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THE SEARCHER
By Mrs. Paul E. King

The class door opened and in walked Ardyth looking every inch the competent secretary to the president of Greer and Greer Associates. It always gave her a warm feeling to know that her father was the president of the large firm.

"Good morning, Miss Greer." The clean-cut smiling face of Ruth Endicott looked up from her work at the receptionist's desk to greet the tall, slender, blonde.

"Ardyth, please! Miss Greer makes me feel rather ancient. "

"Courtesy and respect demand the former. Not to mention the usual business ethics."

"But Dad won't mind you calling me Ardyth . . .

"I have an obligation, Miss Greer. I signed my name beneath the company's written policy and its rules, meaning of course that I would adhere to and abide by said rules and policy."

"You're the first who has ever done it. Cheers for you. But I know Dad wouldn't mind. I suppose you went to church yesterday again?"

Ruth Endicott smiled again. She liked this lovely young woman. "It was Sunday, wasn't it?" she teased.

"Do you go every Sunday?"

"Unless I'm providentially hindered."

Ardyth studied her father's chosen receptionist. Ruth was different. Extremely different. For one thing, she was all natural. Now what made her think of that? she wondered as she studied the young receptionist. Age-wise, she knew they were the same. But the similarity ended there. Ruth's long hair was as blue-black as hers was blonde, and her face and eyes were as vibrantly clear and natural as any little child's which she had ever seen. "You must really like going to church," Ardyth said quickly. "Don't you ever find it boring?"

Ruth's dark eyes met those of her employer's daughter. " I love church. I never find it boring. I teach a class our own age, Miss Greer. When are you coming? I'd feel honored to have you."

Ardyth smiled. "Some day I'll surprise you. You'll look, and there I'll be."

"I like surprises," Ruth answered. "Always have. The little girl comes out in me every time I receive or have a surprise."

She is different, Ardyth thought, Utterly transparent and totally unpretentious. No airs; nothing highbrow or put on. All natural. Totally natural. She was beginning to see and to understand now why her father had selected this petite girl instead of the many others whose applications he had looked over and whom he had interviewed. Her father was a shrewd judge of people. Yes, indeed. "Why not go out to lunch with me, Ruth? Or must I call you Miss Endicott?"

"I am the employee" came the smiling reply. "Ruth is within your rights; your father is my superior. And I think lunch with you would be perfect. "

"At twelve," Ardyth said, turning into her father's suite of offices.

"Sharp," Ruth added, swiveling her desk chair around to where a pile of papers awaited her attention.

The restaurant was crowded as the two young women entered, but the manager, seeing Ardyth's face, motioned for her to follow him.

"He always reserves the alcove for me," Ardyth explained to Ruth. "He's known Father and our family from his infancy, and I suppose one would call this a favor . . . what he does for Father and his clients and associates, and me. Bill's quite a grand young man, Ruth. He's had to climb the ladder of adversity and hardship to get to where he is today. But he succeeded. Which proves to me that it's not always a person's circumstances, whether good or bad, that is the decisive factor in his or her 'making it'; but it is the attitude, the persistence, and the sheer determination of the individual to succeed and to amount to something -- to 'make his mark in the world,' using an old cliché. Bill is living proof of this."

"That takes courage," Ruth admitted, following Ardyth to the alcove, a pleasant and quiet place away from the hustle and bustle and noise of the crowd. Here palms grew tall and beautiful in strategically placed areas and vines hung from attractive planters while air and light filtered softly through partially-opened louvered windows overlooking the bay. "Lovely. Lovely!" Ruth exclaimed in compliment.

Bill, hearing the exclamation of glad surprise, turned and looked down into Ruth's large, expressive eyes. "You like it?" he asked, wearing a pleased expression on his face.

"Oh, it's beautiful. Yes. Yes, I like it. I . . . I love it.

"Pleased to meet you," Ruth said sincerely. And now she knew the reason for all the growing, blooming plants and flowers and vines that she saw when she entered. "You have elegant taste," she added with a smile. "The name fits the place and the place is synonymous with the name."

"Thank you. Thank you. I have always had a profound love for all growing things, barring none. So, little by little, I added the planters, the hanging baskets, et cetera, and today it keeps one man busy caring for what you see above you, beside you and around you. Well, enjoy your meal. I'm glad to have met you, Ruth." And with that, Bill was gone.

"He's one of the most sincere and dedicated men I know, Ruth."

"Great qualities, Miss Greer."

"Please! Call me Ardyth out of the office, at least."

Ruth smiled. "I will, Ardyth. I don't have my signature on any contract while I'm not working."

Ardyth looked at Ruth for a long while, studying her, trying to figure this dark-eyed, dark-haired receptionist out. After awhile she asked, "Okay, what gives with you? Why are you like you are?"

"How am I?"

Ardyth gesticulated frantically with her arms, her hands. "I . . . I don't know how to put it. But you . . . you're different from anybody I've ever met, seen or encountered."

"Good 'different,' or bad?"

Again Ardyth gesticulated. "Good! Oh my," she exclaimed, "it's good 'different.' What makes you like this? Do you have religion or something?"

"It's not religion, Ardyth; I'm a Christian."

"You mean there's a difference? I always thought anyone who went to church went sort of out of habit, or some such thing. You know, 'my mother and father went; their parents went; I go' that sort of thing."

"No, it's not that way at all. My parents are Christians, so naturally I've always gone to church. But I know a lot of people in our church who had non-Christian backgrounds. But they got converted, same as I did, when I was less than twelve years old."

"Converted? You're converted? Isn't that something some of the ancients once taught, Ruth? I mean, well, it's outdated, isn't it?"

"Never. So long as man exists and continues to sin, he'll need to be converted to get to Heaven."

"What happens when you get converted, Ruth? I know the word 'convert' means to change . . ."

"Right. It does mean that. And it goes even farther; it means to 'go the other way.' When one becomes converted, he becomes a Christian. He is forgiven of all his committed sins and becomes a 'new creature' in Christ Jesus. The things he once loved and practiced and did that were sinful and evil, he doesn't do any more. Converted . . . changed. See?"

"I believe I'm beginning to see. Know something? Next Sunday I'm coming to your church. I want to see what's going on. What time do you have your class?"

"Ten o'clock, Ardyth. Preliminaries begin at 9:30, though. "

"I'll be there."

"And I'll be standing at the door waiting for you," Ruth promised, smiling.

The following Sunday Ardyth sat like one mesmerized all through Ruth's class. She was amazed at Ruth's scriptural knowledge and her

teaching ability. The pastor's sermon in the after-service filled her with holy fear and awe. Never had she heard anything like it. She felt smitten and uncomfortable inside her heart. Ruth sensed the Spirit's moving and prayed silently for her friend.

On the way to Ruth's house for dinner, Ardyth, thinking she was returning the favor, asked, "Will you be my guest at the Country Club Estates on Saturday night? Father's giving a bash, a gala affair for his employees."

"He invited me."

"You're coming?" Ardyth's voice and her eyes both registered shocked surprise and incredulity.

Ruth smiled. "I didn't say that. I merely stated that I was invited. No, I'm not coming."

"Not even as my guest, Ruth?"

"I can't. Thanks much though."

"Why not? You ask me out to your church, and I come. We invite you to one of father's gala affairs, you refuse."

Ruth kept her eyes on the road. "What happens at such gala parties?" she asked softly, kindly.

"We talk. Socialize, you know. Almost everybody drinks. Myself, I don't drink. You wouldn't have to, either. There's always tomato juice, V8 and ginger ale. You could have any of these. Or all three, if you wanted them. "

"It's not that, Ardyth. Convert means to change, right? Remember?"

"That's what the dictionary states. And I said it, yes. "

"I have been converted -- changed. Radically and wondrously so. Could I talk about what I best and most frequently talk about?"

"Religion? We often get on this subject."

"Not about religion. About Christ and . . ."

"What do you mean?" Ardyth's eyes never left Ruth's face.

"May I tell those people what the Lord Jesus Christ means to me? How He changed me so completely and turned me about face until the things I once loved I now hate and the things which once I despised and rejected I now love?"

Ardyth lowered her eyes. Her head shook in a slow but positively negative gesture. "It . . ." She stammered for the right words. "We'd all be embarrassed," she finally blurted. "And everybody would think you were . . ."

"Crazy?"

"Well, I wanted to be a bit more kind and say they'd all think you were a kook."

Ruth cast a hasty glance toward her boss's daughter. "A Christian doesn't fit in the world's mold," she said kindly.

"I guess I'm beginning to see what you mean. You and I are in different worlds, Ruth."

"So far, yes. But it needn't stay this way."

Ardyth caught the significance of the simple statements and felt a slight pain in her heart. Nothing more was said that day about the "changed heart" and when the two parted it was with a better understanding of how each felt.

Saturday night came and, Ardyth, dressed in a shimmering evening gown of silver sequins, went to the party with her parents. From the beginning, she felt uncomfortable and ill at ease. Everything she saw and heard made her only more aware of the fact that Ruth Endicott did not fit into this kind of life. Frankly and honestly, she admitted to herself that she would have been disappointed in Ruth had she come.

She was half deafened by noise, such chaffy, insipid noise. Tongues wagged; people were cut apart with the sword of words. Liquor flowed. She sipped her ginger ale. Why was she sipping anything? she asked herself in

disgust. She wasn't thirsty, and she didn't like ginger ale, particularly. She finally came to the conclusion that she was sipping just because others were doing it -- and because she didn't want to be different.

The last conclusion shook her. She rushed to the posh powder room to get away from it all. She had watched the sequence of events at all too many of these parties and she had never seen it as she saw it now. It was like the opening of a book and she, for the first time, was reading the facts. Sin, she guessed Ruth would label it. But maybe the little receptionist was right, she thought. Yes, maybe she was right. What were dirty, filthy jokes? What was the consuming of alcoholic beverages? Might it not be called sin?

Feeling somehow strangely all out of place she fled to the balcony for fresh air; away from the ribald laughter, the thick tongues and flushed faces. She huddled in a dark corner with her pounding heart and her turbulent thoughts.

An hour later, she fled the party, leaving word with one of the waiters to tell her parents that she had taken a cab home. Something was happening inside her; she had seen a better way.

Inside the door, she ran to the phone. "Ruth . . ."

"Ardyth! You OK? I've been praying for you. Where are you?"

"Home. Ruth, I'm ready for that change. I want to be converted. Dad and Mother will explode, but I've seen a better way. In you. In your life. I want it. They've given me everything but peace in my soul. I see now that the world doesn't have it; the world can't give it to me. When can you pray with me?"

"Now. Right now. I'll be right over . . ."

Tears shimmered in Ardyth's eyes as she placed the phone back on the receiver. Her search was almost ended.