

STRONGER THAN THE SWORD

PERSECUTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE

BY

FAITH COOK



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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

AS WE LISTENED TO THE NEWS ON ONE UNFORGETTABLE evening in June 1978, we heard of an appalling massacre of Western missionaries at an Elim Pentecostal school in present-day Zimbabwe. Three men, six women and four children—one a baby of only three weeks old—had been bayoneted and mercilessly hacked to death. Mutilated almost beyond recognition, their bodies had been flung into the bush and abandoned. Slowly the names of the victims were read out one by one. We gasped with horror and dismay at the final name in the list: Wendy White, a close friend of ours. Later we heard that in those last harsh moments of life, Wendy had cried out to the others, ‘Do not fear them that kill the body! They cannot kill the soul ...’ In that hour of extremity her faith had proved stronger than the cruel sword.

And so, down through the centuries, courageous Christians have embraced suffering and death rather than deny Jesus Christ. From Stephen, the first martyr of the early church, to our present day, countless numbers worldwide have demonstrated a faith in the living God stronger than the sword—a faith that prevails even though a civil power may attempt to crush and annihilate it.

Recollecting the sufferings of Wendy and her fellow missionaries in that remote African bush, together with those of an innumerable host who have ‘loved not their lives even unto death’, this story has been written. Based on a period in English church history between 1660 and 1688 known as ‘The Great Persecution’—a time of relentless suffering for Dissenters—the narrative focuses on a typical family living in Somerset during these years. The circumstances of their lives are told in the context of the stirring historical events of the times and illustrate the surprising repercussions and rewards that may result from such spiritual faithfulness and sacrifice.

Of necessity the majority of the characters in *Stronger than the Sword* are fictitious, but they are representative of the true. Scattered throughout the story and interwoven with it, however, are references to a number of historical characters, men such as Joseph Alleine, John Bunyan, Hanserd Knollys, Lord Henry Wilmot, Judge George Jeffreys, Sir Matthew Hale and other political figures.

I am particularly grateful to four kind friends who have helped me with the illustrations for this book. Judy Holt has contributed some of her art work; Harold Gibson two of his paintings; while Chris and Alison Day have taken numerous photographs of Somerset scenery. Our friend Patricia Gibson has constantly encouraged me to persevere

with the story, and my daughter Esther has read through my manuscript, making most helpful suggestions. As ever, I am indebted to Ralph Ireland, whose ability to spot mistakes in a text has saved many a writer from a host of verbal and grammatical errors. And mere words of thanks can never adequately express the debt I owe to the patience and encouragement of my husband, Paul.

It is my hope that this account, based on real-life events, may strengthen our own courage and determination to remain faithful to the truths of Scripture, cost what it may, and especially in these days when persecution is often presented in a host of subtle forms.

Faith Cook

1.

THE RESCUE

NICHOLAS WILKES HELD HIS FLICKERING LAMP STEADILY IN front of him, its beam of light probing uncertainly through the mists of that July night in 1645. Again and again he stumbled over the tufts of sedge grass that grew in clumps everywhere across the moor. Mounds of peat loomed up unexpectedly in the darkness. Here and there the stunted trees cast weird shadows on the ground. Sometimes a startled sheep bolted across his path and disappeared into the night. Nicholas paid little notice. He was searching for his son.

‘James! James!’ he called urgently, but nothing except the eerie cry of night birds broke the silence. How different it was from the clatter of horses’ hooves, the yells of cavalymen and the roar of battle that had rampaged past Moorside Farm that very afternoon! Sprawling on the edge of bleak



A view of Langport today

moorland, the farm, two miles from Langport in Somerset, was known locally simply as Moorside, and was currently owned by Nicholas Wilkes and his wife Alice. Here the Wilkes family had bred Romney sheep—a rare long-haired breed—for many generations.

With the Civil War raging across the country since 1642, and the Royalists now facing defeat, Somerset men and women were deeply apprehensive. Everyone knew that the men of the Royalist army, led by the hard-drinking, unpredictable Lord George Goring, had been pillaging wherever they had been stationed. Hungry, angry and defeated yet again by Oliver Cromwell's well-trained troops at an engagement that became known as the Battle of Langport, they cared little whose property they robbed, or whose animals they killed, as they thundered past.

With the fighting so close, Nicholas had been concerned about the safety of his sheep grazing out on the moor not far from the farm and had sent his older son James to round up the flock and pen the animals securely in the field behind Moorside. But James had not returned. Many hours had passed since the disorderly troops had fled along the nearby path. Nicholas and Alice were growing ever more troubled about their son's safety. As darkness fell, the anxious father set out to look for James. This way and that he peered into the darkness. Then Nicholas heard a sound. A muffled moan seemed to come from low down in one of the treacherous ditches that criss-crossed the moor. Perhaps an animal had fallen down and was unable to find a way out, or perhaps ...

Holding his lamp at arm's length, Nicholas scanned the length of the deep ditch as far as the beam would penetrate. Normally filled with water, the rhyne, as it was known

locally, was dry; the unusually hot weather had left the soil cracked and hard. He could see nothing. Perhaps it had been his imagination. Calling his son's name repeatedly, Nicholas stumbled on. Then he heard it again, only this time it sounded closer and more desperate. Somewhere nearby there must be an injured animal, or even a man. Could it be James?

Hooking his lantern to a protruding twig, Nicholas began to scramble cautiously down the side of the ditch, holding on to rough clumps of grass and mounds of earth. With limited light he could hardly see where to place his foot for his next downward step. Suddenly a loose stone gave way, and he found himself sliding helplessly into the ditch. He lay still for a moment at the bottom, dazed and shaken. Then, heart beating heavily, he began to grope around him. Suddenly he touched something. A man was lying prostrate almost beside him, with one leg doubled up under him. He appeared to be only semi-conscious.

Nicholas could just make out the grey jacket, black breeches and hose of a Royalist cavalryman. At that moment the moon emerged from behind a cloud. Now he could see the man's pallid face, drawn with pain; a tuft of fair hair plastered with blood was lying dankly across his forehead. As the farmer tried to make out the injured man's features, he could see that he was young, perhaps not much older than sixteen-year-old James. He must have been thrown from his horse as he hurtled across the rough ground, trying to escape the approaching horsemen.

But what could Nicholas do at this time of night? He could not possibly move the injured man on his own. And what about James? Why not leave this Royalist soldier to die? After all, who could tell what destruction he might



A wounded cavalier

already have wreaked on the properties, or even the persons, of innocent villagers? Nicholas hesitated, struggling with competing thoughts of anger, fear and pity.

‘Water,’ whispered a hoarse voice, ‘Water’.

‘I must help him,’ thought Nicholas frantically. What if it had been James lying there? ‘I have no water,’ he answered steadily, ‘but I will go and fetch help.’

Reaching home he called his younger son, fourteen-year-old Robert, still awake and troubled about his brother, and then begged the help of two grumbling neighbours who unwillingly left their beds. After some persuasion the men agreed to help Nicholas. The party set off into the night, equipped with a rough coat to act as a makeshift stretcher.