

John

JOHNS WORDS came fast and his low voice seemed earnest as he talked to the work campers seated in front of him. His slight body grew tense and he stretched out his hand — the fingers spread far apart and bent at the first joint, the fingertips quivering with the intensity of the words he was saying. “Yes, Jesus is the conquering King who broke the bonds of death and came forth from the tomb clad in his spotless robes of immortality, pure as the spray as it dances in the sunlight in the morning, and ready to ascend into the presence of the Father God. ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.’ Tense silence. His hand dropped to his side and he relaxed. “Shall we pray?”

Pray? My thoughts were hopelessly confused. My head was bowed but I couldn't follow the prayer. I wasn't sure I wanted John to talk to God for me — not after last Sunday.

“In Christ's name, Amen.”

The campers and visitors flocked up to John and surrounded him. An old lady looked up at him admiringly. “A wonderful message, young man — so inspiring. We're all glad you're going into the ministry.”

John smiled at her and gently took her hand — every motion, every gesture just what it should be. “And I'm very glad you could come visit us work campers for our evening worship service, Mrs. Greer.”

I sat on the piano bench at the edge of the group and tried to think. I should go up to John and tell him the talk was good — and it was good. But how could he preach the way he did tonight after what he told me last Sunday?

I remember sitting next to him in the church service. I remember feeling that something was wrong toward the end of the prayer and opening my eyes just for an instant. John's head was high and he was looking out over the con-

gregation of bowed heads. His gaze shifted and he caught me looking at him. I saw the faintest glimpse of a mocking smile as he bowed his head. He frightened me.

After the service John turned to me and his voice was calm. "I don't know whether I believe Jesus is the Son of God. I doubt His divinity."

The voices from the crowd around John broke into my thoughts. "— Really glad you're going to be a minister, John."

"You are so sincere, John. Your talk meant a lot to me."

Didn't any of them wonder if he's sincere? I know Sandy did because she was with me when John came back to the work camp after he had been gone for a week. The minute he came back he rushed up to me and there was gladness on his face. He grabbed me by the shoulders. "Jean! It's certainly good to see you again." I smiled and was happy. And then in the next instant his face was cold. "Your hair looks like you haven't combed it since I left." Then he turned and walked away. I whirled angrily towards Sandy. "At first I almost thought he was glad to see me. What on earth makes him act like that?"

"I can't answer you, Jean. He's a complete puzzle to me and to most of the kids down at the University. John has a small group of close friends at the U. — all of them geniuses like he is. He told me once that he was never really glad to see or talk to anyone except his friends from this group."

I could feel my teeth clinching together. "I guess that about shuts off the rest of us boring commoners, doesn't it?"

"Oh, not especially. He can be charming, you know. In fact he's quite popular — only I think everyone dislikes him at times. They're bound to because he makes them feel so darned inferior."

"You're right about that, Sandy. He made me feel like a simpleton the other day while we were working. He walked over to me and stood so close I could hear him breathing. He looked me straight in the eye. "Jean, I want to tell you you're beautiful." I laughed when I thought of

how I must look — dirty jeans, sloppy shirt and a man's cap crammed on my sweaty hair. His voice was tense and his face completely serious. "Don't laugh, Jean. I mean it." I believed him. I knew I looked horrible, that I wasn't beautiful even when I tried to be, that he was lying — yet, crazy as it sounds, I believed him."

"I stammered something to him, and then his gaze shifted from my eyes to the top of my head and he laughed — not the laugh of a boy that's pulled a good trick. John's laugh was a horrid, mocking sound that made me feel miles beneath him and I hated myself more than I did him."

"I know just how you feel, Jean. He told me once that he likes to get people right on the brink of making a fool out of themselves and then let them dangle and laugh at them."

"That — that's inhuman!"

"He does it to all the professors — makes them look silly sometimes, but he always seems to do it in such a sincere way that they don't get mad at him."

The crowd was thinning now. John was smiling a beautiful smile and talking to an old lady standing next to him.

Should I go up and tell him his talk was good? He is a good speaker. There was the night when he eagerly led the work campers' discussion on the will of God — inspiring! But then in another discussion when someone had said, "Don't take it hard, John. Maybe it wasn't God's will that you marry that girl," John had glared. "Damn God. I want my love." — Then that mocking laugh of his.

Only one boy left talking to John — what was I going to do? My thoughts were in a maze. What is John? What is he trying to do?

Now he was standing alone on the platform. He stretched out his hand in that familiar gesture of his — fingers spread far apart, fingertips quivering.

My voice was normal. "The talk was good, John — good thoughts." I turned to leave. He touched my arm. His voice was warm, sincere. "Jean, I'm glad you liked my talk." I walked towards the door. Then I had to turn around. Was he smiling?

—*Lorena Duncan, Sc. Jr.*