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THE SEVEN SLEEPERS SERIES

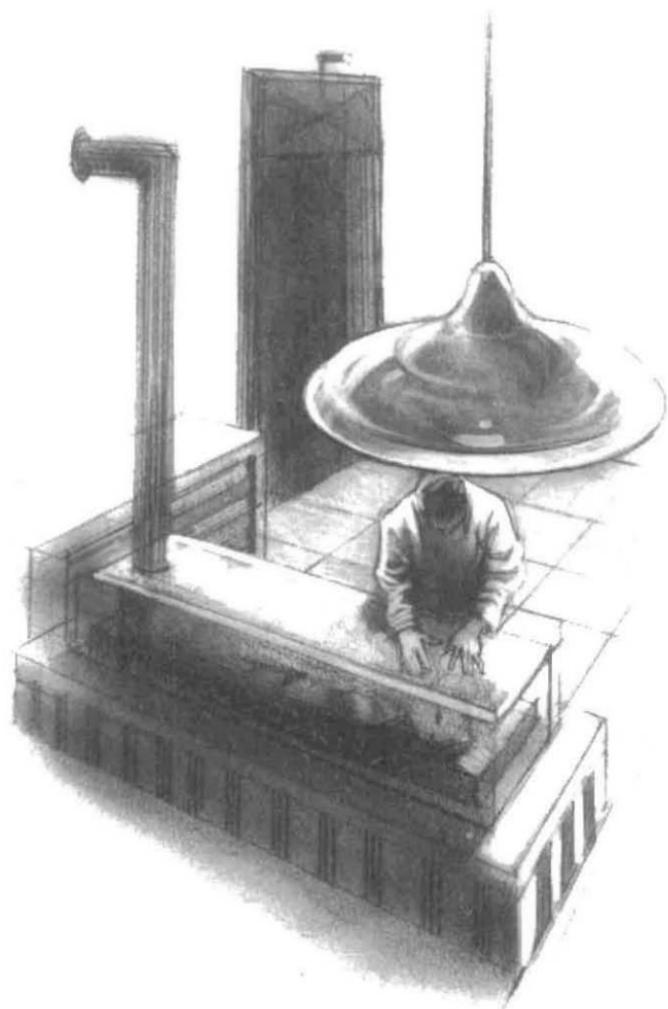
FLIGHT
of the
EAGLES

GILBERT L. MORRIS

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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1

The Last Night on Earth

Josh Adams lived with his parents in a small brick house not far from a large city but close to the open countryside. For the first thirteen years of his life—up until about a year before the adventure began—he had led a happy life, enjoying his parents, his school, and his friends. But all at once he shot up until he was more than a head taller than any of his friends. He was, of course, quite clumsy, and several of his schoolmates made matters worse by calling him “Ichabod Crane” or just “Icky” for short.

His father noticed that Josh began to walk with a slouch that made him even more conspicuous. One day, he put his arm around Josh’s thin shoulders and pointed at the collie puppy next door, all legs and falling over his own feet.

“That’s you, Josh,” Mr. Adams said.

“Yeah,” Josh muttered grimly.

“And that’s what you will be before too long.”

Josh stared at the perfectly shaped grown-up collie, then shook his head sadly. “Not in a million years. I’m just a clumsy jerk!” he said.

It was not only that he was clumsy and towered over his friends, though that seemed bad enough. But just when he felt most isolated from what he bitterly called normal people, Sarah came to live at the Adamses’ house.

Josh had heard his family talk about some old college friends whose daughter might come for a visit, but when he came home from school one afternoon to find her already moved in, he was caught off guard.

He opened the door and found his mother standing there with a very pretty girl a little younger than himself.

"Josh, this is Sarah Collingwood. We've told you about her so often. Sarah, this is Josh."

Now if Sarah had been a boy, or even if she had been tall and awkward, or if she had been plain, Josh would probably have taken the small hand she reached out to him, and he would have found a close friend, which he sorely needed. However, since Sarah was small, graceful, and quite pretty, Josh turned red and ignored the hand, muttering, "Hi ya," under his breath.

"You know, Josh, we told you that Sarah might get to make a visit, but her parents have agreed that she can stay for the rest of the school year."

Mrs. Adams hugged Sarah warmly. "It'll be so nice for me to have a girl in the house. Josh and his father hunt and fish together all the time—now you and I can do things together."

"I hope so, Mrs. Adams." Sarah smiled. She had large brown eyes and very black hair.

Josh sneaked a glance and saw that she was slender. Her hands were so small that they made his own look like catchers' mitts.

"Josh, I want to discuss some business with your father. Sarah and I have been so busy talking that we haven't even gotten her things up to her room. Why don't you help her do that, and I'll be back soon to start supper."

She gave Sarah another hug, then left them alone.

Josh looked everywhere but at Sarah. His thoughts were gloomy. He was thinking how Sarah would be just like the other girls at school who made fun of him and his appearance.

Now there were two things wrong with this. In the first place, the girls were not making fun of him. Instead, they were noticing that he was filling out and getting to be good-looking.

In the second place, Sarah did not disapprove of him. If Josh had had the courage to look at her, he would have seen a rather frightened young girl, uncertain at being in a strange place and very anxious to be liked by the young man before her. She had just passed out of the leggy, coltish stage that some girls go through and knew very well Josh's feelings of inadequacy.

"Josh," she said shyly, "I hope you don't mind my coming to live here."

Josh wanted to say that he was glad that she'd come, but he covered up his feeling by answering roughly, "Well, where are your folks? Why'd they send you here?"

Sarah said, "They're missionaries in Africa."

"Missionaries! Your folks are preachers?"

Actually, Josh enjoyed going to church with his parents. However, he was afraid of being considered "soft," so he affected the tough manner he had seen in others. "Well, don't go trying to preach at me!"

Sarah stiffened and said sharply, "Don't worry about that! I just wish I was home!"

"Why'd you come anyway?"

"My parents said it was because I needed a good school—but it wasn't really that." Her voice trembled slightly as she continued. "The real reason is that there's a revolution in Africa, and it's dangerous. I didn't want to come!"

Josh saw to his dismay that she was about to cry, and he *almost* did the right thing. He *almost* smiled, and he *almost* told Sarah it was great to have her. He *almost* assured her that they would be great friends and that her parents would be safe. And if he had done this, the following days would have been much more comfortable.

But Sarah was too pretty, and Josh was too afraid of girls.

He merely shrugged toughly. "I don't guess you have

to worry about your folks. Missionaries never get killed in revolutions."

Instantly Sarah drew back and blinked away the tears.

Josh could have bitten his tongue, but it was too late.

From that moment, Sarah kept as far from him as possible. They ate at the same table and even walked to school together. But there was a wall between them that Josh could not break down. Sarah found new friends at school, and Josh felt even more sorry for himself, forgetting that he had closed the door on her.

* * *

It was almost a year after Sarah came that the adventure began. Josh was sound asleep one winter evening when he heard his name being called.

"Josh! Josh! Wake up!"

He sat up at once, shielding his eyes against the overhead light. He saw his father standing over him, his face pale and tense.

"What's the matter, Dad?" he cried in sudden fear.

"Son," Mr. Adams said, "we've got to go to the silo. Get dressed quickly."

Josh's father was a scientist who did some sort of secret work for the government. The silo had been part of an old underground missile base that had been made into a laboratory.

"What's wrong, Dad?" Josh asked as he started pulling on his clothes. "Is something wrong with Mom?"

"No, I'll explain on the way, Josh. I've given Sarah a call, but you go by and make sure she's up. Meet us in the car." He rushed out of the room without another word.

Josh scrambled into his clothes, shaking from cold and fear. When he was dressed, he ran down the hall and knocked on Sarah's door.

She opened it at once. She was fully dressed too, and Josh saw that her eyes were large with fear.

"Hurry up," Josh said. "My mom and dad are waiting for us in the car."

"Do you know what's wrong?" Sarah whispered.

"No. Come on, let's hurry."

"I—I think I know what it is," she said. "I think something's wrong with my parents."

Josh paused for a moment. He knew there had been a lot of trouble in the African nation where Sarah's parents were doing their missionary work.

"Well," he said, "I don't think that's it. Why would we be going to the lab in the middle of the night for that?"

Quickly they scurried out of the house through the freezing cold and piled into the car where Josh's parents were waiting.

As soon as Josh slammed the door, Mr. Adams sent the car onto the highway so suddenly that the young people were thrown back against the rear of the seat. Josh had never known his father to drive like that before. Something had to be very wrong.

"Josh and Sarah," Mr. Adams said quietly, "you might have guessed what's happened."

"Is it something about my parents?" Sarah asked quickly.

"Well, Sarah, I just don't know about them, but we're *all* in danger now."

Suddenly Josh knew what was happening. "It's a war, isn't it, Dad?"

"Yes, Josh, it is. There's been an attack on the East Coast, and reports are that the rest of the country will be bombed at any time. We have to get to the silo."

Then he turned on the radio, and they heard the familiar voice of the president.

". . . indeed the most terrible crisis in the history of

mankind. I have declared a national emergency, and our armed forces are even now being deployed for our nation's defense. I must warn you, my fellow Americans, that not just our own country but the entire world stands on the brink of destruction tonight. I ask that you pray for—"

Squeak! Crash! Suddenly, the radio went dead. Mr. Adams could find no other station on the dial. The airways were quiet, and everyone in the car fell just as silent.

Soon they pulled up before the plain concrete building that contained the silo. They got out of the car just as the eastern sky was beginning to turn red.

"It's almost daylight," Josh said.

Mr. Adams paused and looked at the sky. Then he said quietly, "That's not the sun."

They moved quickly into the silo. Turning on the lights, Mr. Adams led the way down a winding staircase. As they descended into the earth, Josh had the feeling that he was being buried alive. He suspected that Sarah held the same thought.

Finally, they came to the foot of the stairs. After Mr. Adams unlocked a strange steel door, they entered the silo.

Josh had never been inside the silo. He had always thought it would be filled with huge banks of scientific equipment like the spaceships in movies. But all he saw was a small room and something that looked like a white coffin covered with clear plastic. Several tubes and cables were attached to a machine next to the wall. There was nothing else in the room except a small desk.

Josh and Sarah looked at the casketlike device.

"What's *that* for, Dad?" Josh asked with sudden fear.

"It's for you, Josh," Mr. Adams said quietly.

"But—what's it *for*?" Josh asked. He felt Sarah moving closer until she touched him, and he knew that she was sharing his alarm.

Mr. Adams put his arm around his wife and looked at the two youngsters, his face deadly serious. "The world is ending tonight—for a while, at least."

Josh felt Sarah's small hand creep into his. He took her hand and held it tight.

"This war won't be like any that you've ever read about," Mr. Adams said. "It will probably last only a day or two—but it will be so terrible that the world as we know it now will be gone forever."

Suddenly, there was a rumble like distant thunder. They all looked up. Josh knew that anything they could hear so far under the earth through heavy concrete had to be something monstrous. He felt the concrete vibrate under his feet. Then there was a buzzing sound, and a red light went on over the door.

Mr. and Mrs. Adams looked at one another. Then Mrs. Adams put her arm around Sarah and said, "Sarah, it's time for you to go."

"Go!" Sarah cried and held Josh's hand more tightly. "Go where? I—I want to stay with Josh."

"You can't, child," Mr. Adams said. "You see, this is what we've been working on ever since we saw that war was coming." He put his hand on the plastic canopy. "You can call it—well—call it a 'Sleep Capsule,' for that's its purpose. You'll just go to sleep. Then, when it's safe, you'll be awakened—safe and alive."

Josh's mother spoke gently to Sarah. "You see, there aren't two capsules in one place. This way, if something happens, some of the capsules will be sure to get through."

"No one knows where the capsules are," Mr. Adams said. "It's a closely guarded secret. But after you come out, there'll be a way to get all of you together—and start a better world!"

The buzzer sounded, and the red light flashed insistently.

"Come along, Sarah," Mrs. Adams said. "I insisted on going with you to your location so you wouldn't be alone."

She turned and held Josh in her arms tightly and said, "Good night, son. I love you very much."

Josh's mother turned suddenly and moved to the desk. Opening a drawer, she took out a leather-bound book. She stroked the covers, then said, "Josh, for many years I've kept a journal. In it I've put down all the things I believe in." She held it out to him, and there were tears in her eyes. "I want you to have it, son."

Josh took the book and held it carefully. He'd seen his mother writing in her journal and knew that she prized it highly. "I'll—I'll keep it, Mom. And I'll read it too."

Mrs. Adams suddenly threw her arms around him again, whispering, "Whatever happens, Josh, we'll meet again."

Then she released him, and Josh's father opened the massive steel door. An officer in uniform was standing outside. Josh's mother pulled Sarah through the door, and, just as it swung closed, Josh caught one glimpse of Sarah's pale face.

With a catch in her voice, Sarah said, "Josh, I—I'll see you soon!"

Then the door clanged shut. Josh was left alone with his father.

"Dad—what about you and Mom? Where will you be?"

"Well, son, it's very complicated. You'll just have to trust me. We don't have much time, and—" A heavy rumble shook the silo again. "It's time, son."

He must have seen the stark fear in the boy's eyes, and he asked gently, "Josh, do you remember last year when you and I climbed down the mountain in Colorado?"

Joshua nodded silently.

"Well, you remember how you were afraid to go down the face of the steepest cliff? You said, 'I'll go down if you'll hold the rope, Dad.'"

"I remember," Josh said.

"Well, I'm asking you to do that again. I know you're afraid—anyone would be—but if you'll trust me, *I'll hold the rope!*"

Joshua looked into his father's face for a long moment. Then he said slowly, "All right, Dad. I'll do it."

"Good!" Josh's father hugged him. Then he stepped back and said, "Josh, for the last few weeks, something has been happening to me. I've been having—well, *dreams* you might call them."

He stopped, and there was the strangest look on his face. "I'm a scientist, and I've always laughed at such things, but Josh, night after night, I've had the same dream."

"What was it, Dad?" Josh asked, seeing his father hesitate.

"Well, a man comes to me. I can never see his face, and I can't really remember what he says. But he always says the same thing, and I can't understand any of it."

"Are you afraid of him, Dad?" Josh questioned.

"No! I always feel better after one of these—visits. It's like everything's going to be all right. But I just can't remember *him* much—only the song."

"The song?" Josh asked.

"Yes. You know I don't sing very well. But almost every night for a long time, he's been teaching me a song. I don't understand it much, but I think it has something to do with you and Sarah, and what you'll find when you go up to the world again."

"What does the song say?"

"I made a tape of it—the tape is in there," Mr. Adams said, pointing to a brown case. "And some other things. I wanted to study the song, but it must be for you

and Sarah. I'm almost sure the man in my dream told me that. You can keep your mother's journal in the case too."

The lights dimmed again, and Josh's father motioned for his son to climb into the white box.

After Josh was comfortably settled, his father moved to unhook the props of the plastic canopy. Then he stopped and nodded to the control board.

"See that switch, son?"

Josh saw one red switch marked simply AWAKE.

"One day, someone will throw that switch. Then you and Sarah and some others will come out of places like this and go into the world. I don't know what kind of a place that world will be—but it won't be like anything you've ever known. Now it's time for us to go, and I want you to promise me to do two things—OK, son?"

"Yes, Dad."

"First, when you come out of here, I want you to believe the song—the one on the tape. Then, for your mother, obey the book—the one she's given you. Will you say those things over and over again, Josh?"

Josh began to say the words. "Believe the song, obey the book."

As he repeated them, he heard his father say quietly, "Good night, Josh. I'll be near you."

Then the lid closed, and there was a sound of escaping gas. Josh began to dive down into a deep sleep.

He found himself saying again, "Believe the song . . . obey the book . . ." just as he dropped off into a strange sleep. He heard himself murmur, "Good night, Dad. I'll see you . . ."

Then he became part of the darkness that was all about.

THE SEVEN SLEEPERS SERIES

THE GATES
of
NEPTUNE

GILBERT L. MORRIS

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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1

Out of the Frying Pan

The great stone door swung slowly to and fell into place with a click.

"Quick," Josh urged, "they're coming!"

Even as he spoke, the angry cries of the soldiers of the Sanhedrin sounded, and they began to pound on the stone walls.

At his side, Sarah shivered. "We just barely made it, didn't we, Josh?"

"Yes. Inside, right now!" Calling their names, tall, lean, freckled Josh shoved his companions in quickly, pushing them one by one down the corridor that led to a gentle, downhill slope. "We've got to get away. They may break through the door."

The company that made its way down through the dark passageway, lit only by torches at irregular intervals, was strange indeed. Sarah watched the group in front of her, thinking, *I never thought to see such creatures as these—not on this earth.* But she knew she was not on the old earth. She was on a planet completely changed by nuclear war. The changes had brought genetic transformation, so that Oldworld was gone and now new sub-species were to be seen.

She glanced again at the group ahead, those members of the new world who had been chosen to help keep the Seven Sleepers from the wrath of the Sanhedrin. Three of them were the strange looking "hunters"—one having huge eyes that could see, it seemed, forever; the second having great ears that flopped and wiggled; and the

third having a large, twitching nose, so that together the three made what was called the Hunter.

Next in line was the giant, Volka, larger than any human had ever been on earth. He had powerful, bulky muscles and a blunt but kind face. Then came two sets of twins, "Gemini twins," who had to stay close together all their lives—Mat and Tam, and the females Amar and Rama. If they were separated, Sarah knew, they would die. And last came their friend Kybus.

"Look! There are some boats," Jake called out. His red hair shone in the light of the torches. "Five of them. How did they know how many boats we'd need?"

"We can worry about that later," Josh said. "Let's get aboard."

One boat was required for the giant. The twins got in another, and Kybus and the Hunter in the next.

"Sarah, you, Reb, and Wash go with me," Josh said. "Dave, you take Abbey, and Jake."

"Right," Dave said.

And they began to climb into the small, flimsy-looking boats.

"Wow," Reb said, his pale blue eyes staring doubtfully at the little craft. "I wouldn't go fishing on the Mississippi in a thing like this."

"It's what we have," Josh said impatiently. "The Sleepers will bring up the rear. The rest of you, go on."

"Yes," Kybus said, his sharp face glowing with intelligence. "Come. I've got the feeling that we need to hurry. They have ways of breaking through stone walls."

The first three boats shoved off, then Dave, Abbey, and Jake followed. Sarah sat down between Reb and Wash, and Josh took the stern, handling the paddle.

The current was swift, and Wash said, "I sure hope that this don't get fast. I can't swim a lick. Can the rest of you?"

As it turned out, Josh was the only one who could swim well, but he said, "Don't worry, this is easy. I've done a lot of canoeing, and if the current doesn't get any faster than this, we're all right."

They glided along smoothly. The underground stream was black in the darkness. Only their hand-held torches cast reflections.

Somehow Sarah sensed that this was a very deep river. She had never liked boating—or water—and since she was not much of a swimmer, fear ran over her. But she said nothing.

They had glided along for perhaps half an hour when Josh said, "I think the current's getting faster." He called ahead, "How is it up there?"

From far in front came the voice of Kybus, very faint, "Be careful, be careful."

"I don't like this." Wash's black face was tense, and his usual cheerful smile was gone. He clung to the sides of the boat. "Sure wish we could get out in the open."

Reb, perhaps trying to lighten the situation, said, "You know what this is like?"

"I know it's like something weird," Sarah said. "What's it like to you, Reb?"

"Why, I went in one of them parks in Dallas, and they had a thing called the Log Ride. I got into that sucker and slid down all the way. And you know what?—it was fun!"

Josh said, "I've been there too, and it *was* fun, but this is a little different." Suddenly he cried out, "Look, look up there!"

Sarah looked up and saw at once what he had seen.

"The ceiling's getting lower," Josh said.

Far ahead, they heard a cry, and a cold chill ran down Sarah's back. Not only was the river beginning to boil, throwing forward the little boats at a speed that was terrifying, but was the ceiling closing in on them? Before, it

had been high enough so that their torches barely illuminated it, but now she saw that it was only a few feet above their heads.

"What if it plays out?" Reb asked suddenly. "What'll we do then?"

"Never happen," Josh said.

But was he feeling queasy himself? Sarah wondered. Was his stomach churning too? This closing in of the ceiling and the racing of the river were things he must have never counted on.

But Josh said, "We'll be all right."

Another cry came from far ahead. "Look out!" And then silence.

"The tunnel's closing in!" Sarah cried. Now the ceiling was so close that she could almost reach up and touch it. "We're all going to drown!"

Sarah grabbed at Josh. She caught his arm, which he was using to paddle, and caused him to miss a stroke.

He said angrily, "Don't hold onto me, Sarah. I need to guide the boat."

As if they hadn't enough trouble, suddenly the torches far ahead of them disappeared—just flickered out, except for the one right in front containing the other Sleepers. "Are you all right?" Josh cried out. "Dave?"

Dave's voice floated back. "We're all right, but it looks like we're running out of river. I can't even see the others."

The ceiling dropped lower and lower, and now it was as if the boat were being drawn into a giant whirlpool. The water was white. Its roaring as it streamed over the rocks was almost deafening. The fury of the rushing water and the sensation of being closed in were terrifying. Fear rose to grip Sarah, and then she heard Abigail scream.

"We're all going to die! We're all going to die!"

And at that moment, though she had little use for Ab-

igail's manners, Sarah thought there was some excuse for the girl's terror.

"Hang on, hang on!" Josh said. "We'll make it."

There was a mighty roar then as the river seemed to reach a crescendo of sound, and Sarah gave up all hope. She crouched in the bottom of the boat, covered her ears with her hands, and began crying out to Goel for help.

And then, as if in answer to her cry, the roaring began to diminish. Sarah looked up to see that the ceiling was no longer right above her head but was rising—almost magically, it seemed.

"We made it through! We made it through!" Josh cried. "Look ahead there!"

Sarah gasped in amazement. They had come into a huge cavern with a ceiling so high that it seemed to go up forever. The torches did not enable them even to see it. On each side, they began to pass huge stalactites and stalagmites that glittered like diamonds, reflecting the torchlight.

"We've come to a big cave," Sarah cried out. "Oh, Josh, there's a shore over there. Let's land on it, quick."

"I think that's a good idea." Josh called out, "Dave, see that shore? I think we'd better pull in."

"All right," Dave called back.

The two boats turned toward a long, sloping beach in a side eddy of the river. As the first boat landed, Jake leaped out and pulled in the prow. Reb did the same for the second boat.

Soon everyone was out on the sand, and Reb was lighting other torches so that they could see what sort of place they were in.

"Why it's like Mammoth Cave," Sarah said. "I was there one time. It looked like this."

"Well, I'm just glad to be anywhere," Jake said. "I thought we'd had it back in that river." He looked all around. "Where are the Nuworlders?"

Dave said, "Didn't you see that divide back there?"

"No, I didn't see anything," Josh said. "What was it?"

"The river divided, and the other boats went the other way. I didn't have a chance to even make a choice—it just seemed like this branch sucked us into it."

Sarah looked around, saw the pale faces, and knew that her own was no better. Everybody's nerves seemed a little shaky. "Let's fix something to eat," she said. "Then we can talk about what we are going to do."

That idea sounded good to the others, and soon they were busy preparing a meal.

"Someone had planned for us," Reb said as he pulled food and firewood out of the boat. "I don't know what kind of grub this is, but I'll be glad to have it."

As the others prepared the food, Josh went up and down the beach. He came back just when the meal was ready. "Well, we might as well eat, because we're sure not going but one way."

They sat down and ate the meat, which was delicious, and afterwards Wash asked, "Well, what are we going to do now?"

Dave shrugged uncertainly. He was a tall, handsome boy of fifteen, the oldest of the group. He had fine, yellow hair and striking blue eyes. "Not much choice about that. We're separated from the rest, and we can't go back up the river, can we?"

"No," Sarah said at once. She was fourteen, small, graceful, very pretty. Her black hair was now wet with the spray of the river. She said, "But we're all right. Goel has brought us this far."

It was Abigail Roberts, who at thirteen was the most attractive of the Sleepers, beautiful, blue-eyed, blonde-haired, very small and well-shaped, and yet always complaining, who said, "No, we're all going to die down here." She pouted. "We'll never get out."

Jake shook his head stubbornly. "Goel didn't save us to let us die like moles underground."

The argument went on for some time, but at last it was obvious to everyone, even seemingly to Abigail, that they were going to have to go on down the river.

Reb summed it up. "Well, I'll tell you, back in the war, Stonewall Jackson, when he seen a bunch of Yankees, he always done one thing."

"What was that, Reb?"

"Why, he charged 'em!" Reb exclaimed. He waved his hand toward the stream. "And we're going to do exactly the same thing." He had pale, sun-bleached hair and light blue eyes, as had his ancestors on the fields of Bull Run and Antietam. "And we'll do it too! But first, I think I'm going to rest a while."

Everyone seemed exhausted. They found blankets in the bottom of the boats—a little soggy but better than nothing, and it was not freezing in the cave. They lay down wearily, and soon most of them were asleep.

But Sarah lay awake for a long time. She was thinking about all the things that had brought the seven of them to this place, and now she began to think of the strange person called Goel, who appeared from time to time to give them counsel.

"Who is he?" she whispered. "*What* is he, and why do I believe in him so much?" But she knew that Goel, whoever or whatever he was, had proven himself to be their friend. "So," she said, as she began to drop off to sleep, "I'll trust him. You have to trust somebody, so I'll trust him."

She was almost asleep when suddenly her eyes flew open. She had heard splashing out on the smooth water, and then a footstep.

"Josh—wake up! Somebody's coming."

Josh, lying close by, came awake instantly. "What is it?"

“Somebody’s coming.”

Josh quickly awakened the others, and they gathered in a group as a shadowy shape moved toward them.

Josh said, “There’s just one. Come on, you guys, let’s get him.”

As they charged across the sandy beach, Reb let out a wild rebel cry that almost raised the hair on the back of Sarah’s neck. Reb got to the intruder first and threw himself on him. Down they went. The others were yelling and trying to get into the fight. Then Sarah ran up holding a torch, saying, “Who are you?”

Josh grabbed an arm, jerked the intruder to his feet, and then stood stock still. A gasp went up from the group, and Josh muttered, “Why—you’re just a girl!”

What Sarah saw was a young woman of perhaps eighteen, with black hair and green eyes. She wore some sort of transparent costume through which Sarah could see a green swimming suit that looked much like fish scales. A strange-looking belt was around her waist, having several tubes that ran up to the top of her suit.

“My name is Jere,” she said quietly. “And Goel has sent me to be your guide.”

Silence fell over the Sleepers. They stared wildly at one another, and then looked again carefully at the beautiful young woman.

“Well,” Sarah said tartly, “if there’s a pretty girl in a hundred miles, you’ll find her, won’t you, Josh?”

THE SEVEN SLEEPERS SERIES

THE SWORD
of
CAMELOT

GILBERT MORRIS

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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1

A Long Journey to Make

Darkness had almost overtaken the small band emerging from the damp forest. For an hour now a steady rain had fallen, and all seven young people who trudged down the muddy road were soaked to the skin.

A lightning bolt scratched the darkness, blinding Josh Adams. Instinctively he twisted his head away and squeezed his eyes shut, then promptly stepped into a hole and fell sprawling.

"Josh—are you all right?" Sarah Collingwood was at his side in an instant, pulling at his arm. Unlike Josh, who was tall and gangly, she was small and graceful.

"The lightning didn't hit you, did it?" she asked in a frightened voice.

"No, it didn't—and you can let go of my arm. I don't need any help!"

Josh, at fourteen, was the same age as Sarah. However, he was the leader of this party, and it looked bad for the leader to fall flat on his face, so he pushed Sarah away almost angrily. He was easily embarrassed and already felt himself to be clumsy and plain. He scraped at the mud on his shirt in disgust. *Some leader I am—can't even stay on my feet!*

Then he glanced at the girl and noticed the hurt on her face. "I'm sorry, Sarah. I—I guess I'm a little bit on edge."

"I guess we all are," another voice said. Bob Lee Jackson paused beside him. Jackson was never known as anything but "Reb," for he came from the South. Another

fourteen-year-old, Reb had light blue eyes and pale, sun-bleached hair.

"Do you have any idea where we are, Josh?"

"No, I don't," Josh snapped.

The others had caught up and now stood in a half circle, silently watching him.

"Well, don't look at me! It wasn't *my* idea to travel in this storm!"

This was the sort of thing Josh despised. Others in the group, he felt, were more capable leaders—people such as Dave Cooper. But it was he who had been chosen by Goel to head the party, so now he peered forward and shook his head glumly. "We'll just have to go on."

"We might not find a place to camp all night. Why don't we at least try to get under some trees?" Jake Garfield was a small boy of thirteen, and he looked thoroughly miserable. Water ran down his soft, black cap and dripped onto his shoulders. He shivered. "Looks like we'll have to wait till morning to find a place to stay."

"No, there's got to be something not too far. We can't stay out in this." Josh wheeled and marched off down the road, his feet squishing in the mud.

He had not gone more than a hundred yards when another lightning bolt rent the sky, this time not as brilliant. He batted his eyes and cried out, "Look up there—a house!"

Quickly the others moved forward. Dark as it was, a house of sorts could be seen nestled off the road under some huge elms. "That must be the house Goel marked on the map!" Josh cried excitedly.

"It looks like something out of an old TV series," Dave Cooper said grumpily.

Sarah agreed, and the others looked troubled by the appearance of the building before them. It was a small,

forlorn-looking dwelling. But despite its gloomy appearance, Josh realized they had little choice.

"Come on," he said, ignoring their remarks. "At least it's got a roof and four walls. Goel said that they'd take us in—if it's the right place."

The seven sloshed up to the house, and—wiping the rain from his eyes—Josh knocked on the door.

It opened almost instantly, and the crackling in a large fireplace sent forth a cheerful sound.

"Who be you?" The speaker was a short, muscular man with a set of suspicious dark eyes. "What do you want?"

"We need a place to stay." Josh was aware of the quiver in his voice. "Go—"

"This ain't no inn. You'll have to go someplace else."

But before the man could slam the door shut, Sarah called out, "Goel sent us. He said you'd take us in."

"Goel? Well—that's different." He stared at them for a moment, then shrugged and stepped aside. "You'd better come in out of the wet." He called out, "Matilda, we have guests, guests from Goel."

Eagerly the young people entered the room and stood making puddles on the floor.

That seemed not to trouble their host, however. He said, "You'd better get out of them wet clothes." He peered at them once again and asked, "You say it was Goel who sent you?"

"Yes," Josh said eagerly. "He told us to wait here—that he'd come to us at your house. You *are* Crinen, aren't you?"

"Aye, I be Crinen." He turned away. "Matilda, take these girls to their room, and I'll take these young fellows to the attic."

The woman with merry blue eyes led Sarah and Abigail to a small room attached to the back of the house. "It ain't much," she said, "but at least you can get out of them wet clothes, and I'll fix you something to eat."

"Oh, thank you!" Sarah said warmly, and as soon as the woman left she began unpacking her knapsack. "It's a good thing we wrapped our clothes in oilcloth or we wouldn't have anything dry to put on."

"Well, I don't have anything fit to wear anyway." Abigail Roberts was a year younger than Sarah and much prettier—at least some thought so. She had blue eyes, blonde hair, and a small, graceful figure. Now, as she looked at the garment that had been wrapped in the oilcloth, she frowned in disgust. "This is the ugliest dress I have ever seen."

"At least it's dry."

Sarah put on her own dress, one much like Abigail's, and the two of them picked up their wet clothes. "Let's go by the fire. I hope they have something good to eat."

* * *

Crinen led Josh and the other boys up a ladder into the attic. The boy quickly saw that it was a neat room with a ceiling that sloped to a peak. There were only two beds.

Reb said, "Looks like some of us will have to bunk on the floor." "Oh, we've got plenty of bedding," Crinen said. "You can strip them clothes off, and I'll go see if Matilda has something for you to eat."

As soon as Crinen had disappeared, the boys began eagerly changing their clothes.

"I don't know how we're ever going to get these dry," Jake complained, wringing out his shirt. He watched it drip on the floor. "Maybe we can take turns putting them in front of the fireplace."

The smallest member of the group—Wash—was a black boy of twelve. He moved quickly and soon had on dry clothing. Then he stood watching the others. Glancing toward the opening that led from the loft, he said, "I hope they've got something to eat. My stomach feels like my throat's been cut!"

"Mine too," Reb said. He looked over at Josh. "How long you think we'll have to stay here?"

Josh was pulling a warm brown sweater over his head. "I don't know. Goel didn't say. But I hope it won't be too long, because it's going to be pretty crowded in here."

"Well now, let's go down and see if Miss Matilda has cooked up some vittles." Reb grinned and led the way down the ladder.

Everybody gathered in front of the huge fireplace. Soon the two girls joined them, and they stood greedily soaking up the heat.

Thirty minutes later they were seated at a large, wooden table, wolfing down steaming bowls of what appeared to be beef stew.

"This is *good*, ma'am!" Reb exclaimed. "I don't guess you got any grits to go with it—or hog jowl?"

Matilda paused from her task of stirring the stew and refilling Josh's bowl. "Grits? Hog jowl? No, we don't have any of that. This is just deer stew."

"Well, it's good, whatever it is," Josh said. "And being here sure beats sleeping out in the mud, doesn't it?" He devoured his stew eagerly.

Soon all of them were pleasantly satisfied. Then they sat around the fire, and its warmth began to make Josh, at least, very sleepy.

Crinen came to look at them. He cocked his head to one side. "Would you be telling me where you come from?"

Josh opened his mouth to answer. Then a thought came to him, and he closed it.

Sarah must have guessed what was on his mind. "Well," she said, carefully, "if you mean where we *just* came from, that would be the Kingdom of Atlantis."

Crinen stared. "Why, that's under the ocean! You couldn't live in a place like that! Only mermen and merwomen live there."

Sarah shook her head. "I'm afraid you're mistaken about that. Goel sent us there to do something for him. And now that it's done, he told us to come here."

Crinen looked at them incredulously. He scratched his head. "People living under the sea! If that don't beat all! And now ye be going somewhere else."

"Yes," Sarah said. She started telling him that they were not really from his world—that all seven of them were aliens and strangers.

She tried to put together the story of how nuclear war had come to the earth. "We were all put in time capsules—sleeping chambers—where we stayed in a suspended state for years and years." Then she related how they had been awakened and commissioned by Goel to do his bidding, which meant to combat the dark forces that were now sweeping over Nuworld.

Sarah realized that was too much to explain to Crinen, and she ended by saying simply, "We are the servants of Goel, and we go where he sends us."

Crinen's eyes brightened. "And that's what I be! Me and Matilda." Then a shadow crossed his face, and he lowered his head. "There be not many of us now. The Sanhedrin, they came here last month looking for someone. I don't trust those priests and this Dark Lord they talk about!" He shook his head violently. "I'll have nothing to do with him!"

"That's wise," Josh said. "The Dark Lord is an evil force, and Goel is the only hope for this world."

They talked for a while, but soon all heads were nodding. Josh snapped out of a doze long enough to say, "Let's get to bed. Goel may come early tomorrow."

The girls went to their room at once.

Josh and the boys talked a little more before going to sleep. The last thing Josh remembered was Reb saying, "I shore do wish Goel would hurry up! I purely do *hate* not knowing where I'm going or when I'm going to do something!"

* * *

Reb was due to be disappointed, for Goel did not come the next day—or the next week either.

The Seven Sleepers were glad to rest for a few days. Their journey from Atlantis had been difficult. However, as the week passed, they became edgy. There was nothing to do but walk through the woods, and the weather was turning colder.

Every night they would meet in the attic room before bedtime and talk of making plans, but there were no plans to be made.

"I don't like it," Reb complained one evening. He had been growing more and more impatient. Night after night he had expressed a desire to get on with it. "I want to be doing something!"

Dave Cooper's mouth turned down in a frown. "I'm tired of listening to you, Reb," he said shortly, "All you do is complain."

Ordinarily Reb would have turned off such a remark, but their circumstances had made him short-tempered, and he snapped back. "Well, I haven't heard you singing any happy songs, Dave."

Dave glared. "All you've done is gripe, and I'm telling you to shut up!"

Reb's face flushed. "I don't see anybody in here that can *make* me shut up!"

Dave had been keeping his temper under tight control, but now he threw himself onto Reb, driving him backward. The two fell and began hitting at each other, rolling on the floor.

Sarah jumped to her feet and grabbed Josh's arm. "Stop them, Josh!"

Josh shouted, "Cut that out!"

But the two combatants paid him no heed. They got to their feet, and Reb caught Dave over the eye with a blow that drove him into the wall. Dave struck out, catching Reb in the mouth.

Then Jake came up behind Reb and jumped on him. "Get hold of Dave, Josh!" he called out.

Josh thrust himself between the two. He started to say, "Now you two quit this." However, he had no chance, for in their anger both boys were unreasonable.

Dave's fist caught Josh on the chest and knocked the wind out of him.

Sarah and Abigail were both crying for them to stop.

Suddenly a voice said, "I bring you greetings of peace."

Startled, Reb and Dave dropped their arms, and everyone turned toward the dark end of the attic. A dim form could barely be discerned there.

Instantly Josh knew who it was. "Goel," he gasped.

The figure stepped forward, a tall man wearing a dark gray cloak that reached to the floor, with a cowl that covered his head. The lamplight illumined his stern features. "Why do I find you fighting among yourselves, my friends?" he asked, pushing the cowl back.

Reb ducked his head and muttered, "I'm sorry, Goel."

"Me too," Dave said, his face flushed with embarrassment. "I—I just lost my temper."

And then they all moved toward him, and he took each one firmly by the shoulders, greeting them all warmly—even Dave and Reb.

Finally Josh said, "I'm sorry you found us like this, Goel, but—"

"I know, my son." Goel nodded. "It has been hard." His gaze ran over the seven young people. Then a smile turned up the corners of his lips and gave him a kindly look. The sternness left him. "I have asked hard things of you—and now I have come to ask another hard thing."

Reb instantly said, "Just ask *anything!* I'd rather be doing something important than just sitting here."

Goel looked at him for a long moment. "My son, you must learn to wait. They also serve who only stand and wait. And the least of my servants, if they are faithful in what I command, are as great as the mightiest." He obviously saw that the boy did not understand. "One day you will learn this, Bob Lee—and it may be a hard lesson."

"What is it you want us to do?" Josh asked.

Goel looked long and hard at the Seven Sleepers. "You have a long journey to make—and a difficult task at the end of it. The Dark Power is sweeping over a small portion of Nuworld. Many years ago, after the old earth was destroyed, when all of you were placed in your sleep capsules, a man named Dion survived with some of his people. He led them far back into uninhabited places. There he founded a kingdom, and now that kingdom is in trouble. He is a good man, and his people are good people—but the Dark Lord and the servants of the Sanhedrin have already begun to destroy what he built up."

"What sort of a place is it?" Sarah asked timidly.

Goel asked, "You have heard of King Arthur and his knights of the round table?" When they all nodded, he

said, "Dion was a scholar studying medieval days. After the last great war, his mind was not steady. And when he built his kingdom, he built it after the ideas of King Arthur, even naming it Camelot." He paused. "When you get there you will see strange things. What you must remember is this—unless someone goes to help Dion, Camelot and all in it will fall under the sway of the Dark Lord!"

"We'll do it!" Reb exclaimed. "Just tell us how to get there."

Goel nodded. "I knew that you would, my son." His eyes swept over them. "I have great faith in you, and now you must have great faith in me, for your task will be difficult. Come now, let us talk, and I will tell you about Camelot . . ."

THE SEVEN SLEEPERS SERIES

THE CAVES
that
TIME FORGOT

GILBERT MORRIS

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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1

Another Quest

I'd give anything if I could go to a beauty shop." Abbie Roberts was a petite girl of thirteen. She had blonde hair, and her blue eyes gave off sparks as she ran her hands through her long locks. "And a manicure," she added. "Look at these fingernails! They'll never be the same again!"

Sarah Collingwood, sitting across from Abbie, was one year older. She did not have Abbie's spectacular good looks, but she was small and graceful with large brown eyes and black hair.

"Abbie," she said with some irritation, "you might as well forget about such things as beauty shops. You may have had things like that in Oldworld, but they're gone forever."

The two girls sat at the mouth of a small cave and had been staring out into the late afternoon dusk. Both wore clothes that were much the worse for wear. Abbie's blue dress had a torn skirt and was practically stiff with dirt. Sarah's garb was not much better—a pair of jeans with ragged cuffs and a tan shirt with most of the buttons replaced by pins. Both were hot and tired and hungry.

Abbie glared. "I think this camping out is terrible. I liked it much better when we were at Camelot—or even down in Atlantis." She picked up a cloth, went and dipped it into the small stream that ran beside the cave, then wrung out the excess water. Wiping her face, she protested again. "I need some face cream. My skin's getting as rough as rhinoceros hide."

“We’ll just have to make the best of it.” Sarah looked again into the gathering darkness. “I wish the boys would come back. It’s going to be dark soon, and I’ll bet there are wild animals around here.”

Abigail said abruptly, “Let’s wash our hair. I can’t stand it when my hair gets stiff with dirt like this.”

“We don’t have any soap.” Sarah gave her companion a critical look. “I wish you’d just learn to be patient, Abbie. We knew this was going to be a hard trip.”

The Seven Sleepers had just completed an adventure at a strange place called Camelot. Their heads were still filled with visions of ladies and jousting knights and even dragons.

It was the sort of adventure they would have enjoyed in their earlier lives. But their time in Oldworld had been cut short by a terrible war. They had survived only because their parents placed them in sleep capsules. Years passed, and the world changed completely so that when they came forth they were shocked to find themselves living in the midst of strange creatures and alien landscapes. Then they were called to spread the news that Goél, a strange shadowy figure, was going to bring order and peace to Nuworld, as it was called.

“When do you think we’ll get out of this terrible forest?” Abbie asked irritably.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I think Goél could have arranged things a little better. If we have to go from place to place, I don’t see why he can’t give us better transportation.”

Sarah rose to her feet suddenly, biting her lip. She was tired and hungry, and Abigail’s constant complaining got on her nerves. She walked downstream a few feet, stopped and listened, then said, “Someone’s coming!”

Abbie scrambled up and came to stand beside Sarah. Her eyes grew large, and she whispered, “I hope it’s

them—but it could be anybody out in the middle of this forest.”

The two girls peered into the wall of huge trees that flanked the stream.

The voices Sarah had heard grew louder, and then, as three young men stepped out from the shadows, she cried with relief, “It’s Josh—and the others! I hope they brought something to eat.” She ran across the small clearing to the leader. “Josh, are you all right? We were getting worried.”

Josh Adams was fourteen. He was tall and gangling, but there was a promise of strength and grace in his growing form. He was not handsome, and yet there was reliability and steadiness in his face. He had auburn hair that caught the last rays of the sun, and blue eyes. He had been the first Sleeper, the one called to find the rest. He had grown especially close to Sarah.

“Sure, we’re OK, Sarah. Just tired and ready to eat.”

One of the other boys held out a sack. “We’ve got three rabbits,” he said. “That’ll be enough to eat tonight.”

“Oh, good, Jake,” Sarah said. “Give them to me. I’ll clean them.”

Jake Garfield was thirteen, a Jewish boy, small with red hair and intense brown eyes. He handed over the bag. “I wish they’d been yearling calves though. I’m hungry enough to eat one.”

The other boy was the smallest of the three. He was twelve, and his black face was split now by a gleaming white smile. “I’ll clean those rabbits, Sarah,” he said. “I don’t mind.”

“Oh, thank you, Wash. But you all go rest while Abbie and I do the cooking.”

The boys threw themselves down in front of the cave, groaning with relief.

Sarah borrowed a knife from Josh and dressed the rabbits, gutting them while Abbie quickly gave herself to building a fire. She managed to cut some saplings into sticks, and the girls soon had the game roasting over the yellow flame.

When the rabbits were almost done, two more boys came in. Dave, the tallest of the Sleepers and the oldest at fifteen, called out, "We've got another rabbit if we need it." He was athletic, very handsome. He had yellow hair and blue eyes and walked with a springy step.

"Reb," he said to his companion, "that was a good shot. I don't think I could have gotten that one."

The final Sleeper was the most spectacular of all. At fourteen, he was very tall. He had light blue eyes and pale, bleached hair. He wore a Stetson as only a cowboy would wear it. In fact, he had been a kind of cowboy, growing up in Texas in his old life. He grinned now and said, "Shucks, that wasn't no shot at all, Dave. If I'd of had my 30-30, I'd of got that deer we seen a ways back."

"Well, I wish you had it." Dave sat down beside the three boys at the cave mouth. "I wish Goél would let us have rifles. Sure would make life simpler."

All seven young people showed the marks of long travel. They had had time for only quick splashes of water on their faces as far as bathing was concerned, and now they were about to find themselves back in a civilization again.

For a while, Dave did most of the talking. He spoke about their recent adventures, and he grinned at Reb. "Do we still have to call you 'Sir Reb' now that we're out of Camelot?"

"Oh, I reckon not."

Reb had been the hero of their adventure there. A natural horseman and having been a rider all his life, he

had been able to do things in that country that the others could not.

Now the darkness closed about them, and the flickering firelight reflected on Reb's pale blue eyes. "I liked that place," he said slowly, "about as well as any place I ever seen."

"Even better than Texas?" Jake asked.

"Well, maybe not that good—but except for Texas I guess it was about the best place I was ever at."

"I think you just had a case of puppy love." Josh grinned across the fire. "I can't blame you though. That princess sure was a pretty thing, and she sure was gone on you."

Reb's face reddened, but he said nothing. Finally he looked up. "You reckon we'll ever get back there?"

Sarah tested one of the roasting rabbits with Josh's knife. "I hope so. I hope *you* do anyhow. It seemed like you were born for a place like that—horses and jousting. A little bit like the days of the old West." Again she poked at the rabbit. "I think this is about done. Come and get it."

They gathered around, and Sarah and Abbie cut up the rabbits and served them. Then they all sat back, handling the hot meat gingerly, listening to the silence of the forest as they ate.

"Well, that was good," Wash said, licking his fingers. "Still wish that rabbit had been as big as the deer that got away. My stomach thinks my throat's been cut." He looked over at Josh. "How much longer you think it'll be before we get out of this woods?"

"I don't know." Josh pulled the last fragment of meat off a bone, then tossed the bone out into the grass. "Maybe a day or two. And then what?"

His question produced a moody atmosphere, and each Sleeper seemed to be thinking of all that had gone past.

"I'd like to have a little R & R," Reb said.

Jake looked up. "What's that?"

"Rest and recreation." Reb grinned tiredly. "It looks like we could use a little vacation, but I don't know if we'll get it."

Sarah opened her mouth to comment. But before she could speak, a familiar voice broke the silence.

"I realize you're all tired, and I wish that you could have more rest."

The suddenness and unexpectedness of the voice shocked her. Then a tall figure stepped out of the darkness into the firelight, and Josh cried out, "Goél!"

"Goél!" the rest echoed, and all jumped to their feet to greet their guest.

The man was dressed in a gray robe that reached to his knees. His feet were clad with heavy sandals, and the cowl for covering his head was thrown back. He carried a staff in his hand, and there was strength and patience in his face as well as great gentleness.

He let the Sleepers have their way for a moment, smiling at their greetings, then said, "Sit down, my friends. Rest."

He himself remained standing. His craggy face caught the light of the fire, and a smile still touched his lips. "You did well on your quest to Camelot. All of you."

Reb ducked his head. "Well, I made a mess of part of it," he mumbled. "I let myself get taken in by that there sorceress."

Goél's expression did not change. "But you have learned, my son, something about how to defend yourself against the powers of darkness. It is a lesson that you can put to good use on your next quest."

"Are we really going on another journey?" Josh burst out.

"Do you feel strong enough for it?" Goél asked.

Dave said at once, "We're tired, but if you give the word, we'll go. Anywhere you say, Goél."

The strange man smiled yet again. "That is good, my son, and for your bold speech you shall be the leader on the next adventure."

Sarah thought the others looked surprised, especially Josh. From the beginning he had been the leader of the Sleepers. He blinked his eyes in shock. He said nothing, but she could read the disappointment in his face.

Then Goél was speaking, and all paid careful heed. "You have been obedient to my commands. You have learned much. But the next task I will put to you will demand every bit of strength you have, for the people to whom I send you now are quite different."

"As different as the people of Atlantis that live under the sea?" Wash asked. "They were pretty strange folks, I thought."

"And the people at Camelot?" Abigail said. "They were unusual too. How can anybody be more different?"

For a time silence fell over the small, open space where the little fire gleamed. Far off a bird cried, and the trees about them seemed to breathe.

Goél's voice was low, and Sarah listened carefully, knowing it was likely they were going to face danger.

"The Dark Power," Goél said slowly, "is strong and is growing stronger. Those who are my servants, such as yourself, are small in number. They must make up in courage what they lack in numbers. All over Nuworld the Dark Lord is desperately striving to stamp out all of the things that I value—courage, goodness, and love most of all. I am about to send you to a people who know little about such things."

"What kind of people are they?" Josh piped up.

"Not like you," Goél said. "At least you will think they are not. They will have different values, and you will

have to convince them that the things you believe in are important. You must teach them that if they are to survive, they must stand against the evil that darkens the world. They need," he said firmly, "to learn about dignity and honor and love. They must learn to treat others as they themselves would want to be treated."

He spoke for a long time. Sarah sat listening, trying to store up his words.

Finally Goél said, "These people are simple. I do not wish that you would dazzle them with your superior knowledge or with inventions that might bring destruction to them. When you go to them, you must become in some ways as simple as they are. Only by humility will you win them. I can give you encouragement and hope, but the path that you must tread will not be easy."

Goél drew the cowl up over his head so that his face was shrouded. He reached into a pocket of his cloak and drew forth a paper and a leather bag. "Here is money for your journey and a map. Follow it. You will discover this people when you reach this point—here." He pointed. "Good-bye for now, but I will not be far away from you."

Then he turned and walked off into the darkness. The Sleepers looked after him until the gloom swallowed him up.

"Well," Wash said, "I guess that answers any questions about our getting a vacation." He sat down, looked at the carcass of one of the rabbits, almost picked clean, and shook his head. "I sure wish you was as big as a deer," he said sadly. "I could eat you all myself."

THE SEVEN SLEEPERS SERIES

WINGED
RAIDERS
of the Desert
GILBERT MORRIS

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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1

A Plea for Help

Look out, Sarah—you're going to lose him!" Sarah Collingwood had been dozing, holding her fishing pole lightly in her hand. At Josh's yell she made a wild grab for the pole. It slid across the grassy bank and hit the water with a splash. Sarah cried out, "Oh no—!" staring at it.

Josh Adams, age fifteen, was a tall, gangly boy. He had auburn hair and dark blue eyes—and loved to fish. With another yell he plunged into the water, stabbed at the swiftly disappearing pole, and managed to catch the end of it. "I've got it!" he yelled excitedly. "I've got it!"

Sarah watched Josh splash back to the bank, slipping in the mud once and falling headlong. He struggled to his feet, rolled over to a sitting position, then hauled up sharply on the pole. It bent double, and he held it with both hands yelling, "Sarah, it's a real pole-bender!"

Sarah danced around crying out advice as Josh held onto the pole. Finally, with a mighty heave Josh sent a wet fish right into Sarah's face. It knocked her over backward, and she grunted, "Umph!" Falling headfirst, she tried to brush the fish away, but it seemed determined to nestle inside her clothing. "Get him off of me, Josh!" she screamed, shoving desperately with both hands. Josh stood up, muddy from head to foot, and began to laugh. "Hang on to him, Sarah. I think he likes you. He must think you're his momma."

Sarah finally managed to push the fish away and stood up, her eyes flashing. She was a small girl of fifteen, the

same age as Josh. She was very graceful, but her brown eyes flashed with anger. "You did that on purpose! Look—it's got my hair all slimy." She pulled her hand through her long black hair and patted it. "I ought to throw that fish back."

"Not on your life!" Josh picked up the fish carefully and took it off the hook. It flopped mightily, and the sun caught its silver scales so that they flashed and made a beautiful sight. Holding it up, Josh said, "Look, isn't it a nice one? I think that will feed you and me, and we already have enough for all the others."

Sarah was still peeved and walked over to the clear stream that trickled over mossy rocks. Kneeling down she washed her hands carefully and then dabbed at her face. "Well, I'm not going to clean these fish," she declared. "You'll have to do that."

"No way," Josh said. "We made a bet, remember?" He pulled a stringer up, added the fish to it, held it up, and admired the fish, flopping and trying madly to escape. "The one that caught the most fish doesn't have to do any of the cleaning," he said. "I've caught six, and you've caught three. That means you lose."

Sarah gave him a disgusted look, then shrugged. Suddenly a light came into her eyes, and she smiled slightly. Stepping a little closer to him she put her hand on his arm and said softly, "Joshua, I just thought of something."

Josh stared at her suspiciously. "When you talk soft like that," he said, "I know you're going to try to get me to do something—but you won't."

"Oh, Josh, you know how I hate cleaning those nasty old fish! If you'll clean them for me, I'll make you a fresh pie tonight—all your own."

Josh's face lightened. "Well now, that's business," he said. "But it has to be apple, though, with cinnamon, just like I like."

"That's a deal," Sarah said quickly. She smiled and patted his arm fondly. "Come on, let's go home. It's getting late anyway."

They followed the path that traced its way along the stream. They talked about the fishing trip, and when they came in sight of the house, Josh said, "You know, I wouldn't care if we stayed here for another month. I'm tired of going out on quests and fighting dragons and things like that."

Sarah giggled and looked at him mischievously. "I don't remember you fighting any dragons," she teased. "That was Reb, if you'll remember."

Josh reached over and hit her lightly with his fist. "Never mind that. Living in the caves of Mondar was enough adventure for me," he declared. "Remember those T-rexes?" He gave a shiver. "They had teeth six inches long, just like sharpened knives. They could bite a horse in two."

Sarah nodded. "I wonder how they're getting along? They were good people, weren't they, Josh? You usually think about cave people as being thickheaded—but they're not. They didn't know as much about some things as we did. Down deep, though, they were just like us."

The two walked along thinking of the adventure they had just had. They were part of a group called the Seven Sleepers. The group had been miraculously preserved, surviving a nuclear war. They had awakened in a world they had never imagined, filled with strange beings, and discovered that they had slept for many, many years. All things were changed now. Earth was gone, and the place they now inhabited was called Nuworld.

They discovered that they had been preserved to serve a strange man called Goél, a leader who fought against the powers of darkness that threatened to overcome the world. Many adventures they had known, facing

danger and trial, often failing but learning to trust in the power of Goél. They had just returned from a strange land inhabited by primitive people. They had been glad to get back to a very nice house. Goél said before he left, "You need rest. Enjoy yourselves. Someday I will come again, and you must once again go forth to combat the powers of darkness."

Now as the two young people moved along, light-hearted and laughing, they were suddenly alarmed by a horseman that burst out of the dense woods to their left. He was upon them almost before they knew it, and Josh saw that he was a fierce, warlike man.

"Look out, Sarah!" he yelled, for the stranger had drawn a shining sword that flashed in the red rays of the dying sun. Josh threw himself in front of Sarah, wishing desperately that he were armed. Now there was nothing he could do but try to stand between the warrior and Sarah. "What do you want?" he cried out, standing straight.

The warrior was mounted on a fine, clean-limbed horse that looked swift as the wind. He was not a large man but slender and muscular. His eyes were almost black, and he swept the two with a careful glance. His skin was darker than usual, burned golden by the sun. He had a black beard and trim mustache. He wore a light robe that was almost white and reminded Josh at once of pictures of inhabitants of the desert back in Oldworld.

"What is your name?" the rider demanded.

Josh ignored the whirling sword that was held almost at his chest. He was afraid but was determined not to let it show. "My name is Adams—Joshua Adams," he said. "Why do you come at us with a sword? Are you a bandit?"

For one moment the lean, tanned bronze face of the rider relaxed, and his white teeth showed as he smiled. "No, I'm not a bandit. If I were I would have what I wanted from you already."

Sarah stepped from behind Josh. "What is it you want?" she demanded.

The rider examined the girl carefully and seemed to like what he saw. "You have courage," he said. He nodded as if pleased and added, "I like that." He sat on his horse for one moment, then seemed to make a decision.

In one swift move he came off the animal in a smooth, gliding motion. He slipped his blade back into the sheath at his side, then shoved the hood back from his face. His hair was black as hair can be, and he was a handsome man, though somewhat the worse for wear. He looked tired, and when he spoke again his voice sounded weary. "My name is Abdul," he said. "I serve Chief Ali Shareef."

"Ali Shareef?" Josh shook his head. "I've never heard of him. What's he the chief of?"

"My people live far away," Abdul said. "As you see, my steed is weary." He slapped the coal black stallion fondly on the shoulder and said proudly, "It takes a long, hard ride to tire him out."

"Who are you looking for?" Sarah asked. She had appeared frightened at the rough appearance of the heavily armed rider, but now she came to stand beside Josh saying, "If we can help you, we will."

Abdul stared at her. "I seek Goél," he said and watched their faces. "Do you know of such a one?"

Sarah and Josh exchanged glances, then Josh nodded. "We are the servants of Goél."

"Good!" Abdul seemed to sigh with relief. He suddenly seemed very tired, and his lips grew white. He leaned against his horse, and his head drooped. "I-I want to—" He grabbed at the horse and seemed to be falling.

Josh leaned forward and held him up. "He passed out—or he's about to!" he cried. "We've got to get him back to camp."

"Let's see if we can get him back on his horse—then we can lead him in." Sarah came up and asked, "Can you hear me, Abdul?"

He didn't answer but nodded slightly.

"Come on, Josh, help me boost him up."

The two youngsters managed to get the warrior back in the saddle.

"You lead the horse, Sarah. I'll get on behind him and hold him." Josh leaped up behind Abdul and supported him so that he would not fall. "All right, let's go."

Ten minutes later they reached the small rest house, set back in a grove of trees. As Sarah led the black steed into the yard, the house seemed to erupt with young people. The first out was Bob Lee Jackson, age fourteen. Bob, whose nickname was Reb, was a tall young man with pale, bleached hair and very light blue eyes. He wore a white cowboy hat and came at once to help Josh get the man out of the saddle.

When he spoke, his voice had a distinct Southern twang. "Well, where in the cat-hair did you come up with this one?" he demanded. He was very strong, and between the two they helped the man to a chair on the porch. "He looks like he's done run out of spizerintum—and he sure does look thirsty."

A small-boned girl of fourteen, Abigail Roberts, ran at once to get water. She was a pretty girl with light blue eyes and fine blonde hair, very conscious of her appearance. She brought a glass of water and put it to the lips of the stranger.

He drank thirstily, and when he opened his eyes she smiled at him. "There—is that better?"

Abdul swallowed, then looked around. "Yes, much better." He looked at Josh and said, "Are these your friends?"

"Yes, that's Bob Lee Jackson with the funny hat, and this is Abigail Roberts. This little guy here is Wash." He indicated a small black boy no more than thirteen who had come to watch with round eyes. "And this is Jake Garfield."

Jake was small—the same age as Abigail and not much larger. He had flaming red hair and alert brown eyes.

"And my name is Dave Cooper." The speaker was the largest and obviously the oldest of the young people. At sixteen, he was tall, athletic, and handsome enough to have been a movie star back in Oldworld. He had yellow hair and blue eyes and looked down curiously at the visitor. "Where did you spring from?"

Josh interrupted. "His name is Abdul and he's looking for Goél. He's come a long way, he says."

Jake demanded, "What do you want with Goél?" He was a suspicious boy by nature, and some of the hard adventures he had undergone had made him more so. He looked around, and his eyes narrowed. "How do you know he's not a spy?"

"Oh, Jake, you'd be suspicious of your own grandmother!" Wash said in disgust. "Give the poor fellow a chance, can't you?" He was almost diminutive, certainly not as long as his name, which was Gregory Randolph Washington Jones. There was a kindly light in his light brown eyes. "Don't pay any attention to Jake." He smiled, his white teeth flashing. "He was born suspicious."

Josh had been the leader of the Sleepers from the beginning, except for those times when Goél had indicated otherwise. Now he said, "You're obviously tired and haven't eaten. Suppose we fix you something and afterward you can tell us about yourself?"

"That would be good," Abdul said. "I am very hungry. I've not eaten in two days."

Josh said, "Well, I've got enough fish for all of us. Come on, Jake, you and I'll clean them. The others can get the rest of the meal thrown together."

The Sleepers at once became very active. They were all curious about the visitor, and Abbey insisted on leading him inside and putting him in an easy chair. She sat down and talked with him while the meal was being prepared. Finally she came and whispered to Sarah, "Isn't he the handsomest thing! He looks like a desert sheikh."

"Yes, he's nice looking all right," Sarah said, putting a platter of fried fish on the table. "I wonder what he wants with Goél?"

At that moment Josh came in and said, "Looks like supper's ready. Come on, let's get at it. Abdul, you sit right here. I hope you like fried fish."

Abdul sat, his eyes going over the food, and soon he and the others were eating heartily. Josh kept the conversation going, but every eye kept going back to the man of the desert.

Finally Sarah brought out two pies and said, "Josh, you'll have to share your pie with everyone else."

Josh's face fell, but he shrugged. "All right, I guess I'll have to do it then. Sure hate to give up my pie though." He ate his slice, and when he had finished he leaned back and said, "Well, Abdul, if you want to tell us your story, I guess we're ready to listen."

Abdul's face was relaxed. He had been listening to the talk of these young people and seemed somehow to understand that he had nothing to fear. "I come from far away," he said. "My people are being enslaved and killed by the Winged Raiders."

"The Winged Raiders! Who are they?" Jake demanded.

"They are the raiders of the desert," Abdul said, his lips growing tight.

"Why are they called the Winged Raiders?" Wash asked.

Abdul seemed surprised. "Why? Because they have wings!" he said. "Why else would one call them that?"

"You mean, like real wings? Like birds?" Reb asked. "Yikes, that'd be something!" His blue eyes gleamed, and he shook his head. "To be able to fly like a bird—I've always wanted to do that!"

"I wish these could not fly," Abdul said slowly, "but they can."

"You called them raiders." Josh said. "Exactly what do they do?"

The Sleepers sat quietly as Abdul told how the strange beings came sweeping out of the sky, raiding his people. "They steal our young people and take them away, and we never see them again." His face fell, and he said, "My own brother was taken away when he was very young." Angrily he slapped the table. "They take our crops, they take our people—we live in fear. They must be stopped."

"Why did you come to us?" Josh asked. "Is it that you seek help from Goél?"

"There is a song that some of our people have heard," Abdul said slowly. "It says that one day the Seven Sleepers will break the power of the dark ones. We have heard this, but no one understands. I alone asked our chief to let me come." He looked around the circle and said, "You are the Seven Sleepers?"

"Yes, we are," Josh said quickly.

"Then you must come. Otherwise we will perish."

"We can't go unless Goél commands us," Dave said at once. He shook his head, adding, "We're under his command."

Abdul began to beg, "Surely he wouldn't say no. Can you not ask him? We understand he is a good force and that wherever he goes, peace follows."

"He comes and goes when he chooses," Sarah said. "We have no way of calling him."

Abdul seemed to slump in his chair, his face grew weary, and he shook his head. "You are my last hope. If you will not come, I think our people must all perish." He looked around and said, "I must go back to them."

"Wait!" Josh said quickly. "You're tired and your horse is tired. Rest a few days. Perhaps Goél will come. If he does and if he commands us, we will come and help you."

Abdul nodded slowly. "That would be good indeed. I will hope that Goél will come—and that he will send the Sleepers to help rid my people of the raiders of the desert!"

THE SEVEN SLEEPERS SERIES

EMPRESS
of the
UNDERWORLD
GILBERT MORRIS

MOODY PUBLISHERS
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1

The End of the Rope

Come on, Abbey. You can't sit down!"

The group of teenagers straggling through the depths of the jungle were completely exhausted. One of the young men reached down, seized the blonde girl by the arm, and pulled her to her feet. "They've almost caught up with us!" he gasped. "We've got to keep going!"

"I can't go any farther!"

"You've *got* to, Abbey," the boy said firmly. "They're only a few minutes behind."

The speaker was tall and gangly, with auburn hair and blue eyes. His name was Josh Adams, and he was the leader. He looked around quickly and saw that Sarah Colingwood was not in much better shape than Abigail Roberts.

Sarah, however, had her lips drawn up in a determined line. She took Abigail by the other arm. "I'll help you, Abbey," she said. "We can't stop here."

The other four members of the group, all young men, looked to be as bad off as these three.

Dave Cooper, at fifteen, was tall, athletic, and handsome, but now his clothes hung on him in rags, and his cheeks were hollow.

Jake Garfield was a slim redhead. His clothes also were ragged, and he was huffing and puffing. "Don't know if we can make it this time!" he gasped.

Another fifteen-year-old, with light blue eyes and pale bleached hair and wearing a cowboy hat, looked in better shape than the others. He was breathing hard, but there

was still a natural strength in him, and he said quickly, "Maybe I should go back and head them off."

Josh managed to grin at him. The boy's clothes were in tatters, but the hat looked good. "No, let's stick together, Reb," Josh said. "I know you're ready to fight a sack of wildcats, but we don't have anything to fight with. Let's just get going."

"Are you all right, Wash?" Reb turned to a small black boy, the youngest of the group at thirteen. He was sitting on the ground, drawing in deep gulps of air.

"Yep, I'm all right," he said, getting up. "But my feet won't go any faster." He looked over his shoulder and shivered. "I heard a fellow say once, 'If you hear a foot-step behind you, don't look back, 'cause something might be gaining on you.'"

Josh slapped the boy on the arm. "I guess that's right. And it's hard not to look back when something's after you."

He'd no sooner spoken than Abbey slumped down again and put her head in her arms. She began sobbing without control, and the others looked at her helplessly.

Sarah Collingwood leaned over and patted her shoulder. "We're all right. We've been in worse spots than this, Abbey."

"No, we haven't! We've been running for days now. Every day we've almost got caught. We're all going to die!"

Her hysteria was almost infectious, Josh saw. Everybody, weak from lack of food and sleep, was in bad shape. He thought, *If I were just a good leader, I'd know what to do. But we've run so hard and long, it looks like the Sanhedrin's going to get us this time.*

As he stood there despairing, wondering when the soldiers of the Sanhedrin would come bursting out of the jungle, he thought about how far he and his friends had

come since being brought to this strange place called Nuworld.

All seven of them had been hidden in sleep capsules on planet Earth, just before a nuclear war. Years had rolled by, changing almost everything, including the geography of the earth and the beings that inhabited it. And they came out of the sleep capsules to find that the world was in a struggle between good and evil. The evil was led by a strange being called the Dark Lord. His henchmen were a council called the Sanhedrin. They were a powerful force and were filled with hatred for a good leader called Goél.

At the thought of Goél, Josh said as heartily as he could, "We'll get out of this. Goél won't let us down." He sincerely hoped this was true.

He knew Goél was gathering his forces in Nuworld for a battle against the Dark Lord and the Sanhedrin. Goél had already sent the Seven Sleepers to several places to help Goél's people. Now, as they were returning from one of their missions, they had been ambushed by the Dark Lord's soldiers. For days they had struggled through this thick jungle, and now it looked as if they were not only lost but doomed.

Wash was watching Josh's face. "It don't look too good, does it?"

Reb slapped Wash on the back. The two had become fast friends, though they had not liked each other at first. "Why, sure, we'll get out of this. I remember the many times General Robert E. Lee got penned up and looked like he'd lose, but he'd come out of it."

Jake stared at the tall cowboy with a sour expression. "He lost the war though, didn't he?"

Reb didn't like to be reminded that the South had not won the Civil War. He glared at Jake. "Well, we ain't losing this one. I think—"

"Be quiet, Reb! I hear something." Josh held up a hand with alarm.

Instantly Abbey stopped crying and sat up. As they all listened hard, she said under her breath, "We're going to die—I just know it!"

"We'll fight 'em with whatever we've got." Reb pulled a pocketknife out of his tattered trouser pocket, opened it, and looked into the jungle defiantly. "They're getting close, I reckon. I can hear them."

Someone was indeed coming through the jungle, and it could only be an enemy.

"Get ready," Josh said. "We'll do the best we can. You girls head on out of here. We'll hold them off. Maybe you can get away."

"No, we're all staying together." Sarah's blue eyes flashed as she faced the wall of green jungle. "There," she whispered. "There they are. They're coming!"

Forms moved out of the greenery, and Josh, who had been ready to see the red cloaks of the soldiers of the Sanhedrin, yelled, "Look! It's Mat and Tam! And Volka too!"

The two approaching in front were short—not much more than three feet tall. They were fat as sausages. Their bellies gave promise of exploding any minute and were held in by broad, black leather belts with shiny brass buckles. Both had plump red cheeks and small black eyes peering out from under bushy brows. Both had beards that came almost down to their belt buckles. The newcomers looked identical.

"Well, I knew I'd have to come and get you out of a mess sooner or later!" one of them declared crossly.

Grinning, Josh said, "I know you're Mat. Still the eternal pessimist." He shook the dwarf's hand and turned to his exact replica. "And you're Tam. I know you've got a good word."

Tam grinned broadly. "Why, we'll get out of this. It's just a piece of cake."

Mat and Tam had been with the Sleepers on their first adventure. They were Gemini twins, looking exactly alike but the exact opposite in spirit. Whereas Mat was grumpy and always seeing the dark side of things, Tam was jolly and always cheerful.

Tam turned now to the third newcomer and said, "We've got your old friend here. You remember Volka, don't you?"

Volka was no less than a giant. He was enormous, towering over the Sleepers, twice their height. He had huge bulging muscles and a rather simple face. "Ho!" He beamed. "It's me!"

At once he was surrounded by Sleepers pulling at him. They'd always liked Volka.

Sarah said, "Now I feel safe with you around."

Mat scowled. "Well, you're *not* safe. The Sanhedrin troops will be here in five minutes."

"What're we going to do?" Abbey wailed. "I just can't go any farther."

"Why, don't worry about that." Tam grinned. "Pick her up, Volka." He watched the giant reach down and do so. "Now," Tam said, "come this way. We'll show you something you'll like."

The Gemini twins turned and plunged into the jungle, and the Sleepers followed. Volka brought up the rear, carrying Abigail, speaking to her from time to time, but she appeared too worried to answer.

They made their way down a trail, and though they were exhausted, the Sleepers were so cheered by the sight of old friends that everyone seemed to gain new strength.

"How did you know to come after us?" Jake asked.

Tam looked back and grinned. "Why, Goél sent us to get you."

"Is he close by?" Wash asked hopefully.

"Not far," Tam answered.

"Far enough that we need to hurry up. If you'll stop dragging your feet," Mat complained.

The Sleepers moved as quickly as they could. The rain-forest trail was very narrow, and the trees were so tall that little sunlight filtered down below. The jungle floor was almost bare here because small plants could not grow due to the lack of sun.

After they had crossed two small streams, Tam directed them to walk through the trees to their left for a hundred yards. "This probably won't throw them off our trail completely," he said, "but it's the best I can do. Come along."

Soon the forest began to grow less dense, and finally when they were all practically falling down, Tam said cheerfully, "Look, there it is!"

Josh, right behind him, looked up to see a house with a steep thatched roof. A half dozen strange-looking figures stood in front of it. His heart leaped up.

"I'm so glad to be away from the Sanhedrin!" Sarah said.

Abbey raised her head from Volka's shoulder and looked. "Why, it's just an old house!" she exclaimed. "Surely Goél won't be *there*."

"Any port in a storm," Dave Cooper said. "As long as they've got something to eat and some clothes for us to put on, I'll be happy."

They walked into the clearing, and indeed the house was very old. It was built of small logs.

One of the odd-looking people came forward—a shaggy-haired man, his garments made of black fur. "You found them," he said in a deep voice.

"Yes, Zohar," Tam said. He turned to the Sleepers and said, "This is Zohar. He is our leader. And Zohar, these are the Seven Sleepers you've heard about."

He named them off, and the strong-looking man's gray eyes gave each one almost a physical touch.

Zohar nodded when Tam had finished and said, "You are tired and hungry. We will eat, then we will talk."

"I say amen to that," Wash said. He looked at Reb and winked. "I wish they had some hominy grits and hog jowl, don't you, Reb?"

Reb grinned faintly. "I bet you'd settle for moon pie and Dr Pepper, wouldn't you?"

Wash nodded. "I sure would. Seems like the things I miss most from the old time is moon pies and Dr Peppers."

The Sleepers threw themselves down to rest while some of the inhabitants began cooking over an open fire. They were strange-looking people indeed. Some were tall and thin and pale, others short and muscular, not much larger than Tam and Mat. The nuclear explosion had done strange things to the inhabitants of Earth, so that these human descendants looked little like people from the time of the Sleepers.

Yet they seemed to be loyal and good, so the Sleepers relaxed. They sat around sipping the delicious liquid that one of Zohar's helpers had produced, and soon the meal was ready.

When the seasoned meat was put before them, Reb opened up his knife and began slicing it. "Where's Goél?" he asked. He stuffed a huge piece of meat in his mouth and chewed furiously. "Boy, that's good!" He closed his eyes and chewed even faster. "What is this anyhow?"

"Wild pig," Zohar said. "We had good hunting this morning."

"If I just had some barbecue sauce to put on it," Reb said, "it'd be perfect. But is Goél here?"

Zohar looked around and shrugged. "He was, but he had to leave."

"When will he be back?" Josh asked.

"He not say," Zohar grunted. He seemed to be a man of few words, and Josh could get nothing more out of him for the time being.

Looking around her, Sarah saw another house down the way. Other people were moving about it, and some of them finally came to greet the Sleepers. They were mostly wounded men, some of them terribly so. There were also women and children. All looked tired and frightened.

After the meal was over, Zohar sent the people away and sat down to talk. "Goél says that you should rest until he sends for you."

Abigail was looking up at the rather dilapidated house. It seemed ready to fall in. "I'd hoped we'd get something better than *this*," she whispered to Sarah. "It looks awful."

Sarah did not complain, however, and soon the two girls were shown their sleeping quarters.

Zohar led them into the house and pointed to a ladder, then upward. "You sleep there." He nodded at a woman, who gave them two rather thin blankets, and then the girls climbed to the dim loft, where they found some straw and nothing more.

At once Sarah began to fix a bed for herself. "I'm so tired, I could sleep on stone."

She lay down and watched Abbey try to fix her hair.

They had lost all their baggage, and now the blonde girl's hair was stringy and her face was dirty. Her mouth was turned down in a sour look, and she said, "I'll never get clean again. And look at my hair—it's awful!"

"Well, we all look pretty awful, but we'll get cleaned up tomorrow. I'll fix your hair for you, and we'll find something to wear."

Abigail gave her hair a yank, then plopped down on her blanket. Pulling half of it over her, she began to complain again. "What good does it do, Sarah?"

"What good does what do?"

"All that we've been doing for Goél. We've been here for over a year, living with cave people, living under the ocean, living with bird people. And we've helped all of them—but the war isn't any closer to being over."

"Goél sent us on those missions. If we hadn't gone," Sarah said, "these people would all have been lost to the Dark Lord."

"But we can't go *everywhere*. You've seen the Dark Lord's soldiers—there are thousands of them. They have weapons. What do we have?"

Sarah was almost asleep, but she heard Abbey's question. She turned toward her and said gently, "We have Goél." It disturbed her that Abbey was so bitter.

She had known for a long time that Abbey was spoiled. *And if I was as pretty as she is*, she thought, *I'd have been spoiled too*. But now she saw that there was resentment in the girl. "You've got to learn to look on the inside of things, Abbey. Not the outside."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, no matter how bad things look—circumstances, I mean—there's always hope." She tried hard to think of an example and said, "Remember the American Revolution at Valley Forge? The Americans were starving and freezing, and the British had so many trained troops with all the weapons they needed and food. If anybody looked at that, they would've said, 'Those Americans will never win their independence.' It just looked hopeless."

Abigail looked over at her friend, and there was rebellion in her smooth face. "That doesn't have anything to do with us," she muttered.

Sarah reached over and patted Abbey's hand. "Yes, it does. Washington and his army were in a hopeless situation—but they won. And we'll win too. You'll see."

Abbey stared at her unbelievably. "I'm going to see if I can go to sleep. This blanket's probably got fleas in it."

THE SEVEN SLEEPERS SERIES

VOYAGE
of the
DOLPHIN

GILBERT MORRIS

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1

Captain Daybright

The waves were slow and long and emerald green, washing up on the sandy white beach. Twenty feet out in the surf a gray rock rose like a bald head. The breakers threw white droplets over the two boys standing on it.

"Oh, come on, Reb. You're not going to get hurt. I'm surprised at you." The speaker was a small black boy wearing a red bathing suit. He was much smaller than his companion, who was tall and lanky with bleached hair and very light blue eyes. "It won't hurt you. It's just water."

Bob Lee Jackson, known as Reb to his companions, shivered and stared at Wash Jones. Then he sat down abruptly on the rock and shook his head. "Never did like water," he mumbled. "Give me some old flat Texas desert every time." He looked mournfully out at the breaking surf and said, "I'll never get used to this."

Wash grinned, his white teeth shining against his dark skin. "Shoot! I never thought I'd see the day you was more scared of something than I was."

This was true enough. The two boys were members of a group called the Seven Sleepers, teenagers who had been thrust into an alien world after the earth was ravaged by a fierce nuclear war. They had been preserved by being placed in sleep capsules programmed to keep them alive. Many years afterward, they awakened and found themselves in a world far different from even what they had seen in *Star Wars*. Much of what they had known was gone, and the planet now was inhabited not only by hu-

mans but by strange beings that sometimes seemed to come out of very bad nightmares.

Reb looked up and shook his head sadly. "Just give me a horse, and I'll be all right. But this water—it ain't natural to be swimming around in a thing like this."

"Funny thing to me," Wash said merrily, enjoying himself immensely, "you didn't mind facing a dragon back at Camelot, and now you're scared of a little old fish." He referred to the fact that Reb had almost jumped out of the water a while ago when a small fish brushed against his leg.

It delighted Wash—at fourteen, the smallest of the Sleepers—that here at last he had found at least one area in which he outdid the boldest and most active of the Seven Sleepers.

"Come on, then. Let's get off this blamed rock before an octopus or something gets us!" Reb stood to his feet, stared longingly at the shore, and then with a shout made a wild jump. He hit the water, went under, came up sputtering, and clawed his way toward the beach.

Wash made a clean dive and swam alongside.

"Come along. You can do it, Reb. Let's see you swim!"

But when they were only five feet away from land, Reb gave a terrible cry. "He got me!" he screamed. "He got me!"

"What is it?" Wash stopped swimming in alarm. He knew there *were* dangerous things in the sea, such as sharks and barracuda. He grabbed Reb's arm. "What is it? Are you hurt?"

Reb shook him off and floundered to shore, then fell on the sand and held his foot. "He got me!" he said. "I don't know what it was!"

"Let me see." Wash leaned over and grabbed the tall

boy's ankle, then said with relief, "It's OK. It's just a jellyfish sting. You must have stepped right on it."

"It's killin' me!" Reb moaned. "I didn't know a jellyfish had teeth!"

"They don't have teeth," Wash said, "but they've got little stinging cells, I guess. Come on, we'll put something on it."

He pulled Reb to his feet and helped him limp down the beach to where two other Sleepers were sitting on the front porch of the shack where the group was staying.

"Sarah!" Wash yelled. "You got any meat tenderizer?"

Sarah Collingwood, a small graceful girl of fifteen with brown eyes and long black hair, got up at once. She was wearing a white bathing suit that set off her tan. "What's wrong?"

"It's Reb."

"What do you want meat tenderizer for? You're not going to eat him, are you?" Josh Adams was a gangling boy with auburn hair and blue eyes. Also at fifteen, he was tall for his age. He had not filled out completely but gave evidence of being a strong man when he did. He was the leader of the Seven Sleepers.

He came off the porch and stared at Reb, who sat down, holding his foot again. "What's the matter?"

"He stepped on a jellyfish."

"Well, what are you going to do with meat tenderizer?" Reb demanded.

"Best thing in the world for a jellyfish sting or just about any other kind of sting. You got any, Sarah?"

"I don't think there is anything like that in Nuworld," Sarah said doubtfully. "Anything else work?"

"Well, some of that stuff we use for mosquito bites, I guess. That might work."

The three tried to comfort Reb, who looked very little like the courageous young man they all knew. He was bold as a lion about most things, but he hated the sea. He hated water of any kind. He also was a terrible patient.

Then two other members of the group came up. Jake Garfield was fourteen and small, with red hair and brown eyes. "What's the matter with Sir Jackson?" he said. He was jealous of Reb for his strength and made fun of him whenever he saw a weakness. "Did he stub his toe?"

The sixth member of the troop, Abbey Roberts, now joined the onlookers. She was a beautiful fourteen year old with China blue eyes and long blonde hair; and even though she wore a rather worn swimsuit, her face was carefully made up. "What's the matter, Reb?" she asked, kneeling down to look at his foot.

"I was attacked by a sea monster," Reb moaned.

"No, you weren't. You just stepped on a jellyfish." Josh laughed. "Come on, Sarah, get him some lotion."

That was the end of that adventure, but Reb did not let them forget about it. Even the next day he limped around, saying, "No, I'm not going in that water. No telling what would happen. I'd probably get bit into by a gigantic whale. That ocean ain't nothing to fool with!"

All except Wash were sitting on the front porch as Reb made this declaration yet again. They had just finished an early supper of fried fish, hush puppies, and a salad with a secret dressing that Sarah refused to identify.

It was a beautiful evening. The sun was a huge red disk in the sky, and the waves were gently lapping at the shore.

Jake leaned back, put his hands behind his head, and half closed his eyes. "This ol' beach looks like a postcard of the Gulf. I used to go down to Gulf Shores, Alabama, with my folks," he said thoughtfully. "Sure was fun." Si-

lence fell over the group, and he added, "I'd like to do that again."

It was a familiar theme. All of them in one way or another longed for the homes that were forever gone. And all knew that they could never go home again. Still, from time to time, one of them would voice that longing, as Jake had just done.

For a while the only sound was the wind blowing through the tall sea oats and the murmuring of the ocean as it rhythmically lapped onto the shore.

Then the silence was broken as Josh sat up, saying, "There comes Wash, and he's got somebody with him."

"It's that sailor that's been taking him fishing," Sarah said. "Ryland Daybright."

Abbey sat up and began to smooth her hair back. "I declare, he's the handsomest thing," she said.

"You *would* notice that." Dave Cooper grinned. He was the oldest Sleeper and was used to Abbey's ways—she had been accustomed to admirers all of her life in Old-world and still wasn't past such things. He stared at the pair approaching and said, "They sure make a contrast, don't they? Like Mutt and Jeff."

"Who's Mutt and Jeff?" Jake demanded.

"You don't know? Characters in an old, old comic strip."

He was right about the contrast. Wash was under-sized, and Captain Ryland Daybright was well over six feet. He had blond hair that came almost down to his shoulders and a pair of cornflower blue eyes that glittered in the sun. He had a tapering face, and his skin was tanned a copper color. He looked very strong and confident. Wash had met him a month earlier and had spent most of his time since then with the captain, who was teaching him to sail, he claimed.

"Hello, Captain Daybright." Abbey smiled and got to her feet. "We've just finished eating, but there's some supper left. Sit down, and I'll get you some."

Captain Daybright flashed her a quick grin. "That might be pretty good, Miss Abbey," he said. He sat down on the porch and stretched out his long legs. He was wearing a pair of ancient white pants that were cut off above the knee and a white shirt that left his powerful arms bare. "I guess you could eat a bite, couldn't you, Wash?"

"I sure could, Cap'n." Wash grinned.

Abbey and Sarah brought out some leftover fish and hush puppies, and as they ate, Wash spoke with excitement. "Y'all ought to come on the *Dolphin*. It's the coolest boat there ever was!"

"Why'd you call it the *Dolphin*, Captain?" Josh inquired. He admired the handsome face of the captain as well as his obvious strength and agility.

"Oh, I always liked dolphins," Captain Daybright said. He washed down the last of his meal with a long drink of cool water, then held the cup in his big hands. "They stay together like family, you know. You've seen them out there, coming up out of the water with those fins of theirs. They make a pretty sight, don't they? Well, I'd like my ship to be able to sail just like that."

But even as he spoke, a frown creased Daybright's face. He shook his head and said no more.

The others talked for a while, and finally Sarah, who was always perceptive, asked, "Something wrong, Captain?"

Daybright shrugged his broad shoulders. "I guess something's always wrong, isn't it?"

His reply was so bitter that all the Sleepers turned to look at him. They had visited the ship he had been working on when they arrived at the coast and had found him to

be a cheerful, optimistic young man who knew lots of songs and endless stories about the sea.

"Not like you to be so down in the mouth," Reb said. "What's the matter?"

Daybright turned the cup over in his hands. "I'm having trouble getting a crew," he said slowly.

"Why, I wouldn't think that would be hard," Wash said. "A beautiful boat like that."

"It's a *ship*, not a boat," Daybright said sharply. "If you're going to be a sailor, Wash, you've got to learn to call things by their right name." He grinned briefly at the others and said, "He called the deck a *floor* this morning. I almost pitched him over the side."

Abbey moved a little closer to the captain, her eyes fixed on his sunburned face. "I'd think that with a beautiful ship like the *Dolphin* you wouldn't have any trouble finding a crew."

"Ordinarily I wouldn't, but I've got a chance to make a voyage that most sailors would avoid." He swept the Seven with his eyes and said, "I don't guess you've ever heard of the Lost Sea?"

"I've seen it on the charts," Josh said. "Way out in the middle of nowhere."

"It's mostly uncharted waters," Captain Daybright said. "Way off the shipping lanes. All we know is a little about some of the lands that lie just on the edge of it."

"Why do you want to go there?" Dave asked. "Just for the adventure?"

"No, I've had enough adventure to last me a lifetime." Daybright smiled briefly. He set the cup down, clasped his hands together, and stared at them. "There's a man who wants to hire my ship. His name's Mennic Catalina. He's got lots of money, and he wants me to take his daughter to her wedding. Actually, he couldn't find another captain and crew willing to go."

"She's getting married to somebody out in the Lost Sea?"

"Well, there are some pretty big islands out there. The way Catalina tells it, the king of one of them has contracted to marry his daughter. The ship's captain who takes her to him will be richly paid—by Catalina and the king as well."

An irritated look crossed Abbey's face. "Why doesn't the bridegroom come for her—get married here in *her* country?"

"Can't say." Daybright shrugged. "I guess kings do pretty well what they want to."

"But what's the problem?" Dave demanded. "If her father's rich, why has he had trouble hiring a ship and crew to take her?"

"This kingdom his daughter's going to is deep in the Lost Sea. The people there are good sailors and send their ships here to the mainland often—but there are some bad currents and some seasonal winds out there. Lots of ships have started out from here for that part of the world and just never showed up again. Some say they fell off the edge of the earth." He grinned. "I know better than that, but they don't return."

"Maybe a sea monster grabbed them and pulled them down," Reb suggested. He had a vivid imagination about bad things in the ocean. "I wouldn't want to go out to a place that had things like that."

"There's nothing like that out there," Daybright said, "but there are bad winds and bad currents to drive a ship off course." His broad shoulders slumped, and his lips drew down in a frown. "This was my big chance. I've put all I could beg, borrow, or get credit for in the *Dolphin*. If I don't pay the money back right away, I'll lose her to my creditors."

"Looks like there'd be *some* sailors that would go," Josh offered. "Maybe you could promise them a bonus."

"They're all afraid of the Lost Sea—" Daybright hesitated "—and they're afraid of the ship. It's the first one I've ever built. They don't think it'll hold up in heavy seas under those winds. But I've made it better than most ships!" he said defiantly. "Put some of my own improvements in it! They say it'll break up the first time the wind blows or the waves get high."

"I'll bet it won't." Abbey smiled. "I bet it's the best ship out there."

At the age of twenty, Daybright felt a hundred years older than any of the Sleepers. But he had heard of some dramatic things they had done. He grinned at Abbey. He had known she was a flirt the first time he saw her.

Then he looked around and said longingly, "If you were all about five years older, I'd recruit you. You wouldn't be afraid to go, would you?"

"Well, I wouldn't exactly be afraid," Josh said, "but I'm pretty cautious."

"What do you mean, five years older?" Wash demanded. "I'm fourteen years old—and Dave there, he's sixteen and big as any man. We're big enough."

"Well, it's not a matter of being big or even old enough, really." Daybright smiled fondly at his small friend and slapped Wash's shoulder lightly. "You see, some people just don't do well at sea."

"That's me." Reb nodded. "I wouldn't do well at all on a long voyage. I'm not cut out for it."

"Some people aren't," Captain Daybright agreed. "You're out of sight of land. The only thing that you've got to look to is the ship that's under you and the courage of the captain and the crew."

"That sounds great," Wash said. He turned to the others, his eyes bright with excitement. "We've been fussing because there was nothing to do—that Goél hasn't given us any assignments for a while. Well, here's our chance. We can go on this voyage with Captain Daybright. It'll be fun."

Reb said, "No, it wouldn't be fun! We'd all probably get drowned."

"Oh, I don't think that would happen," Josh said quickly, "not with a good sailor like Captain Daybright. But we're not experienced sailors."

Daybright looked them over. They were a hearty-looking group of young people. Josh, Reb, and Dave were tall and strong. The others were healthy enough. The captain said slowly, "Well . . . ordinarily I wouldn't even think of it . . . but if you'd come with me, I'd train you, and I could pay well—as soon as the king pays me—and you'd get to see some exciting things. Sailors do get to see the world."

At once an argument broke out. Josh and Dave wanted to go. So did Sarah and Abbey. But Reb and Jake were doubtful if not downright loud in their arguments against it.

Wash, of course, was jumping up and down with excitement. "We can do it!" he cried. "We can do it! You'll just have to teach us how to raise the sails and that kind of stuff!"

Daybright nodded. "I would do that." Then he got to his feet, saying, "You talk it over. If you'd like to make a nice voyage, here's your chance. A little danger is involved—" he paused and looked around "—but I understand all of you have seen some of that. You're young, but you've lived a pretty full life, if what I hear is true."

After the captain left, the seven engaged in an argument that lasted until bedtime.

Finally Josh said, "Well, we'll all have to agree. We're here for a rest after our adventures, and maybe a sea voyage would be fun—though I think it'd be a lot of work."

"I don't mind the work," Dave said eagerly. "Just think! We could learn how to sail a ship. That could come in handy a little later. We don't know what we'll be doing for Goél."

Goél was the mysterious figure who guided their activities. He came and went without warning, often asking them to go to dangerous places.

"Well, that's just it," Wash said. "He might come at any time and ask us to go down the cone of a volcano, right into the fire. That's the kind of thing he does. Not that I mind," he said hastily, "but I think we deserve a little relaxation once in a while. I vote that we go."

Josh insisted they hold on a decision until they all were perfectly agreed.

The next morning, those in favor of the voyage began a pressure campaign, and by noon they had almost convinced Jake and Reb that a sea voyage would be a good way to spend a few weeks.

Reb was the last to give in, but finally even he threw up his hands, saying, "All right! All right! You're worse than a blasted parrot, Wash! I'll go on this old trip just to get you to hush!"

Wash let out a yell and called the others around. "Reb says he'll go! Come on, let's go tell Captain Day-bright! I feel like a sailor already!"

The Seven Sleepers made their way down to the harbor, where the *Dolphin* was riding on the small swells.

Captain Daybright saw them coming and came to greet them. He met Wash's big smile with "Well, it looks like I've got me a crew. Come on aboard the *Dolphin*, then. We'll start teaching you a few things about how to sail a ship."

Reb was reluctant even to step onto the ship. He finally crawled aboard and held to the mast as if the vessel were going to drop away from under him.

"I don't like this," he said to Wash. "I'm doing it for you. So the next time I want to go on some kind of wild goose chase, you've got to pay me back."

"Yeah, sure. I'll do that," Wash said. He looked up at the mast, swaying as the ship rolled, and said happily, "This is going to be a fun time!"

THE SEVEN SLEEPERS SERIES

ATTACK
of the
AMAZONS

GILBERT MORRIS

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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1

Happy Birthday—I Think!

Ow! Will you get your big foot off me, Josh!” Sarah Collingwood jerked her foot out from under the heavy weight that had descended on it, and shoved Josh Adams away. “Don’t stand so close, will you!”

Josh Adams blinked into the murky darkness. “Well, I couldn’t help it,” he said. “Besides, why are you standing so close to *me*?”

“Why, she’s got a crush on you, Josh. Didn’t you know that?”

The voice came from somewhere across the darkened room, and the Southern twang identified it as belonging to Bob Lee Jackson, better known to his friends as Reb. He chuckled. “I don’t know why we have to go to all this trouble for old Dave. Just for a little old thing like a birthday.”

“It’s his *seventeenth* birthday, that’s why!”

That voice came from another far corner. Jake Garfield started to add something else but then said, “Quiet! I think I hear him coming.”

Josh heard footsteps approaching the door, and he held his breath until it opened. For a moment there was silence.

Then, when the young man who had come inside turned on the light, all of them shouted at the top of their lungs, “Happy birthday! Happy birthday, Dave!”

“Hey, what’s going—” Dave Cooper could not say more, for suddenly he was surrounded by the six other

teenagers, who lunged from their positions, beat him on the back, and shook his hand.

Sarah ruffled his hair so that it fell down into his eyes.

“Hey, cut it out, will you? You want to kill a fella?”

“You only have one seventeenth birthday,” Josh said, giving him a hard clip on the shoulder with his fist. “You better make the best of it.” Then he said, “All right, you guys, step back and give him a little air. After all, he’s a senior citizen now, you know. We have to be careful of our elders. Old Dave is getting along in years.”

The subject looked anything but elderly. Dave was exactly six feet tall and well-built. He had yellow hair and blue eyes, and his tan gave him an outdoors look. He grinned at Josh. “That’s right! Have a little respect for us old folks.”

Abbey Roberts said, “Back in Oldworld we used to spank people on their birthday. One lick for every year old they were.”

“Yeah, you go ahead, Abbey.” The speaker was a small black boy whose full name was Gregory Randolph Washington Jones. This would have been tiresome to say, so he was known simply as Wash. He had large eyes, and his teeth shown brightly against the blackness of his skin. He nudged Abbey with an elbow. “Go on. You start.”

Abbey, at fifteen, had blonde hair and blue eyes and a perfectly shaped mouth. Now she pouted rather prettily. “He’s too big. I’ll let you guys take care of that, but I will wish him happy birthday like *this*—” She pulled Dave’s head down and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Then she said, “Now you, Sarah.”

Sarah Collingwood was sixteen. She was small, graceful, and had brown eyes and black hair. Quickly she slipped over and kissed Dave’s other cheek. “And

now, you guys can give him that spanking anytime you want to.”

“We’ll take care of that later,” Reb said. “Let’s give him his presents before we get on with that little ceremony.”

Reb was lanky and muscular at six feet one. He had light blue eyes and sun-bleached hair. He was known to give a Rebel yell when he got excited, and now his eyes shown with fun as he said, “Birthday gift!” and shoved a package at Dave.

Self-consciously Dave took the present, muttering, “You guys shouldn’t have done this.”

“Yeah, you don’t deserve it,” Reb said. “We all agreed on that. Now, go on and open your presents.”

Dave opened the bulky package, and when the paper was ripped away, he looked up and grinned. “Hey, Reb! These are the eelskin boots that I wanted so much. I don’t know how you paid for these!” He rubbed their shiny surface. “But thanks. Just what I wanted.”

“Well, here you are,” Josh said, thrusting a small package at him. This proved to be a razor-edged knife with a bone handle and a black leather sheath that mounted on the belt. “Be careful you don’t cut yourself on it—” Josh grinned “—and don’t let Jake borrow it. You know how he dulls a knife.”

Jake Garfield was much shorter than Reb or Josh or Dave. He had a head of flaming red hair, his brown eyes were sharp, and he had a mind that worked constantly. He ignored Josh’s remark and handed Dave a plain brown-paper parcel. “Didn’t have time for fancy wrapping paper,” he mumbled.

Everyone watched as Dave unwrapped the gift, for Jake was the most innovative of the Seven Sleepers. He loved to invent things, and he watched carefully as Dave took off the paper.

“Well, I sure appreciate it,” Dave said, puzzlement in his blue eyes, “but what is it?”

“Just push that little button on the side and you’ll see.”

Cautiously Dave turned over the small black object. It was less than an inch thick, about two inches wide, and three or four inches long. Its smooth case was broken only by one small button. “It won’t blow up, will it?” he asked.

“Just push the button,” Jake repeated.

Dave held the box at arm’s length—he was aware that some of Jake’s inventions were rather scary—and pressed the button.

Instantly a high-pitched howl nearly deafened them all.

Dave threw the box across the room and covered his ears. The rest of the Sleepers did the same, and it was Jake who scrambled across the floor and shut off the noise by pushing the button again. He turned his bright eyes on Dave and nodded. “Well, how’d you like that?”

“Wonderful!” Dave exclaimed, removing his hands from his ears. “Maybe I’ll be able to hear again in a week or two. What’s it for?”

“Why, if somebody jumps out and starts to mug you, you just push the button. It’ll scare the waddle out of them.”

“It’ll sure deafen them,” Josh said ruefully. He shook his head and grinned at Jake, for it was just the sort of thing that Jake would do.

Sarah presented her gift, a shirt that she had made herself out of some very soft blue material. “If it’s too big, I can take it up,” she said anxiously.

Dave held up the shirt, admired it, and smiled at her. “It looks great, Sarah. Thanks a lot.”

Then Wash stepped up. “Here. Try this on for size.” His gift proved to be a beautifully constructed snake-skin belt, which Dave liked exceedingly and said so.

Abbey’s gift was even larger than Reb’s, and her eyes glinted as she gave it to Dave and watched him open it.

It was a fawn-colored suede hat—much like the kind Australians wore back in Oldworld. It had one side pinned up, and he put it on at once. “Just a fit,” he said. He looked around for a mirror and saw none. “How do I look?”

“You look like Crocodile Dundee,” Josh said cheerfully. “Now, let’s have the cake. That’s all the presents you get.”

Abbey and Sarah had made a huge chocolate cake—Dave’s favorite—and he blew out the seventeen candles that they’d set afire.

“You always were windy, Dave,” Reb said, as the smoke curled upward. “Now, let’s get at that cake.”

Abbey served huge slices on plates, and they all sat around eating and talking cheerfully.

As Josh sat down next to Sarah, he looked around and thought, *It doesn’t seem like two years since we got blasted out of everything we knew and came to Nuworld.* As he looked at his six friends, memories flashed through Josh’s mind, and he was soon lost in thought.

The seven of them had been placed in sleep capsules just before a nuclear bomb devastated the earth. Through the miracle of Dave’s father’s science, they had slept for many, many years. When they awakened, they discovered themselves on a strange planet. The nuclear war had changed the shape of continents and oceans. Mutations had arisen, so that strange and exotic life forms now roamed the earth.

And they soon learned that there was a war going on, involving a strange figure called Goél, who appeared and disappeared with startling speed. Goél stood for the old values that they had learned to treasure, but he was opposed by sinister forces led by one called the Dark Lord. All of Nuworld was now a battleground, and the Sleepers had thrown themselves into Goél's service without reservation.

Now Sarah leaned over and asked, "What do you think this assembly is about, Josh?" She spoke of a calling together of the leaders of the House of Goél. They had come from strange and distant places all over Nuworld, and all of them were wondering what was to come.

Josh, who was the leader of the Sleepers, stretched out his six-foot frame in his chair. He had grown up very fast and was still a little embarrassed by his tall, gangly shape. He had not filled out yet like Dave and still had not lost some of his adolescent countenance. He had auburn hair, blue eyes, and had always been a shy boy, unsure of himself. He wondered often why Goél had chosen him to be the leader when there were others smarter and stronger. He had learned to cope with this, however, and covered his insecurities with a good imitation of confidence.

"I think it must be something pretty big," he told Sarah. "Goél has never done this before. He's always come to us individually." He scratched his cheek thoughtfully, then took another huge bite of chocolate cake.

The Sleepers had been hundreds of miles away when the summons from Goél came, and they had rushed as fast as they could to the general meeting place.

"It must be trouble," Jake said.

“Why does it have to be trouble?” Abbey asked. “Maybe it’s good news.”

“You never saw a mob rushing across town to do a good deed,” Jake stated flatly. “Anytime we get a call like this, you can bet there’s got to be a problem.”

“Well, we’ll find out in the morning,” Dave said. He looked fondly around at his friends. “After all the troubles and hard times we’ve been through, I guess we ought to be used to difficult things.”

Dave looked more like an adult than anyone else in the room, although he was only one year older than some of the others. But as it is with some young men, the year between sixteen and seventeen had brought a maturity that did not come to all. He was broad-shouldered, and his body had filled out with sleek muscles so that he looked like an Olympic swimmer.

“I guess,” Dave said, as he put down his empty plate, “whatever Goél says, we’ll do it. Sometimes I think we’re losing, though—that the Dark Lord is gaining ground so fast that we’ll never make it.”

“You can’t think like that, Dave. None of us can!” Sarah exclaimed. Of all the Sleepers, she, perhaps, had more faith in victory than any of the others, and now she said cheerfully, “Let’s get to bed. We might get sent off on a mission to the ice cap tomorrow. Who knows?”

For once the young people had been housed together. The boys had been assigned two rooms, and Abbey and Sarah had a room to themselves. The bathroom was down at the end of the hall, however, and they had to take turns.

While they were waiting, Dave drifted over to Abbey. “I sure like this hat.” He put it on again and turned for her inspection. “It looks good, doesn’t it?”

“Why don’t you let somebody else brag on you, Dave? You’re getting downright conceited.”

There was such sharpness in Abbey’s voice that Dave was surprised. He looked at her and answered in kind. “You’re a fine one to be talking!” he snapped. “You spend half your time primping.”

“I’m just trying to look nice. I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

“I don’t either. That’s why I’m trying on my new hat!” Actually, Dave was still pleased with his birthday party. He changed his tone. “It was awful nice of you and the rest of the gang to do this for me, Abbey,” he said. He studied her for a moment, thinking how pretty she was. “You know,” he said, “when you grow up, you’re going to be some foxy lady.”

“When I grow up! I *am* grown up!”

“Fifteen is not grown up.”

“I’m almost sixteen. Besides, girls are more mature than boys. Didn’t you know that?”

“I don’t know who invented that rumor. I never noticed girls being that much smarter.”

Abbey, for some reason, was out of sorts. Perhaps she was nervous about the mission. It had taken a terrible experience in the Underworld for her to learn that her beauty was not something to be trusted. She had learned that lesson the hard way—and not completely, perhaps. And if one of the Sleepers could be said to be fearful, she was the one. The others had to constantly keep her cheered up. Now she was upset with Dave.

“Of *course* girls are more mature than boys, and they could run the world better too.”

“You’re just bossy,” Dave said. He settled the hat on his head and tried it at a new angle. “I wish I had a mirror,” he muttered, “so I could see what I look like.”

He glanced at her. “Women would make a mess of the world if they ran it.”

An argument broke out at once, and the two picked at each other until they were really angry.

Sarah came into the room, stopped dead still, and stared at them. “Are you two arguing *again*? What’s it about this time?”

Dave reached out and patted Abbey on the head—something he knew always infuriated her. “This child thinks she’s grown up. Try to straighten her out, will you, Sarah? And tell her that men are made to take care of women. You know how it is—women are weaker. They need to be cared for.”

Furiously, Abbey slapped Dave’s hand away. “Get out of here . . . you . . . you immature *man!*”

Dave laughed at her and, turning, left the room.

“Why don’t you two stop picking at each other?” Sarah asked in exasperation. “It looks like you’d get tired of fighting all the time.”

“He thinks he’s so smart—and so grown up!”

“Well, Dave *is* pretty smart,” Sarah said calmly, “and he’s very grown up. He’s big as a man, and he’s changed a lot over the past two years. Try to get along with him, won’t you, Abbey?” She sighed. “I don’t think we can stand you two fussing much more.”

Abbey sniffed. “I’d like to be his boss for just about one week! I could really make something out of him.” She smiled and tapped her cheek gently with a finger. The smile brought out a dimple, and she nodded. “Yes, I certainly would like to have charge of Mr. David Cooper for a little while!”

THE SEVEN SLEEPERS SERIES

ESCAPE

with the

DREAM
MAKER

GILBERT MORRIS

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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1

Last Days for Nuworld

I'm so tired, I don't think I can make it another day, Sarah!"

Josh Adams slumped down beside the small stream that wound through the village and locked his fingers behind his head. Josh was a tall, gangling teenager with a mop of auburn hair and dark blue eyes. He closed his eyes, saying, "It seems like it's nothing but one mission after another—and *nothing* ever really gets accomplished."

Sarah Collingwood sat beside him and crossed her legs Indian fashion. She was wearing a pair of faded blue slacks and a man's white shirt. Her black hair had just a trace of red in it. She had large brown eyes and was, at fifteen, experiencing that first bloom of womanhood that comes to young girls. She was small and graceful, but fatigue marked her face as she answered quietly, "I know what you mean, Josh. It's hard to get up every morning knowing that nothing is really going to change."

Five yards away a flock of sparrows began a miniature war, fighting and rolling in the dust. They cheeped angrily, and finally the largest bird appeared to win some sort of victory.

Josh had opened his eyes slightly to watch the battle, and a cynical smile tugged the corners of his lips upward. "You'd think birds could agree, wouldn't you? Even the birds can't get along in this blasted Nuworld!"

“Oldworld wasn’t a paradise either,” Sarah reminded him. “Birds fought there sometimes too.”

But Oldworld was long gone. It had been called Earth once, but a nuclear holocaust had seared the planet. Continents moved, ice caps melted, new lands rose out of the sea. The inhabitants of the world changed too. The explosion caused mutants of all sorts to spring up in the races that developed after the Great Burning. There were giants, and dwarfs, and Snake-people, and all sorts of alien life forms roaming the planet that was now called Nuworld.

Josh and six other teenagers had been saved from the nuclear explosion by a small group of scientists, including Josh’s father. The seven young people had been put into special capsules, where they slept for many years. Finally they had emerged to find a strange planet in which a sinister being called the Dark Lord was engaged in a horrifying struggle against Goél, the leader of the free peoples. The Seven Sleepers, as they were called, became the servants of Goél. He sent them on several dangerous missions, which had taken them under the sea, across burning deserts, to the tops of mountains, and into jungles harboring saber-toothed tigers.

“How much longer do you think it will be?” Sarah asked idly. She plucked a dry dandelion out of the green grass, examined it, blew at it. As the tiny fragments scattered, she tossed the stem down, saying, “I wish we would have done with it. I know Goél is going to win—but sometimes it doesn’t *look* like it.”

Josh was almost asleep. He mumbled drowsily, “It’s not just the physical stuff that’s so hard. That’s bad enough. I get tired, but I’m tired *inside*. You know what I mean, Sarah?”

“I know. I think they called it ‘battle fatigue’ back

in the wars on Oldworld. Men just got so tired fighting they couldn't go on."

The two rested, saying little, for in truth they were exhausted. They had actually been little more than children when they had first been called from their sleep capsules; now, Josh and Sarah were sixteen and fifteen and had matured greatly. They had paid a price, however. The strain had taken its toll on them.

Finally they wandered up to the house where the Sleepers had been staying since their last assignment.

Josh looked up the four steps that led to the main floor and shook his head. "I don't know if I can climb those steps," he groaned.

"Sure you can." Sarah took his arm. "Let me help you. I was always taught to respect my elders."

Josh managed a grin. "I'm only a year older than you are." As they reached the landing, he said, "That means we'll never get married."

Sarah shot him a startled look. "What do you mean by that?"

"I've decided to marry an older woman. Maybe someone seventeen."

"I hope you marry a widow who's forty years old and has six redheaded, mean children!"

They stepped inside as Sarah said this, and the five young people who were sprawled around the room heard her comment.

"What do you mean, 'redheaded children'?" Jake Garfield piped up. "Redheaded kids aren't mean. They're like me—easy to get along with." Jake had a New York City accent even after being away for so long. He was small, with brown eyes—and red hair.

A laugh went around the group, and the tallest boy, a handsome, athletic seventeen-year-old named Dave Cooper, added, "Everybody knows redheads are

hot-tempered. Now you take us guys with yellow hair and blue eyes—we're right out of *GQ* magazine."

A groan went up, and the girl sitting next to Dave, Abbey Roberts, said, "There's no chance of you winning the humility award, Dave Cooper!"

At fifteen, Abbey had large blue eyes, long blonde hair, and beautifully shaped features. And despite the hardships of their journey, she had managed to dress in a neat light-green skirt and a tan blouse that fit well. She was carefully made up, and her hair was done expertly. She looked over at the small black boy sitting by the window, looking out. "Wash, do *you* think redheads are mean?"

Wash was really named Gregory Randolph Washington Jones. He had been born in New Orleans and had grown up on the street there until he had been popped into a sleep capsule. At fourteen, he was slightly undersized, but he continually wore a cheerful smile. "I suppose redheads are just about like the rest of us. Some good and some bad—but Jake there, I expect he's one of the better redheads."

The young man leaning against the wall beside Wash was six feet one, even though he was only sixteen. Lean, lanky, and muscular, he had very light blue eyes, bleached yellow hair, and was sunburned. Freckles were scattered over his face. His name was Bob Lee Jackson, but everyone called him Reb. He was a true Southerner from the hills of Arkansas originally, who was still fighting the Civil War.

"When do you think we might get out of this place and do something?" Reb asked. "I'm gonna go crazy! It's like being in the pokey. Why, my Uncle Seedy, if he was here, he'd get us on our way toward a new adventure."

A groan went up. Of all the Sleepers, Reb was the only one who continually looked for new adventures.

“Don’t tell me about your Uncle Seedy. I don’t want to hear about him anymore,” Jake protested. He had been busily working on some invention.

“What’re you making now?” Josh inquired, coming over to look at the mass of wires and tubes and coils.

Jake stared at him adamantly. “I’m not going to tell you until it’s finished. I’ve taken enough ribbing from you about my inventions.”

“I hope it’s not a bomb that’s going to blow us all up,” Sarah said wearily. Then she slumped down onto one of the straight-back chairs. “Though I don’t know but what that might be a welcome relief.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say so, my daughter.” The new voice seemed to come from nowhere.

And then every one of the young people leaped to his feet.

Standing in the doorway was a tall man wearing a light gray robe. He had pushed back the hood, and his long brown hair hung down past his shoulders. He had warm brown eyes, a generous mouth, and could have been anywhere between twenty-five and fifty.

“Goél!” Josh shouted, and instantly his fatigue seemed to drop away. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

“I know you have,” Goél said, “but I have had many miles to travel.”

“Here, we have some apple cider. Let me heat it up for you, Goél,” Sarah said quickly. She was given to touches like that—cooking and keeping house, whenever the Sleepers had a house to keep.

Abbey could not cook an egg without ruining it, but she was good at serving, and as soon as Sarah poured the cider, Abbey served Goél first and then the rest of them. “I hope you like it, sire,” she said.

“I’m sure I will,” Goél said. He drank gratefully, then took a seat on the chair that Wash had brought.

“Thank you, my son.” Goél waved an arm. “All of you sit down. I have many things to say.”

“Will you stay long this time, Goél?”

“No, I must be gone almost immediately.” When a slight groan went up, a smile touched his full lips. “Some day it will be different, but for now we must do what we must.”

Reb said, “Well, that’s what John Wayne always said. You all remember? In about a hundred movies he said, ‘A man does what he’s got to do.’ I guess him and you are right, Goél. So what’re we going to do now?”

“I know what you would *like* to do.” Goél fixed his eyes on the tall boy. “You would like to go back to Camelot, and put on a suit of armor, and fight dragons again.”

Reb looked down at the floor, embarrassed. In truth, their adventure to the land of Camelot had been the high point of his life. He had become an expert jousting and had, indeed, done battle with something like a dragon. When he looked up, his light blue eyes glowed. “Is that where we’re going? Back to Camelot?”

“I’m afraid not, Reb.” Goél seemed to note the disappointment on the young man’s face and said, “Few of us get to do just what we’d like to do. That is a prize that must be won. But I promise you that some day, if you trust me and obey, you will come through to your heart’s desire.”

He then looked around at the Sleepers, and when Goél’s eyes locked onto his, Josh thought, *He knows everything I’m thinking—he knows everything I’ve ever done!* As the eyes continued to hold his, another startling thought came, *And I think he knows everything I’m going to do!* It was disconcerting. Josh, like every other boy and every girl, had a secret life that he would not care to see paraded before everyone’s gaze.

Yet, somehow it was comforting to know that here was one who knew all about him but still had faith in him and love for him.

“I’m ready to go wherever you say, Goél,” he said simply.

“You are a good servant of Goél, Joshua.” There was pleasure in the tall man’s eyes. He sipped his cider and for some time sat talking about the groups all over the world that bore his name. They were called, collectively, “The House of Goél,” and they comprised all sorts of strange beings as well as those who looked much like dwellers of Oldworld.

Despite Goél’s statement that he must leave soon, he found time to speak with each one of the Sleepers alone.

Sarah prepared a fine supper—including steaks and fried potatoes and a salad—and Reb somewhere had found a quantity of fresh milk. They enjoyed the meal together, and afterward, when night came on, Josh lit the lamps.

Finally, Goél arose. “You have a mission to perform once again, and you have never failed me. You have gone through dark hours, dangerous times, but this, I think, will be perhaps your most dangerous mission of all.”

“It can’t be worse than those giant squid!” Wash exclaimed. It had been Wash who braved an enormous octopuslike creature in the undersea world.

“There may be physical dangers, yes, but some dangers are worse. There are many men and women and young people who could face a physical trial but who would falter before other kinds.”

“What other kinds of trials do you mean, Goél?” Sarah asked.

“Spiritual trials are always harder than any other

kind,” he said. “We’re in a spiritual battle for the world, as well as a physical one, and I would warn each of you to be on guard. You’re all my servants, and I’m proud of each one of you. You all have your strengths . . .” His eyes glided again over each one of them as he said quietly, “And you all have your weaknesses. That is the way of men, and it always will be in this world.”

“Can you tell us more about the mission, sire?” Dave asked.

“Something strange and terrible has been happening in Nuworld.” Goél’s face darkened, his eyes smoldered. “Some of my most trusted servants have disappeared.”

“*Disappeared!*” Jake exclaimed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly that. They have fallen out of sight.” He hesitated, then said, “I caution you again. Be *very* careful! You might be one of the next to disappear. Those that have been taken have been some of my most trusted aides, even as you are.”

“But what are we to *do*?” Abbey asked with some bewilderment.

“Your mission is simply to find my servants and bring them back. They have somehow fallen under the power of the Dark Lord, and they must be rescued.”

“But how can we find them?”

“That is part of your mission—finding where they have gone. I will give you a helper along the way. But there will be those who would lead you astray. So be very careful.”

“How will we know our helper?”

Goél said quietly, “I have given the one who will help you a special phrase. When he meets you, he will say, ‘The stars are doing their great dance.’ Do not trust anyone who does not say *exactly* those words—‘The

stars are doing their great dance’—and then you must say as a countersign, ‘Yes, and every tree will sing.’”

For a few moments he gave them further instructions, concluding, “As you trust in me, so will your mission succeed. Farewell, my Seven Sleepers.” He hesitated, then said, “The last days are upon this planet. The final battle looms on the horizon. I think this may be your last mission before that battle—and your most dangerous. Take care. Remember the signs.”

Goél turned and without another word stepped out of the doorway and faded into the darkness.

A silence fell over the group, and at last Josh said wearily, “So we’ve got to find the missing members of the House of Goél, and then we’ve got to get them free.” He slouched down in his chair, saying nothing more.

As Sarah and Wash began cleaning up the supper dishes, Wash said, “I never seen Josh look so worn out. It looks like he can hardly keep his eyes open.”

Sarah glanced over at Josh, who was sprawled in his chair, his head tilted back. “He’s exhausted—but then we all are.”

“Well, we better get some more get up and go.” Then Wash looked down at the dishes in his hands and shook his head. “But it seems like my get up and go done got up and went!”

THE SEVEN SLEEPERS SERIES

THE
FINAL
KINGDOM

GILBERT MORRIS

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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1

Final Call to Battle

A sullen, hot sun beat down upon the weary travelers winding their way along the mountainous road. Their feet raised tiny puffs of dust that rose in the almost motionless air, then fell back to earth.

The last member of the procession—a smallish fifteen year old with red hair—stopped abruptly and pulled off his hat. He yanked a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped the grime from his face, spat on the ground, and called out, “I’m tired of eatin’ all this dust! Let *me* go in front for a while.”

The leader of the hikers, tall, gangling Josh Adams, did not even break stride. Auburn hair peeped out from under the wide-brimmed straw hat he had on. He kept his light blue eyes fixed on the road ahead as he called back sharply, “Stop complaining, Jake! We’ve all had to take our turn in the back.”

Jake Garfield jammed his hat onto his head and plunged forward, sending up choking clouds of dust. “I don’t see why we can’t wait until it rains. This dust is killing me—I can hardly breathe!” He looked off to the low-lying mountains on one side and abruptly ran into the youth in front of him. “Why don’t you pick up your feet, Wash!” Jake snapped, giving the boy a shove.

Wash, who had been born with the rather grand title of Gregory Randolph Washington Jones, caught his balance. The heavy knapsack on his back pulled him backwards, and he grunted involuntarily. The smallest boy of the party, Wash had ebony black skin

and large, innocent brown eyes. Now he rolled those eyes wildly.

“Watch where you’re going, Jake! Them big clodhoppers of yours are enough to sink a battleship!” Wash was good-natured, however, and turned around to wink at Jake. “If you ever grow into your feet, you’ll be a big fellow, sure enough.”

Sarah Collingwood, marching along behind Josh, was small and graceful with brown eyes and black hair. Dust coated her hair just now, and her face was tense from their long march. She hooked her thumbs under the straps of her knapsack. Pulling at them to ease the discomfort, she groaned. “I’m so thirsty I’m spitting cotton. Can’t we stop and find a stream somewhere?”

“Me, too, Sarah—I’m ready to drop.” The speaker just behind Sarah was Abbey Roberts, a pretty blue-eyed blonde, who was at the moment extremely irritable. “This dust is under my fingernails, in my hair, up my nose. I’ll *never* get clean again! We’ve got to stop!”

Josh gave a heavy sigh. “All right, have it your own way—but we’ll never get to Dothan at this rate.”

“Hey—look over there—I think I see a line of trees. Maybe there’s a creek alongside them.” Reb Jackson was tall, lean, muscular. Traces of the old South were in his speech, and the journey had not worn him down as much as it had the others. He was tough as a piece of leather, and now he shoved his sweaty tan Stetson back on his head and squinted against the bright sun. “I’ll go see how she looks. You come when I holler.” He left the line of march, broke into a half run, and soon was hidden in a gully.

“I wish I was as tough as that fellow,” Dave Cooper said. At seventeen, he was the oldest of the Seven Sleepers. He was tall and athletic, though the weary trek had worn him thin at the moment. He wore a

white cotton shirt, yellowed now with the thick dust of the road, and he took off a light felt hat to wipe his brow. He continued walking, his blue eyes searching the gully for Reb. "There he is—waving his hat. I expect he's found water."

"Well, let's go," Josh said wearily. "But we'll have to make better time tomorrow to make up for today."

"I don't see how we can do any better tomorrow," Jake mumbled as they left the road and trudged through thin grass toward where Reb stood at the line of trees. "We've been practically running all day."

"I guess Josh is afraid we'll be late," Wash said. "After all, somebody's got to keep this bunch on the move."

"We've been on the move for weeks," Jake stated flatly. "We won't be any good when we do get there at this rate. We'll be so dried out we won't be able to even *hear* Goél—much less do what he says!"

Wash shrugged and said nothing. He was accustomed to Jake's grumbling. Now, however, he felt there was some ground for it—the Sleepers had been hard driven.

As he plodded along, Wash thought of the strange life into which he had fallen. He had been born in the slums of a great city. If nothing had happened to redirect him, he would have probably joined a gang and perhaps been shot in one of the drug wars that raged there incessantly.

But he had not met that fate. Along with the other six Sleepers, he had been chosen and placed in a sleep capsule just before nuclear war swept the earth. Time passed, and Wash lay in his capsule oblivious to the raging fires, explosions, and terrible changes that took place on earth. Finally the Sleepers had been awakened and came forth to find the world that they had

known gone forever. They were now inhabitants of Nuworld, where mutations had created strange beings such as giants, snakepeople, and dragons.

Wash kept his eye on the figure of Reb, waiting ahead, and thought of the adventures they had experienced together under the leadership of Goél. At first Wash had not understood Goél, but now he knew that their strange leader was the only hope of Nuworld. The Sleepers had immediately discovered that Nuworld was under the dominion of a sinister being called the Dark Lord. It was only the force of Goél that kept the Dark Lord from tyrannizing and enslaving the entire planet.

Wash thought of how they had fought Goél's battles, narrowly escaping death many times, and wondered what task lay ahead for them. They had been summoned to a council, where the leaders of the House of Goél would rendezvous on the Plains of Dothan.

The Sleepers had been halfway across the globe when the summons came. Their trip had already involved scaling high mountains, sailing treacherous waters, fighting hunger and thirst across desert plains—but now, hopefully, they would soon be at the gathering.

Josh slipped his knapsack from his shoulders and stretched painfully. He did not want to show weakness, but he felt drained and knew that he could not have gone on much farther himself. Looking down at the small stream that wound in snakelike fashion through the rocks, he said, "Well, let's make camp here. We'll eat and get a good night's sleep."

Sarah began going through her pack and shook her head. "We don't have much food left. I'll do the best I can."

"I'll make a fire," Reb said. "Wash, do you and Dave want to help me drag up some of that firewood?"

Tired as they were, they all eagerly joined in the business of setting up camp. They had become experts at this, for they had camped out under many strange skies and in dangerous places. Soon the tent that the girls shared was up, the blankets for the boys rolled out, and the smell of cooking meat on the air.

By the time the food was ready, the red sun was sinking rapidly into the horizon. The boys plopped down, eager for the meal that Sarah and Abbey were preparing.

"I'm hungry enough to eat a skunk!" Reb declared. He was sitting cross-legged. His eyes were bright as Sarah passed him a chunk of meat roasted over the open fire.

"This isn't skunk," she said, "but it's all we have."

"Actually what is it, Sarah?" Dave asked.

"It's part of that last antelope that Reb shot three days ago."

"Huh!" Jake grunted as he took his share. "Must be gettin' a little ripe by now. It'll probably make us all sick." Nevertheless, he chewed with evident enjoyment.

Sarah divided the meat as evenly as she could and then said, "We've only got six potatoes. How do you divide six into seven?"

"Just give me Wash's potato." Reb grinned. "He doesn't like potatoes anyhow."

"You keep your mouth off my potato," Wash protested. "I wish it was a sweet potato, though."

They wrangled for a while. Finally Dave settled the problem by sharing his potato with Abbey. "I'm the only mathematician around here," he said. He put some of the steaming potato into his mouth, then juggled it around fiercely. "Wow, that's hot!"

“Baked potatoes always are.” Abbey smiled. “Don’t be so greedy.”

The Sleepers made the meal last as long as they could. When they came back from enjoying drafts of fresh water from the brook, Sarah said, “I’ve got a surprise. I saved these for a special treat.” She pulled four apples out of her bag and smiled. “Dessert. I kept them, but how do you divide four into seven? That’s worse than six potatoes and seven people.”

“Just let me have Reb’s and Dave’s.” Wash laughed. “That way I think it’ll come out even.”

Sarah managed to distribute close to equal slices.

Josh took his portion and said, “You’re a miracle, Sarah! You keep dredging up food when you think we’re all out.” He bit into the apple and chewed thoughtfully. “It’s almost as sweet as those that grew in the orchard out behind our house back in Oldworld.”

“I remember those,” Sarah said dreamily. “But I don’t think these are near as good.”

Josh and Sarah had been close friends in Oldworld, and he thought that now they were closer than ever. They had been little more than children when they had been snatched out of their homes and placed in the sleep capsules, but now they were quickly approaching maturity. They sat apart from the others, for a time saying little. Finally, Josh demolished all of his apple except for a fragment of core. He stared at it thoughtfully. “I’d like to have four or five of those.”

“You’d have a stomachache if you did. Remember how you ate those green apples back when you were fourteen? I thought we’d have to take you to the hospital. I never heard such hollering and carrying on.” Sarah’s brown eyes held a trace of fond amusement.

Eventually fatigue drove the Sleepers to bed. To Josh’s dismay, they slept late the next morning, and the

sun was high in the sky when they finally dragged themselves out of their blankets.

Reb looked at the creek and said, "I'm gonna fish a little bit. We gotta have something fresh to eat."

Josh was already shaping his blanket into a roll. "We don't have time for that. Better get ready."

"I reckon we've got time to catch a fish," Reb argued.

"You heard what I said, Reb! Get your bedroll pulled together. We've got to get out of here."

Reb stared at him, his face reddening. "The rest of you go on, Josh. I'll catch some fish and catch up with you."

"We can't be separated," Josh snapped. "I don't want to argue about it anymore."

"I'm not arguing," Reb stated. "I'm just going to do what I said."

Sarah laid a hand on Reb's arm. "I'd like to have some fresh fish too, Reb, but we're running late. And we don't want to miss the gathering, do we?"

Josh could see that the Southerner was angry, but Sarah's soft words seemed to draw most of the anger from him.

Reb said shortly, "Well, all right then—but I think it's plumb foolish."

Ten minutes later they had broken camp and were on the road again. A light drizzle began and settled the dust. The ground underfoot became somewhat muddy, but Josh was relieved not to be breathing yellow powder.

When they stopped for a midmorning break, he went to sit by himself under a spreading tree at the roadside.

Sarah came over and sat beside him. "Don't be angry at Reb. He's just wound up tight—like all of us."

“I know it,” Josh said immediately. He was a gentle-spirited boy, not at all certain of his abilities. He often felt that someone else—someone such as Reb, who was the best fighter—should be the leader of the Sleepers. Goél had named Josh, however, and he had to obey.

Picking up a stick, he drew a meaningless figure in the dirt. Silence had fallen over the land, and a slight breeze had risen. Looking up, Josh said wearily, “We can’t go on much longer, Sarah.” There was a touch of defeat in his voice. “I don’t like to talk like that, but it looks to me like the Dark Lord is winning. We’re getting pinned down all over the world. Everywhere we go, the Sanhedrin has its spies.”

“But think of how many we’ve helped, Josh. If we hadn’t gone to the land of the Amazons, for example, the Dark Lord would have won the whole tribe over.”

“Oh, sure.” Josh shrugged his lean shoulders. “We’re winning a little—but the Dark Lord’s servants are everywhere. They’re like . . . like a cloud of locusts. And you can’t kill them by stepping on them one at a time.”

Sarah said quietly, “I think everything’s coming to a focal point.”

“What does that mean?”

“I mean—well, there’s something *important* about this summons to come to the Plains of Dothan. I think that we’re going to find out something exciting from Goél.”

Josh nodded slowly. “He did say something the last time about a final battle.” He took a deep breath and tried to smile. “I hope this is it. It’s been a long, hard road the past couple of years.”

Sarah put a hand on his arm. “You’ve done wonderfully well, Josh,” she whispered. “No one could have led better than you.”

Josh suddenly grinned and looked much younger than his sixteen years. “You always know how to make a fellow feel good, Sarah.” He put his hand over hers and squeezed it. “But you’re right. We’ll make it. We might walk our legs off—but we’ll make it.”

The huge field called the Plains of Dothan lay at the base of some high-rising mountains to the east and the west. The Sleepers found the level floor of the plain swarming with activity.

Reb suddenly let out a yelp. “Look! There’s Princess Elaine!” He ran ahead to greet a young woman mounted on a beautiful snow-white steed.

The girl wore a long white dress and a cone cap with a blue veil on the tip. She looked like a medieval princess, which was, in a way, what she was. Elaine came from the Nuworld land of Camelot, where people still lived the lives of knights and ladies and warriors.

Behind Elaine rode a troop of knights wearing armor that glistened like silver. They carried their lances high. Several laughed as Reb came to greet his old friend.

“My Reb!” Princess Elaine said. She came down from her horse and gave him her hands.

When Reb kissed them, a cry of laughter went up from the other Sleepers and from the knights.

Reb flushed but kept his head up. “How’s my horse?”

“We’re still keeping him for you. I’ve been expecting you to come back to Camelot every day since you left.” The princess was looking up at Reb. “You have grown. You’re a man now.”

The other Sleepers, too, were meeting old friends from their past adventures. Jake ran at once to a tall

man and a beautiful young woman who had large wings attached to their backs.

“Sureflight—and Loreen!” These were the winged warriors of the desert where Jake and the others had learned to fly. He approached them, grinning from ear to ear. “I was hoping you’d be here. Did you bring a set of wings for me?”

“No, you’ll have to come back to our home,” Loreen said.

She put out her hands, and Jake grabbed them and held them tightly. “It’s so good to see you, Loreen!” he whispered. “I’ve been lonesome for you.”

Sureflight looked down at his daughter and the young redhead, and amusement came to his eyes. “We have been waiting for you to come back. Loreen has been very lonely.”

Jake looked quickly at Sureflight and then at the masses of people about them. “Looks like we’ve got a little business here first. I think there’s some kind of trouble.”

“You’re right, Jake,” Loreen said. “Goél’s message for us said to bring all of our warriors as soon as we could. We came on ahead of them. There’s going to be a battle—I think there’s no doubt about that.”

Josh and Sarah soon ran into Captain Ryland Daybright and the beautiful Dawn. Abbey and Dave and Wash saw still other old friends, and it was a pleasant time indeed. A meal had been prepared for the large company, and they ate and drank, enjoying a wonderful time of reunion.

And then a voice came over the air, clear and strong.

“Welcome, my friends, to the House of Goél!”

Instantly Josh knew that voice! He turned and saw a figure standing on a flat rock that rose above the

floor of the plain. A tall man, wearing a light gray robe with the hood thrown back, he stood before the host, looking around him calmly.

Goél. The mysterious leader who carried the battle to the Dark Lord. He was burned by the sun, and his eyes were deep set and darkly brooding. His hands were corded with strength, and there was a powerful presence about him as he looked around at those who had come at his bidding.

“My faithful friends, you have come—and I thank you all. For years now you have fought the Dark Lord. Many of our comrades have fallen in the struggle—and some will fall in that one which is to come.”

A voice called, “Is it time, Goél?”

“Yes! The time comes for the final battle. Will Nuworld be ruled by the tyranny of the Dark Lord, or will peoples everywhere come into the House of Goél and live as free beings should?”

The question seemed rhetorical, and he stood there for a time, apparently thinking. Then he began to tell them of many things, and no one moved as long as he spoke. At last, he said, “I will be giving you more instructions later—but for now, eat, and drink, and enjoy the fellowship of Goél.”

Josh turned to Sarah. “Well, that tears it,” he said. “We were right. There’s going to be a final battle this time.”

Sarah looked troubled. “It all sounds so—well, so *final*. What if we lose?”

Josh was silent. He did not want to consider that possibility.

The Sleepers continued to wander among the milling crowd, meeting more old friends. And then Goél himself appeared at Josh’s side and greeted him warmly.

“And here is my faithful Joshua.”

“Sire, we have come,” Josh said. “But we have not the strength that we once had. I fear that we are worn thin.”

Goél smiled at him. “You have done your best, and that is all that I ask of any of my servants. But the hour is near, and I must send you on a mission to alert three more groups of my people.”

“Who are they, Goél?” Sarah asked, standing close beside Josh.

“You must go to the Land of Ice and to the Centaurs and to Celethorn, Land of the Magicians. It will be another long journey, but when those three groups are here, my host will be complete. I will not send you alone. I will have guides for you. Will you do this for me?”

Josh suddenly felt refreshed. The very presence of the tall man, and the warmth of his eyes, and the power that seemed to flow through him strengthened the boy. He said sturdily, “We will follow your orders as long as we draw breath, Goél!”

“That’s my faithful Joshua!” Goél said warmly. “The Seven Sleepers are indeed my pride!”