

## THE MISSING MAN

*He always loved his gold necklace and large gold belt buckle. Such were the thoughts of his mother as she tried to deal with her son's disappearance. While that might seem like a strange way to remember a lost offspring, it did reflect a prominent feature of her son. He savored the wealth that a successful family enterprise had thrust upon him. He never hesitated to parade that wealth in front of the public any chance he could. Could there have been some enemy within his mind that made him cling so to those two particular trappings of wealth?*

*His mother long since passed away, Horace Van Buehler no longer occupied the memory of any living relative in Jack Valley. I have pieced together this account from old newspapers, family diaries, and an interview with Marvin Katchmayer, the former sheriff who lived at St. Mercy Home for the Aged when Pastor Anderson spoke with him. A chance discovery by the reverend and his young people's class brought the young man's story back into the light.*

*Jess Harper, Cedar Crossing Gazette*

Every spring Pastor Anderson took his young people's class on a hiking trip to the hills around Jack Valley. He found it a great opportunity to instill some concepts within the young people while free from the distractions of everyday life in the city. And the kids responded by opening up and growing one day closer to maturity.

Pastor Fred led his pupils down every path with the rod and staff of a true shepherd. A gift from a fellow pastor who had visited Israel many times, the rod and staff added a certain authenticity to the scriptural parables and metaphors. The path they took on that day ran both narrow and wide at varying spots. Every so often he would stop and point out something that might help bring a Biblical story to life. When they reached the end of the path, they stood on a slight overhang of rock that gave a partial view of Jack Valley off in the distance. As he talked to his little flock about when the devil took Jesus up on a mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, Fred felt a slight

vibration in his feet. He quickly moved the group back off the overhang. Within minutes, the rock overhang collapsed down the side of the hill.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Pastor Anderson led the students back down the path toward their campsite. As they wound around the snaked trail, Fred glanced over to the area of the overhang every so often where he could see it from different angles. At one point, he stopped the group and fixed his eyes on what appeared to be a cleft in the rock underneath where the overhang had been. The narrow gap in the side of the rock had been shielded from view before by the overhang. He thought sure he had seen a momentary sparkle coming out of the cleft. They continued down the path until Fred once again thought he saw a shimmer of light coming from the gap in the rock, but as he stared at it, he couldn't make out anything.

“Why do you keep stopping and staring back at the rock, Pastor?” asked Jimmie Cahill.

“I thought I saw a sparkle of light coming from that gap in the rock,” answered Pastor Anderson. “Listen, kids. Do me a favor and watch that

cleft in the rock as we go down the path. If anybody sees a sparkle of light, let me know.”

After they had gone about fifty feet farther, Melissa Fairbanks said, “I saw it, Pastor.”

“Me, too,” said Doug Gottfried.

Pastor Anderson walked back to where Melissa and Doug stood and looked at the gap. At first, he couldn't see it. Then he momentarily could. He tried to figure out what would make the sparkle be intermittent like that. Then he noticed the movement in the leaves of the tree near them. When the wind blew, it changed the shadow of the tree ever so slightly. At a certain point in the movement, the sun hit the gap in the rock.

“What do you think it is?” asked Melissa.

“I don't know, guys,” replied Pastor Anderson. “It's a little too dangerous to get any closer, but we'll find out what it is, one way or another.”

The group finally reached their campsite below, packed up, and headed for home. The next day being Sunday, Pastor Anderson didn't have time to pursue any answers to the mysterious sparkle in the rock. On Monday, he called his friend, Roger

Olafson, who was an experienced rock climber and cave explorer. He arranged to meet Roger and his climbing partner, Mary Thoms, at church on Tuesday and lead them out to the trail where he and the kids had been on Saturday.

When they reached a spot just above where the overhang had been, Mary secured and monitored the safety harness and Roger went over the edge. When he reached the gap in the rock, he shined his flashlight into the gap.

“Okay, I’m coming back up,” hollered Roger. When he got back up to the flat spot where Mary and Fred stood, he said, “You’re not going to believe this, guys, but there’s a human skeleton wedged into that gap. The sparkle of light that you saw is from the sun hitting a large gold buckle. There is a slight darkening of the reflective surface of the gold, probably from the acid in the rock, but enough clear area to pick up the light. It’s hard to imagine how this person got trapped there, but I would say they’ve been there for a long time.”

“I’ll call the sheriff and let him know what we’ve found,” said Pastor Anderson.

“There’s got to be access to the back of that gap,” said Roger. “I’ll bet there’s a cave behind him. Care to do a little exploring, Mary?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll wait down below for the sheriff,” said Pastor Anderson. “You guys be careful.”

“We will, Fred,” said Roger. “I’ve got all my equipment in the trunk.”

By the time the deputy sheriff arrived, Roger and Mary had found the cave entrance, mastered the internal maze, and marked the path to the back-side of the gap. Then they led the deputy and Fred back to the skeleton.

“Don’t touch anything, folks,” said the deputy. “I’ll get the lab boys up here so we can get ‘em out of there. My guess is that it’s been there a good fifty years or more.”

Pastor Anderson studied the scene intently while they were waiting for the county crime lab to get there. He noted the two very striking pieces of gold jewelry that the person wore. The gold necklace appeared to be caught on a sharp piece of rock and the gold buckle likewise appeared to be

jammed into a rock, but curiously, in opposite directions. The leather bag that laid about two inches below his right hand also looked like it was wedged tightly in the gap, but it still held its contents securely, showing it had been of sturdy construction. All of that rested only about two feet from the outer edge of the opening. He or she appeared to be so close to freedom.

With the lab crew done with what they had to do, there only remained the task of removing the skeleton. The bones came out easily from the backside, but they had to use a chisel on the rock that clutched the jewelry, as well as on the rock on one side of the leather bag. When they got the bag free, they opened it up to find it about half full of gold coins and half full of deteriorating paper currency.

Pastor Anderson remained fascinated with the find and continued to follow up on the case, unofficially, of course. The official public statement comprised the belief that the remains were of Horace Van Buehler. Investigators saw no evidence of foul play. Law enforcement concluded the man had simply got caught in the gap and died there. Fred wanted to know more and set about on an investigative trek of his own. He researched every

newspaper article of the time period still available in the library. He tracked down two distant cousins who had retired and moved to Florida. One of those cousins remembered something about a box of old books found in the attic of the now demolished family home. That trail led to the diary of Horace's mother. His final piece of evidence came when he talked to the aging sheriff at the time of the missing man. The family enterprise collapsed soon after the man went missing. The contents of the leather bag that Horace carried held a goodly portion of the company's assets they had saved for the business partnership with another firm.

Carefully laying out everything he had gathered on the floor of his den, Fred first considered the picture of the missing man wedged into the rock. Then, weighing everything else in front of him, he developed a theory. It could not, of course, be absolutely conclusive, but it brought satisfaction to his inquisitive and mathematical mind.

Pastor Anderson's theory had Horace Van Buehler traveling to a business meeting to complete the partnership that the family enterprise needed to survive. He had a traffic accident in a severe storm and his car, never found, lay at the



bottom of some inaccessible ravine, now completely covered with vegetation. He escaped the car before it went over the cliff and entered the cave to get away from the storm. Slightly disoriented, he got lost in the cave and couldn't find his way out. He happened upon the gap in the rock and thought he had found the path to freedom and life. Thinking he could squeeze through the gap, he attempted to do so. His expensive gold necklace got caught on the jagged piece of rock, so he started to back out, when his large gold buckle got wedged into the rock also but in the opposite direction. The coroner said his left arm appeared to be broken and was probably of little use to him. His right arm became wedged as he tried to hold on to the leather bag with all the money in it, so that too became unusable. And that was how it ended. He simply got wedged and couldn't move.

His theory remained entirely within his mind, for no one remained on this earthly domain who cared if finalization came or not. Some years later he jotted down his theory and so provided us with this unofficial written account of the fate of Horace Van Buehler.

As extensions to his theories on such matters, though, Pastor Anderson always tried to look deeper into the meaning of why things happened the way they did and whether there were any spiritual implications involved. The extension on this case began with the fact that he had his young people's class on a hiking and camping retreat. As part of that experience, he tried to reinforce and bring to current life a picture of certain Biblical lessons as they would present themselves on the trail. His shepherd's rod and staff, as well as the sights, sounds, and touch of nature itself helped to authenticate those principles. Vindication of the Lord's words, "For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few." and "it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." seemed obvious in the physical sense. Perhaps too obvious for his critical mind. Yet, there it stood. The stones cried out with the evidence. Would the rich young man have been able to get through the narrow gap in the rock and continue living if he had left his riches behind him? Perhaps ... is there a

corresponding question regarding his spirit? Perhaps ... would the answer be the same? Perhaps ... it all seemed to fit, yet the answers would all be speculation at this point.

The evidence of “The Missing Man” had just come to the light. The evidence of the Lord’s words has been in the light for two-thousand years. Any metaphorical connection cannot help the dead. It can still help the living.