

THE STRANGER

During his sleep Aaron sensed the overwhelming presence of a dark and cold mountain totally without feeling, without any caring. It seemed to surround him on all sides, above and below. It was trying to swallow him and was doing a good job at it. But then the presence began to shrink and to move away losing its awesomeness until eventually it softened and was gone. Left in its place was a feeling of lightness and quiet rest. A deep, reviving rest. This lasted for a long, long time and gave Aaron, at least in his dreams, some renewed strength and courage.

Aaron woke with a start! He was not alone! "Who! W-W-Who are y-y-y-you?" he said finally with a wave of fear crashing over him. For on both sides of his pine needle bed stood large men dressed in dark robes and holding sharp swords that rested on the ground. These two had eyes like hot coals and looked like mighty, fearless warriors.

"W-Wh-Wh-Who...", Aaron gasped a second time.

"We are friends to guard your path, young one. Do not be afraid; we will not harm you," replied one of the powerful men.

Speechless, Aaron sat still while a flood of thoughts came on him. All the details of the last three days. His present mess. His leg that still throbbed with pain. The lost hiking gear. No food or water! And yet, strangely, he felt neither hungry nor thirsty this morning as if he'd eaten a big breakfast in his sleep.

While pondering all these things, sitting like a small lamb between the two impressive soldiers, he heard another voice behind him. It was smooth and pleasant, loud but not startling. At least the soldiers weren't surprised but stood quietly waiting for the person to approach.

When Aaron had the courage to look up he saw a tall, simple looking man making his way down towards them. His walk was sure-footed and graceful. When he arrived the guards quietly slipped away.

"Hello, young child. Where are you going?" he asked politely.

Aaron answered, "I-I-I- w-w-w-wa-wanted to, to explore the m-mountains and, and m-m-make m-my way to where the s-sun r-r-r-rises. B-B-But,

you see..." Then a flow of tears came gushing even surprising Aaron a little. Feelings built up since the unhappy scene with his father, and even before that, burst out. He began to sob deeply until the stranger put a kind hand on his shoulder. A soothing calm moved over him like a blanket until he stopped crying.

"I'll take you to those places and even to where the sun rises. We'll explore them together! An adventure we can share and both enjoy. As a matter of fact, before you came along I already had it in my mind to visit some of those very same places."

"Come now," he said helping Aaron to his feet;"let's be on our way. There's much to see. Much to do and learn. Much to understand."

With amazement Aaron jumped to his feet ready to continue his journey. This mysterious person had come peculiarly just at the time and place of his failure and unlocked a new door for him to get up and walk on through. Aaron trustingly followed the stranger. He no longer even needed his walking stick!

As they moved on down the way, the stranger spoke of the things around them: the plants and trees, the shape of the mountain, the way the streams found their way down and more, all in a cheerful tone that invited meaning even in the very little things, the lowly things, all full of rich, hidden meanings and exciting discoveries. He said most often all a person had to do to join in the excitement was to take a closer look at his or her own backyard. And he talked as if he knew this mountain as his own backyard!

Aaron listened intently drinking in the warmth of this person. He talked as smoothly as the wind that flowed by them. And as each word or description was spoken, crystal clearness or something before unseen was so obviously and plainly set before Aaron's eyes. This continued for some time until they came to a meadow carpeted with lush grasses, sprinkled here and there with bright wildflowers.

The stranger gave a sigh along with a smile as he sat down beneath a tree. Aaron was at his side wondering what he would pull out of the big pack he carried on his back. Once again he felt hungry and thirsty.

"Would you like some of this?" asked the stranger offering some fried chicken. "How about this and maybe this?" he added until a

great feast was spread beneath the cypress tree. Aaron was dumbfounded. It was all of his favorite foods and more- fruits, desserts, potatoes. It was sonderful. The juice and sweet milk quenched his thirst completely. He ate and drank with great happiness. Soon he felt like taking a short nap to savor the banquet. Curiously the man watched Aaron more than anything else, deriving as much pleasure as Aaron, though he only nibbled and took just a few sips.

Aaron slipped into a heavy sleep, deep and refreshing. It seemed to last forever. He felt a tug on his shirt and opened his eyes. They followed high up into the branches of the massive tree. Then they came back down and rested on the deep calm eyes of the stranger.

"Come little one. We should be on our way," he said quietly.

Just then Aaron felt the urge to tell this friend the hurtful story of why he left home. The last meeting with his father and the gift. The way kids made fun of his speech and didn't understand him. His fears of always being rejected and not loved. And on and on. Suddenly out it came until Aaron began to weep big tears with sobs. The stranger took Aaron in his arms as if he were a small child and silently held him until the crying stopped. Then he told Aaron to look at the wide meadow, the grass and flowers.

"You see this open meadow," he said with a tear in his own eye. "The way a sea of green grass is dotted here and there by the colorful flowers? Your days are like that. A small sea of regular everyday green marked by high points in special ways as you walk your own path. Because there's distance between the flowers, you can't be sure of where and when others will sprout up in the grass. Maybe some are seeds you plant yourself. Some planted by others. But you know, through it all, such a towering tree as this cypress can be seen always, clearly. It always calls and welcomes you to rest beneath its branches. To be revived, to draw strength. Don't worry, little one. There are many flowers in your life with countless others soon to be discovered. And through it all you will always have a place to come to for rest and to draw strength. A place where you can satisfy every thirst and hunger."

"Come now. We must go on."

By now Aaron was bubbling over with a new found excitement and joy. He had found someone to trust. A friend, one who somehow knew him, who understood him. It was such a surprise turn for him. Just when all seemed lost-this! It was totally unexpected. He began whistling and ran and hopped like a young calf. He felt like the young lambs he'd often watched at the neighbor's farm.