

The Evangelist

MILDRED BARKER

WHEN I was a child, there were a lot of sinners in Southern California. Fortunately, my family belonged to the Loquat Avenue Church, a rock beacon tower of a building, where the way of salvation was known. I knew I was lucky, but my good luck was accompanied by certain heavy responsibilities.

One afternoon, when I was about ten years old, my mother took me to the church. Our minister, Reverend Endicott, stood in front of the oak doors waiting. A gusty wind slapped my unfashionably long dress against my legs and flicked strings of hair into my eyes, stinging them, but Reverend Endicott's heavy black vestment did not ruffle, and his hair remained cemented down.

Looking up at Reverend Endicott, my mother laid a hand on my head and asked, "Is she old enough for the Children's Crusade?" The hand pressed lightly, but I knew it would come down more firmly if I tried to squirm out from under.

Reverend Endicott drew in a breath. "Did Abraham ask if Isaac was old enough?" The minister's chin was heavy and dragged the rest of his face down. His powerful hands were out in front of him, palms up to support the body of a child. "The sacrifice of a son was not too much for Abraham," he said, raising his hands as if they

carried a burden slowly heavenward.

I stepped back, but my mother seized me by the elbow and shoved me forward. "She wants to be an evangelist." Her pale cheeks glowed.

Reverend Endicott's hands dropped to his sides. His hard dark eyes focused on me for the first time. "Do you want to be an evangelist?" he demanded, his voice closing around me like a net.

"Speak up," my mother whispered, "and straighten your feet. They're pigeon-toed again."

I looked down at the high-topped shoes—sensible, my mother called them. A wrinkled dull black, they laced above my ankles. The toes were indeed pointing in. I straightened them. "Yes," I muttered.

MY MOTHER went home then. I entered the church alone, walking between heavy oak doors into a dank container of holiness where mildew rose like incense from the carpeting. Dusty orange light from a high round window left unpenetrated pockets of darkness under rows and rows of empty pews. At first the church looked deserted. Then I noticed dark blobs, scattered heads above the front pews, and walked toward them, passing the pews slowly, looking into the young faces, but none smiled a welcome and all were older than I; and so

I sat by myself behind the others.

Reverend Endicott strode to the front of the church and stood for a moment counting heads—there were about twenty. Then he began to pray. When I leaned my back against the hard back of the pew, my feet stuck straight out in front of me. When I wiggled forward and bent my knees over the sharp wooden edge of the bench, my feet dangled. I shifted and shuffled.

Reverend Endicott's voice grew heavier. "Souls falling into hell," he intoned forcefully. I could feel his voice hit the air, then fall; each word was a soul plunging headlong, sinking endlessly into the bottomless floor of the church. Darkness crouched in all the corners, watching me, waiting. If I thought a truly wicked thought, I might be struck dead. I tried not to think of any.

Reverend Endicott finished his prayer and opened the big church Bible. "Once Jesus went down to the Sea of Galilee and met three fishermen," he began in the special voice he reserved for children's sermons.

I knew the story well. I had even tried in a small way to be a Fisher of Men among my classmates. "The only church in town that's any good is the Loquat Avenue Church," I told them. For a moment I thought I would be martyred. I came home with my face scratched and my books smeared in mud.

"They just aren't ready yet for the gospel," my mother said. I wondered if the people I was to seek out today would be any readier.

Carefully, as though he were trying to catch and crush something between the pages, Reverend Endicott closed the big church Bible. It made a plopping sound as its gilt edges came to rest together. "We will all stand now and sing," he announced. I would soon be outside trying to save strangers. Something inside me wanted to run away. I stood but I did not sing. The others sang determinedly, "I will make you Fishers of Men, Fishers of Men, Fishers of Men." Like floats on a fishnet, their heads bobbed up and down with the beat.

"I will now distribute the bait," Reverend Endicott announced. He passed out piles of mimeographed invitations to a week of evangelistic meetings. He had divided the neigh-

borhood into "ponds." Each child was to fish both sides of one of the ponds. My pond was Orange Grove Avenue.

I WALKED out of the church into bright sunlight clutching my stack of invitations against the wind. Hard red berries from the pepper trees had scattered over the sidewalk and there was a faint spicy fragrance as my shoes crushed their shells. I passed a church I had often seen but whose name I didn't know. It was bigger than the Loquat Avenue Church and fancier. I looked up at its many spires reaching almost to heaven, and thought what a shame it was that people had gone to so much trouble building the wrong church.

I came to Orange Grove Avenue, which was now an orchard of bungalows. Square bungalows on square lots. Rows of brown bungalows with blue doors, each with wooden steps leading up to a tiny porch.

I climbed to the first porch and pressed the doorbell. The yard was overgrown. In the high tangle of Bermuda grass, a cat stalked a butterfly. I held the doorbell down until my finger hurt, but no one answered. I thought about Reverend Endicott and what he said: each soul saved would be a star in my crown when I got to heaven. So far I had no stars. I was the only girl in school with high-topped shoes. I didn't want to be the only one in heaven with a plain crown.

I walked to the next bungalow. Its square of mowed grass was boxed in by a precisely trimmed hedge. I rang the doorbell. This time the door sprang open almost immediately. A woman stood framed in the doorway, a bathrobe pulled tightly about her long bony frame. Her hands were tightly clasped in front of her, as though each restrained the other from some violence. Her arms and elbows formed a tight little box, a protective bumper.

"Well, what do you want?" she demanded.

I held an invitation out to her. Unclasping her hands, she pinched a corner of the paper. Gingerly, using just the tips of her thumb and finger, she held it away from her and began reading. Suddenly she let go of the invitation as though it

were something dirty. "We are Mormons," she said angrily and slammed the door shut. I wondered what it was about being a Mormon that made her so angry. I tried to retrieve the invitation, but it was caught in the closed door and would not come loose.

I felt like quitting, but I remembered the Bible story: when Peter, James, and John had been fishing all night, catching nothing, Jesus told them to let down their nets again. They did so, and caught so many fish their nets broke.

I walked to the third bungalow. There was no fence or hedge. On one side of the door was a clump of fig trees; on the other side, a young avocado tree. I rang the door-



bell. As soon as I had rung it, my courage left me. Dear God, make them not be at home. Please make them not be at home.

THEN I realized that the door was already open and a woman was standing inside. She held a tray full of food in one hand and a bowl of something in the other. I couldn't see how she had managed to open the door. "We're all around in the back," she said and closed the door with her foot. I wasn't sure, but I guessed this meant I was supposed to go around to the back too. Slowly I climbed down the steps of the porch and walked around to the back yard, clutching the stack of invitations.

There under a wide walnut tree was a long picnic table made of several small tables shoved together and covered with white cloth. Around the table was a noisy group of people, eating and drinking. I had

heard about wild parties and decided this must be one of them. At home we did not talk much when we ate. Here everyone seemed to be talking at once. Besides, there was beer on the table. I knew it was beer because Reverend Endicott in his temperance talk had shown us the different forms of alcohol. At the end of his talk, he put a goldfish into alcohol, and we watched it flop around and die. I thought of that goldfish now. I thought of hell, too. I could see these people in hell, writhing, splashing, wriggling, leaping out and falling back in again like the goldfish in alcohol.

I decided that I had better go, but just as I turned to leave, a large dog bounded up, greeting me with enthusiastic barking, jumping and threatening to make me drop the invitations. The people stopped talking and looked. All eyes were on me. "Did you want something?" one of the men asked. I stood there. Then I remembered the invitations. I walked over and put the whole pile down on the table next to the man's elbow. His shirtsleeves were rolled above the elbow and his arms were hairy. He examined the invitations, one finger placed on his lower lip, his forehead wrinkling up into straight lines.

Suddenly he leaped to his feet and banged his fork on a beer bottle. All the people stopped eating. "This little girl here has just invited us all down to the Loquat Avenue Church for a whole week of evangelistic meetings. What do you think of that?"

Two or three people laughed. "Very nice, Jack," a woman said.

Jack turned to me. "You do want all of us, don't you?"

"Yes," I said.

HE READ the invitation aloud, including the words in red capitals at the end: "COME SAVE YOUR SOUL FROM HELL." Then he passed the sheets out merrily as if they were some new kind of party favor. "May you enjoy them in health," he told the guests, who seized them eagerly, like children reaching out to pop balloons. Some took several. Soon they were gone.

He turned to me. "Well, we got those off your hands," he said and sat down. "Hannah!" he called to

the woman who had met me at the front door. "Bring our little guest something to eat!"

But Hannah had already gotten me to sit down and was heaping my plate with food. There were several kinds of salads and preserves I had never seen before.

"No, thank you," I said, but she didn't seem to hear me.

She passed me a plate of rolls in an astounding variety of shapes. "Here, take more," she said. "There's no need to count them."

"Do they make you go around ringing doorbells, handing out those save-your-soul things?" Jack asked.

I didn't know what to say. I swirled a mound of sour cream with my spoon.

"Do they force you to do it?" Hannah asked.

I broke open a crescent roll. Outside it was hard and golden, decorated with tiny seeds and toasted bits of onion. Inside, it was soft and delicate. "Yes," I answered, knowing it was a lie.

"A god-awful way to treat a kid," Jack said.

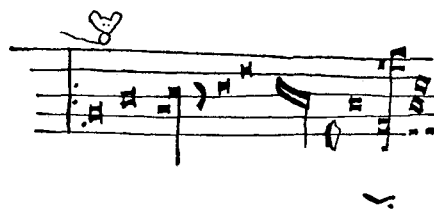
"Poor little thing!" Hannah said, gently patting my shoulder.

I looked at her. Her eyes were tender. They like me, I thought; they really like me. I stopped chewing.

"Eat! Eat!" Hannah said, heaping more salad onto my plate. No one told me to eat more slowly or to close my mouth when I chewed.

Finally when I could eat no more, I announced that I had to leave.

"WELL, see you in church," Jack said, and the others burst out laughing. It was like a cluster of skyrocketed fired together. The table shook, and beer sloshed in the sparkling bottles. I was laughing too. It made me think of Peter, James, and John when they let down their nets for the last time and caught so many fish their nets broke. Fish glistened in the sun as they broke free. All the nets in the world were broken. All the locked doors were suddenly flung open. I ran down Orange Grove Avenue singing, "I will make you Fishers of Men," leaping and shouting until I set all the dogs barking and birds flew from the tops of the pepper trees.



Handel Makes the Scene

ROLAND GELATT

WITHOUT BENEFIT of anniversary or special occasion, George Frederick Handel is dominating the musical scene. His life and works have been chronicled in a copious, long-awaited volume by Paul Henry Lang (W. W. Norton, \$12) that provides a seasoned survey of the composer's career and pulls together the fruits of much recent Handelian research. The high point of New York's opera season this fall has been the marvelously stylized production of Handel's *Julius Caesar* by the New York City Opera Company, a staging almost balletic in its controlled and stately execution, which made one revise all previous notions about Baroque opera in general and Handel as musical dramatist in particular. And record companies have been bringing out some extraordinary albums of *Messiah*, the *Water Music*, and the *Concerti Grossi*, Opus 6.

Lang has an illuminating chapter on *Messiah*—its origins and first performance, its musical content, and its relation to Baroque opera and oratorio—and he is at some pains to hammer home the theme that "Handelian oratorio is not church music, not even religious music." If we continue to view oratorio as if it were surrounded by a sacred halo, it is only because we are still seeing it through the eyes of the nineteenth century, which subverted the form into a massive and stuffy exercise in moral uplift. Handel and his contemporaries saw it quite differently. For them, oratorio was entertainment, a species of musical drama having to do with rousing biblical themes. *Messiah* is atypical in being without a cast of characters and in striking a more abstract and contemplative note than was Han-

del's usual way. Even so, the work has much more in common with the dramatic oratorios and with Baroque opera than is commonly thought.

A NEW APPROACH to *Messiah* has been under way for many years, a reappraisal initiated by Sir Thomas Beecham more than a quarter century ago. Beecham's instinctive appreciation of Handel's musical thought led him to celebrate *Messiah* as a secular and predominantly festive entertainment. But though he got the spirit right, he paid scant attention to the letter. Beecham's disdain for musicological research landed him in some bizarre stylistic incongruities, and in his third and last recording of *Messiah* he went so far as to present the work in a lavish reorchestration by Sir Eugene Goossens. On its own terms it is utterly captivating, a compendium of tripping delicacy and luscious swagger, but the sounds are not those which Handel intended. Other recordings, notably those of Hermann Scherchen and Sir Adrian Boult, drew considerably closer to the authentic sound, with small performing forces and orchestration true to Handel's own scoring. For a time they served us well.

Nothing in the past, however, compares in authenticity to the new recordings that have appeared this fall. One comes from London and is led by Colin Davis (Phillips 3-592, mono; 3-992, stereo; three discs); the other comes from New York and is led by Robert Shaw (RCA Victor 6175, mono and stereo; three discs). The Davis version utilizes forty instrumentalists and forty choristers, with a solo quartet made up of soprano Heather Harper, contralto