

A man wearing a hat and a dark jacket is sitting on a pile of large, dark rocks on the bank of a river. The river is flowing rapidly, creating white water rapids. The background shows a forest of evergreen trees and mountains under a sunset sky with orange and yellow hues. A small lantern is lit on the rocks next to the man.

# The River & THE RESCUER

BY MARK LITTLETON

I can't remember quite how I got into the river, though I recall it was pleasant. The river rolled along, pitching us here and there, eddying and playing, spraying our faces. We had plenty of time to talk and play cards. No one had any particularly enchanting explanation for how it all started. Of course, there were speculations.

Some said we'd been here all along; it never ended; the river just went on and on. Others said we were a part of it; we'd grown up and changed with it. Still others remarked that there was no need to question, just to enjoy. And then there were those who said it wasn't

always like this, but some ancestral sin had put us into it.

Just the same, it didn't seem so bad, if you were one of the rich ones, or had everything taken care of.

### **The Rescuer**

Then the Rescuer arrived. He was this burly, friendly fellow. Suddenly he was there in the river next to me. I had been sipping some River-ade while watching one of our teams put on a water polo exhibition. When I turned my head, he was there.

"I've come to rescue you," he said. He began to put his arm over my chest.

"Wait," I cried. "Rescue me from what? I didn't know I needed rescuing."

He said quietly, "The river is running towards a waterfall. You'll be dashed on the rocks."

I laughed. "I've heard about the waterfall. Many say it's not true."

"It's true," he said.

Something about the way he said things sent fear through my bones. But I countered, "How do I know it's true?"

"It's true," he said. "There is no need of proof except that I say it's true."

I snickered. "And who are you to go around telling everyone you know the truth?"

"I'm the Rescuer," he said. "Whatever I say is by its very nature true. I can't speak anything but truth. You can rely on me for that. And you, I assure you, are headed for the waterfall."

"What if I don't go along with this?" I asked. "What if I refuse?"

He replied, "That's your choice. I will take whatever action I choose in such an event." It was a startling answer. Nothing threw him. He stayed calm.

"Where will you take me?" I asked.

"To safety."

"Where is that?"

"I'll show you."

I laughed again. "You speak in circles. This doesn't make any sense."

"It will," he said.

I shook my head, smiling. "You're the strangest person I've ever met."

This time he chuckled. "Many say that. But I've come to rescue you. Are you ready?"

I gulped. "You're being rather pushy about this."

He said, "I won't force you. Would you rather I left you alone?"

"But what if I decide I want to be rescued later?"

"I might not be available later."

I gulped again. I searched his eyes to see if this wasn't some new lie. I'd heard a lot of lies in the river. You learned to trust no one, not even yourself. But I could detect no falsehood in him.

"Okay," I said. "Take me."

### **My Rescue**

He put his arm over my chest and began pulling me toward the bank of the river. I'd seen it often enough before. A desolate place. No one but fools went there. No one quite understood how they got there. But everyone was sure there was no reason to go there. It was cold and damp and appeared lifeless.

The Rescuer set me upon the shore. "Make yourself at home and move inland. Whenever you want to talk, call me. If you need anything, just ask. Only keep moving inland."

He paused. Then he said with grave precision, "Whatever you do, don't go back into the river, no matter who tells you."

I swallowed and watched as he dove back into the river. Already he was speaking with another.

I noticed the ground was hard. The air was cold. I saw others wandering around on the bank. Some appeared lost. One, I noticed, dove back into the river. But several were making their way inland.

I turned back to the river, and suddenly I was struck with the most incredible longing.

"Just a quick dive," said a voice. "You'll be warm again."

But I remembered the Rescuer's words and hesitated.

The voice said again, "How do you know he's right? A quick dive can't hurt."

"But he said," I protested, "I shouldn't do it."

"But why?" said the voice. "What harm can there be?"

I thought about it. I didn't know. But something within me had changed. I liked the solid feel of the ground. Not a whole lot. It hurt my feet. But it gave me a contented feeling. Not like the river—always changing; never knowing what was coming next.

### **The Rescuer at Work**

I began watching the Rescuer. He was pulling people out all over the river. He worked quickly. Once I watched him argue with someone for nearly an hour. The man eventually succumbed.

There were some he approached and after only a brief conversation, he left them. I never saw him rescue them. There was one he argued with for several hours, then stopped abruptly. He left him swirling along, alone. Two of them, I observed, he talked to several times, went and rescued others and then came back to them. One he finally did rescue. I don't know about the other.

The amazing thing was that everyone was approached by him at least once, and many were approached often. I couldn't see how he could keep it up, but he did.

As he rescued more and more people, a small group was gathering around me. We began to talk.

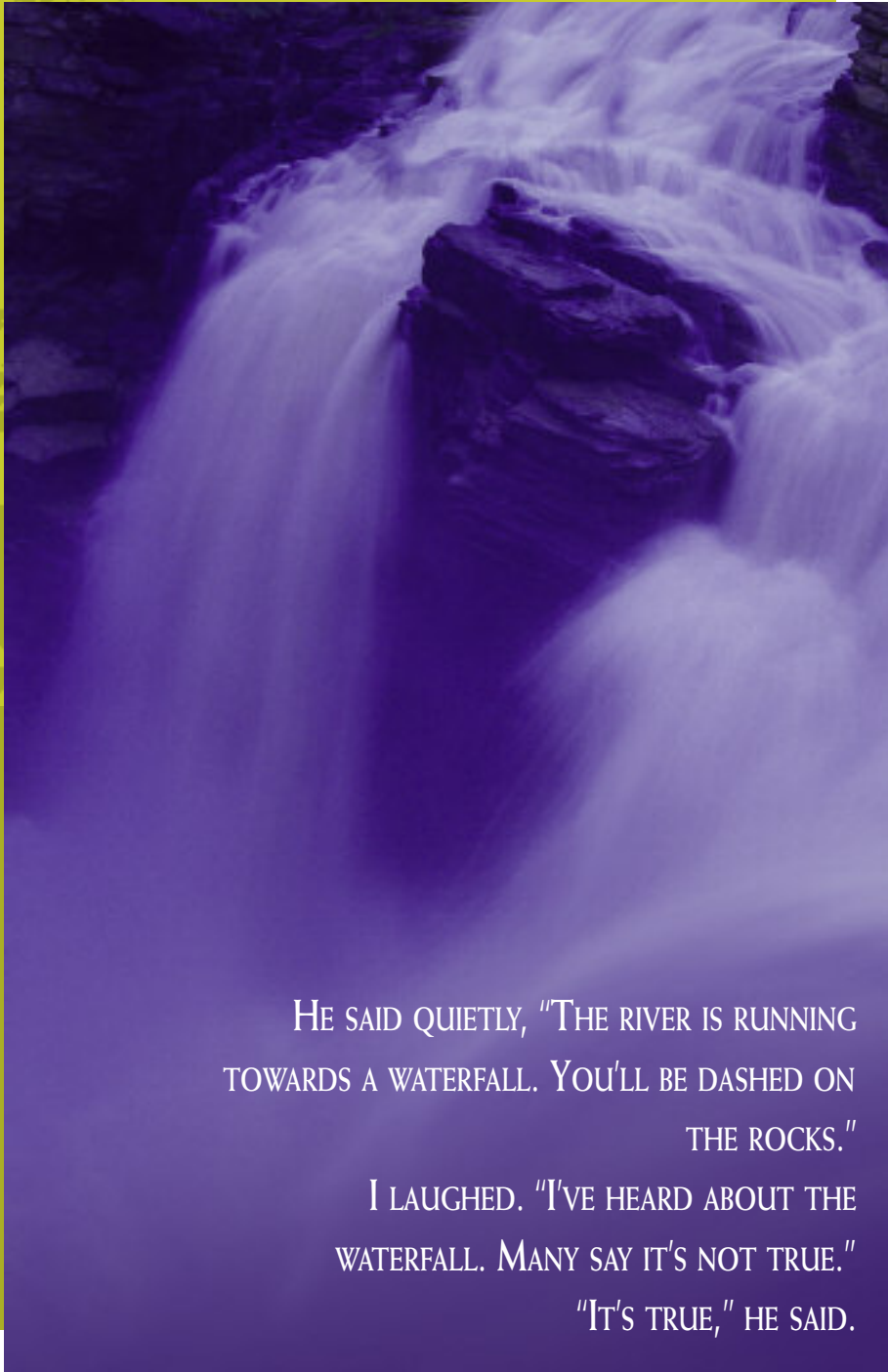
"Isn't it wonderful," said one, "he rescued all of us from the waterfall."

"Yeah, but how do we know there's really a waterfall?" asked another.

No one had an answer. But someone said, "I guess we just have to trust him."

Most agreed. But one was angry. "I think it's wrong that he barges into my quiet existence and demands to rescue me. I'm going back into the river."

Several tried to stop the man. But he dove in. We didn't see him again.



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### **Survivor Guilt—Why Us and Not Others?**

We began walking inland together. But one turned back and watched the Rescuer for awhile. When he caught up to us, he was angry. "He didn't rescue my Uncle Pete."

Soon the whole group was upset.

"Yeah, and my father went down toward the waterfall too," another

said. "The Rescuer only talked to him once that I saw."

A third remembered a sister who wasn't rescued. It seemed everyone knew someone he didn't rescue.

"He's a bit unfair about this," said one, "rescuing some and letting others go."

I replied, "But he approached them all."

We had no answers.

"Perhaps we ought to ask him. That's what he told me to do," I said.

"Right," answered another. "Let's ask him."

We all began shouting out our request and instantly the Rescuer was among us. Each brought out his protest. "Why didn't you rescue my mother?" "What about my sister, Jo?" "How come you didn't convince my cousin Anthony?" And, "Why did you only talk once to my card partner, Bill?"

The Rescuer was silent for a long time. We all waited, somewhat impatiently. Finally, he said, "I choose to rescue whom I will rescue. I choose when to start and complete a rescue, and when to leave off. That is my choice, because I'm the Rescuer."

"But what did they do," cried another, "to make you leave off?"

"Many things," said the Rescuer. "Some argued, some fought, some dove back in. There are many reasons I choose not to rescue a person."

"Then what did we do that made you rescue us?" asked still another.

The Rescuer smiled. "Nothing."

Instantly, the group exploded with anger. "Nothing!" shouted one. "You rescued us for no reason?"

"Not 'no reason'," said the Rescuer. "I rescued you for reasons known only to myself. But, I assure you, it had nothing to do with anything about you, or in you, or that you did. I chose to rescue you because I love you."

### **A Different Kind of Love**

Everyone was silent for some time after this. But then a lady voiced the question that was on all our hearts. "But why do you love us? There must be some reason."

"Because I'm love itself," said the Rescuer.

"You mean there was nothing in us or about us that made you love us?" said the woman, miffed and unhappy.

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"Nothing," said the Rescuer quietly. We were all very frightened and worried about this.

But the Rescuer went on. "Think of it this way. My love and choice of you is not dependent on anything about you or in you. It's totally dependent on me. That should give you great security."

Frankly, I didn't know what to think. But it did make sense. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more settled I felt. Finally, I said, "If this is so, then we have every reason to love you all the more."

The Rescuer said nothing. Suddenly, another member of the group said, "But why don't you rescue all of them?"

The Rescuer was quiet again. Then he said, "That is not how I've chosen to do it."

The Rescuer peered into our faces. He said, "Don't you do as you please with what is yours? I do as I please with what is mine."

I said, "You mean you own us, the river, everything?"

"Yes."

Now everyone was upset. But then a small voice, a child, spoke from the back of the group. "Why did you rescue me?"

Everyone turned and looked at the little boy. He was deformed, ugly. He couldn't even walk upright. No one had noticed him before.

The Rescuer's eyes grew tender. "Because I love you."

"As much as everyone else?" said the lad, a tear forming in his eye. It was obvious he'd known much pain in the river.

"I love everyone equally," said the Rescuer, "but I also love them infinitely. I love you infinitely

also. There is no end of my love for you."

Some members of the group were weeping now. My own throat was feeling a little taut, but I managed to ask, "What if you hadn't rescued us?"

"You would go over the waterfall."

"But isn't there some other way?" another replied.

"None," he said. He didn't say this like it was an unhappy state of affairs, or that he wished it was otherwise. He just said it.

"But if you didn't rescue us, wouldn't someone else?"

"There is no one else," he said.

I gulped. "But if there's nothing about us that makes us worthy, the amazing thing is that you rescue anyone."

The Rescuer gazed steadily at us, saying nothing.

### **The River—A Place of Certain Death**

"But how did we get into the river?" asked a bearded man standing in the back. "It seems that the whole problem is being in the river."

The Rescuer looked him firmly in the eye. "You put yourself in the river," he said. We all gasped. I'd heard it before, but I never really believed it. The man seemed bent on pressing this, though. He said, "When? I don't remember that."

"After the beginning."

"You mean we weren't always in the river?"

"No."

He let this sink in, and seemed about to turn to go, but a large man jumped up and asked, "Can I say something?"

"Begin," said the Rescuer.

"It seems to me that if we put ourselves into the river, couldn't get out on our own and would have gone over the waterfall if you didn't do something, then you have done us a great service."

Everyone agreed.

"Then," said the man, "although I don't have much, I want to offer you my life for service and worship. Will you accept it?"

The Rescuer gazed steadily at all of us. It seemed as he caught my eye, that he looked right through me to the very depths of my soul. I quivered and suddenly felt afraid in his presence. Then, almost without thinking, I knelt before him and said, "You are my Lord. I will follow you wherever you go."

I can't quite explain it, but that moment was astounding. He didn't act as though we had done him a great service, nor did he appear to think of our deeds as nothing. It was as though he recognized this was as it should be. He enjoyed it, and yet at the same time he desired it without demanding it.

Then, just as suddenly, he cried, "To the uplands! Move inward and upward. Run! You must learn more."

We all began to move. Some ran, some walked, some labored, limping and tired. But all of us moved onward, helping one another, encouraging one another. □

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