit took the other big chair. “So, what brings you all this way?” “They say you can help people find God,” she said. “God is in you and all around you,” replied the Hermit. “I know,” she said, “but I only seem to be in touch with God once in awhile.” “I wonder why that is?” I don’t know.” The Hermit sat silently for a moment and then said, “Do you pray?” “Well, if things are really hard, like when Gran was dying. A few other times but that’s all. I don’t go to church anymore. It just doesn’t help.” “If you want to find God, why not try praying more often?” “I don’t really know how,” she said.

“Prayer is one of the easiest things in the world,” he said, “and one of the hardest. It’s easiest because all we have to do is to turn towards God and start praying. It’s hardest because we always have something more important to do.” “Not you,” she said with a smile. “I can’t imagine you finding something more important to do!” The Hermit laughed and said, “I’ve had to learn, just as you will have to learn. And even now it’s sometimes a battle.”

“How do I learn?” “You just keep trying. You have to get very stubborn about trying. It may take you months.” “How long to I pray?” “Start with ten minutes,” he said. “Well, I should be able to do that,” she replied. “Even ten minutes will often be hard.” “Why is it so hard?” “Because you don’t want to be that honest about yourself. And you can’t help being honest with God.” “Oh,” she felt a shiver go through her as she began to realize the cost.

“What do I pray about?” “Whatever you want. That’s one of the wonderful things about talking with God. You don’t have to pretend to feel what you don’t feel or want what you don’t want because God knows what you are thinking and feeling anyway. Just be yourself. Be open and honest.” “Yes, but I’d feel more comfortable if I at least had some idea about what to be honest and open about.” “Well, you can start by saying what you feel about God.” “But I don’t really know!” “Tell God that. But you also know that you are seeking God, that you want to find God. Tell God that.” “O.K. I guess I could do that.”

The Hermit stood up and went over to the stove. “Would you care for some tea?” She said she would like some; and he poured water from a kettle into a blue teapot and brought over two mugs. The mugs didn’t match, she noticed. She liked hers. It was a natural clay color with ferns etched on it. His, she noted, was blue with perpendicular white lines. The Hermit sat down and smiled at her.

“Was this what you expected to be talking about?” “I didn’t think about what we’d talk about,” she said. “I just wanted to find God and came.” “The action of coming does a lot,” he said. “It doesn’t have to be coming to me, but people have to move, to take some action if they want to find God. A great many people just keep hoping and doing nothing about it.” “And that doesn’t work, does it?” she asked. “Well, God is not bound. A person may be sitting still and all of a sudden God just comes to them. But God seems to be a lot more interested in the seeker.” “May I come again?” “I wish you would. Why not try praying for three months and then come back, or any time you are in serious trouble with your prayer.”

She shouldered her backpack, said thank you and good-bye, and was soon off on the forest path. Her trip home was a joyful one. She noted leaves and ferns that she hadn’t on the way. The dappled sunlight on the forest floor danced with her spirit and God seemed very present.

Two days later she was home and, as she had promised, she went to see the Reporter and told him all about it.

“I don’t want to sound negative,” he said, “but all that really happened was that he told you to pray for ten minutes a day.” “Oh, but that’s not all! Because it works! On the way home in the forest I tried it early every morning. God not only felt near then but the whole way home. I was just singing inside!” “Hmm,” said the Reporter, “but now that you are home it may be harder.” “Sure, but he told me that. I just have to keep trying until it’s a habit.” “And just ten minutes a day will do it?”

“It will grow,” he said, and if it doesn’t, or I have trouble, I’m to come back. And I’m to come back anyway in three months.”

IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED she didn’t always find it easy to pray. She tried to pray just before she went to bed but found she was often too tired to make a good job of it. She then

tried the early morning and that worked better; but it was hard sometimes to get out of bed and she found she had to make a point of getting to bed earlier.

And what did she talk about with God? Anything and everything as the Hermit had suggested. Honesty was the hallmark: "Sometimes you seem very real to me, God. More and more now, But sometimes I couldn't care less."

And from somewhere (was it from God?) came a response, "That's all right. Just keep trying." Had she really dared to say to God, "Sometimes I couldn't care less"? Yes, she had. It seemed both wonderful and terrible. How could she have been so rude to God? "Forgive me, Lord. That's what you are about, God, isn't it? Forgiving us and affirming us." "And helping you," said a voice in her mind, "helping you to grow."

FOR ALMOST THREE MONTHS, she prayed every day. The ten minutes a day grew to fifteen, then to twenty. But she realized that she wasn't just in touch with God during those twenty minutes. Prayer spilled over into the rest of her life. God was with her when she took her daily walk, when she met people on the way and smiled, said "Good morning," and held them up to God in her heart. God was with her at her job making the dull work happier, the difficult easier. She didn't say much about this to the Reporter. Somehow this was between her and God. It was, she thought, the secret of life itself.

Prayer was not always easy. She found out things about herself that she didn't like. She failed often in trying to do what God wanted her to do. But joy was always around the corner because she would tell God she was sorry and then forgiveness would come---that blessed acceptance of her very being, of her faults and sins.

Her three months were almost up and she rejoiced that she would have nothing but thanksgivings to share with the Hermit. But then her state of mind and heart began to change. The joy that had been almost her constant companion began to fade. Times of prayer became duty. God seemed distant. She realized that, if she had never found God, never known joy, the contrast would not be so great. Was this the way life had been before she found God? Perhaps it was. She found it hard to remember. She made arrangements to go to see the Hermit.

ONCE she was actually on the forest path she began to feel better. She remembered what the Hermit had said about the need to take action. Perhaps that was why she felt better. Or perhaps it was just the forest. It seemed particularly beautiful this time. She noticed things she had not seen before: the different kinds of trees, the shape of their leaves, low growing plants on the forest floor, a family of chipmunks chasing each other. The time sped and there she was again, knocking on the Hermit's door.

"Come in," he said. A wide smile made his comfortable face seem even more welcoming. "I thought it was about time for you to make another visit."

Within a few minutes they were both seated in the large chairs with mugs of tea. She looked happily at the same mug she had had before with the ferns etched into the clay and told him what had happened since her last visit.

“Why,” she asked, “why did God leave?” “God didn’t leave,” he answered. “God never leaves us. You just became out of touch.” “But I was doing just the same things I was doing before,” she protested. “Exactly. Perhaps God wants you to do something different.”

“You mean the darkness is really a message from God?” “It sounds probable,” he said. “Sometimes darkness comes because something depressing happens in your life. But you’ve told me of nothing but joy and growth, so perhaps it is God’s way of asking you to do something new.” “But what?” “Let’s see if we can find out,” responded the Hermit, pouring some more tea.

“Have you tried going to church?” “I tried once or twice but it was boring. I mean, I felt like shouting about God and everyone was just polite.” “I understand,” replied the Hermit, “but what about your friends. Did you shout a bit to them?” “No.”

The Hermit was silent for awhile and then said gently, “You’ve been given a great gift. Do you think God wants you to just hug it to yourself?” “Oh. I never thought of it that way. But it’s hard to talk about.” “Yes.” “But what about church? I can’t just tell people in the middle of a service.”

“What you have is catching,” said the Hermit. “Go where people might want to catch it. After awhile the service won’t seem so boring.” “I guess not.” She felt quite subdued.

Before she had a chance to recover, the Hermit brought up another subject. “How about learning. Are you sure no one at church has anything to teach you?” The Secretary felt stunned. She’d never thought about any way of learning except from the Hermit and directly from God. But she realized that there must be others, others who had been to the Hermit before she had and who were farther along.

There was silence in the room for quite awhile as she thought about it. “It’s a journey, isn’t it? I mean, I thought I’d just find God and that would be that.” “Yes,” he said gently, “it’s a journey. Do you want to keep on?” “Oh yes!” she replied and realized how deeply she meant it.

“Tell me one thing before I go,” she said. “About the Bible. It seems as dull as church. But it shouldn’t be, should it?” “Have you read it much since you started praying?” “No,” she said, a bit surprised to realize that she hadn’t. “I think you’ll find it reads quite differently now. And another thing: Don’t be too *earnest* about it. Let God sing to you through the Bible. And sing with God.”

“Oh, thank you!” she exclaimed. “You have given me so much.”

ON THE WAY HOME she had a great deal to think about. Perhaps the church had a Bible group. But she knew she wanted a group that prayed as well as studied the Bible. Should she go to the Pastor and talk about what was best? She didn’t know the Pastor and felt shy. And then there was the Reporter. He really would like to know more than she’d been telling him, she reflected ruefully.

That night before she lay down to sleep, she rummaged in her backpack. Some instinct had made her bring a Bible. She chuckled, “That was you again, God, wasn’t it?”

She curled up comfortably and propped the Bible against a handy boulder. It was still light and she ruffled through the pages reading bits here and there as they caught her eye. Soon sleepy, she closed the book, and pulling it to her, she tucked it under her inflatable pillow and went peacefully to sleep.

WHILE on the forest path, she felt adventurous about her new tasks but, when she arrived home, she found she felt overwhelmed. There was so much to do and she didn't feel up to it. "I'll give myself a few days to rest," she said.

But the idea didn't help and she felt herself sinking into the darkness again. *Sinking*. The word tugged at her mind. Where had she heard the word recently? And suddenly she remembered. It was when she had been reading the Bible, or thinking about it as she fell asleep. It was the story of Peter, walking toward Jesus on the water and then suddenly losing faith and sinking.

"Help me, Lord!" Peter had said, and Jesus put out his hand and helped him. "I don't want to sink either," she said. "Help me, Lord." And suddenly God was there, holding her up.

The realization flooded over her that God had spoken to *her* through the Bible. Not just to Peter.

BY LATE AFTERNOON she had unpacked and rested a bit. About 4 P.M. she called the Reporter's home phone and left a message that she was back and would like to see him. At six her bell rang and there he was bearing a box of pizza and a bunch of flowers. "Welcome home!" he said. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you! I want to tell you all about it." "And I want to hear," he replied.

THE SECRETARY talked for a long time that evening. She not only told the Reporter about the recent trip but about all the time before it. He asked questions and she answered as best she could. Finally she concluded: "It's been hard sometimes. I think it may get harder. But I wouldn't trade this way of life for anything in the world."

For a long time they sat in companionable silence.

Finally the Reporter spoke: "Thank you for telling me. I don't know if I'm ready yet, but I'd like to go to see the Hermit."