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BY STRANGE PATHS

By Mrs. Paul E. King

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CHAPTER 1

"It's settled then," Miss Clare said with absolute finality. "You will move into the Thurston mansion within a month. Your suite of rooms will be ready. Celeste and Millicent will take care of things."

I looked dumbly at Ian. "But . . . but why the rush? How will it look? To the outside world, I mean?" I hoped I had made myself clear to my fiance at least.

Miss Clare's voice broke in again. "How very prudish of you!" she exclaimed, highly irritated with me. "Who cares how it looks! But Ian will be abroad for a year. Or had you forgotten?" she asked mockingly.

"I know. He leaves next week for his.., his..." I stammered, groping for words and becoming suddenly aware that he had given me no reason other than that it was necessary for him to leave. Why was he going abroad, I wondered now.



"I will expect you within a month, Anna," she said crisply.

"Business!" Miss Clare snapped. "Business for the Thurston Estates, Anna Lou. And I do wish you had a different name. Anna Lou Benton! Such a common name! Ian will change the last name," she said thoughtfully, being careful to stress 'last' in a meaningful manner, "and Anna is well enough if pronounced with a short 'A'; but Lou! Too common. Too common. It doesn't fit the Thurston name."

"Aunt Clare!" Ian tried to get his aunt's attention.

Miss Clare, standing straight and tall and slender and domineering, met the eyes of her nephew, "The Thurstons are proud people, Ian. Or had you forgotten? They hold their head high! And for good reason," she reminded impatiently, brushing a thin wisp of tinted blue-gray hair from her high forehead with a heavily jeweled hand, "And Anna Lou... well, the name must be changed to something with dignity. Like Ann Ferre Thurston or.... snapping her fingers she exclaimed brightly, "That's it! Anna Ferre Thurston. It sounds right. Dignified!"

"But, Miss Thurston," I began, "I"

"Miss Clare, it must be!" she corrected petulantly.

"I'm sorry," I apologized, blushing scarlet, "but I . . . well, I couldn't possibly have my name changed."

"I see no reason why." she snapped. "If it's because of money..."

"It's not due to the lack of money," I interrupted. "It's simply that my father and mother gave my name to me; and I . . . well, I like it. It becomes me: a common name for a common girl. I've worn it for nearly twenty-two years and I shall continue"

"Nonsense!" she broke in. "Sheer nonsense and sentiment. Pure sentiment!"

Ian spoke up again. He said simply, "I like Anna Lou's name."

"Pronounce it with the short 'A', Ian!" she exclaimed emphatically, correcting her nephew. "Never say it the way common people do!" Giving Ian and me a withering look she walked briskly down the hallway to the commodious library.

"I will expect you within a month, Anna," she said crisply, before disappearing inside the room.

For a long moment Ian and I faced each other, too shocked and confused to speak.

Ian broke the silence.

"You will have to overlook some of my aunt's frustrating ways and her brusque mannerism," he stammered. "She's really not bad at all when you know her."

"Quite dogmatic and domineering," I replied on impulse, "and you . . . you are afraid of her," I added. "Furthermore, Ian, I could not possibly tolerate living under the same roof with your aunt. Even if it is a mansion. I am a Benton. Your aunt looks upon me as a mere commoner., which is what I am. Nor am I ashamed of the fact that my parents were not wealthy."

I watched as the color drained swiftly from Ian's handsome face.

"But you must come here!" he exclaimed, laying his hands roughly upon my slender shoulders and all but shaking me. "It's the only way," he added.

"The only way for what?" I asked. As though answering my own question, I continued, "The only way for you to inherit the Thurston mansion and Estate? Is that what you mean, Ian? Coddle and pamper, appease and please Miss Clare over, above, and beyond my own will, convictions, and desires until you fall sole heir to the Thurston millions? Thanks, Ian. I can't do it. I have a conscience of my own and convictions, too. My parents were honest, upright people who taught me rightly."

I started to leave but Ian's fingers dug into my shoulders.

"Please, Anna Lou," he pleaded. "Be reasonable. You will have a suite of rooms that overlooks the river and the plantation estate. Aunt Clare will leave you quite alone when once you are settled here. She is extremely busy with clubs and teas and such like things. You will see very little of her, I promise."

"But I am perfectly capable of supporting myself, Ian, and I see absolutely no reason at all why I should not continue my employment at Berringer's until after we are married."

"That will be quite unnecessary. The Thurston mansion is to be your new home and you must move into it."

Thus it had happened. Ian went abroad and I moved into the mansion. My suite of rooms became a veritable haven to me. True to Ian's word, Miss Clare left me much to myself, being herself overly pre-occupied with the varied and numerous clubs and social functions to which she belonged.

Having lost father when in my teens, and my mother less than two years ago, Celeste and Millicent and I became bosom friends. I spent long and many enjoyable hours working in the kitchen with them or helping with the cleaning and dusting; sometimes just merely fellowshiping with them . . . all this after Miss Clare had left the house! If she disapproved of my name and my common but righteous upbringing,

she would have little less than a total abhorrence for me if she ever learned of my association with the 'lowly' kitchen and house help.

I laughed softly over our little secret... Celeste's and Millicent's and mine . . . as I dressed this morning. It was no different from many another early morning since I came to the Thurston mansion. I hurried down the long winding stairs and took my seat at the table across from Miss Clare who was in a hurry to get to one of her innumerable social functions. She excused herself and left the table early to finish her dressing.

I poured my second cup of coffee, took another of Millicent's hot buttered biscuits and went out through the hall to enjoy them along with the morning.

I crossed the wide front gallery and paused on the top square where the steps divided in two long curving flights. The Thurston mansion had been built under the French influence and the first floor was high above ground, making a cool under-story. The steps at my right led to a path that ran between altheas to the side yard where flowers of every description bloomed and grew.

I took the steps on the other side and went out under the pines, across to where the land dropped away abruptly to the river. The path I followed was one my own feet had made, a faint path always, as though the Thurston earth yielded unwillingly to alien tread. Cup in hand, I stood on the brink of the bluff beside an old pine tree and looked down the green-pricked tangle to the water.

I was always going for a look at the river. Its great sweep of water moving lazily in the colder months or tumbling along as now in a rush to meet the Gulf satisfied something uncertain within me. It was more than a reminder of the early settlers with flat-boats heaped high with household goods, of Indians in tipsy canoes, of the first steamboats and handsome packets. It was the future as well as the past. It would be here when I was gone and forgotten, as others had been forgotten. Changeless and every-changing, it seemed to set my little moment in time.

The river was high now, filled up with brown water from far-off places. I could hear the current murmuring to itself as it nibbled away at the bank.

I took a hungry bite of biscuit, leaning over so the butter would not drip down on my clean pale-blue perma-press dress, thinking how I would someday change my restless way and turn again to the God of my early childhood. I would tell Ian that this was the only way to begin married life, to establish a happy and enduring home.

"Why, Anna Lou!" He had a way of saying my name quick and sharp when I puzzled him. "What do you mean, 'The only way?'" he would ask.

I licked the melted butter from my fingers, smiling to myself, treasuring my secret. I drained the last of my coffee, relishing its flavor and the delicacy of the thin china cup. Our cups at home . . . my father's and mother's and mine . . . had been thick and heavy and durable, straight ten-cent store. Everything we had was like that, inexpensive. We had been poor; but love was the guiding and ruling factor there and I was in no way embarrassed that we were not among the wealthy. The Thurstons were different. Their things were different, too.

Turning, I looked back. The pines, planted long ago by Ian's great-grandfather, looked as if they had been there forever and meant to stay as long again. The moss, still wet and darkened by last night's rain, dripped with a whispering sound on leaf and grass and scraggly shrubs that were showing the first tint of fall's coloring.

I set the cup down on the ground and turned around just in time to see Miss Clare move towards me, her prominent gray-green eyes fastened on the cup I had just set down.

"Oh, you will be careful, dear?" her voice was deep and exclamatory, as if she had too much breath for her words. "That set -- you know it is my treasured one!"

I looked at the cup, avoiding the facade of determined sweetness on her face. I would have liked it better if she had just said, "Anna Lou, what are you doing with my best cup? And on the ground, too?" Miss Clare was iced with sweetness, and the icing, like the powder that plastered her cheeks and neck, was so thick that one could not be sure what was underneath.

"I'll be careful," I said, and added, "It's the one Millicent broke the saucer to."

Miss Clare turned and with brisk, short, noiseless steps, walked away. Her firm figure had a solid look that made everything around her seem nebulous and airy, as if she could walk right through it if she took the notion.

I turned and faced the river again . . . the ever-changing but changeless river. I was suddenly determined that, like the river, I would never allow the Thurston name to change the real me. At heart, I would always and forever be Anna Lou Benton, daughter of honest, righteous and upright parents.

I stood till I heard the car drive down the driveway then I walked to the far side where there was a clearing and watched as Philippe, portly and dignified looking in his chauffeur's uniform, bore Miss Clare away. She was an incongruous figure in the long car.

I stood for awhile and watched the car jounce down the driveway and disappear beyond the grove, trying to recapture the mood of early morning. In the yard, not a leaf stirred nor any of the moss anymore. My step sounded ghostly and hollow as, after

picking up the cup, I moved through the open front door, under the many-paned fanlight.

I was gathering myself together again, becoming my whole self: Miss Clare was gone.

I liked the feel of the empty house. It became mine, somehow, when Miss Clare left it. The stairs pleased me, rising as they did in a graceful curve to a landing where an arched door led to the upper ell porch. On my right and left the doors to parlor and music room were closed, and along the walls, above the enormous sofa and following the stair upward, the Thurston portraits hung, gold-framed and fixed in their rigid pose. All Thurstons. The other side of the family had not run to that kind of vanity. "More 'common' people, no doubt," I said aloud, thankful that not all the world was proud and contained only people who 'held their head high.'

A few moments later I was on the open platform that extended from the ell porch to cover the well, thankful that the old pump had been allowed to remain as a pleasant reminder of things simpler and more common. I worked the old handle briskly up and down and let the cold water run over my now bared feet. Overhead the cloudless sky was a pale, hazy blue. It seemed like all the color in the world was caught in the courtyard formed by the main body of the mansion, the ell and the runway to the kitchen. There the azaleas -- red, white, pink, salmon, and magenta-trapped on the three sides spilled out to where the pines banked them. Color like heat waves danced in the air, reflected by the white brick of the house.

I laughed like a carefree child as the cold well water ran over my feet and trickled refreshingly between my toes.

I heard a hearty laugh and turned around to see Celeste, polishing cloth in hand, come toward me. "Miss Clare should see you now!" she exclaimed lightly, laughing heartily.

"You certainly don't look like a dignified Thurston is supposed to look, Anna Lou!" Millicent said, joining in the fun and coming to greet me with heavily floured hands. "You must be feeling fine this morning," she added.

"I am. Oh, I am," I exclaimed. "This is such a beautiful morning. My mother always said God made the earth beautiful; that sin and sinful men made it ugly."

"It sure sounds good to hear someone around here laugh," Millicent said.

That struck me forcibly. Nobody really laughed when Miss Clare was around.

"The Bible says, 'A merry heart doeth good like a medicine,' " I quoted, surprised at the amount of Scripture I remembered.

"And it's only too apparent that Miss Clare doesn't know the Scripture then," Millicent said, washing the flour from her hands, at the same time catching a good supply of water and splashing its cold contents over Celeste and me.

"You're as refreshing to have around as this water, Anna Lou," Celeste laughed.

"And that's the truth. Every single word of it," Millicent affirmed. "I don't mind my work since you came here. In fact, I enjoy it. You make us all so happy."

"Like a breath of spring or like sunshine after a hard and bad storm!" Celeste asserted. "Miss Clare's intolerable. Absolutely intolerable. But since you came here things have changed for us. Not that Miss Clare's attitude is any different. Ah, no! But you make things bright and pleasant for us. Even Philippe has noticed the difference and mentioned as much to Millicent."

"I noticed that Philippe has quite an interest in you, Millicent," I teased.

"It's not a lopsided interest, I can assure you," Celeste added, laughing and tossing water over Millicent.

"And Philippe has a young brother who holds special attraction for our little Celeste!" Millicent teased.

A sudden longing, hidden and deep and heavily masked by gaiety and jollity, welled up within me then. A haunting longing it was... a longing to be a Christian again, like I had been so very long ago. A Christian like mother and father had been. I wanted to help others ... Celeste and Millicent and Philippe, all of French extraction. And, yes, Miss Clare, too!

The question I had so long evaded now rose up mightily before me. Forcibly so. Was I cut out to be a Thurston? Was I? And would I ever be able to hold my 'head high' like one of them? I could never be a real Thurston, I realized.

As though reading my thoughts, Millicent stated flatly, "The Thurston's are proud people, Anna Lou. Miss Clare would scorn and loathe you if she saw you now. But who cares! All work and no play makes Millicent a dull cook," and she laughed merrily as she showered us with another handful of water before hurrying back into the kitchen.

"I'd better follow suit," Celeste laughed. "Horror of horrors, should Miss Clare come home and find the library desk not polished till it reflects her image in it! And look at my hair: It's soaked!"

"It'll dry rapidly on a day such as today," I encouraged. "You do have the most beautiful hair, Celeste. Has it ever been cut?"

"Never. I have a mother who believes a woman's long hair is her glory."

"And she is right, Celeste. The Bible teaches us this. It is the reason I have never had mine cut."

As Celeste turned the corner to go into the mansion, I grabbed my loafers up and called after her, "I'll be back later to see where, and if, I can fit into the work plan. But for now, I'm going back to the river."

* * * * *

CHAPTER 2

I hurried down the narrow pathway to the river and sat down at its edge on a fallen log. Then I saw the skiff. Today it challenged me. Had it been Ian's? I wondered, when he was a boy.

Nimbly, I climbed aboard and sat sunning myself. Then the challenge overwhelmed me. I undid the stout rope that anchored it and set it adrift on the river -- the ever-changing but changeless river which was empty. No other boat was in sight. I was alone in the world. Pulling hard then against the current, I felt a sense of triumph over it, that I could drive the skiff ahead as I wished. For there is a fine exhilaration of spirit as well as body which comes of mastering something larger than one's self. I could not change the direction of the current, only the slow mighty force of nature could do that, but I could move in the desired direction.

oars, guiding myself with one hand on the rudder. I watched how the small waves broke and danced in the sunlight and their brightness lulled me, almost hypnotized me. I did not see the floating snag until it struck and almost swamped my skiff, setting it spinning crazily. One oar got away from me, so I had to paddle awkwardly after it, reaching, and missing and reaching it again. It was caught in one of those eccentric little currents in which the river abounds, one that moves counter to the main flow of water and, seen from the shore, makes a little rosette of ripples on its bosom. I retrieved my oar at last and, trying to turn shoreward, found that I too was caught in that deceptively little innocent eddy which moved downstream as it whirled. It was like a world turning on its axis and yet moving on its appointed course through the heavens. I was penned in by driftwood so could not make a fair stroke of the oars. I began to pray, knowing full well I was not prepared to die and meet the One whose love I had turned my back upon.

I was nearly breathless from the struggle when a voice came to me from downstream. A man shot his narrow dugout toward me, swinging his paddle with swift long strokes. "Take it easy. Don't panic. I'll get you," he called. In a few moments he

was near enough to toss me a rope. "Brace your feet and hang on. I'll have you out in a short while."

He kept to the edge of the eddy and with a few strong strokes drew me out of danger. "I was caught like that myself," he said. "These currents are tricky." When I was towed close to shore, out of the main current, he held my skiff alongside his boat saying, "You really should look where you're going, young lady."

I laughed shakily. "I know," I apologized lamely.

He gave me a long look. "You're Ian Thurston's fiancée, are you not? I've heard quite a bit of good about you. I'm Michael Mark Kingsberry. Quite a lengthy name. Just call me Mike." He laughed then, in a good-natured way. As he did so, I noticed his handsome, ruddy face with its set of thick auburn colored hair, the penetrating but kind, dark-brown eyes and a set of beautiful white, even teeth.

"I'm Anna Lou Benton," I said simply, wondering why, in the presence of this young man, so unlike Ian and utterly and totally devoid of any and all pretense, I felt embarrassed to admit that I was to become a future Thurston.

Apparently sensing my embarrassment he changed the subject.

"I'll take you in to the landing," he said, giving me a pleased look of admiration.

I let him take me most of the way, then I said, "Thanks a lot. I'm all right now."

"Only when I see you safe at the landing will I let you go," He said. "Father and mother taught me to do whatever I do well . . . and do it to the finish. No halfway business with them. Not only in the everyday work-a-day routine of duties but in the realm of the spiritual as well. I suppose you attend church where Miss Clare goes?"

I blushed then and groped hopelessly for words. Why did I feel so uncomfortable and sense a gnawing feeling and sensation inside of me, like a hungry longing, when Michael spoke? "I... I didn't realize Miss Clare ever attended church," I stammered with sudden frankness.

Michael gave me a long look. Was it a look of pity and kindness? I felt it was. And it was like a lash to my already longing heart. Slowly his lips parted. We were close beside each other now.., the skiff and the narrow dugout.

His words came out carefully, thoughtfully. "Perhaps some time you would like to attend services with mother and father and me, Anna Lou?" He searched my face eagerly.

"I... well, I hardly know what to say..."

"We would be delighted to have you," he said with heartfelt meaning.

It was like tossing a rope to a drowning man.

Why shouldn't I go to church? Miss Clare never bothered herself with anything religious or spiritual so far as I knew and I was an individual with individual desires and longings that needed fulfillment in Christ. "That's most kind of you, Michael," I found myself saying, "and I would love to come. If you will tell me where the church is located I will..."

Joyously, he interrupted me. "The Lord willing, we will come by for you tomorrow morning."

"But I'll have a way," I protested, thinking that Philippe could drive me there if Miss Clare had not already made plans for another of her many socials.

"Grant us the favor, please," he insisted kindly as we came up to the landing.

I consented then.

He caught the rope I tossed him and let me go. But he waited until I was out of the skiff and safely on shore. Then, with a wave of the hand, he turned and headed downstream. I watched till he was out of sight beyond the curve, then I tied up the skiff and slowly, thoughtfully mounted the bluff. Once on top, I stood thinking. A multitude of confused thoughts raced back and forth in my mind. My life, what had I done with it so far? And what was I planning on doing with it in the future? God had just now saved me from that treacherous little current for a reason. Michael hadn't just happened along. God had sent him! I was convinced of this. "Your life is not your own, honey," Mother had told me on many occasions. "A great ransom price was paid for it. Don't ever make light of that price!" she had admonished and warned.

How foolish I had been! I even remembered thinking, "Here is my life, separate, unique and all my own to do with as I please." Now I knew better. For every life God has a definite and distinct plan... a Divine plan and purpose. Was I going to fulfill that plan and purpose or would I thwart and destroy it? The answer to that question lay in what I did in the near future. Or even better, the now. A chill surged over me and I found myself trembling. Suddenly I was not the least excited with the thought of becoming Mrs. Ian Thurston. I was afraid. Was it a warning from God, I wondered.

I swallowed hard and often, trying desperately to remove or at the least relieve, the lump that arose in my throat. I remembered our chance meeting -- Ian's and mine -- and how like a story it had seemed. It happened so suddenly.

I had been coming down the escalator of Berringer's Dept. Store that particular day, an order of expensive clothes, boxed and ready for gift-wrapping, held securely in my arms . . . on my way to the gift-wrapping department when it happened. A boy of nine or ten summers tripped gaily down the moving escalator. He whistled a merry tune as he came. Everything went well until he passed me. His jacket, swinging loosely from his arm, caught the piled boxes and sent them sprawling every way, scattering their contents.

I was in tears. These were no ordinary purchases: they were bought by an extremely wealthy customer.

"I . . . I'm sorry!" the lad apologized. "I truly am!" His whistling ceased and his eyes became deep blue pools of sorrow and remorse.

"It's all right," I murmured softly, weakly, trying to smile through my tears.

"You little rascal!" A man's voice broke in just then, harsh, brusque, and unkind. "Apologize to the lady!" His hand came down hard on the small shoulder.

"Bu... but... I did, Sir."

The firm hand had a tight unrelenting hold on the slender shoulder and his gray eyes looked like steel., cold and penetrating. The boy trembled under the gaze.

"Please!" I begged. "He is sorry. Can't you see it in his eyes!"

I laid a hand of kindness and tenderness and understanding upon the trembling body.

"Thanks," the lad said simply, giving me a look that sent shivers through me. I longed for Peter then., my very own brother who had died and was just about the age of this young boy and who looked so much like him.

By now the moving escalator had deposited us and the scattered boxes with their contents safely on to the next floor when the man spoke again.

"You'd better help the lady gather the things together. It might not hurt for you to be reported to the manager of the store, either!" he threatened.

"O please, Sir. Don't!" The face was upturned and the blue eyes held intense yearning and pleading in them.

"Of course we'll not do such a thing," I consoled, longing to know the boy's name.

"Peter. My name's Peter," he stammered.

I dropped the one box which lay securely in my hand. "Peter!" I exclaimed. "Peter! What a lovely name!" Involuntarily my arms stole around him protectingly. Tenderly I folded him to me. I was crying for happiness at hearing the dear name.

"You . . . you mean you're not angry?" he stammered, looking into my eyes.

"Of course I'm not, Peter. And you may call me Anna Lou. You see, I once had a brother named Peter. He... was very, very dear to my heart and..."

The man's voice broke in upon us then. "Your packages, Miss." He had gathered them all together and was holding them out to me.

Seeing my look of embarrassed astonishment he said, "Come, I shall carry them for you. Where to?"

"Gift wrapping," I answered politely. Then, to Peter, "Come back and see me soon. I work in women's clothing on four, mostly. Sometimes, like today, I work up on six, too."

With a promise from Peter, the stranger and I started toward the next escalator and down.

I felt his eyes upon me.

"That was kind of you," I faltered, "gathering the scattered articles up so nicely for me. Thank you."

"It was quite a pleasure." He paused and studied me. "You're... permit me to say, 'unusual'. Perhaps a bit too lenient but it is heartening to see someone with a disposition and temperament such as you possess."

I felt color rise in my cheeks and knew I was blushing.

"Hm! You can blush, too!" the man teased. "Another rare quality these days."

"Please!" I said. "I can manage the boxes."

"Absolutely not! This is a man's job. I shall have to speak to Mr. Berringer about this. Are there no errand boys here any more?"

"O yes." I answered quickly. "But I promised Mrs. McHaffie I'd see to her purchases personally on my lunch hour."

"Mrs. McHaffie? Huh? She's a good friend of my aunt's. I shall tell her how diligent you are."

We had reached the third floor when he said, "Anna Lou is your name. Anna Lou what?"

"Benton," I answered quickly, irritated at his forwardness and hoping he would ask no more.

He set the boxes on the counter top. I thanked him again then proceeded selecting the proper paper and ribbons to have put on the respective boxes. When I looked up he was gone.

"And how did you manage to meet the wealthy Ian Thurston?" Mary Clark asked and teased as she wrapped.

"Who? Why, I didn't meet him." I laughed then as I related all that had happened.

"Well, that's who he is... the wealthiest eligible in these parts!" Mary affirmed when I finished my story.

"You mean he's not even married?" I questioned.

"Guess not. He wouldn't be a bachelor if he was," Mary teased good naturedly, her dexterous fingers working busily away.

I thought no more of the man. But I did think much about Peter. Someday, when he came in to see me, I would find out where he lived and pay him a visit, taking a little gift with me to compensate for the harshness and the unkindness manifested by the irate bachelor, I decided.

I had just finished eating a light supper that same evening and, having already showered and changed into a pale blue housedress, decided to settle down with one of father's religious books when a knock sounded on the door. It would be old Mr. or Mrs. Tiffany, I mused silently as I started to the door.

"Surprise!" a man's voice called as I stood speechless in the doorway.

"Why... I..., you... who are you looking for?" I asked confusedly, seeing Mary Clark's 'wealthiest eligible' standing outside the threshold of my humble apartment.

"For Anna Lou Benton," was the frank reply.

"I... I don't understand."

"No? But then you wouldn't. It's one of those strange but pleasant things," he had said simply, almost humbly apologetic. "I'm Ian Thurston, by way of introduction. I should have called you and asked for permission to see you but I didn't. Some things don't have time or patience for waiting." He laughed softly as he said it and I felt the color rising in my cheeks.

"I have a gift for you." He held before me a bouquet of the most elegant and exquisite roses I had ever seen. "For a young lady whom I greatly admire," he said seriously. "Will you take them, please?"

"I... I hardly..., know what to say . . ."

"Accept them, please" he urged. And do pardon my rudeness in coming here this way."

I stood in the doorway, looking from Ian to the roses and back to Ian again, question after question arising in my mind.

"How did I find you? I know you are wondering as much." Ian's refined voice cut into my thoughts. "I went immediately to Mr. Berringer and asked him for your address. The Berringers and Thurstons have been close friends for many years, Anna Lou. Ask Mr. Berringer about me some day. But here, please accept the roses. As from a friend." He held them toward me.

Reluctantly I reached out and took them. "Thank you, Mr. Thurston. They are beautiful!" I exclaimed truthfully.

We stood and talked for a few minutes then he excused himself and was gone.

The following day found him in women's clothing on the fourth floor, and many days thereafter; never lingering overly long nor bothering me in my work. On one particular day he paused at the cash register just as I finished ringing a sale up for a customer.

"Would you grant me the honor of your presence at Moritz for dinner tomorrow evening at six, Anna Lou?" he asked seriously.

I was speechless. Dinner at Moritz! And with an almost perfect stranger!

"Thank you, but..., well..., we barely know each other."

"What better way to get acquainted then?" he asked. "Please, Anna Lou, don't be so evasive and don't fear me. I'm a respectable citizen and I'll be frank with you, I'm attracted to you. Immeasurably so. Will you accept and take dinner with me?"

I consented. From that evening Ian and I saw much of each other and, months later, we became engaged.

Recalling the past now and Ian's sudden outbursts of temper and sulkiness, I had an uneasy feeling about marrying him. I felt suddenly and miserably that I would be out of the will of God if I did so -- even though I was no longer a Christian.

I turned quickly and rushed into the house. Seeing the daily paper on the hallway desk, I grabbed it then hurried to my room. In a halfhearted, hasty way I scanned the headlines. Wars, murders and crimes of every sickening description seemed to steal the scene and make front page news. But no! What was this! In the middle of the first page, too! I read it eagerly. A sickening sensation overwhelmed me as I reread:

"Ian Thurston, wealthy plantation gentleman from the U.S.A. and Bridgett Dunniferson, beautiful daughter of millionaire Alan Dunniferson and his wife Hedy, are quite a 'two-some' these days. One is never seen without the other. Bazaars, art galleries and theaters are visited in the daytime. Henris is their favorite night-time haunt . . ."

With a weak, sinking and nauseating feeling, I folded the paper and turned toward the balcony just outside my bedroom door.

* * * * *

CHAPTER 3

I paced back and forth on the balcony, totally oblivious of my surroundings. So this was the business that needed taken care of abroad! Bazaars, art galleries, and, (completely and totally obnoxious to me and sinful) theaters and night clubs!

I groaned inwardly. Did I want to spend my entire life with a man so utterly devoid of anything and everything spiritual and good and wholesome? A man whose appetites were extremely fleshly and debased and so unlike mine? A man whose engagement vow meant absolutely nothing and whose marriage vow (I now feared) would mean little more? Did I?

I leaned over the balcony, facing each question squarely as it arose. The color drained from my face. I felt suddenly quite faint. Wearily I dragged my feet into the bedroom and fell across the bed. I was too shocked to cry. Too hurt. All I could do was groan.

At last, overcome by pain and grief, I fell asleep. I was still sleeping when Miss Clare's voice awakened me.

"Have you see the paper, Anna Lou?" she asked, standing over me. "It's not on the desk in the hallway."

"It's on the chair," I answered, nodding toward the white plush boudoir chair near the foot of my bed.

"Thank you," she said, gathering up the paper and leaving the room as silently as she had entered it.

I bestirred myself then, realizing how late it must be if Miss Clare was home.

I made a hasty run down the stairs to the kitchen and begged Millicent and Celeste to forgive me for failing to help them as I had anticipated doing, vowing to do better another day.

"You look tired," Celeste said softly.

"I shouldn't," I answered lightly, trying to conceal my hurt and disappointment. "I had a long nap; and all the while you dear girls were down here slaving away. Shame on me! If it were in my power I'd make both of you run upstairs for a long rest while I'd finish with whatever work needs done."

"O you dear, kind girl!" Celeste exclaimed, hugging me soundly.

"Too kind and good for a Thurston!" Millicent added impulsively in almost a whisper.

I turned toward the window so they couldn't see my face. Tears had sprung suddenly to my eyes, filling them to overflowing.

"Run along outside till the meal's finished," Millicent said anxiously. "Miss Clare'll chew us all out if she finds you in here with us."

I wanted to throw my arms around the girls and tell them it didn't matter what Miss Clare thought or would say, that I was not one bit above either of them; but I didn't. Everything Millicent had said was true. So to avoid unpleasantness, and to maintain a measure of peace and harmony while Miss Clare was in the house, I smiled and walked through the doorway to the outside.

I was glad to get out. The house oppressed me. Only in the open air, with space around me, only then could I breathe easily. I stood among the great trees that stretched their branches out over the bluff and I tried to be like a tree myself. A tree did not feel: it stood rooted in the earth, bent this way and that by the wind, yet

steadfast and seemingly without pain. The clouds too, I would think, seeing a shadow pass overhead, the clouds did not think. They moved untroubled across the sky.

I stood with my hands pressed against the gray bark of a hackberry tree, liking its feel of hardness and impenetrability then suddenly headed for the river. My third trip there today. Why had I ever turned my back on things spiritual? Things truly worthwhile? I was reaping. Ah, yes. Sorely so. Sin always has its payday. A full payday and an hard one! And the full reaping had not yet begun! Wait till I married Ian Thurston! Just wait! I groaned at the thought.

Blindly now I ran toward the river, praying and half-stumbling, longing for freedom from the load of sin in my heart and freedom from Ian Thurston.

When I reached the river, I sat down on a fallen log and buried my face in my hands, praying all the while. I sat thus a long time.

Suddenly I was intensely aware of everything around me, of the hard log beneath me, of the fading sunlight on the tree trunks, the sound of the current eating away at the bank beneath the bluff, of the rustle of a bird in the underbrush behind me, of the smell of brown leaves and the crisp autumn air. I felt sharply the ache in my back, too from sitting so long and I was confident that somehow God would help me and make a way out for me.

The sun was low above the still, flat swamp beyond the river, a bright orange ball dropping visibly behind a strip of gray cloud, red-rimmed, when I bestirred myself. I must get back to the house.

As I came in sight of the pines and the low, brooding roof that contained the gallery, holding it in, close, secretive, the last rays of the sun were slanting in between the shaggy tree trunks and penetrating to the white bricks of the house, to the fanlight over the door, and the panes of the windows, making them blaze red as fire, as if fire were eating out the heart of the house.

I stood under the moss-hung trees and looked, thinking of all the Thurstons who had lived in that house, who lived there now, of myself, living among them, being for the moment a part of them. And, as I stood there, facing the many questions that flooded my thinking, evading no knowledge, no reality, a new strength rose to meet them. As if all the forces which had been busy evading, dulling, numbing, had turned, and in turning gathered power -- like a bird that had fled before the wind, and in wheeling rose against it, mounting to new power. I knew that by prayer I would find the answers after I was truly born again. All backsliders know the way back!

Resolutely I turned and walked into the house.

"It's time you got here!" Miss Clare scolded. "Millicent's waited supper an hour for you." Her penetrating eyes searched my face. Was she trying to determine whether or not I had been weeping, I wondered. I knew she had to have seen and read the account of Ian's escapades for she always read the paper through from cover to cover. "I've already eaten," she informed me coldly.

I was thankful to have the table to myself. It was more relaxing and pleasant . . . especially when and if Miss Clare chose to be unpleasant and irritable and argumentive. Also, I was able to have Philippe send Ian a wire from me with no interference.

I excused myself early that night and retired to my suite of rooms. Miss Clare followed me.

"Have you heard from Ian today?" she asked, suddenly sweet and quite amicable.

I studied her impassive white face but it was blank. "Should I have?" I asked simply, too hurt to talk about him.

"I just thought you may have," she replied in an impersonal tone of voice as she closed the door and left me to myself.

I dressed quickly for bed and sank down into the luxury of the mattress but I could not sleep. The mattress suddenly felt lumpy and seemed to press in upon me with malicious intent. My back ached and I thought I must have taken cold, sitting so long on the log by the river.

The moonlight came in bright as day across my bed and laid a silvery, shimmery coverlet over me. I got up and pulled the drapes against it but still I could not sleep. I heard a rooster crowing off in the chicken yard. I heard a bird's low night call and the stirring of a faint wind in the branches. I heard the night creaking of the mansion itself. At last, weary of tossing and turning, I got up, opened the drapes, and put on my housecoat and sat by the window.

Around me the old mansion breathed and stirred, its boards and beams shrinking as the night grew colder. As so many times before, I marveled at how I had come to be here. O, I should never., under any circumstances nor any amount of flowery speech., have granted Ian that first dinner date. Suddenly I realized what course I must take. A feeling of rightness crept over me warmly as the thought filled my heart and mind. It was a seed . . . a mere seed of thought that was quickly gaining in momentum. I heaved a sigh. It was a sigh of relief.

The night was beautiful and my heart, in having made its choice and final decision, was inexpressibly happy. Ian should be receiving the wire Philippe sent for

me, telling him of my refusal to marry him; that I wanted released from the engagement. I felt Miss Clare would rejoice to know the news. If not outwardly, inwardly.

The evening star was slowly fading from view when I crawled back into bed and fell asleep.

In spite of little sleep, I was awake early. I took a leisurely shower and started dressing for church. The day was beautiful and filled with sunshine. I chose a plain, pale pink dress and slipped into it then hurried downstairs.

"Up so early!" Millicent exclaimed as I entered the kitchen.

"I'm going to church. A family by the name of Kingsberry is coming after me. I wish you and Celeste could go, too."

Millicent gave me a pleased look. "Nice family, those Kingsberrys," she said.

"You know them?" I asked, pleasantly surprised.

"For many years. A deeply religious and pious family, they. One daughter's a missionary abroad, another married a minister and still another is a nurse. One son is a doctor. I don't know what Michael's plans are for the future.

I gasped in profound astonishment.

"I'm glad you met them," Millicent continued softly, that satisfied, pleased look lingering all the while on her face.

"I . . . I met Michael," I confessed. "In fact, he saved my life from a treacherous little current that was . . ."

"You mean you were on the river?" Millicent asked suddenly, horror written all over her lovely face. "You were alone? You might have been drowned. That river's treacherous, Anna Lou!"

"So I found out. But Michael Kingsberry came along just in time. I'll always believe God sent him. After the rescue he invited me to church."

Millicent smiled. "He's quite a missionary. I have nothing but the highest respect and admiration for him. I'm glad you're going with them. You've been too confined here. However, I daresay Miss Clare will highly disapprove if she learns about it."

"I am not bound to Miss Clare," I said. "Nor Ian."

Millicent gave me another of her satisfied looks then she hugged me quickly. "I hope and pray you'll never become bound to any Thurston . . . in no way, Anna Lou." "You're too good for them. Too good!" She said it with such emotion and feeling and knowledge that I trembled.

I wanted to tell her what I had Philippe do; how I planned on leaving as quickly as possible, but I decided against it for the time. Instead, I said simply, "I have my bearings now, Millicent. The way is clear before me. I have merely to do what I know is right."

I ate a hearty breakfast then took a leisurely walk down the winding driveway and waited eagerly just inside the heavy iron gates for the Kingsberry car to arrive.

I hadn't long to wait. It was quite apparent that this family practiced getting to church well before starting time.

Michael smiled warmly and broadly when he saw me. I noticed his approval of my modest, plain attire and I thrilled inwardly that I had never thrown my standards of old fashioned modesty overboard when I had lain down the cross to try life on my own. The elder Kingsberrys immediately made me feel a part of them and their warm, sincere and genuine concern over me warmed my heart through and through.

We talked of many things that morning and when the conversation turned to my father and mother and I learned that Mr. Kingsberry had known and greatly admired and respected my father. The ties between us grew stronger. I wasn't among strangers. I was with friends.

The same held true of the church service. I knew that I had found my kind of people again. My crowd. I could scarcely wait until the sermon was finished and the altar was opened for hungry sinners to be saved and believers to be sanctified. I was the first to make hurried steps to the mourner's bench where I sought for the restoration of the joy and peace I had known so very long ago as a child. For the first time in years, my heart lost its load of guilt and sin and shame. I was converted. My joy knew no bounds that morning.

I thanked the Kingsberrys as they discharged me at the gate of the Thurston mansion, accepting their invitation to attend the night service with them.

I fairly ran up the driveway to the house. I wanted everyone to know about my peace and inner joy.

Millicent saw my radiant face and came toward me with outstretched arms. "You're happy!" she exclaimed. "Something wonderful's happened to you!"

"I got saved, Millicent! I'm a Christian again, like I used to be long years ago. O I'm so happy! I'm a child of God! Imagine! I have no more condemnation on my heart. It's all gone."

"Everything's going to work out fine now," Millicent prophesied emphatically. "But you must be starved. Come. Let me get you something to eat. Miss Clare had her dinner nearly an hour ago and had Philippe drive her somewhere -- I don't know where."

"Oh, Millicent eat with me! You and Celeste."

"We wouldn't dare!"

"Then I shall eat right here in the kitchen with you. I have so much to tell you..."

I was still in the kitchen talking to Millicent and Celeste, pleading with them to become converted, when Miss Clare's shadow filled the doorway. One look at her face and I knew she was enraged.

I stood up and went to meet her with happy but tearful eyes. "I got converted this morning," I said. "My soul is so happy in Jesus now that I'm a born again Christian. Oh, Miss Clare, I wish you . . ." But I never finished the sentence.

Miss Clare drew in her breath with a hissing sound. Her face took on a mottled look.

But I was suddenly too happy to fear her any longer. "Oh, if only you would get saved!" I exclaimed, trying to take the heavily jeweled hands in my own. "You'd be so happy, Miss Clare. So would Ian..."

"Stop. Stop, you..., you... common wretch. You . . . I hate you. Hate you!"

I stood and watched and listened as she unleashed all her pent up anger and hatred upon me, my heart an inner calm and peaceful rest.

"O you common wretch!" she exclaimed again. "Out! Get out of here! You're not good enough to wear the Thurston name. Out! Do you hear? Leave, now, this instant, and don't return. Not ever!" Her voice rose. She beat me across the face and shoulders with a fan she had.

"Stop striking me and listen." I said it so quietly that she was shocked into stillness. "I will go, but not before I have told you that I love you. I shall be praying for you, Miss Clare. There is no happiness outside of Christ."

I let go her arm upon which my hand rested, turned and went outside, not looking back. My feet took the winding driveway toward the heavy iron gates and the quiet road beyond. On and on I walked till the Thurston estate was no longer visible.

Along the roadside bank in shaded places, spiders had spread their silver scarves to dry amid golden rod and purple gentian. In low places a gray mist stirred lazily, as if earth and cloud had lain together and day had caught them lag-abled. I turned from the gravel road into the main highway now. A little pond, flashing like a mirror, with a green embroidered frame lay off to my right. For a moment I stopped to enjoy its beauty.

Suddenly I wondered where I was going. What was I to do? I had nothing except the clothes on my back and my Bible and purse.

In the midst of my wonderings, I heard footsteps behind me. Hurried footsteps they were. Startled, I turned to see who was following me.

* * * * *

CHAPTER 4

Turning from the peaceful setting before me to see who was following me, I saw Philippe. He was running toward me. "Anna Lou! O Anna Lou," he exclaimed in an animated tone of voice, "don't leave Please! You are the only bit of sunshine Millicent and Celeste and I have."



"You will be safe here," he told me before departing.

"But Philippe, I must get away. You have heard Miss Clare's command and orders, I am sure. Millicent or Celeste can tell you if..."

"They needn't tell me. I heard every word. How well I heard! That woman is a demon, Anna Lou. She's possessed, I tell you. Possessed! Sometimes I get scared of her. But you mustn't go away."

"I have no alternative. Besides, I want to leave. It's imperative that I do so, Philippe. I should have the wire you sent and, well, it's something I must do. I got my direction. It came from God. This time there will be no turning back."

"But where will you go? What will you do? You have nothing. Absolutely nothing, Anna Lou. Not more than the clothes on your back."

"And my Bible and purse, Philippe! You forgot about these," I said, bringing forth the Bible from my purse. "I shall have to sleep out tonight but I have a sufficient

amount of money to rent an apartment in the city tomorrow, Lord willing. I shall seek employment then, too."

"But what about tonight? Where will you sleep?"

"My heavenly Father will provide and take care of me."

"He sent me to do that," he replied quickly. "Come! You must go with me, back to the Thurston mansion. There's an old servant's quarters you have never seen. You must stay there until Celeste and Millicent gather all your personal belongings together. One or the other of us will get them to you when it is 'convenient.' The madam will never bother you nor know that you are anywhere on her property. Come."

I followed Philippe obediently and was surprised and amazed when finally he showed me to the door of an old but well-kept building, no longer used.

"You will be safe here," he told me before departing. "I shall have Celeste bring you food until such a time as we can get you and your belongings away. Until then, you must remain here."

"Thank you, Philippe. You are most kind," I said, feeling suddenly tired.

"It's neither elegant nor spacious, Anna Lou, but you will be comfortable; and dry, if it rains," he added, as an after thought. "Miss Clare's brother... Ian's father... took a very special liking to the servant who called this his home, and when he died Ian's father ordered that nothing be disturbed or changed in the house. Maybe God saw that you'd be needing this for a shelter some day. Who knows!" He started to leave.

"Oh, Phillippe," I began, suddenly remembering my commitment to the Kingsberrys for that night, "you have been so good and kind to me and I thank you from the bottom of my heart; but please have one of the girls get word to the Kingsberrys that I can't keep my promise of going to church with them. Tell them not to worry; to pray for me; that I have indescribable peace in my heart."

He turned and looked back at me. "I will tell them everything, Anna Lou," he said softly. Coming toward me, he pleaded, "Pray for Celeste and Millicent and me. We all want what you have . . . if it costs our jobs! Millicent's been telling me that someday you'd come back.., like she's going to do too."

I stood rooted to my post in the doorway, too happily shocked to make immediate reply. "Millicent was one time a wonderful Christian," Philippe continued tearfully. "I was taught the right way, too; but money has a way of talking loudly to some people. When I heard that Miss Clare needed a trained chauffeur, I applied and was hired immediately. The salary is enormous. But money can't buy what you got this

morning." "I'll pray for you all, Philippe," I promised as he turned and walked briskly away.

I surveyed the inside of the three-room cottage now. It was small and humbly furnished but was kept meticulously clean. Undoubtedly this was one of Philippe's odd jobs when he was not chauffeuring Miss Clare to her social functions, teas and club meetings.

I stood for awhile inside the modestly furnished house then decided to survey the outside. The bright warm sunshine lured me, invited me, toward a rock above me that jutted out from the hillside to my right. Making my way through bushes in which scarlet and russet leaves waved at me as I passed, I hurried up the hillside to the rock. It was steeper than it had looked from the cottage and I was breathless by the time I climbed to the top.

I dropped down on its flat, warm surface, tired but extremely happy. My heart was free from condemnation and I was free from the Thurstons. By now I would have the telegram I had Philippe send. Then too, Miss Clare had ordered me to leave and never return so that broke the tie completely. I marveled at the workings of God. His ways are past finding out, as the Scriptures state.

Suddenly too happy for words, I knelt on the rock, thanking God for His deliverance. His glory flooded my soul. I began shouting for joy. In that moment I realized that were I going to stay saved, I must be sanctified. My heart longed and hungered for this second definite work of grace and I sought it earnestly. And He came! My heart experienced its Personal Pentecost. Oh, my joy was unspeakable. I was wholly and entirely His!

I arose from my knees to a sitting position again, feeling as if the devil had never existed, when I heard a soft rustle in the bushes behind me.

I turned suddenly and saw Celeste come through a little clearing.

"What brings you here?" she asked anxiously, coming quickly to my side.

"Oh, Celeste, I'm so happy!" This seemed all that mattered for the moment. "My joy is now complete in Christ: I just now got sanctified!"

She brought a clean white handkerchief from her pocket and began wiping the tears that fell from her eyes. "So I heard," she said reverently. "Oh, Anna Lou, you have done the noble thing. The right thing."

"Were you here while I was praying?" I asked.

"Forgive me, Anna Lou. I didn't mean to be an intruder. Am I?"

"Not at all. In fact, I'm very happy to have you here."

Celeste made explanation then. "I was out walking and . . . and thinking. Miss Clare's gone for the present, at least., thankfully. I tell you, Anna Lou, that woman's possessed. Never have I seen her so angry and upset like she has been today since you talked to her about her soul. She's been acting like a wild maniac. I was thankful I had a bit of leisure and could get away for awhile. Poor Millicent! She's stuck with the cooking."

I shivered suddenly as we sat in silence for a long while. I was so thankful to have Celeste around to talk to but I hoped she knew what she was doing, venturing so far from the Estate.

The leaves rustled gently, softly. When Celeste spoke again it was with great concern. "I wish you weren't here," she said. "I don't trust Miss Clare. You're rather far from the Thurston mansion, true; but that woman's wicked. Anna Lou."

"But Philippe said I must remain here for the present since Miss Clare's orders for me to leave the mansion and never to return," I said simply, having forgotten completely about the incident for the present over my new-found peace and joy in the Lord and the sweet Holy Spirit. "Philippe hurried after me and told me I must remain here until such a time as Millicent and you can gather all my belongings together and bring them to me... when Miss Clare's wrath is abated slightly, if such a time comes."

Celeste's face took on a worried look. "But why did she do this to you? You have done nothing but good to her."

"Christ and the world don't mix, Celeste. It's that simple. And since I got converted it has embittered her sorely. I'm afraid Miss Clare has nothing but the profoundest kind of hatred for those who become Christians. But don't look so disturbed and distressed! I am happy about it. So very, very happy. God is working for me. It was of His making and planning I found the right direction. Nothing, nor anyone nor anything, can deter or detour me. Christ is my all in all. He is my everything!"

"How I wish I had courage like you!"

"It's not courage alone, Celeste; it's God!"

Celeste looked at me pityingly. "You're staying in old Josh's house, aren't you?" she asked.

"It's the cottage in which a deceased servant once lived," I said, laughing lightly. "I don't know that Philippe mentioned his name. But you can see the chimney from

here. See?" and I stood to my feet and pointed to a mere speck of chimney nestled cozily and snugly in among tall trees and scrub below us.

"That's the house," she said thoughtfully. "Are you afraid, Anna Lou? To stay alone, I mean? It's awfully isolated. You'll be safe enough, I'm sure; but the house has all kinds of peculiar noises at night. Josh used to tell Millicent and me it did."

"You knew the old servant?" I asked, intensely interested.

"Very well. He was a real Christian, Anna Lou, and many times talked to Millicent and Philippe and me about our souls. He was a great man. A great man," she repeated. "The only reason he was never fired nor dismissed by Miss Clare was that her brother, Ian's father, had taken a very special liking to him. He had the highest regard for old Josh who proved totally and completely trustworthy and faithful and diligent in all that was given him to do."

Great tears welled up in my eyes and I found a great admiration surging through me for this wonderful man of God, long gone. "That's wonderful!" I exclaimed. "I wish I could have known him. The Thurstons had at least one bright light among them while the dear old saint lived," I said. "God has been faithful to them. Did either Ian or his father ever seek after God, Celeste?" I asked suddenly.

She studied me seriously. A dark cloud seemed to shroud her face. "To my knowledge, no. Never. They're not religious people, Anna Lou, I'm sorry to say."

"What happened to Ian's father?" I asked impulsively, wanting desperately to know the answers that were denied me heretofore by Ian and Miss Clare.

"Must you know?" Celeste's face grew pale and sad.

I studied her curiously. "I don't suppose so; but I would like to know. Why all the secrecy?"

Celeste sighed heavily then. "He died a horrible death by his own hands!" she exclaimed, shuddering with remembering. "He was a wicked man, Anna Lou. A very wicked man."

I gasped in astonishment. Slowly, I said "I'm sorry to hear that. And this is the reason why Ian was so evasive whenever his father's name was mentioned. I suppose his mother died from heartbreak?"

"She's not dead! Hadn't you known?" she gave me a surprised look.

"Not dead!" I gasped. "Where is she? I mean" I brushed my hands over my eyes to try to clear the confusion from my mind.

"Oh, Anna Lou, it grieves me sorely to tell you all this for you are engaged to Ian and..."

"I'm not engaged, Celeste. Not anymore." I said it with relief in my heart, for although the hurt was there, I felt greatly relieved at having done what I did. "I am free from all the Thurstons," I told her. "For a long time God dealt with me over becoming one of them but I felt with no mother and father I needed security. Oh, don't get me wrong and feel that I was going to marry Ian for his money; I wasn't. I loved him deeply; but there comes a time when one either obeys God and takes His way for their life or goes over the checks of the Spirit and pays the wages and suffers the consequences for all of time and lives an eternity of remorse and eternal damnation. I got it all settled, Celeste. The Lord took the scales from my eyes and gave me a new vision. My feet are now planted upon the Solid Rock, Christ Jesus. I'm free in Christ and free from the Thurston's, too. Truthfully, I've never been happier in my life."

"Do you mean it, Anna Lou? Am I hearing right?" Celeste asked in sheer amazement as she looked at me.

"You heard right. I had Philippe wire Ian for me, telling him that I could not go through with the wedding."

"You'll never regret what you have done, breaking off with Ian, I mean. Eventually you'd have ended up where his mother is..."

"Where is she? Do tell me, please!"

"She is in an insane asylum," Celeste said frankly and bluntly.

I gasped. It felt as if the blood were draining from my body. I felt cold.

"Miss Clare had her put away," Celeste continued sadly. "She was a wonderful woman. So full of goodness. Most kind and also very common. So unlike any of the others at the mansion. Too good for the Thurstons, really." I shivered, remembering that the girls had said the same about me.

"Are you trying to tell me that . . . that Ian's mother wasn't insane? Is that what you're saying?" I asked.

"Precisely. She wasn't and isn't insane! Mrs. Kingsberry, Michael's mother, visits her at least once every month. She was put away because of her faith in God. All this after Ian's father was dead, of course. Old Josh convinced her shortly after he arrived on the place, that there was a better way of life and of living, than the Thurston way of life. She was gloriously converted and later on got marvelously sanctified. That's when Miss Clare 'showed' herself. Money talks. At least it did in this case; for she had the

dear soul committed to the mental hospital in the upper part of the state. But she's far from being insane, Anna Lou. She's as sane as you and I."

"O-oh! How dreadful!" I gasped in horror. I felt dizzy and faint, seeing the picture all too clearly now. This accounted for Miss Clare's violent outburst of temper when I told her that I had become converted. I was sure that she would have managed it (somehow) to have had me put away too, had I married Ian. I leaned my head back against the rock, feeling unusually weak and faint.

Celeste's hand brushed my forehead. "Are you all right?" she asked anxiously.

"O-oh, Celeste!" I moaned. "Suppose..." But I got no farther. I buried my face in my hands and wept.

"Don't cry," Celeste admonished. "I certainly didn't mean to make you cry. Forget the 'supposes', Anna Lou and thank God instead. For, sinner though I am, I recognize this deliverance as the hand of God!"

"Yes. Oh, yes," I answered. "Thank God! Thank God!" I was overwhelmed at the marvelous deliverance He had wrought for me. In such marvellous ways, too.

Celeste walked with me to the cottage door and refused to leave until she heard the lock click shut from within and saw that I had lighted a lamp and put it on the table. Then she started slowly away, waving all the while and smiling back at me. How good it was to have friends, I mused silently, thankful to God that our paths had ever crossed.

I prepared early for bed but sleep wasn't easy to come. All night wind shook the house and roared in the chimney; it banged the shutters and flung sudden, unannounced rain in sheets against the side of the house. I snuggled farther down among the bed covers, completely thankful to Philippe for compelling me to use the cottage. I thought of Miss Clare then and of Ian. In the aloneness of the night I realized how wrapped up in the Thurston millions was Ian. Like Miss Clare, money was his god. It wouldn't have surprised me to hear that he had sold his soul for it. It was his everything. His very life was dominated by it. I shivered with thinking. I had been a most unwise girl to have allowed my heart to fall in love with him. But that was in the past now. I must forget and pray that God would guide me aright. This time I had something within me as an anchor of the soul . . . a Hand to guide me.

I lay there in the dark trying not to think of anything at all. In this period of turning in on myself I had found that when I was alone, blankminded, with earth and sky about me, my own self could feel its relationship to both. As the least molecules in their motion and behavior are akin to the stars in the vast reaches of space, so it was with this small me and the great universe about me. I felt little and small but I also felt a blending with the earth, so that at times I felt conscious of the curve of its surface, of

its motion through space, of the Mighty force that held it on its course; and, looking through my window to the rain-darkened sky, I felt freed from the laws of gravity almost. I was so happy in my new-found peace and joy. I felt sudden exhilaration . . . as if what I was feeling was an intimation of better things to come. A warm drowsiness overpowered me, and I was soon sleeping soundly.

It was nearly eight o'clock the following morning when I awoke. The rain had stopped but the cottage felt chilly and damp. I found kindling, wood and matches and soon had a fire blazing in the fireplace. The heat was welcome. Soon the cottage was cozy and comfortable and warm. A clock on the mantel behind me struck eight. It was a small black clock that struck the hour with internal wheezings, with a raucous clang, and hurriedly, as if to remind mortals that time was going fast and they were heading for an awful and unpleasant judgment day and eternity. I wondered how many times old Josh thought of it that way.

I had just finished my devotions when a gentle knock sounded on the door. It was Philippe. He was carrying a basket of food. His face registered relief upon seeing me. "How did things go?" he said.

"Wonderfully well," I answered. "And I am thankful to you for insisting that I stay here. Last night's sudden rain would have left me quite uncomfortable outdoors, I am sure. I love this little cottage, Philippe. I presume it is you who take such marvelous care of it. You're quite an excellent homemaker," I complimented.

He colored slightly then smiled. "Thank you, Anna Lou. I am especially thankful that it was nice and clean and cozy since you occupied it. As to the unexpected rain, this time of year one can't predict the weather accurately." I nodded in agreement.

Philippe set the basket of food on the table then hurried to the door. "I must run along now," he said. "The madam has, in her words, 'pressing business in town,' this morning. She wants to get an early start so I must get back quickly. The girls send their love and regards to you. Later in the day one of them will be bringing some of your belongings to you. Miss Clare ordered Celeste to make 'good riddance' of everything that belonged to you. Burn it or give it to the poor or do whatever you want with it,' she ordered harshly. But I must be going! Good-day."

I thanked Philippe and watched his hurried footsteps until he was lost completely from sight, swallowed up in the tangle of scrub brush, pine, oak and such.

An uneasiness crept suddenly over me and I had the strange feeling that I must get away from here as quickly as possible.

I ate hungrily of the tasty food Millicent had packed and sent then I hurried outside. Seeing the rock above me, I decided to walk to it and pray. Grabbing a faded afghan from the couch in the living room, (I judged Josh's wife had crocheted the piece

which, in its day, was beautiful, I was sure) I flung it around my shoulders and headed toward the rock.

The fallen leaves whispered softly, damply under my feet. I paused every now and again to pick up a crisp red or yellow leaf which had fallen from one of the maples in the woods. A great bare root projected from the wall of honeysuckle and woodbine and I sat down on it to rest, damp though it was. A pool of sunshine lay around me and in its brightness I examined the leaves and a bit of velvety looking moss I had picked up. The sunlight magnified the veins in each leaf and made the wisp of moss come alive in my hands.

In the stillness of the morning I heard someone whistling loudly and steps rustling in the leaves beyond the turn in the path that led upward.

I sat still, like a petrified mummy, not wishing to be discovered. My heart beat like a giant hammer within my chest and in one fleeting moment I despaired for my hiding place. No one . . . but no one . . . from the outside world must know that I was presently occupying old Josh's cottage. Words had a subtle way of getting around and I didn't fancy the idea of Miss Clare learning of my whereabouts. I was gripped with sudden, unexplainable fear. Instantly my heart sent an earnest petition heavenward for help and guidance and protection.

With bated breath, I waited. Then I heard the happy whistler pass around me. I got a fleeting glance of the carefree one and saw a boy of not more than twelve summers. His hair looked like golden wheat straw on a late June or early July morning. A dog, small of size, with a wagging tail and a pleasant looking face, tagged gleefully behind. A cane pole dangled idly over the shoulder of the whistler. I smiled and relaxed. "A fishing expedition!" I exclaimed aloud.

Relieved immeasurably, I waited until the whistling had long since died away then I took a leisurely walk to the rock.

I found the alcove in the rock and knelt humbly there, my heart suddenly heavy with a burden.

Three hours later I stepped through the small clearing that led to Josh's cottage. Before I could reach the house, I heard running footsteps coming toward me. I tried to hide but it was too late.

* * * * *

CHAPTER 5

I started to run but my pursuer soon had me in his grasp. "Don't:" I screamed in terror. "Let me alone: Please take your hands off me. Please!"

"Look, Miss Benton," a soft voice spoke close to my ear. I sorry I frightened you. You have nothing to fear. Believe me! I'm Philippe's younger brother Anton. It just happened that I had today off; so Philippe and the girls sent me here to get you. You must leave. Immediately!"

There was urgency in his voice. I felt it. Fear, like burning electric shocks, tingled through me. First, I was nearly overcome with fright at having been pursued and now this! My legs felt wobbly with weakness and my head was light and dizzy, but as I prayed silently for strength and courage to face the unknown future, I felt a great surge of new strength enter my body.

"Where...? What...?" I questioned hastily.

"Here. Read this," Anton said, thrusting a hastily-written note into my hand.

With trembling fingers I unfolded the paper. "Dear Anna Lou," it began, "You must leave the cottage immediately. It's urgent! Miss Clare (before leaving this morning) ordered me to 'air out' Ian's rooms and give them a thorough house-cleaning from ceiling to floor. You have been here long enough to know what that means! This is a procedure I follow only when guests are expected in or a relative home . . . aside from my yearly spring and fall house-cleaning, that is.

"Philippe called Millicent from the city, and told her he had orders to go to the airport by twelve-twenty this afternoon. He dropped Miss Clare off at her lawyer's office and is to pick her up by mid-afternoon. He was told to go inside the airport and wait for the twelve-twenty flight. She said he'd know his passenger when he saw him alight from the plane. He's almost positive Ian is returning. You must leave the cottage immediately. Anton will take care of you. Don't be afraid to go with him. He's a perfect gentleman., like Philippe. Please hurry! Make no delay! My love, Celeste."

"Oh!" I moaned, too shocked to say much else. Then, recovering suddenly, I said, "Take me to the city, Anton. I'll find an apartment there and . . ."

"Not back there!" Anton exclaimed firmly. "The girls have a place for you in Madisonville. Ian will never think to look for you there."

My hand flew to my throat. "Madisonville!" I exclaimed. "That's between two and three hundred miles from here!" With new awareness I realized what dangers were encompassing and surrounding me. No telling what would happen to me unless I obeyed and complied with the girls' orders. "Ian? Back?" I said aloud. "He wasn't due back for another month and a half."

"It looks as if he has worries on his mind," Anton said. "Worries like losing a fine young woman with principle. The great lover boy wanted only the best and purest and

cleanest for his wife while he enjoyed doing the public places and making public scenes and front page news even, with a social butterfly who wouldn't know how to fry an egg or keep a house clean, I dare say!"

I said nothing to that. I was hurt. Deeply hurt. I was alone with my own thoughts as we made sure the fire in the fire-place was out and locked the cottage door, leaving it just as I had found it when entering. I wondered why, when he was having such a grand time with socially prominent women and spending his money in riotous living, Ian should be hurrying back to the States. Was he too proud to have it known publicly that he was rejected? Was he? Or would he try to force me into marrying him, using 'breach of promise' as his weapon? Whatever his reason . . . or reasons.., for returning prematurely, I was sure they were not good.

"My clothing!" I said suddenly, following Anton through the woods to a dirt road I hadn't known existed, to where a car was parked, ready and waiting for me. As he opened the door for me he said softly, "The girls thought of everything, Anna Lou. All your belongings are in the car. Celeste did an excellent job of packing. So very neat. The trunk's full. I dare say though, that for a while I thought we weren't going to get everything in here." He laughed pleasantly as he closed the door and walked around to the other side of the car and settled himself behind the steering wheel.

It suddenly struck me that I knew no one in Madisonville and, when I went looking for employment I would have to give Berringer's Dept. Store as a reference of my past efficiency while in their employ. Without a doubt, Ian would find out quickly of my whereabouts since the Berringers and the Thurstons were intimate friends and acquaintances of long standing.

I thought again of living my life with Ian... a man who had committed, (without a doubt in my mind now) the grossest of sins. I felt suddenly nauseous. The mere thought of it was overwhelmingly repulsive. I knew God would have been highly displeased, clean marrying unclean, a believer joining up with an unbeliever. Involuntarily, I shivered violently.

Anton's eyes rested on me enigmatically for a moment.

"Cold?" he asked, turning the car heater on.

"Not really. Fright!" I answered truthfully.

"Whatever will I do when seeking employment in Madisonville? I shall have to give Berringer's as a reference of my past work and.., and..."

"And Ian Thurston will find out where you are? Is that what you mean, Anna Lou?" Anton asked.

"They have been close friends for many years, I understand," I answered.

"True. They have been close friends; but Millicent and Celeste have been most solicitous of you and your well-being. They have taken care of everything. Everything!" he emphasized.

"Relax and enjoy the scenery.. This is a beautiful drive. Especially so this time of year."

"Thank you, Anton," I sighed in grateful relief. "And please forgive me for expressing my fears aloud. I should have known the Lord would take care of me. David said, in one of his lovely Psalms, 'What time I am afraid I will trust in Thee.' I should have trusted, not feared."

Again his eyes rested on me in that enigmatic way.

"Let me explain," I said. "Long years ago," I began, a warm flow of tears coming into my eyes, "I was a real Christian, Anton. I had a wonderful mother and father. They were true Christians... saved and sanctified wholly. At an early age I too got converted but I was never truly sanctified. I know this is why I backslid. I needed that 'double anchor.' O I never went into out-broken sin but I was backslidden in heart.

"You can never know the intense, secret, inner yearning and longing of my heart! I can't begin to describe it. I went to bed with it; I awoke with it and carried it with me all day long.

"Yesterday in a small but spiritual church, I found my way back. In that humble place of worship I bowed at the altar for prayer and was wondrously converted. Then yesterday afternoon the blessed Saviour sent the Holy Spirit and cleansed my heart of all carnality. My soul found its perfect rest and my heart is pure and clean. It's wonderful, this way of Holiness of heart! Have you ever been born again?" I asked.

Anton swallowed hard. "No, I haven't been, Anna Lou," he answered. "But it sounds like a miracle."

"It is. That's exactly what it is, Anton. It's the only way to Heaven. I'm going to pray earnestly for you that you will soon get converted."

He spoke no more; neither did I then.

We drove on, mile after mile, the country-side unfolding itself in new and gloriously gold and scarlet patterns before our eyes. We swooped down a long lane where branches from weeping willows whipped at the car windows on either side in a friendly, welcome way. It was certainly deep country, I thought, once we left the main highway. Here was a river, glinting silver under a now-sullen sky and there a great

pool, or was it a lake? with a solitary small sail craft whose hardy owner didn't mind the wicked wind cutting through him as he made intricate maneuvers like a big, winged bird showing off.

I didn't miss a thing. Time and again the Scripture stood out in bold outline before me... 'When I consider the heavens and the work of Thy hands what is man that Thou art mindful of Him? or the son of man that Thou visitest him?' I felt my own unworthiness and nothingness as I viewed His mighty handiwork.

We stopped briefly at a restaurant and ate a sandwich hastily then proceeded on our journey again.

Twilight lay thick over the country-side when Anton pulled into the driveway of a well-kept farm. I was surprised. Pleasantly so.

"Come," he said, helping me from the car and leading the way to the door of the lovely house. "You must meet the lady of the house," he informed me, knocking on the kitchen door which was opened by a pleasant-faced woman in her late sixties, I judged.

Anton made introductions. I was greeted most warmly by the woman whose name was Mrs. Joseph Dunkirk. I loved her on sight. She was just that kind of elderly sweetness and motherly love.

"Come in. Come in, Anton," she greeted, smiling. "And welcome here, Anna Lou. Seems as if I've always known you. I've heard a lot of good about you," she said, taking my hands in hers and pressing them lightly to her wrinkled cheeks. "You must be hungry. Sit down," and she pointed to a well-laden table. "This is a hasty meal, Anna Lou. When Millicent called and told me of your plight, I told her to tell Anton not to feed you too well so I could give you a good meal. I am so glad you have come. It gets lonesome here with Joseph in the hospital. But the doctors say he should be strong enough to come home by the middle of next week, Lord willing. The old house will seem normal when he's home with me again."

My eyes filled with tears. How different this home was from the Thurston mansion. How full of love and warmth and heart-felt Christian hospitality! A good feeling took possession of me. I was among my own element... God's children. Instinctively I knew I had nothing to fear. Nothing! God, in answer to my beloved, deceased parents' many earnest prayers and pleas, was tenderly and lovingly looking out for me.

After a sumptuous and more-than-adequate meal, Anton drove me down a narrow, winding road along the hillside of the farm to a neat cottage, nestled snugly in among peach and apple trees. Below the orchard a silver ribboned stream wound merrily along. On its banks sheep rested and grazed in utter contentment and peace. I

was awe-stricken at the peaceful setting and sat spell-bound long after the car had come to a stop.

"Like it?" Anton asked.

"I can't express my feelings, Anton. I have no words adequate."

A flurry of voices broke in upon us then.

"You made it, I see!" and the Kingsberrys greeted me warmly.

"You... you're here?" I exclaimed joyfully, too happy for words. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you!"

"We came early to get the cottage aired out," Mrs. Kingsberry replied.

"And I dare say you'll love it here!" Mr. Kingsberry exclaimed with animation in his voice. "It's, well, it makes me feel like I'm close to heaven here. There's a big stone in back of the cottage alongside the hill that makes a perfect altar for praying..."

"And we had a powerful prayermeeting there already," Mrs. Kingsberry said, breaking in upon her husband's unfinished sentence. "But come, you must see inside the cottage."

I was speechless when shown my new living quarters. True, there was no front gallery leading on to an open square where steps divided in two long curving flights, nor many-paned fanlights as I entered the front door; no upper ell porch either, but everything inside the spotlessly clean cottage spelled love and home and warmth.

I felt as if I had come home. I was a girl again in happy, carefree childhood, remembering how I used to fling open the gate to our humble cottage. I could still hear the clatter of the plank walk as I ran to the steps, pigtails flying akimbo, books under my arm, coat flying open, shouting gleefully to my mother as I made a dash for the kitchen and her open, waiting arms. I was always allowed one cold biscuit before supper and I remembered how, digging a hole in it with my index finger, I filled the hole with molasses then proceeded happily to relate to mother all that had happened at school, licking my fingers all the while as I chattered. All over the world, no doubt, countless children ran home from school to relate happy and not-so-happy incidents to their mother, but I was this one, just this one, to be remembered now with poignancy. I thought too of the mornng when my dear mother did not wake and a new flow of tears ensued and followed.

"Why, Anna Lou, are you not happy? Why do you cry?" Mrs. Kingsberry asked.

"I am too happy, my dear. I was just . . . remembering. This all reminds me of father and mother and.., of home. The gay-colored gingham curtains in the kitchen and the bedroom furnishings! I couldn't be happier. But when do I make my first rent payment and to whom? To Mrs. Dunkirk?" I asked.

"Everything's taken care of," the Kingsberrys informed me. "Millicent made all the arrangements and had us come by and see that everything was in order for you."

"Millicent?"

Anton smiled at me. "I told you the girls took care of everything. Remember? They've taken quite a liking to you," he said. "After Miss Clare treated you like she did and put you out with nothing but the clothes on your back. Millicent called her aunt, Mrs. Sally Dunkirk, and asked whether the cottage was still vacant and would she allow a 'very dear friend.., a Christian friend,' in her own words, to live in it."

I sat down in the nearest chair, weak from happy surprise and marveling at the strange but wonderful and marvelous leadings and providences of God. Sally Dunkirk, Millicent's aunt! I could understand now why Millicent wasn't content to live as she was and why she would someday get back to God. She had one soul interceding to God in her behalf. And soon she would be changing. All, yes: 'The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much,' James had written in his epistle.

The weeks and months that followed were pleasant ones. The trees were bare of leaves now and the early snow had a special magic as the starry flakes drifted from a pewter sky. The little stream seemed now still and seal-dark, and the hibernating animals were snug down in their burrows.

No longer could I go to the stone in the back of the cottage for my devotions as the air and earth were too cold and frozen. Instead, the quaint old love-seat in the living room became my altar of prayer. Every Sunday and Wednesday night found me in the little church seated beside the Dunkirks who called me "daughter."

Winter passed quickly by and soon the ice on the silver stream below the cottage thawed and melted. Once again I heard its happy gurgling, murmuring song as it ran on and on, following every curve and bend through the meadow, the woods and on into the river. Flowers, awakened by warm spring sunshine, peeked shyly out of the bosom of mother earth's dark vest then stretched themselves, looking all about, and suddenly stood straight and slender and tall and donned bright dresses of every description and color. The earth had come alive, suddenly, beautifully and wonderfully. I was alive, too. My heart pulsated with something more wonderful than I had ever imagined possible. That was the most wonderful winter of my life. I grew spiritually and got rooted and grounded deeply in the things of God. I was happy in Christ.

The year that followed was equally blessed and wonderful as I learned more and more to depend upon the Lord. My Sunday School class of teenagers was growing in a marvelous way. Scarcely a Sunday went by without seeing some of the new ones bowing at the altar of prayer for salvation or sanctification. I had found my place in God's plan, His will for my life and I was truly satisfied and completely happy in Him.

Two years later I was informed that Michael Kingsberry was called as assistant to our pastor. I rejoiced, knowing he would do the church much good and would be a great asset to my teens.

His coming was timely and God-ordered: a great revival broke out in the church under his God-anointed preaching and much earnest praying and fasting.

Millicent and Philippe were married in the church..., by Michael, under whose ministry they had also become converted and sanctified. A year and one month after his arrival to Madisonville, I became Mrs. Michael Kingsberry.

Shortly after our marriage, Celeste and Anton too were converted and gloriously sanctified. A few months after, Michael united them in the bonds of sacred and holy wedlock.

Truly, I was led by strange but marvelously wonderful paths!

* * * * *

THE END