

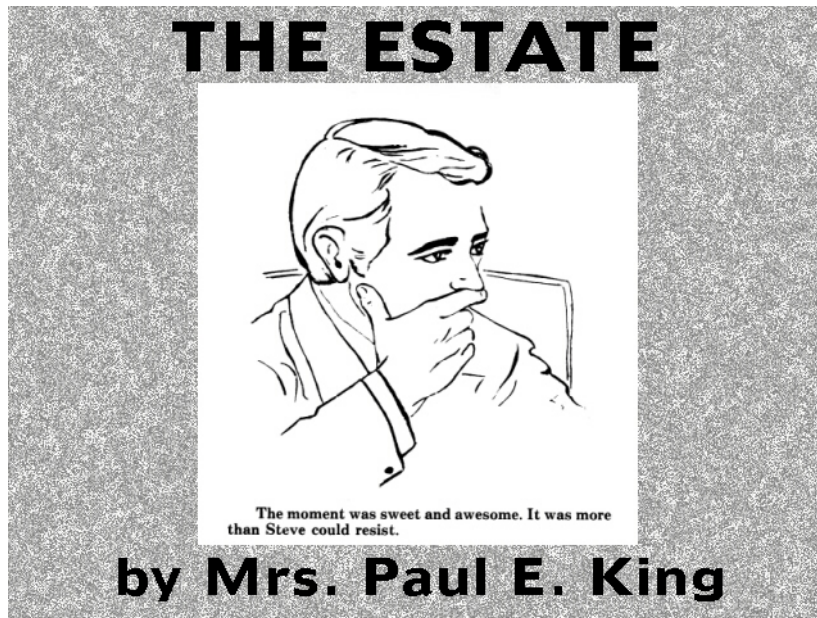
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THE ESTATE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

The train whistled its shrill warning a half mile away and then flowed on into town on its rails--noisy, and with a strength about it which sent shivers racing up and down Steve's spine. Or was it the train, making the shivers? he wondered silently gathering his belongings together and stepping gingerly into the aisle.

"Bellemeade. Bellemeade!" the conductor shouted from one end of the coach. "This way out, please. Bellemeade."

Steve started forward with his one piece of luggage and attache case, balancing himself to keep from falling. With a squeaking protest at being stopped, the giant engine ground ahead. It halted, obstinate, a hundred yards up the tracks, and the passengers began to file into the soft, balmy breezes of an early summer night.

"Steve Derryberry!" a voice exclaimed suddenly as the young man walked under one of the few lights along the station platform. "Steve! Fancy seeing you here!" Steve whirled about and came face to face with an old high school chum.

"Derek!" he exclaimed in glad surprise, extending his hand in greeting. "I thought you lived in Farrington. . . ."

"I used to; but, well, you know how it is, the homing pigeon always returns to the place of its upbringing." Derek laughed amicably. "Helen and I decided there was no better or finer place than Bellemeade in which to raise six children. So-o-o,. . ." His voice trailed meaningfully. "What about you, Steve? You here for long?"

"I hope not too long, Derek. It all depends. . . ."

"Will your sisters be coming in? I suppose Janet will take you to her home: she's the closest to Bellemeade--six miles, isn't it?"

Feeling suddenly uncomfortable, Steve said, "Look, Derek, you'll do me a favor if you don't let anyone know I'm here. . . ."

"But the girls will want to see you, I'm sure, Steve. How many years has it been? Eight or nine?"

Feeling irritated and agitated, Steve set his luggage down on the platform. "I'll appreciate it if you won't tell anybody that I'm in Bellemeade, Derek!" he said, sounding more caustic than he'd meant to.

"But . . . your sisters . . . I know they'd want to know. They're two fine women, Steve."

"Especially do I not want them to know. Do you understand?"

Derek stood, looking stunned and dumbfounded. "No, I don't understand, Steve, but if that's the way you want it. . . ."

"That is the way I want it, Derek!"

Shocked almost speechless, Derek looked Steve over from head to foot. "You'll need a ride to wherever you're going," he ventured cautiously after a time of silence. "Get in my car and I'll take you where you want to go. I came to pick Heather up -- she's my oldest sister's youngest daughter. She's in the front seat with Pamela and Sue, our two oldest. There's plenty of room at our house, if you'd care to stay with us."

"Thanks, Derek. Thanks much, for the offer of a ride and a room in your house, but I have other arrangements. Not that I'm ungrateful, mind you."

"I understand, Steve," Derek said, stepping off the platform to a silver-gray Mercury from whose interior merry laughter bubbled forth.

"Again, many thanks, Derek. Sure was great seeing you."

"One last thing, Steve, if you need me be sure to get in touch with me. The dear old homeplace where you and I had many a good time together is home for Helen, the children, and me. We love it there! Oh, yes, one thing more, if you decide to stay in Bellemeade over Sunday, come out to church -- same one we attended when we were growing up. We have a wonderful preacher and wife and family. I believe you'd like them."

"Thanks, Derek," Steve replied, picking up his luggage and hurrying into the station.

Same old Derek, he thought silently, walking to the ticket agent.

"I'm Steve Derryberry," he said, standing in front of the ticket window and speaking to the agent on the opposite side. "I was to pick car keys up to a '75 Buick here at the window, compliments of my friend Harry Stoner who works for the Blum and Rosedale Agency in town."

The ticket agent looked over his glasses that were dropped low on the bridge of his nose, and smiled. It was a pleased smile. "Of course, Steve," he said warmly. "Harry told me you'd be home on the evening train."

Fishing a set of keys out of the corner of a drawer and sliding them beneath the narrow window, the agent continued with, "You don't remember me, but I know you. Your father and I were bosom friends. A great man, your dad. Yes, indeed, a great man. Too bad he died so young. . . ."

Ignoring the favorable comments, Steve picked the keys up and started for the door. "Thanks," he called, turning and looking into the face of the aging man.

"Wait a minute, Steve!" the man said quickly.

"You're not going any place special, I presume, and the evening's still young: I want to tell you something. . . ."

"I'm in a hurry, Mr. . . ."

"Chap Steiner's the name."

Fixing his steel gray eyes on Steve with a look that seemed to penetrate his inmost being, the gray-haired man said in an emotion-packed voice, "Your father pined away over you, young man! He went to a premature grave. So did your mother. What answer do you expect to give the Almighty One when you stand before Him some day? I'm a father and I know how deeply a wayward son can break one's heart. . . ."

With a hammering heart and a heaving chest, Steve stomped out of the station, fearing to speak lest he shout at the man.

Once inside the car and behind the steering wheel he felt his tense body slowly unwind and relax. Meddling people! he thought in disgust. What business of theirs was it that he hadn't gotten home in years? He was of age, wasn't he?

By the light of the silvery moon, the road to the old homeplace was bathed in beauty and transformed into a ribbon of loveliness filled with memories so poignantly familiar and sweet until something inside Steve's

chest hurt. He took a long, deep breath, suddenly aware of the fact that scenes from out of the long-distant past haunted him.

Accelerating more heavily now, he wondered what motive had prompted his coming. But it was time the estate was settled, wasn't it? he reasoned -- modest though it would be.

He winced as he recalled how long he had held up the finalization of the settlement. And why had he done it. . .?

He dismissed the unpleasant thought and turned into the driveway, nestled snugly and solidly behind a row of close-growing blue spruce trees. How tall they had grown since he last saw them! he thought in pleasant surprise.

The trees were his mother's pride and joy. She had planted them with her own hands many years ago when he was still a small boy, adding three each year as he and his two sisters celebrated their birthday. "A lasting birthday remembrance of sweet memories for your father and me when each of you is grown," she would say, wearing her ever-present sweet and loving smile.

Breathing heavily, Steve cut the motor and walked with faltering step toward the door. Once, he felt almost sure that the door would open and his mother's petite form would be framed inside, waiting to welcome him with open arms like always.

Suddenly his breathing became labored, coming out in quick heavy gasps; almost like he was suffocating, as he turned the knob and stepped into the stonelaid foyer.

The house smelled musty and damp from being shut up. As he closed the door and stood silently inside, Steve thought of his mother and how sweet smelling and fragrantly-clean she had always kept the place. This time of year, especially, there would have been the heavy-sweet fragrance of night blooming jasmine and honeysuckle perfuming every room in the house since the windows were always left open when the weather permitted and the jasmine grew beneath the dining room windows and one of the bedroom windows, as well. The honeysuckle ran in a glorious wild way along the chimney and the long porch at the back of the house.

Setting his luggage down, Steve made his way to the mantel where a kerosene lamp was always kept in case of electric power failure. Would it still be there? he wondered, feeling carefully along the sturdy shelf. He was rewarded when his hand felt the contour of the familiar lamp. Now to light it, he thought, bringing a match from his pocket and striking it. It burned brightly for a moment, then went out as quickly as the flame had shot forth. He struck another and by its light he saw the lamp was empty; not a drop of oil was in it. Naturally, it would have evaporated after all the years.

He hurried to the car and brought in the quart of scented oil which he had purchased at a discount store for this very purpose and soon the soft golden light spread its warm shadows across the room.

Involuntarily, and almost instantly, his eyes lifted to the enormous portraits above the mantel. As before, his breathing became labored and hard. He wanted to run, run, run -- away from the place, to some out of the way island; a foreign country or. . . ."

"Why run, Steve?" a voice seemed to shout the question at him. "You tried running once: it didn't work . . . 'There is no place where his voice is not heard'; no country so far and no island so forlorn and desolate but what God steps down upon it and His presence is felt: running's not the answer, Steve; you know it! . . . Not the answer . . . Not the answer . . . you know it . . . know it . . . know it. . . ."

The strong, tall, muscular frame trembled and shook violently. His eyes rested enigmatically on the portraits. He had painted them. With his own two hands and brush, he had!

He stood like one mesmerized. Charmed. His father's and mother's eyes all the while probing the very depths of his soul and penetrating his inmost being. Why had he painted them thus? he wondered, feeling both condemned and agitated.

In a flash the answer to his question came back to him: the paintings would not have been natural had he portrayed them otherwise: each was kindness and gentleness and goodness personified in human flesh when he was growing up. They were the very embodiment of everything that was

noble and lofty and wonderful. Once, he had adored them; loved them, and never feared them. But now. . . .

He spun around so quickly that he almost lost his balance. He would have fallen had it not been for the great and sturdy rocking chair nearby.

Feeling limp and like a frightened, cornered animal, he sat in the chair and dropped his face into his hands while cold beads of perspiration formed on his forehead.

Outside, a gentle breeze stirred the ivy and woodbine that grew green and dense up the great stone chimney. Here and there an errant branch tapped lightly and gently against the window, bringing back to his mind the many nights he had lain in his own bedroom listening with awe and intrigue to the same soft sounds.

Sighing, he lifted his head. The lamp cast flickering shadows on the wall. How highly reminiscent of other days was the scene, he thought, remembering how he and his sisters had tried to outdo each other with "finger shadows" on the wall: a dog wagging its tail, a rabbit wiggling its ears, a ferocious looking man or beast. . . .

He stood quickly to his feet and as his eyes once more met those of his deceased parents there was a look of gentle rebuke buried in their depths. A look of compassion and yearning, too. Again it captured him, holding him like one hypnotized and when, weak and bereft of strength, he once more sat down in the chair, his heart searched the hidden depths of Steve Derryberry - now famous artist.

"A wayward son," Mr. Steiner had labeled him, when he picked up the car keys. Maybe the aged man was right! Yes, he could have been right! Steve thought, feeling a wave of shame and remorse wash over him. In so many respects, he was like the prodigal son in the Bible. There was only one difference between them: he had amassed a small fortune by his talent and he had not "wasted his substance in riotous living" as did his Biblical counterpart. But he had strayed, this was true. Far!

Blowing the light out, he hurried through the house to the bedroom that was his for so long as he could remember, deciding to wait for daylight before

he did any looking around. Furthermore, he felt he couldn't go into the kitchen with his mother not there.

The moon filtered its soft light through the opened drapes and made a shining, silver path across the floor, outlining every piece of furniture in the room and etching it in pale yellow.

Opening his luggage, Steve extracted his night clothes and was soon beneath the bed covers. Ah, but it was good to be in his old bed, he thought, feeling unusually tired and weary.

He closed his eyes and tried to sleep but it was an elusive thing. It evaded him. He lay, listening to the night birds sing Strange, he thought, how one could ever have forgotten anything so sweet. The house breathed, its aged boards every now and again snapping and creaking as the night grew cooler. Steve turned from one side to the other, trying desperately to go to sleep, but his mind was too preoccupied with memories. He tried counting the proverbial sheep but it only served to make him nervous. It didn't work. For once, his conscience refused to be silenced.

Sliding his feet from beneath the covers, he sat on the edge of the bed and ponderously traced the downward tread of his steps. It was a gradual process. So gradual, in fact, that he wasn't too alarmed at first. It was like the time he'd been fishing and wasn't aware that his boat had drifted -- until a sudden vicious and fierce storm blew in and it was almost too late to do anything about either himself or the boat. But God had gotten him safely to shore in spite of the turbulent, churning, foaming waters and the mammoth waves. His life was spared -- for what? or why?

The impact of the question had a sobering effect upon him. It staggered his thinking. There was no way -- no logic -- that he could deny the fact that it was God alone who had brought his small craft safely to shore and spared his life. And that for a specific purpose and reason, too!

Was it right for him to waste his time and his talents? he wondered quickly. Yea, the best years of his life, even, and, finally, give God what was left -- when his steps became feeble, his brow wrinkled and his hair hoary? Quick came back the rejoinder -- the answer: no, no! A thousand times no!

His face fell into the palms of his hands and his body shook with fear. For years he'd wasted his God-given talents and gifts on the devil's market, thinking he was having a hilarious time and feeding gluttonously on the praise and applause of man. But it hadn't satisfied. Not one bit. Lying in his innermost being, never still nor calmed but ever begging, pleading and imploring for recognition, was every prayer he'd ever prayed and heard prayed, each sermon he'd listened to and the lovely old hymns he'd sung -- urging him to "do his first works over, and repent."

At times the voice -- the proddings -- came in a still, small voice, as gentle as a dove; other times, like tonight, it was with the force of mighty crashing waves against the shore. Several different times he almost yielded and surrendered only to be held back by wondering what his friends would think and say. But tonight . . . tonight. . . .

Sitting alone in the house in the stillness of the night, the atmosphere was charged with the sacredness and holiness of righteous people, their prayers from a long-distant past as sweet incense yet ascending upward. The moment was sacred and awesome. It was more than Steve could resist.

Rushing from his room to the sturdy rocking chair by the fireplace, he fell to his knees and, burying his face in the cushioned seat, he wept brokenly, his sobs shaking his manly frame with no shame whatever for what he was doing. On and on he prayed and confessed and repented and when, finally, he lifted a radiant face heavenward to thank God for the healing balm which was applied to his soul, a night bird sang in jubilant song outside the window. Steve was certain he had never heard a sweeter song. It sounded like an angel.

With his newfound joy and peace, his troubled thoughts vanished and disappeared, as did his desire for sleep. He remained for a long while on his knees, praising the Lord for the forgiveness of sins when suddenly the purpose of his coming came before him. He got to his feet and sat in the chair, his head resting peacefully against the tall, stout back. The estate? he thought, smiling in the darkness. No problem there: he would call his sisters first thing in the morning. Better yet, he would drive out to see them. Telling them what God had done in his heart would be sheer delight. They would shout and rejoice with him.

Janice and her husband could have the place (if they still wanted it) for the first price the three had agreed upon -- until he had backslidden and gotten stubborn and contentious and held up everything.

If the girls agreed, he would buy the five-acre field whose sides and back snuggled up tight against the beautiful Mahantango Mountains, also a 20-acre tract of mountain land adjoining it. He would build his house and studio on the land overlooking the rest of the farm, and the valley beyond.

Smiling, Steve exclaimed aloud, "What a wonderful change God hath wrought in my heart!" He felt new all over. This, he knew, was just the beginning: Holiness of heart was the next step. And God alone knew what great, good things the future held for him. One thing was settled -- forever so! -- God should have all of him and his talents.

Closing his eyes, the young man fell asleep in his mother's rocking chair and as the parents smiled down upon him from their portraits above the mantel, the angels in heaven rejoiced with loud voice that a sinner had repented and come home. Among them were Steve's father and mother!