

Bright Valley of Love

By Edna Hong

*The true story of a handicapped
child who finds a haven of love in
the nightmare of Nazi Germany*

CONTENTS

Prolog	7
Nothing But a Nothing	9
The House Called Patmos	17
Love Is the Best Antidote	25
The Language of Praise	37
There's a Crack in Everything	49
I Can Read	67
Faith Spreads Its Wings	77
To Glorify God	89
The Ugliest of Times	105
The Unshakable Kingdom	127
Epilog (1976)	153
Update (2021)	155
Sources of Hymns and Scripture Passages	156

The chapter artwork is based on drawings done by the children of Mamre School at Bethel.

PROLOG

This is a true-to-life story. Gunther was a real live boy and now is a real live man. I met him, talked with him, and walked with him in June of 1974.

This is a true-to-place story. Bethel is a real city in a real valley in Germany. In fact, I found it so true a place that I decided it must be one of the most gospel-true places in the world! In no other place have I found love lived so true-to-the-gospel, twenty-four hours a day and every day of the week, as in Bethel.

This is a true-to-the-larger-facts story. It is as faithful to Gunther's life, to the painful life of the epileptics, to the story of Bethel, and to the history of the times as I could make it without writing a dry and full-of-too-many-facts history book or a medical textbook. Of course I had to imagine all the "he says" and "she says," for there were no tape recorders then!

A very wise woman—Simone Weil was her name—once wrote that *imagined* evil is fascinating and inviting, while *real* evil is deadening and repellent. But *imagined* good is dull and uninteresting, while *real* good is fascinating and inviting. Simone Weil is so right, so right! I could never have imagined good as exciting and inviting as I found it *for real* in Bethel. If I had used every ounce of my imagination, I

could never have dreamed up such exciting and interesting characters as Pastor Fritz von Bodelschwingh and his wife Frau Julia. Or that gleeful trumpeter of God, Pastor Johannes Kuhlo! Indeed, I have to confess that the Gunther I imagined into the story before I ever went to Bethel was not nearly as fascinating as the *real* Gunther I finally met. I hope you will find the real Gunther I tried to place between these covers just as fascinating.



NOTHING BUT A NOTHING

In the world of his mother's womb, the fluid of life that trickled into him through his umbilical cord was weak and starved. The world into which he was born one day in the year 1914 nourished him no better. Perhaps even worse. For it was the worst of times, and his mother was not the best of mothers. And his father went off to World War I, which the whole world lost, although some countries thought that they had won it. For the baby boy Gunther, who was born in Germany—the country that lost the war most hurtfully—the sum of all these things was a lifetime as a cripple.

“No good for anything,” said his grandmother coldly when the war was all over and his father rescued him from the woman who was not the best of mothers and brought him to her own house in a great gray, dingy city west of the Rhine, north of the Ruhr, and south of the Lippe rivers.

The grandmother had swept and scrubbed floors and rubbed clothes on a washboard practically every day she could remember of her life, and she believed that only people who did something useful like that had any right whatsoever to live in the world. Or people who were rich enough not to have to be useful.

Although the grandmother's own spine was crooked and curved from everlastingly bending over a washboard doing laundry for the better folk, the long bones of her legs and the short bones of her feet could do what her will commanded them to do. Even though her shoulders were hunched as if all her life she had crept through low doorways, the long bones of her arms and the short bones of her hands could be moved by her muscles when the message came over the nerves from her brain to clutch, to lift, to hold, to let go. Even when she was weary-to-death from a long day's work, her legs and her feet would take her to the woods and her arms and hands would collect deadwood in a little handcart. Even though her hands trembled, she could peel the potatoes or the turnips that were to be their supper.

But this grandchild of hers who ought to be gathering the deadwood, emptying the slop pail in the gutter below, and carrying out the ashes for her—this brat was not worth one dry twig or a bucket of potato peelings and rotten cabbage leaves! He was human junk, that's what he was; that's all he was. Deformed from head to foot. Leg bones and anklebones. Arm bones, wrist bones, and finger bones. Skull bones and jawbones. Back bones and pelvic bones—all of them deformed!

Soft and spongy baby bones, starved of calcium and sunshine—terribly starved!—had stayed soft and spongy too long and too late. And now all the bone-warps and bone-faults had hardened once and for all. Even the knees, elbows, wrists, and ankles had stiffened and hardened. The hands looked as if they had been stuck on his arms by a blind man wearing boxing gloves. The feet seemed to have been screwed on by someone who did not make the last quarter-turn, for they did not point true and straight ahead. Lame from head to foot he was, and very likely lame brained, too, for the sounds that came out of his throat were more bab-

bling than speaking. The large head would roll, the thin, twisted body would strain and struggle just to say something that sounded like, “Ah-h wanna! Ah-h wanna!”

And that, it seemed, was what this brat of a grandchild would be all his misborn days—a piece of human junk that croaked, “Ah-h wanna! Ah-h wanna!”

Because the grandmother was ashamed of him and feared the tittle-tattlers in the neighborhood, she kept him behind the closed door of her one and only bedroom. When she came home one day and found that he had rolled himself off his cot in the back corner and pulled himself into the kitchen, she was both alarmed and angry. Ignoring his panting, gurgling cries of victory, she carried him back and dropped him roughly on his cot. When he protested and cried, “Ah-h wanna! Ah-h wanna!” she flew into a rage. “Ain’t it enough that I gotta feed you and wash you? Ain’t it enough that you choke on every spoon of soup I put in your mouth? Are you gonna start rammin’ round now and cause me more trouble yet?”

After that she locked the bedroom door as well as the door that led from the tiny kitchen to the gloomy back stairway. To make sure that he would be quiet while she was gone, she gave him a tablespoon of Soothing Syrup, an old remedy the advertising claimed would “allay all pain, cure wind colic, and relieve diarrhea.” Not that he cried very much—or loudly—if and when he did. Since his crying had always been ignored in the past, he had given up crying as an infant means of telling his needs. Most of the time he slept fitfully—or sat propped up on a pillow in a kind of dull suffering. The daily double-dose of Soothing Syrup was merely to make sure that he did not disturb the neighbors above or below or across the narrow courtyard.



THE HOUSE CALLED PATMOS

“Ah, so here we have another helpless little mite,” said Pastor Wolf, taking the burden of boy from the shamefaced father’s arms. “And what is your name?” he asked, looking searchingly into the boy’s somber eyes.

Silence. The same dull silence that had lasted the long train ride to Bielefeld and the long walk in the drizzling rain to the Bethel Reception Center. Even when the grandmother had lagged half a length behind and her umbrella had dripped right into his face, the boy had made no sound.

“His name is Gunther,” said the father.

“Does Gunther talk?”

“Not much,” the grandmother answered curtly.

“Do *you* talk to Gunther?”

“What’s there to say—to the likes of him?” snapped the grandmother.

The pastor’s arms instinctively held the boy closer to him. “Everything!” he said. “The more these poor little ones suffer, the more we have to say to them.”

“Gunther,” he said directly to the boy, “we are going to send you to live with the boys and girls in the house called Patmos. Patmos is named after the Greek island where

Christ's beloved John had a vision and a revelation. I think, my son, that in Patmos your little soul will also have a vision and a revelation."

The house called Patmos was farther up the snug valley between the wooded Teutoburg hills, and Pastor Wolf asked a boy passing on the street to show them the way. The boy, however, disappeared into the bakery, from which floated fragrances that would tempt even a man with a stainless-steel will.

For an hour the old woman and the man wandered up steep streets and down, too shy to ask the way again. Finally when they ended up in a cemetery on a high hill with rows and rows of neat white crosses, the grandmother stopped two girls wandering hand-in-hand among the graves. When they turned their faces to her—one sightless and vacant and the other birthmarked a corrugated purplish red, the question on her lips stuttered to a stop. The sunken eyes in the grotesque mask surveyed her quietly. The thick lips moved in song:

O happy they in God who rest,
No more by fear and doubt oppressed;
Living or dying, they are blest!

Both girls broke into a ringing chorus of Alleluias that followed the stumbling, fleeing three down the steep path to the street below.

A man with a bountiful beard and carrying a trumpet came clattering down the street in wooden clogs.

"Do you suppose he's looney, too?" the grandmother whispered. Not being sure, she let her son ask, "Please, sir, can you tell us the way to Patmos?"

“Patmos!” chuckled the man, his eyes twinkling and dancing. “So you want to go to Patmos. How very, very remarkable that you are going the same place I am going! Follow me.”

Placing himself before them like a general before his troops, he put his trumpet to his lips and began to blow. And the song he blew was an old folksong, “All the birds are here again.”

Looking back over his shoulder and seeing them still standing uncertainly in the same place, he blew another tune: “O, come, little children, O come, one and all.”

“He’s looney, too! They’re all looney here!” muttered the grandmother.

“Maybe so and maybe not,” answered the father. “Maybe they’re sane and we’re the looney ones.”

Whereupon he shifted his hold on the boy, who had squirmed from a dull and listless prone position to a sitting-up position—almost as if he had been sleeping and the trumpet blowing had woken him up. His body leaned and swayed toward the bearded trumpeter, who waved his trumpet merrily, faced about again and resumed the march to Patmos. Like the veteran soldier that he was, the father fell in step behind the jolly general, and the utterly weary, utterly confused old grandmother trotted along—two paces behind now. She was sure that the two smiling deaconesses they met, the two laughing young men pushing two patients in wheelchairs—the patients grinning from ear to ear—were all laughing at the three of them. Everybody in this looney place was laughing at them!

It was a somewhat long and crooked way, and by the time they arrived at Patmos the clear notes of the trumpet playing its merry tune had already announced their coming. A little crowd awaited them. Laughing, shouting, and wav-

ing, they crawled, limped, tottered, and staggered toward them, stretching out their hands.

“Kuhlo! Kuhlo!” they cried. “Pastor Kuhlo is coming!”

He took each hand, one by one. “Monika, my little thrush! Gisela, my skylark! Heinz, my red-headed woodpecker! See, my little birds, I have brought you another little warbler to sing praises with you. I haven’t asked him his name yet—”

“His name is Gunther,” said the grandmother quickly, to cover up the boy’s silence. After one swift horrified look at the children, her eyes darted here and there and everywhere but to those dismaying faces so robbed of all the human graces. Their hands reached out to touch some part of him, and their mouths formed his name, repeated it until it became a chorus. The boy looked down in wonder, half fearful that it was all true, half fearful that perhaps it all was a dream.

A deaconess in a long black dress and crisp white cap, its big bow tied under her chin, pushed her way gently through the crowd of children, leading a blind boy.

“O Willi, my little Willi, here is a new friend for you,” said Pastor Kuhlo. “Gunther, this is Willi. He was born without eyes, but God gave his heart eyes that see far better than yours or mine.”

The boy perched in his father’s arms looked into the turned-up face with deep sockets where eyes should be. Slowly he dropped his right arm he had arched around his father’s neck and touched the groping hand. As if through thick mittens his rigid hand felt the blind boy’s fingers touch the stiff pegs that were his own.

EPILOG (1976)

Thirty-four years have passed since that day when Pastor Fritz von Bodelschwingh fought and won the hardest battle of his life—the battle to save the patients with severe physical and mental handicaps from being put to death by a government that did not think their lives worth living. The world war Hitler started ended for the Germans in the spring of 1945. On January 4, 1946, Pastor Fritz von Bodelschwingh died.

Dr. Karl Brandt, Hitler's personal physician, who had been placed in charge of the euthanasia program, was tried in the Nuremberg trials, was convicted, and put to death. In his response to the verdict, Dr. Brandt expressed the wish that Pastor Fritz von Bodelschwingh were still alive, for he could and would tell them all that he, Dr. Brandt, was not the monster his accusers had made him out to be.

The war upon the severely handicapped in body and mind did not end with the defeat of Nazi Germany, the death of Hitler, and the trial and execution of Dr. Brandt. It still goes on in the world, and it will go on as long as there are people who do not know what it is to be human, as long as there are people who think some lives are not worth being allowed to live. Or not worth being born! As long as there are people who think this way, there will be a battle between

them and those who believe that euthanasia and abortion are murder.

Bethel is still a valley of the sick that provides a life of dignity to a wide range of people in need. In 1972 there were 6,311 patients—among them mentally ill, mentally retarded, mentally disturbed, and alcoholics as well as epileptics.

Bethel is still a valley of healing and uses the healing Word of God, the healing Spirit, and healing love as much as ever it did. It also uses the most modern methods of research into the causes and cures of the illnesses that bring patients from all over the world to this valley. It is one of the world centers for the study of epilepsy.

Bethel is still a valley of love, of work, of art, of music. Long before people began talking and writing about the therapy of love, of work, art, and music, Bethel patients were making music, creating art, doing meaningful work, loving and being loved. Pastor Johannes Kuhlo is long since dead, but every festival occasion in Bethel is still celebrated by choirs of voices, brass, and mouth organs. And anyone and everyone who is buried in the hilltop cemetery at Bethel is trumpeted to his final resting place.

Gunther is 62 years old now and is still pecking out poems for Bethel's many festivals on his typewriter. He still "flippers" up and down the up-and-down streets of the valley. He has other and new friends, for those who first gave him the gift of love were dead and gone from Bethel. Until that day when he, too, goes to join those blessed ones who gave him his first taste and glimpse of the heavenly home, Gunther will go on living happily in Bethel.