

The Clutches of a Cult

Turning in my chair to grab a paper clip, I caught a movement with the corner of my eye. Someone was at my office door, nervously twisting a piece of paper in her hands. As I turned she gave a little jump. I wondered how long she'd been standing there.

"Hello!" I exclaimed. She said nothing. "I'm Professor Theophilus."

"I know."

I tried again. "Did you want to speak with me?"

Seconds ticked away. "I don't think I should be here." Her eyes were deeply sunken; I wondered whether from worry, illness or lack of sleep.

"Were you looking for someone else?"

"No."

"Would you like to sit down?" She sat. "Are you all right?" She nodded. This time I kept silent.

Finally she blurted, "Do you know Sarah? She said I should talk with you."

Guessing, I asked "Sarah Charis?"

She nodded, relaxing a little. I wondered what Sarah had got me into, but my visitor was speaking again.

"My name's Prisca," she said. "Sarah and I know each other because we used to go to Campus Christian Fellowship together."

"Used to?"

She hesitated. "I've sort of lost touch with a lot of people."

She began again. "Last week I ran into her again on the street. She said 'We've missed you' and 'It's been ages' and 'I've tried to call you' and 'Where have you been keeping yourself' and all that, and we got to talking — though I shouldn't have — and I told her about The Group."

"The Group?"

"That's what we call it. It has another name that I can't remember." She thought for a moment. "I think it's a denomination."

"So you told Sarah about The Group."

"Yes, and Sarah said" — Prisca looked up at me — "she said it's a cult!"

She began to speak more quickly. "So I was really angry, and I told her I didn't ever want to see her again. And I was still angry when I told my Discippler about seeing her, so when my Discippler said 'You should have known better than to speak with an Outsider,' I told myself 'That's right.' But after a few days I cooled off and remembered how Sarah and I used to be friends, and how she introduced me to her friends, and how she told me about Jesus. That's why I used to go to Fellowship with her. And I thought my Discippler was wrong about Sarah, and that Sarah really had a good heart but just didn't understand. And I thought that if only I could make Sarah understand about The Group, really understand, she'd — she'd —"

"She'd also want to join?"

"That's right. Because The Group is about Jesus too. So even though my Discippler said not to, I went to see Sarah again, and she was glad to see me. And I told her even more about The Group — though of course I don't know much yet because I'm not high up. And I told her how wonderful it is, and how I'd dropped my classes and given up my family for The Group, and I invited her to join. And after hearing me out, she said she was really glad I'd come to see her, but now she was even more sure I was mixed up with a cult. And she asked me if I would let her tell me some reasons, and I did. And I wasn't angry this time, but I was upset."

"Then what?"

"So I went back home, and my Discippler saw that I'd been crying, and asked why, and so I told her where I'd been." Prisca's cheeks were reddening, and tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. "And I had some questions, but she wouldn't even

listen to them. She just got all cold with me and said I'd been disobedient, and that the Others would have to know. And for seven days I was on the Shun List, and I —"

"What's the Shun List?"

Now Prisca's words were coming in a rush as she swiped angrily at her tears with one hand. "That's when nobody talks to you, but it's all for your own good, and you can only eat one meal a day, and only when nobody else is around, and you're only allowed to sleep four hours a night and you spend the rest of the time in prayer, only I had to slap myself to stay awake. And I felt more lonely than I'd ever felt in my life, and I remembered how loving everyone had been when I first joined, and I thought 'This isn't anything like that,' and I wondered if that had all been an act, but thinking like that made me ashamed, but I couldn't stop, and then other thoughts came too. And yesterday was my first day off the List, and my first day on Probation, and I spent all day on the streets, because I was asking people for Mission Money, just like I'm supposed to be doing now, but I wanted to talk to Sarah — and I couldn't talk to her because my Discipler said not to, but I remembered that Sarah said I should talk to you. So here I am — but I don't even know you, and now I don't even remember what I wanted to ask you, and I don't usually babble like this, and I'm making a fool of myself, but I'm so tired."

Except for her sniffles, there was silence for a minute.

Sarah was mistaken, I thought; I wasn't the one Prisca needed to see. I took a chance. "Prisca, were your parents good to you?"

"Yes." Sniffle.

"Do they know where you are?"

"No."

"May I phone and tell them?"

"Yes. No." She hesitated. "I don't know."

"I can't without your okay."

"Oh, do whatever you want," she said angrily, looking away. That wasn't permission. I didn't move. After a few seconds, she spoke a number and thrust the telephone

across the desk. That was permission. I thanked God that the number was local. Then I thanked Him that someone was at home.

"Hello? This is Professor Theophilus, at the State University. Prisca is here in my office. Can you come right away?"

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Months later came a knock at my door. "Professor Theophilus?"

"Yes? Oh, come in!"

"We've met, but you probably don't remember me."

"Of course I remember you. Aren't you Prisca?" She seemed surprised. I considered her. The rings were gone from around her eyes, but wariness had taken their place. "Please, have a seat," I urged. A bit stiffly, she did.

"Well, if you remember me —" She started over. "I think I owe you an explanation. About last year."

"You don't owe me any explanation, but I'd be glad to hear it anyway. How are you doing now?"

"Better. What has Sarah told you?"

"Only what you had told me already. Are you back in touch with her, then?"

"By telephone. This is my first time back on campus in months." Pause. "I'm not in The Group any more."

"No, I didn't think so," I smiled. She became a little less tense but didn't smile back.

"My parents —" her voice wavered — "they've been great. I've talked to an academic counselor. Maybe I'll try the higher education thing again."

"Was the academic counselor encouraging?"

"Yes. Actually we talked more about cults than about courses. She said that what happened to me isn't unusual."

"How do you understand what happened to you, Prisca?"

"What's to understand? I was lonely, trying to find myself, and The Group took me in. They had all the answers. The only problem is that all the answers were wrong. But I don't know why I'm boring you with my sob story."

"You're not boring me."

Prisca gazed meditatively at the telephone, as though remembering that other day in my office. Then she said something that surprised me. "I'm a little afraid to see Sarah again."

I asked, "Has Sarah been unkind to you?"

"Unkind! That's just the trouble: She's too kind. I'm afraid she'll invite me to her Fellowship again."

"Why would that be troubling?"

"I've just escaped one cult, Professor Theophilus. Do I look like I need to link up with another?"

"Do you think the Campus Christian Fellowship is a cult, Prisca?"

The wariness around her eyes turned into anger. "I think the whole Christian religion is a cult. Don't you see it? 'Cult' is just a name for someone else's religion. Sarah says 'Jesus' makes her religion different, but The Group talks about 'Jesus' too. If it hadn't been for Sarah I might never have listened to their 'Jesus' talk. It was 'Jesus' who took away my family, 'Jesus' who took away my friends, 'Jesus' who made me beg strangers for money, 'Jesus' who put me on the Shun List, and 'Jesus' who gave me only four hours of sleep a night."

Facing me, she declared in dark tones, "I've had enough 'Jesus,' Professor."

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