

In Search of Shiloh

Volume I of the Shiloh Saga

Chapter 1

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love the Lord, to them who are called according to His purpose.

Romans 8:28.

“Laurel, I wanna talk to you. Darlin’, leave the dishes and come set with me a spell.” Mark Campbell pointed to the chair near his bed.

With a confused look on her face, Laurel looked across the room to the nook on the other side of the hearth where her father lay. Mark Campbell was not given to endearments, nor had he ever asked her to leave morning chores to sit with him. “Papa, are you hurtin’ this mornin’?”

“No more’n usual. Come over here and set yerself down, like I asked.”

Even at such an early hour, Laurel saw the weariness in her father’s eyes. He was mortally ill, and she knew his main concern was what would become of her when he was no longer around. Laurel sat in her Granny Wilson’s chair, brushed her fingertips across his cheeks, and breathed a sigh of relief that she felt no fever.

“Daughter, my time’s short. This blamed cough’s gettin’ worse ever day and my strength’s all but gone. Don’t mind so much for me....” Her father glanced up at a pen and ink drawing of her beautiful mother which hung over the mantle. “Spendin’ eternity with your mama in paradise ain’t

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exactly a scary thought.” A severe bout of coughing interrupted his remarks. Laurel handed him a handkerchief and turned her head. She knew the cloth would be stained with blood. He’d often told her that he hated this weakness. He closed his eyes and took a couple of sharp breaths.

“Rest now, Papa. We’ll talk more after your nap. Just sleep a while.” “No.” Laurel’s father sharp reply suggested a renewed strength

Laurel hadn’t seen in days. “We gotta talk. Gotta tell you the plans I made for ya.” Again, a hacking cough stopped him. Laurel walked across the room to the hearth for hot water to make a tonic with honey, wild berries, and a bit of some amber colored elixir that Elizabeth Wilson had left. She knew her Papa didn’t like the taste, but the hot brew seemed to help the cough. “Here Papa, drink this. Whatever you want to tell me will wait.” She bent down to pull the quilt over his shoulders, and brushed his forehead with her lips. “Sip this and then sleep, Papa, just for a spell.”

“Can’t wait, Laurel. Your Uncle Matthew found ya a place to teach at the subscription school at Shiloh Station. You got your schoolin’, and you readin’ all the time makes you more than suited. Good way for ya to earn your livin’ once I’m gone.”

“Papa, I can’t go to Shiloh Station. We’ve worked so hard to build our homestead. I can take care of us here, Papa.”

Her father attempted to push himself up. Laurel moved to help him place a pillow at his back. He took her hand and spoke in a low, stern voice.

“Laurel Grace Campbell, you ain’t a hearin’ me. I ain’t a tellin’ you what you might do. I am tellin’ you what’s gonna happen. Girl, you mean more to me than I ever told ya.” Her father strangled and after several moments coughed up phlegm. He wiped his mouth with the bloody handkerchief he held. “Been real selfish lettin’ you make us a home here after your mama died. You’ve been a comfort, ‘specially since I been laid up with this wastin’ disease.” He gasped for breath. “But it’s been all about me.” His attempt to explain to Laurel brought on another bout of coughing. “I gotta look to your well-bein’ now.” Mark Campbell lay back again and breathed deeply. Exhausted at the effort, he closed his eyes and slept.

She dropped another log onto the fire. Although Washington County had experienced an unusually mild winter, on this early March morning the weather was cold. She returned to the dishes, troubled by what her father said. How could Papa want her to move across the state and leave their home? Hawthorn Chapel had been home more than fifteen years. Even if she wanted to go to Shiloh Station to teach, traveling that distance alone would be impossible. She shrugged her shoulders to dismiss the ridiculous idea, dried her hands, and crossed the room to pick up her mother’s seventy-five- yearold King James Bible.

Laurel didn’t have any special scripture in mind so she just opened the book and started to read. The first verse she found was Exodus 20:12. *Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.* She flipped to another page, hoping to find words to ease the foreboding. She turned to Proverbs 6:20. *My child, keep thy father’s commandment and forsake not the law of thy mother.* Laurel was no fool. The word obey rang out to her as if spoken aloud. She made one final attempt to find solace. The New Testament nearly always lifted her spirits. She turned toward the back of the Bible and put her finger on Luke 22:41. *And He was withdrawn from them about a stone’s cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, Saying Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done.*

Laurel sank to her knees before the hearth and allowed her tears to fall. “Father, please let my papa get well. You’re the Great Healer. I’m so afraid. If it’s Papa’s time, I still don’t want to leave my home. With your help I can live here by myself. I’d be so unhappy trying to make a life with strangers. Please help me.” She couldn’t mistake the meaning of the lesson she’d just learned in the Scripture. She was to agree to her papa’s plan. “Not my will, but Yours. If You will give me the strength, I will try, but I don’t think I can.” As she arose, the foreboding didn’t cripple her anymore, but she felt no peace. She would go to Shiloh Station if her Papa asked her to go.

At the same time, she prayed he wouldn’t.

About an hour later, Laurel rushed to her father’s side. He awoke to a severe bout of coughing. “Papa, let me get the honey tonic for you. You don’t suffer so when you sleep.”

“No, Laurel. Come here. I gotta tell you before it gets worse. I wrote a letter to your Uncle Matthew when I knew my congestion was more than a simple catarrh. People don’t get rid of

consumption. Matt arranged safe passage to Greene County.” Again, as he talked, the cough grew worse and his voice fainter. “You just have to get to Shiloh by the end of April when the school term starts. Matthew helped me arrange a good future for you, so you just have to get there on time, and...” Laurel stared at her father, who said nothing. Her grandmother’s mantle clock was the only sound, and it seemed louder than a gong in a church sanctuary. Finally, her father gasped out, “And they won’t hire an unmarried woman.”

An involuntary grimace flickered on Laurel’s face. She turned her face. What was he thinking? Had the pain addled his mind? Laurel was a spinster and likely to remain so. In rural Arkansas, an unwed woman beyond the age of twenty-five was destined to remain in her father’s house...permanently. That was especially true if the woman was plain, spectacle-wearing, independent-minded, and self-sufficient. Laurel was all those things. She had never had a suitor. Now her Papa was telling her that she had a stable future ahead. All she had to do was find a mate and convince this man whom she didn’t know to marry her within a month.

“Can’t you say something, Laurel?”

“What can I say, Papa?” She had never shared the fears and hurts arising from her spinsterhood with her father. The foreboding pushed her to the edge of her control. “Papa, you spoke of a good life waiting for me and then added conditions that make the entire thing impossible. Haven’t you ever looked at me?” Tears rolled down her cheeks. Laurel turned to go to the hearth, but before she could leave his nook, he called her back.

“Come back, Girl. There’s more you need to know.” Laurel’s papa drew his hands through his disheveled hair. With a voice so gravelly, the words were nearly indiscernible, he said, “I sold the homestead and all our stock.”

“Did you say you sold our homestead?” He nodded.

“Why?” The sadness on his face told Laurel it was not by choice.

“The law, Daughter...” After a few minutes, he continued. “I kept only your horse, the two mules, and the smaller wagon. You can take any of the family things you want. I want ya to safeguard the family records, Bibles, and all our family keepsakes. Amos Tomlin and his wife Lucinda will move into the homestead as soon as ya leave for Shiloh.”

Laurel threw her arms in the air. “Papa, what good will it do for me to go to Shiloh? I have no husband. No one has ever asked for my hand. No one wants me. Papa, look at me. I’m plain!”

Deep sobs racked her body as she poured out her heart for the first time in her adult life. Covering her face with her hands, all the hurt, the shards of her broken dreams which she had carried and hidden, were laid bare for her father to witness. “Please excuse me. I need some time alone.” She climbed the stairs to her loft and slumped in her mother’s rocking chair. She wept.

After a long while, she wiped her face, smoothed her hair back and returned to her work. She went to the porch to bring in wood. As the sun set behind the cabin, sunbeams streamed through the limbs of the apple trees in the orchard. Were there new buds on the apple trees? Those trees would be glorious soon. The fruit from the orchard always provided for her family, giving fresh apples in the summer and plenty of fruit to preserve in apple butter, jelly, cider, and ample slices for canning and drying. A blessing every season...Laurel smiled at the beautiful sight before her.

She could survive alone if Papa didn't get well. She knew how to care for animals, grow food in the garden, and harvest the fruits, grapes, and berries in the orchard. She knew where the nuts grew in the forest. But reality forced its way into her daydreams. Her father had sold the Campbell homestead to the Tomlins. She had no home. In her desperation she cried out, "Lord, what can I do?"

An almost audible reply came to her mind. "Child, remember My words. Honor your father and mother. Keep their commandment and follow their law. Live in My will. I am with you." She stared at the mountains around her. Shortly Laurel shook herself to awareness and returned to the kitchen to prepare supper. Within half an hour, she had warmed the brown beans and ham, baked a fresh corn pone, and cooked the stewed potatoes with a spoon of butter she had just churned the day before. Thanks to her bountiful orchard, she had dried apples from which she made an apple pie, hoping to encourage her father to eat. After Laurel prepared a tray for him, she went to eat dinner with him, anxious to know how he would respond to their last conversation. When she pulled back the curtain to his nook, she found him upright and leaning against the carved headboard of his bed.

"Thanks, Daughter. I'm real hungry."

"That is a good sign, Papa. If you eat well, you can get your strength back." They ate in silence. The room was warm and comfortable as the last of the western sun found its way into the cabin. It was a beautiful spring evening in the Ozark. After supper, Laurel took her father his warm brew, but he refused the mixture. Laurel sat with her back to him. He waited for her to open the conversation. She called up her courage and in a quiet, steady voice she spoke. "Papa, please forgive my sass this afternoon. When I heard all that self-pity pour out of my mouth, I was ashamed. I just didn't think. I'm sorry."

"Laurel, don't apologize. Didn't know you felt that way. You never let on that you wanted to get married. Thought you were satisfied here with me. You're not plain, Darlin'. You just never had a chance to learn womanly ways without your mama."

"Papa, please let's just speak truth to each other. I've known a long time I'm not pretty. That's all right because I have other blessings. I know I'm smart, and I've had my schoolin'. I've learned to work hard, and I can take care of myself. Don't worry about me."

"Laurel, you didn't let me finish tellin' you what Uncle Matthew and me planned. Mark Campbell squared his shoulders and in a steady, deliberate voice he spoke. "Your intended will arrive here sometime this weekend, probably Saturday."

She turned and stared at her father. She covered her face. How much more could she stand? Her father had arranged a marriage of convenience for her! She hardly heard another word he spoke.

"That's the news that came in Uncle Matthew's letter today. When he wrote me at the end of the summer to ask you to teach in Shiloh, I told him that I'd not consider such a dangerous trip through the mountains and foothills unless I was sure of a dependable guide. His letter told me he solved that problem. Matthew's friend wants a wife. He'd even thought he'd send for a mail order

bride. When he found out a good woman of an age to marry and of his own faith lived just across the state, he asked for your hand.”

“How can you match me with a man you never met?” Laurel couldn’t believe her father would offer her up as a piece of chattel, passed from one man to another. Laurel’s temper was near the surface. She felt her posture change. Her chin jutted out, her shoulders squared, and she lifted her head.

Her voice was harsh and determined as she responded... “Papa, I will not...” But then her voice broke. No sooner were those rash words spoken than she saw the concern on her father’s face. Mark Campbell looked so defeated. She remembered her prayer and the almost audible reply. She lowered her defiant eyes. She couldn’t cause more distress for her sick father. “Papa, forgive my back talk...I will not disobey you. If you believe this is God’s will for me, I will obey you. You’ve always been a loving father and wanted the best for me.”

“Bless you, Daughter. I should’ve told you more often, but I do love you, Laurel Grace. I hope you know I do.”