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Sole Heir

By Mrs. Paul E. King

From the May 6, 1973 Sunday School Beacon

Beth Conneaut unfolded the official looking letter and read its contents for the third time. Holding it loosely in her hand, she walked to the enormous floor-length window in her bedroom and looked through the sparkling clean glass to the sloping terrace beyond. In a fleeting second, memory rolled back the curtain of time and erased the years with a single stroke of its capable hand. Beth was a child again. A carefree happy child with long golden curls that fell across her slender shoulders and cascaded down her back in a ripple of waves.



Burying her face in her hands, she wept.

Her eyes, deep set, were deep blue. As blue and as clear as a perfect summer sky. Her cheeks, creamy pink and dewy fresh, were full and round and well-shaped. "A perfect little lady", her parents had called her.

Reproachfully, she tore herself away from the window and the magnificent view. She must not think. She must forget. Was she not now a famous and much sought-after designer in Marstens! She had it made. Buyers bowed at her feet and came crawling to her door, begging for her designs. Her creations. No price was too high for her to ask for any single creation. Why worry about the letter?

But . . . mother gone! The thought shocked her now. Mother dead! And the letter just now... after two months..., having found her, the only child of a broken-hearted mother!

Mechanically she walked back to the window and stood staring down at the lawn. Spring had given the silver birch trees their charming haze and every plant and tree bore

the new freshness she had always reveled in at the old home place. Now she stood as one in a dream.

In some branches of the larger trees, the untidily built nests of squirrels could still be seen in sharp silhouette against the light evening sky while just outside the window, scurrying noisily from one branch to another, a squirrel scolded her soundly for invading and intruding upon his privacy. Beth never noticed. "You are sole heir," the letter read. "It was your mother's last wish that every piece of furniture, all dishes and bed-linens -- except those things which you desire to keep, if any -- be displayed on the lawn outside the house and be sold piece by piece at public auction. All said pieces to be put on display by you. Until such a time is convenient for you, the letter continued, "everything is to remain untouched and unhandled by anyone. When can you come? When may we expect you? By way of a suggestion, Friday, the 10th, would be a good time for the auction. Would this, perhaps, be convenient for you?"

Beth walked to the living room of her split-level house and surveyed the immediate surroundings with a pleased and satisfied smile. She would need none of her mother's things. She had more than her heart could desire. What's more, her mother's old-fashioned things would look out of place in her smartly furnished home.

She felt her face grow hot at the thought. That was why she had left home in the first place., her mother was too old-fashioned -- too far behind the times in every way . . . in her dress, her thinking, her living, and yes, in her religious beliefs!

When she left home, after graduating from college, Beth hadn't meant to shut her mother out of her world entirely. But as her fame mounted and her talent increased, she realized it would never do to bring her old-fashioned mother to her home. It would mar her business image, she was sure. So she had "lost" herself to everyone she knew, including her mother, and she had settled down in a large city under another name... MarBeth's Designs and MarBeth Creations. In this city, so far from home, MarBeth's became "the" coveted name in fashion designing. She should have kept in touch with mother, she thought reproachfully now. O but she must have worried that dear soul greatly, not writing and telling her she was well and alive and doing well in her "business." No need to tell what kind of business, for mother would not have approved. She felt sudden guilt surge through her at the thought.

Reaching for the telephone, she began to dial. Just as quickly, she decided against it. It would never do to call Don and tell him about her mother. He would come over immediately and she didn't want that. He was growing entirely too fond of her. She must allow no one, nor anything, to come between her and her business; although she was acutely aware of the feelings of her own heart every time she saw Don at work. He was different, she soliloquized. Rather quiet. A man whom many a person, because of his youthful looks, thought gullible but who, to their cost, had discovered the opposite. He was a shrewd judge of character. He had a way of summing people up and she had no desire or wish to be treated to a dose of it just now. "Why, Beth," he'd say quick-like in

astonishment, "I wondered why you never mentioned your mother to me! I was beginning to wonder if you had a mother even!"

His blue-gray eyes would search her face and then he'd know. He was just that kind of person. His perception was intensely acute and alert and sharp. Too sharp and keen sometimes, Beth thought. No, she must not call Don. She would think it through herself and then work from there.

She walked to the sun parlor where the glass encased sides and front jutted out sharply away from the rest of the house and seemed to hang suspended on the hillside into the woods beyond but which was, in reality, built solidly and firmly upon a foundation all its own. From here she watched the birds all winter long as they fed and feasted from the many bird feeders hung in the trees and near the ground. Here, too, she had solved many a problem, eaten most of her meals, and received great inspiration for some new creation and design.

A blue jay scolded raucously as she stood in the glassed-in room and let her eyes feast on the peaceful surroundings of the woods, where the trees were outfitted beautifully in fresh looking soft green dresses. Many of them wore pale pink and white blossoms in their hair.

Beth sighed deeply. She settled herself in one of the curved rattan chairs and re-read parts of the letter. Making a quick decision, she walked briskly into the kitchen. "Jenny," she said, addressing her housekeeper and cook, "I'm going out of town for a few days. Possibly a week or two. You and George look after the place till I get back. Don't do more than you have to. I know how George's back is bothering him."

"Thank you, Beth!" Jenny exclaimed, her blue eyes shining. "You're a wonderful person to work for. Sometimes George and I feel almost guilty, the big salary you pay us for the little amount of work we do!"

"Now, now!" Beth interrupted. "I couldn't get along without you and George. You're an excellent cook and housekeeper and George is one of the finest gardeners to be found anywhere. Not mentioning the fact that he's my favorite handy-man!"

Jenny laughed softly as she brushed a wisp of stray, partially gray, hair back from her forehead "He's a handy-man all right!" she agreed. "Why, I don't see how we'd ever have made it when we were farming if George hadn't known how to take care of the equipment himself."

"Whatever he does, he does well! Just like you, Jenny! The place is yours till I get back."

As she drove away the following morning in the early part of dawn, Beth's mind was clouded with troubled thoughts and mixed emotions. She hadn't done right. Not at

all! By causing her mother such unnecessary grief and worry and sorrow in that she hadn't contacted her. And she had such a good mother! It was mother who had worn old hand-me-down clothes after father had died so she could have new.

It was her mother who had taken in sewing, done cleaning and baking, so Beth could go to school and learn like other boys and girls her age. It was mother, too, who had sold some of her prized possessions to send her away to Bible College so she could pursue her Bible training and her music and prepare herself for whatever God had intended for her to do or be!

Beth swallowed hard, remembering. She remembered with sickening force now how she had changed her mind.., suddenly... that second summer home from Bible school. "I'm not going back to Penial, Mother" she had said bluntly one evening as they sat in the swing on the front porch.

Her mother did a quick turn. "Not going back, Beth! Of course you are!"

"I'm going to another college -- one where I can take up journalism and designing and some of the fine arts . . ."

She remembered it now as vividly and forcibly as though it had just happened.., how pale her mother's face had turned and the deep hurt and disappointment that registered unmistakably in her tender, loving mother eyes. "You... aren't serious, dear child " Her voice had been barely audible.

"But I am:" Beth had answered. "I begin classes in Westover in early September. Since I've been able to earn my own money I decided I wanted something worthwhile. Something that will pay off in later years.., after I'm through college."

She remembered the hurt look that seemed always to stay in her mother's eyes after she changed to Westover. Somehow, after that, her mother aged rapidly and her health declined too. Had she been the chief cause and factor in her mother's premature and untimely death? she wondered now. After all, sixty wasn't old.

Beth accelerated more heavily now, eager to get to the home-place where she could ready everything for the public auction and clear things up and return to her own home on Buttermilk Falls Drive.

It was late night when she turned into the lane that wound its way in and out among the ninety some odd acres of woodland that belonged to her father and mother and which was now hers. "Sole heir," the letter had read.

The headlights of the car picked up several deer as they darted across the road in front of her and disappeared in the thick tangle of mountain laurel and rhododendron that grew in great abundance among the pine and spruce trees. She was reminded of those

days so long ago when she had taken especial delight in walking hand in hand with her father through the woods to a five acre field enclosed on three sides by the heavy woods. Here they would sit, near the edge of the timber, and watch the deer browse in the lush alfalfa or wheat .. depending on which her father had planted in the field just for the deer. Those were good days, she mused. Days of sweet and close family relationship. A sudden wave of sweet nostalgia swept over her. It was painfully sweet.

Drawing the house-key from her purse where it had lain since its arrival with the letter, Beth let herself inside. Everything was just as it had been when she left home. It was, she thought, as if time had stood perfectly still all those years and hadn't changed a thing.

Here was mother's big old rocking chair and there, on a funny shaped antique table in the corner, was her beloved Bible . . . open! Just as she had always remembered seeing it. A sob sought for the mastery but Beth stifled it quickly. She must not, under any circumstances, get sentimental. She had her work before her. Her life. And she would pursue it to its fullest potential and depth.

She turned quickly, took a cold shower and tumbled into bed -- her very own childhood bed. Somehow, it felt good. Relaxing, too. In a very little while she was asleep.

Not until the soft warm sunlight awakened her the following morning did she stir through the night. She slept the untroubled sleep of the child again; not even thinking about creating anything-new or different. For a very brief moment, upon awaking, Beth tried to figure out where she was; then it dawned upon her.

Tossing the coverlet aside, she dressed quickly, ate a hastily prepared breakfast from things she had brought with her, then started work on the task before her. No need to dribble, she mused, nor prolong the job. There was work to be done and it was up to her to do it.

She worked feverishly all day, sorting her mother's few but treasured belongings into 'good, better and best categories and arranging them accordingly, in preparation for the sale which was to be Friday the 10th. All arrangements were made; ads had been printed and distributed in the local area by her lawyer and his associates. She must work diligently; the 10th, was less than a week away.

It was while she was going through the old but valuable dishes that something hit her. Smote her. Here was the lovely cut glass berry bowl with its twelve serving pieces, all true crystal, etched in a band of pure gold. On the old sideboard nearby stood the transparent, pale green pitcher and its matching twelve drinking glasses, all decorated daintily and beautifully with soft, pale pink hand-painted rose buds.

Memory did a quick flash back. Beth remembered the many times she helped her mother as she and father entertained the pastor of their local church and used the

treasured old heirloom pieces. They treated the preacher and his family like royalty, she thought. It was a gesture of honor, love, and deep admiration and respect from her parents., to be served from the heirlooms. The thought, or realization of it all, stabbed her heart mercilessly. The minister was God's servant -- His mouth-piece to the listeners and hearers. Beth realized with sudden fear that she had been nothing more nor less than both a forgetful hearer and listener! God was terribly displeased with her!

Brushing a trembling hand across her furrowed brow, she hurried to the nearest chair and sat down. "Mother! O Mother! I've missed the worthwhile things !" she moaned. "O Mother, I've had misplaced emphasis..."

With her head buried in the palms of her hands, the words of the faithful minister rushed at her, " 'For what is a man profited; if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Matt. 16:26. Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' "

Sudden determination showed on her face. Contritely, she hastened to the old rocking chair. She would take up the cross she had once loved and embraced but which she had despised in her acquisition to be "some-body." Her dear mother and father's teaching was not in vain and when she got to heaven she would tell them so.

Burying her face in the beloved old seat, she wept and prayed until she prayed clear through.

A sad smile broke across her face as she resumed her work. Mother had been wise, she mused sadly; having the will phrased as it was. She knew what effect the old home place would have upon her daughter. Her wayward daughter. The place was saturated with prayers and an aura of holiness! The fledgling had used her wings to take a flight of her own. How wrong was the course she had taken!

Reminiscing the past, she reviewed the downward course. She had been gloriously converted as a child but failed to go on into Holiness when the light came her way. That was her downfall! She remembered painfully now of the inward struggle and battle. One nature wanted to do only good, holy, and righteous things. Conversely, the carnal nature strove untiringly for the evil and ultimately, won and triumphed.

Paul the apostle had stated it rightly when he said, "O wretched man that I am; who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Romans 7:24.

In the midst of her heart searching came back the victorious answer: "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord..." That was it! She need not keep the traitor-betrayer within her heart! There was deliverance! But it meant a total and complete death to self, to her carnal ambitions and the carnal nature within her!

Beth literally flung herself on her knees beside the rocker again. There would be no turning back this time. She purposed it within herself. God would own her completely . . . body, soul, mind and spirit!

She wrestled determinedly for hours. The carnal man would no longer dominate her life and have her heart! Not any part of it. She wanted victory at any price. Victory over the world, the flesh and the devil. Victory over self...!" "Yes, Lord! O Yes!" she pled, yielding unreservedly, completely and entirely. "I do here and now turn all my talents for designing over to Thee, Lord. I'll use every bit of talent to make modestly simple clothes for Thy children..."

Suddenly, and in an instant, Beth had her personal Pentecost. She was pure and clean within. It was glorious, beggaring all description.

All through the work her fully cleansed heart kept saying over and over again and again, " 'There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit. For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.' " Romans 8:1-2.

She realized with sudden joy that her lust for material..., earthly... things, was gone. With that knowledge came the sudden realization that she could never, under any circumstances, sell the old home place. It was a hallowed spot and sacred ground. Her mother's voice, though silenced by death, was still speaking. What's more, Beth knew it would continue to speak, giving her faith and strength and courage for the days ahead.

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THE END