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THE
Gauntlet

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Chapter I

A CAPRICIOUS BREEZE, down from the Texas prairie and fat with October mellowness, rustled the papers on the little table near the window and blew the chintz curtains against London Wingo's face, pestering him into exasperation. His nerves already were on edge and he was too engrossed in his general problems to think of solving the immediate one simply by pulling down the window or moving the papers, which included his notes from the *Hebrew Lexicon* by Bushmaster, Valentine, and Dangerfeld.

The mere thought of the names and their syllabic connotation irked him because his professor of Hebrew, in assigning lessons, always rolled the words Bush-master, Val-en-tine, and Dan-ger-feld in infuriating sonority as though remembrance of them were evidence of wisdom. Hereafter, London vowed to himself, he would call his textbook *Lex by B.V.D.* He would daub a wad of clay on the feet of his professor's idols.

London Wingo, an ordained minister of the Gospel at twenty-eight, and a fourth-year student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, had not learned that man never wants his idols to have feet of clay, that idols are man's monuments to his own ignorance and fear, and to his vanity. That was only one of the things he hadn't learned, this proud young man who was not so far removed from Oklahoma's dusty furrows as his shiny shoes might have indicated.

However, there was so much he didn't know, not only about mankind and God, but, above all, about himself, that one more gram would not break the delicate scales upon which he was trying to balance heaven and earth to his own convictions. The

ministry of London Wingo was of the mind and not of the spirit.

The curtains billowed again, slowly and gracefully, and he glared at them. The left curtain, behaving as a conformist, began fluttering back to its proper position, but the right one flipped out suddenly and tickled his nose.

London pushed back his chair and the legs scraped on the concrete floor, causing his flesh to creep. He closed his eyes, put one hand on *Lex by B.V.D.* and the other on *Christianity and Ethics*, tilted his head, and exploded a booming "DAMN!" Then he looked around quickly, as though he feared Kathie, his wife, might have heard him, and laughed. She was still sleeping, however.

The harmless outburst was a spontaneous rebellion against the "thou shalt nots" that, at times, seemed to corner him and nag him into frustration. He felt better and wondered why such a silly performance made him feel better. A disciple of the never-too-certain modern school of theology, London was not surprised that his conscience didn't rebuke him, for he believed that conscience was synonymous with fear, mostly the fear of detection.

But sometimes his conscience, be it fear or the voice of God, asked him exactly what he did believe and he was constrained to admit that he didn't know. Often he asked himself, "On the level now, why are you a preacher, and where are you going?"

Really, the answer was so simple that the young minister couldn't understand it, for in snatching for the stars and the never-never nebula of an ever-ever infinity he was overlooking the beauty and truth of grass and clods. In seeking a great river, he hadn't learned the importance of brooks; that the easiest way to find a river is to follow the nearest brook.

London Wingo was there in the seminary wrestling with the boulders of orthodox theology and gulping in cold, stringy heaps the bleak wisdom of dead philosophers because he was on a quest, a search for spiritual peace, a meeting place for his intellect and intuition, an armistice between his mind and his soul. In those days the young minister never considered the difference between a crusade and a quest. He dreamed of charging into

Zion and grasping the Holy Grail from faltering hands, then holding it aloft in its splendor while the world thundered hosannas. He didn't know that the Grail is the troubled heart of mankind and that God is Humanity.

It was his quest that baffled him, and because he was baffled and worried he relieved the tension of his emotions by exploding his "damn." The use of the harmless oath as a safety valve did not trouble him, for his code provided that profane words must be preceded by the name of God.

However, he suddenly felt ashamed and for a reason that only men molded to his pattern ever understand. No one had heard him; therefore, there was none to condemn and, hence, no reason for fear. Nevertheless, he had a feeling that God disapproved of the performance because, confused as he was, he sometimes brought God down to the level of a police judge or to the status of a father who slaps a child's hand for stealing jam.

London had tried for years to convince himself and his brethren that he was a free thinker, impervious to the criticisms and pressure of the multitude. Therefore, the knowledge that the outburst was a thing he had enjoyed, but a mood he didn't dare flaunt before the masses convicted him, he thought, of hypocrisy. The fact that the explosion was intemperate and stupid, and that intemperance and stupidity are sins, never occurred to him. He was a bewildered man, trying to understand a seemingly bewildering Gospel, and had reached that unhappy and uncertain stage where one is apt to confuse intemperance with injunction and stupidity with ignorance.

His temper, at that minute, was not in harmony with his calling, because the Reverend London Wingo, candidate for Master of Theology, former schoolteacher, plow hand, cowpuncher, and train butch, was besieged by troubles. He was worried again about money, but mostly about Kathie, a tiny, merry raindrop of a girl.

For Kathie was pregnant.

The word "pregnant" usually was whispered in the seminary, although the condition was somewhat common among the women

who lived with their student-husbands on the second floor of Fort Worth Hall, a large building that dominated the campus with a heavy-handed air of stability. When a man and his wife ceased to be expectant parents and became real parents they must move out of the hall and into one of the cottages near by, if a cottage were available. Cottages meant furniture and heat and many other things, and things cost money.

The student-minister remembered then a remark by his father, made many years before during one of the frequent quarrels between old man Wingo and his sickly wife. London's father, exasperated by the restraints of society, had pointed his finger at his wife and bellowed, "By God, everything I like is either unlawful, unhealthy, or unobtainable."

Old man Wingo had believed the hearthstone was a millstone and always had sought the green valley beyond the hills. He had known Jack London in California and had given his son his friend's name, much to the consternation of Mrs. Wingo, who preferred the name of Paul.

After one quarrel that had burnt a scar on London's memory, his father had gone away again and left his wife and son in Oklahoma. Soon thereafter he was killed while breaking mustangs in Mexico. Horses were more difficult to subdue than his own wife. London's mother had brought his body back home for a Christian funeral and then had returned to her schoolroom to provide for herself and son. Now she was sleeping near her husband, awaiting the summons of the saints. Somehow, London never thought of his father sleeping, even in death. He had a vague, childish feeling, almost a delight, that his father would go storming to the Judgment Bench, shaking his black hair and roaring commands to the angels, and that the first angel to bow to his will would be the wife whose heart he had broken.

The memory of his father always left London confused but never bitter, although he knew his father's behavior was partly responsible for his quest, that the heritage of old man Wingo was a blanket of skepticism that tried to smother the faith his mother had bequeathed him.

Once when he returned home from threshing wheat in Oklahoma's Grant County, up near Medford, his mother had looked at him a long time and had run her bony fingers through his thick black hair. "You are your father's son," she had said. "You look just like him. He wasn't a bad man."

Then she had put her hands on his arms and felt them and said, "Big shoulders. Just like his. How tall are you, London?"

"Five-eleven."

"He was six feet. Even. But you'll grow some more. Your eyes are not quite as blue as his, but almost. You've got his mouth too. He had a large mouth and he used it for something besides eating. Your skin is brown like his. You know, I always reckoned there was some Indian in the Wingos. Good Indian. Maybe Cherokee from back in North Carolina where the family came from. Black hair and brown skin and blue eyes. You sure look like him. Your hands are not as large as his. You get your hands from my side of the family. My folks had good hands. Long fingers. You've got our nose too. All my folks had good noses. Long, like a nose ought to be."

London was six feet now and his lashes were black and bushy and made his blue eyes look darker than they really were. He had a studied poise and an air of confidence that were the envy of many younger students who had come to the seminary from poor little Baptist colleges or even direct from the farms. His affectations, however, didn't deceive his friend, Page Musselwhite, who often irked London by saying, "You can take the man out of the country, but you can't take the country out of a man." Even London's walk, a swinging gait, proclaimed that he was accustomed to lots of space, and his deep, uninhibited laughter that often bounced against the walls of the seminary's little rooms was evidence that he was not yet broken to the confinements of buildings or to cities.

Thinking of his parents, he forgot about the curtains until they flapped put again. So he weighted his notes with books and got up to pull down the window, but, remembering that Kathie needed fresh air, he left the window up and glanced over at her, sleeping with her head on both pillows.

Then he smiled. Something she had said at supper made him smile. They had walked into the big, stern dining room of Fort Worth Hall and the other women had stared at her, at her stomach. "I'll bet," Kathie had whispered, "they think I've swallowed a peach."

"A grapefruit," he had replied.

There had been pork and sweet potatoes for supper, and Mrs. Kilmer, the superintendent of the hall and godmother to the young preachers, had called on him for grace and Kathie had winked at him. He had thanked God for the food and almost had laughed out loud when his wife whispered that, blessed or not, pork didn't agree with her.

After supper they had returned to their room and she had stretched across the bed to rest while he studied. Then she had fallen asleep after kicking off her shoes and fluffing the pillows. The pillows were theirs, a gift from one of Kathie's aunts in east Texas. The bedcovers were theirs, too, and so was the grass rug that covered only the center of the floor. The floor was painted a dull green.

Kathie was smiling in her sleep, just a trace of a smile that gave her little oval face a suggestion of wistfulness or maybe mischievousness. The womenfolks of her family, Shintoists and matriarchs, might have oracled, without fear of presumptuous contradiction from the menfolks, that she was dreaming of the son she hoped to bear, hence was smiling in anticipation of the miracle. London, however, was too much of a realist to accept any such indoctrined nonsense. He knew his wife was frightened at the prospects of her travail although she had been reared to believe that woman must go into the valley of the shadow of death because she was a sacred vessel. Motherhood was a woman's cross and she must see to it that her children and husband always remembered that. Kathie, daughter of a minister and reared in strict conformity with her mother's views, never had been told that youth and love are handmaidens to the divine plan. She had been taught that youth was for work, and love fit only in Songs of Solomon, a book, incidentally, that she enjoyed far

more than the dreary wars and assembly-line begats of Kings and Judges.

The protective theory that childbearing was a debt to God and a loan to man that must be repaid with interest amused Kathie when she thought about it at all. She couldn't bring herself to think of her marriage as a duty, for loving London was ecstasy, and often she wondered if she were immodest and different from other women, and what might have happened to her if she hadn't married him. As a child she had dreamed of being a bareback rider, wearing white tights.

Her husband spared no thought for the fact that she was smiling in her sleep. She usually was smiling. She was smiling when he first met her down at Baylor University, where they were graduated together, although there was four years' difference in their ages. As editor of the yearbook, a job that had helped him pay his last year through college, he had described her as "merry as the month of May." He had wanted to write that she was "as cute as a button," but that might have been considered flippant, coming from a man who had set his course for the seminary and ministry.

London thanked his lucky star that he had obeyed his mother's plea not to marry until he had finished college and had ignored his father's admonition never to marry at all. He met Kathie his first year at Baylor, his junior year, and after a month of friendship and three months of courtship they decided that after graduation they would marry and spread the Gospel together, thus pledging a covenant.

It took London six years to get his college degree. First he had attended Oklahoma Baptist University until he was twenty-one and then after a few months in the Army worked at many jobs, including schoolteaching, to get a stake for Baylor.

He and Kathie had married in the June of their graduation, then he had been ordained, and together they had come to the seminary to complete his studies. And now, with less than a year to go, his wife was pregnant and he was broke.

London tiptoed to the bed and clumsily put the end of the

counterpane over her feet, and she turned on her back and stretched, then snuggled into the pillows, and a few strands of her brown bobbed hair fell across her face. She was one of less than a dozen women in the seminary whose hair was bobbed, for it was the year of 1923 and bobbed hair was not proper for a preacher's wife. Men no longer stared at bobbed hair, but many women, denied freedom by convention, still looked upon it as a sign of taint and criticized their reckless sisters in public and envied them in private. Shorn locks were associated with short skirts and dancing and, in some circles, even with cigarette smoking. In 1923 few women had succumbed to the lure of cigarettes, but bobbed hair and bridge were shaking the foundations of fundamentalism.

Not only was Kathie's hair bobbed, but she had a Nestle's permanent wave. She had cut her hair her second year at Baylor, the year she dropped the name of Katherine and adopted Kathie. There was a lively connotation to the name, and her mother and aunts had protested, then suggested that if she must give herself a nickname, why not Kate?

None of the skepticism that made London miserable bothered Kathie at all, for she had a surplus of faith and drew on it in times of stress and wished she could deposit some of her abundance to her husband's account. Kathie Wingo was a Christian who had found the balm of spiritual peace and she bothered not at all about the crossed *ts* and the dotted *is*. She knew London was stumbling on a quest of his own choosing, and every night she prayed that God would reveal to him the truth, perhaps in the unfolding of a leaf. Not that she wanted her husband, or anyone else, to be as she was. Oh no. She wanted only for the man she adored to be happy, and she knew he never could be happy unless he found the kind of faith that sustained her—a faith that could not be weighed on scales or proved by a formula.

London liked the name of Kathie and was proud of her bobbed hair and permanent wave and her independence. Looking at her there on the bed, he was tempted to tickle her feet and wake

her up. He was tired of studying and wanted to talk. Instead of obeying the impulse, however, he stepped back to the table and resumed his work. He was calm now.

The Hebrew lesson came easily, as did the assignments in Greek, New Testament history, and homiletics. He pushed his books aside and began scribbling figures. It cost them twelve dollars weekly for board and room in Fort Worth Hall. There was no tuition. He had paid for his books at the beginning of the session and had expected to have no expenses except board and room.

The cottages near the seminary rented for from ten to twenty-five dollars a month, and then there was food and other things, including the doctor and the hospital. He could get ministerial aid, as he was qualified for all requirements, even for requirement No. 3 that "a beneficiary must not be addicted to the use of tobacco in any form." The mere thought of applying for aid from any fund that linked Christ's ministry to Climax chewing tobacco or Old North State smoking tobacco stunned his pride and determination. No, he could not do it.

Maybe he could get a country church and preach there on fifth Sundays. London's mother, an addict to proverbs, often had said that where there is a will there is a way. But he didn't have the will to ask for help, hence there was no way. He had Kathie, and Kathie soon would have a child, and he was determined to begin the second act of his marital drama beholden to no man. London knew, and he had a feeling that Kathie knew, that his days in the seminary were numbered.

The breeze had died down and the curtains were still when London glanced at his watch, a good Hamilton, the only negotiable legacy from his father. It was 10 P.M. and the night was still and starry and the lights of downtown Fort Worth were visible only a few miles away. Everywhere about him was Texas; flat, enormous, and brooding. He sometimes wondered how high up Texas went. Most Texans thought it went all the way, that heaven was a part of Texas, or Texas a part of heaven. London

remembered a saying of his father's that "the wind blows in Texas and so does Texas," and the recollection brought a grin to his broad mouth.

He heard the bus crunching up the driveway and leaned out of the window and watched the students pile out of the vehicle, chattering in undertones. The bus was called the Gospel Buggy by the gay young preachers, a description that brought frowns from those who considered glumness proof of the divine call. On certain nights the Gospel Buggy took student-preachers and gospel singers to a downtown mission where the men and women tried out their wings, using amused Mexicans, hungry tramps, and professional churchgoers as experiments.

London had preached at the mission several times. He didn't like it. It reminded him of a side show, and he felt foolish trying to explain Christ to Mexican Catholics who seemed to be smiling at him in gracious tolerance. The idea of "explaining Christ" (a seminary expression) didn't appeal to him anyway. To him, Christ was not a formula to be explained by adding faith and sacrifice and getting salvation.

This was the night Page Musselwhite was to have preached at the mission, and London was anxious to know how things had gone with his friend.

Taking everything into consideration, Page, a bachelor in his early thirties, was the most popular man in school. Some of the students insisted that that was because ol' Page made the best coffee in the seminary, using a syrup bucket and eggshells. Others, including Devan Schuyler, his roommate, said everybody liked Page because he was so dumb.

London knew otherwise. There was something about Page that pulled men to him. Although he had been graduated from a small college and now was winding up his seminary work, he often lapsed into the vernacular of the land that had spawned him. He was not a brilliant student and said simply that he was called to preach while plowing corn up in Missouri. He was a farmer turned fisherman.

Page also had a war record that was the envy of most men,

including London, who was mustered out of the Army in the winter of 1917 after a siege of flu and pneumonia. Devan Schuyler had been a captain and never allowed anyone to forget it. In his own words, he roomed with Page because "the big guy needs me." Truthfully, Devan felt superior to ol' Page, and the association watered his ego.

London waited until all the students left the Gospel Buggy, then glanced over at Kathie again, making sure she was sleeping. He turned off his table light and stepped out into the hall and began walking toward the stairs that led to the third floor, the bachelors' quarters. Devan Schuyler was waiting at the foot of the stairs. He was wearing a black bow tie, as usual, and was laughing.

"I figured you'd be coming up," Devan said. "Why weren't you at the mission?"

"I had to study," London said. "How about ol' Page? Did he do all right?"

Devan put his hands on the newel post and shook his head. "That big ox. He's got no more business trying to preach than I have running a pressing shop."

London put one foot on the stairs and leaned against the wall. "What happened?" The dread that Page had made a fool of himself began to shape up into a conviction. He had expected his friend to bungle his first appearance at the mission and that really was the reason he had not attended the services. He couldn't stand to see Page hurt.

"Funniest thing I ever saw," Devan said. "Nobody but ol' Page could have made such a mess of things." He removed his hands from the post and adjusted his tie. "First off, I was supposed to do the praying and Lee Stovall was to lead the singing. Ol' Page was so scared that he called on me to lead the singing and Lee to do the praying."

London sighed in relief. "Oh, is that all? Come on, I'm going up to see him."

"All?" Devan was laughing again. "You haven't heard the half of it. It was a mess, I tell you. Ol' Page picked his text from

over there where it says, 'And he knew her not.' You know, about Joseph and Mary. He got all steamed up about his text and pounded the pulpit and hollered. 'What do you think of that? He didn't even know her! Joseph didn't know his own wife. Bet he never had heard of her.' " Devan almost doubled up in a spasm of laughter.

"No-o-o." London felt a heavy pressure around his heart, and his heart seemed to sink. He began running up the stairs. The door to Page's room was closed and there was a mumble of voices within. London opened the door without knocking, and Devan was at his heels.

Page Musselwhite was sitting in an armchair near the window, his feet propped on the sill. He had removed his black high-top shoes, and his shirt was open at the neck. His suspenders dangled at his waist and he was smoking a brier pipe and toying with a can of Prince Albert tobacco.

There were several other students in the room, all jabbering and sipping coffee and eating hot tamales they had fetched from town. Page was staring out of the window. He was a rawboned man with sandy reddish hair that he tried to keep in place by use of sweet-smelling oil. Several scars, little white spots, showed on his left cheek, the result of Argonne shrapnel. Page was so homely that he was handsome. His reddish eyebrows extended almost to his temples and sheltered his gray eyes. One expected his eyes to be fierce, but they were calm and soft.

He turned his eyes quickly from the window to the door as London and Devan entered. Then he hitched one loop of his suspenders over his shoulder and stood up to greet his friend, smiling broadly as he took his hand. The other students ceased their chatter and watched the two men. Devan went over and sat on his bed.

"Lemme pour you a cup of coffee," Page said. "Did you bring your cup? We're sort of shy of cups."

"No, thanks," London said. "I just dropped by for a minute. Been wrestling with that Hebrew." He sat on the window sill and glanced around at the other preachers, nodding greetings to each.

Page relaxed in his armchair and looked closely at London, then asked, "Who won?"

He didn't study Hebrew. The mere thought of trying to master Hebrew or Greek frightened him. He tried his best to understand homiletics and sociology, church history and New Testament interpretation, but they were difficult for him. Page was majoring in evangelism. He understood evangelism, for he was a fisherman. Sometimes London, giving his fancy complete liberty, imagined that Peter must have looked like Page.

"The Hebrew won as usual," London answered. "It threw me in the second round."

There was an embarrassing silence, and Page struck a match on the bottom of his chair and puffed his pipe. "You oughta been at the mission tonight. I gave 'em a show."

"I'll say he did," volunteered a student from Furman University.

"Aw, I knew better," Page said. "I just did it to give you fellows something to talk about."

"Says you." Devan broke into the conversation. "'He didn't even know her.' Wait until the faculty hears about that one. And you did something else tonight. You said, 'Saint Matthew.' Don't you know Baptists don't saint anybody?"

"If Matthew and Peter and Paul and those fellows weren't saints, then what were they?"

"Men," said Devan.

"Well," insisted Page, "men can be saints. Christ said so."

"Where?" Devan challenged.

"It's in the Bible somewhere, huh, London?"

Before London could reply Devan said, "You can prove anything by the Bible."

"Including," said London slowly, "that all men are liars."

Devan ignored the barb if he knew it was intended for him. He had an audience. So he stretched on his bed and winked at his listeners, then said, "Page, did you ever hear about that farm boy who was called to preach?"

Page took the bait. "Which one?"

"Well, this fellow was an old country boy who didn't have sense enough to skin a cat without getting fur in his mouth. He was ready to be ordained when a preacher asked him how he knew he had been called. The fellow said that one day when he was in the field he saw a flashing sign in the sky that said 'GPC.' He said he figured it meant 'Go Preach Christ' and that he aimed to give it a try. The preacher told him he was in the wrong pew, that those letters didn't mean 'Go Preach Christ,' but 'Go Plow Corn.' "

The crowd laughed, all except London. Even Page laughed. Then he stood up and pulled his suspenders over his shoulders and knocked the ashes from his pipe. "I hope," he said, "that you fellows know more about Christ than you do about hospitality and good manners."

Again the room was still, and some of the younger men looked from Devan to Page and their faces were red. London had an urge to slap their cheeks and smash his fist against Devan's jaw.

"Help yourself to some more coffee," Page said. "And there's a few more tamales. Don't think you've hurt my feelings. I made that boner tonight because I didn't know better. But I aim to learn."

Devan was staring at the floor. London was watching Page, and the big farmer was packing his pipe slowly, deliberately. "I aim to be a preacher because I did get the call. And I was plowing corn when I got it. It was a mighty pretty day and the land was soft and my plow was turning the land just right. I didn't see any signs except a few white clouds floating by. But the sky was blue and the birds were out, and I felt good. We'd just had a rain and ever'thing was clean and I felt clean. I felt good, I tell you. I didn't *hear* a call. Didn't hear anything but the birds chirping and raising a fuss. I *felt* the call. I felt it bubbling and boiling inside of me. I felt like I was walking along with the Lord. Now, go ahead and laugh, but that's how I felt. I knew then what I wanted to do. The Lord told me. Maybe you'll say it was the corn rustling, but I know it was the Lord talking to me, and that's why I felt so good. I made up my mind then

and there to go out and preach Christ and Him crucified. And I aim to do it."

His words ended in a whisper. The student from Furman University was the first to move. His face was dull red and he said, "I've got to study." London opened the door for him and the others filed out. Devan went with them. As he passed London he said, "I'm sorry." Then he looked over at his roommate and raised his voice, saying, "Page, I've just heard a better sermon than I'll ever preach."

London closed the door and walked back to the window and pulled up a chair. Page stretched out in his armchair and they both stared out of the window at Texas.

Finally Page said, "How's Kathie?"

"All right. Sleeping." London reached for the coffee bucket and poured himself half a cup. "Go on, say it. I know you disapprove of preachers having wives. Say 'I told you so.' Go ahead."

Page rubbed his hand over his face. "I think it was Paul who disapproved, wasn't it? All you've ever heard me say is that I intend to stay single, but marrying Kathie was the best day's work you ever did. What's wrong with you tonight? You're edgy."

"Oh, I don't know. Just got my habits on, I suppose. I don't see how I can stay in the seminary and get my master's."

"Of course," said Page, and there was a suggestion of pomposity in his tone, "you can stay if you set your mind to it. Have you prayed it through?"

London wished he wouldn't say "prayed it through." He drained his coffee cup and said, somewhat stiffly, "Yes, I've prayed."

Page began stacking the cups and picking up the cornhusks that had been on the tamales. He seemed to fill the room as he moved about, for he was a larger man even than London. When the place was tidy again he came back to the window and, standing near his friend, looked at the night, at brooding Texas. "Tell me something," he said. "When did you get the call?"

"Why do you ask that?" London demanded quickly.