

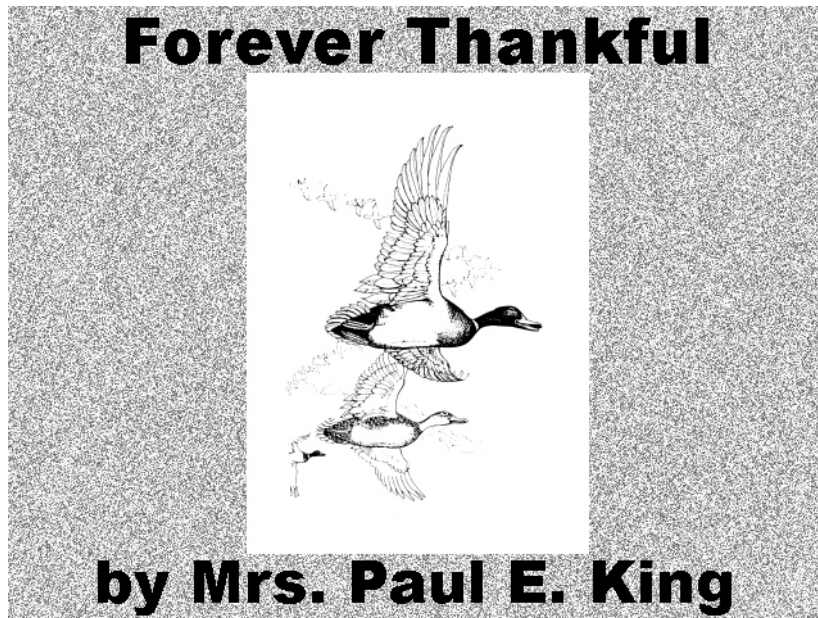
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Digital Edition 10/22/2001
By Holiness Data Ministry

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The Sunday School Beacon
November 10, 17, 24, December 1, 1991



FOREVER THANKFUL
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Chapter 1

A pale lemon-yellow moon crested the tops of the tallest hemlocks and firs, looking, momentarily, like it was attached to the very tip of the tall-most conifer before it made its slow, unhurried way across a star-spangled indigo-blue sky. Its soft silvery light shone down upon the form of the young man

whose lean but ruggedly handsome and muscular-strong body seemed melted against or into one of the trunks of an arrow-straight and towering tree.

He stood with folded arms, wondering, as he had done so many other times, what providence or fate had brought him here in this seeming no-man's land. To be sure, it was late uncle's last request that he join himself to a man many years his senior to "think things through and sort things out" in this majestically beautiful but totally unpeopled wilderness.

He slid easily to the needle-carpeted earth and wrapped his arms around his knees, watching the shadows of the moon in the trees and listening to the souging wind in the branches. The atmosphere had soothed his frayed nerves and eased the hurt and the pain in his heart to some degree, he had to admit, but in another way it had seemed to thrust the dart of loneliness even deeper into his being. And the man Bill, well. . . .

At thought of Bill, the young man's mind was stacked with questions. But he must not ask them. The man was Bill, that much he knew. His last name? "Does it really matter?" Bill had replied with a question of his own, when asked.

He sighed with the wind now, longing for a bit of conversation. Bill was not the talkative kind. He said that too many spoken words left one feeling empty inside and foolish. He spoke to his two dogs and the brown Swiss milk cow and her frisky young offspring, though: The young man had heard him.

His thoughts wandered back to the night when the phone call came for him to come home, that his aunt was dying and was calling for him. He could still feel the chill that gripped him and made him shake and tremble. His aunt and uncle were like parents to him. They had paid his fare to the States and adopted him when he was eight years old, upon the death of his father and mother and a young brother and infant sister on the mission field.

"God spared you for a purpose, J. T.," his aunt and uncle declared as they wrapped their arms around him. "You will be our son now. Someday, if God so plans, you may be called to serve where your dear father and mother labored so faithfully and died so young"

In a state of bewilderment and deep sorrow, he had cried, "But I don't want to go over there! If Father and Mother had been in America they'd still be living."

He recalled now how gently Aunt Lois had stroked his head and wiped the tears from his eyes, saying, "God's will be done, dear boy. He will remove the pain and the hurt from your tender heart and you will feel His arms of love and protection around you." And then she had prayed over him, placing one hand upon his head, the other on his shoulder.

He recalled now how, that after and during the prayer, the healing had begun to take place inside his entire being. It was a true and very real miracle; an answer directly from Heaven through his aunt's prayer. People had often commented one to another how well young J. T. Banks was adjusting; it was another of God's great miracles.

He loved helping his aunt and uncle on their small farm. The sun and wind and the tasks assigned him built muscle and sinew on his anemic, too-slender and frail frame and soon had him looking and feeling strong and healthy. His Aunt Lois saw to it that he had a well balanced diet daily and a regular bedtime hour.

"Your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost," she would remind him.

His school years had passed by in rapid succession, so delightful and intensely interesting were his elementary study books. And then it was off to college. Then, in his final year there, the long distance call had come. He hadn't wasted a minute in making preparations for his departure home. And three days later, his much loved Aunt Lois -- his surrogate mother -- died in his strong arms. For a second time, he felt like his world had collapsed. He was devastated,

Fearing for his dear uncle's health and well-being, T. J. had had his college roommate ship all his personal belongings to him and he had remained home with the beloved relative" who was like a real father to him, much against his uncle's wishes.

"You're too near to graduating," Uncle Jonathan had chided him when he told him he was remaining home with him. "This is quite a sacrifice, my boy. But I do appreciate it. Much"

The words floated back to him now like a bittersweet memory. Sacrifice! The word was totally out of context with his heart motive and inmost desire: What he was doing was an act of love, pure and completely unselfish. Perfect love made no demands nor was selfish in its doing and its giving. He loved Uncle Jonathan. And he loved the Lord.

Tears filled his eyes and trickled stealthily down his cheeks as he recalled the night, less than two months past, when he was awakened out of sleep with the feeling that he must go to his uncle's room immediately. With the agility of the healthy young, he jumped out of bed and rushed into his uncle's bedroom. The moon, looking in through the window, dropped silver spangled moonbeams on the quilt covering the beloved man, whose countenance seemed halo-wreathed by a heavenly light.

"Uncle Jonathan," he called softly as he rushed to the bed side.

"J . . . T. . . ." came the feeble response. "Give . . me . . . your hand . . . son."

Immediately, his hand clasped his uncle's. "Are you all right, dear Uncle Jonathan?" he had asked as he dropped to his knees beside the bed and flung his arms around his uncle's neck.

He would never forget the radiant smile on his beloved one's face, nor the heavenly light that became even more brilliant and bright and wreathed the man's facial features in a light so dazzlingly-white as to let him know his uncle was no longer an earth-bound creature but was soon to be released and leave for the Land of Fadeless day.

"J. . . . T. . . . I'm . . . going.. Home. Soon. My Lord has . . . come for me. He's here . . . oh, I can . . . touch Him! I . . . want you to promise me. . . ."

"Yes. Yes, dear, dear Uncle, what?"

"There's work for . . . you . . . to do, J. T." The uncle's voice seemed to have grown stronger now. "Go up to the mountain . . . the address is on my dresser You will have time to pray and to meditate upon the Word. Read the Word, J. T. Study it. Pray. And someday, after you have prayed much, write B. J. The address, too, is on the dresser. You will go, will you not, dear son?"

"I'll do anything you ask!" J. T. had cried. "Anything! Oh, how I wish I might go with you! Everything I have held dear has slipped through my fingers. Must I be left alone again?"

"Son, hear me." His uncle had tried to raise up in bed. "The child of God is never alone. Never! You must work while it is day; the night cometh, wherein no man can work. It is not time for you to come with me. But my hour has come and, oh, what glory for me! Such singing, J. T.! Oh, how can one begin to describe it! You will go to the mountain then, God willing?. It's only an hour's drive."

"I will, my dear, dear Uncle. God willing, I'll go." A sigh of relief escaped the man's lips. "Thank you, Son. Thank you. You will have to sort things through and think things out -- by much prayer and Bible reading, of course. Bill's not much for talk, J. T. But this, too, you will discover, is to your advantage. He's a holy man. The will for these remaining earthly goods is in a lock box at the bank. I'll see you in the morning, J. T. I love you, and I'll rejoice with you over the harvest of souls when I see you again. God bless you, dear boy. Your parents are beckoning me and my Good Shepherd is waiting to take me across; I must go now. . . ." And waving his hand joyously and rapturously, his uncle left this earth.

J. T.'s tears ran down his cheeks now. How he did miss his uncle. Would the pain in his heart never leave him? he wondered. And was he destined to be a man who lost everyone who was near and dear to him?

Almost two months had gone by since he laid his uncle beside his mate of more than fifty years and still the pain and the hurt inside his being lingered.

He felt numb with shock; then again, the pain was so acute and hurtful and the loneliness so intensely deep and real as to plunge him into the deepest depths of depression. His only help and relief was as he sought it on his knees in prayer, with an open Bible clutched tightly in his hands and pressed closely to his heaving and broken chest. Day after day and time after time he poured out his pain and his loneliness in total and utter brokenness to God, and the One who watched with tenderness and compassion as the clay was being thus crushed and shapen and molded made Himself real to His suffering child.

J. T. dropped his chin on his upraised knees and wondered what his loved ones were doing in Heaven this very minute. Sometimes, like this evening, he longed desperately to be with them. Then he remembered that God's plans and his own desires and wishes were two very separate and diverse things. Sometimes as he prayed, the mission field where his parents' bodies were buried would come into sharp focus before him. But he felt he could never return to the place where, as an eight-year-old, his heart had been literally broken to bits and to pieces by the loss of his parents and the entire family. He could still feel the fear and the loneliness chill him as it had done when all were taken from him and he was left alone. Kind native hands and arms mothered him, it was true, until he was flown back to the States; but the feeling of complete and utter aloneness was beyond any describing. Nor could he be comforted: Not until his dear aunt had laid her gentle hands upon him and had prayed that wonderful and never to be forgotten prayer so many years ago.

J. T. got to his feet and stretched his legs, which felt cramped from the position in which he had sat for so long. He walked back and forth on the soft, thick needle carpet, crying out to God for healing for the pain and the ache within his heart. Several of his closest friends from college had written him to tell him they were praying for him and that he was missed greatly by them. They urged him to return "now that there are no earthly ties to hold you." (His former roommate's words).

J. T. sighed. No earthly ties! How paradoxical was the statement with his own personal feelings! True, Uncle Jonathan was gone; he -- J. T. -- was alone; yet in spite of the death of his beloved uncle there were ties of some kind or other that compelled him to stay on. Invisible ties.

He thought of the letter from B. J. Was this perfect stranger whom his uncle had asked him to write to as lonely and as undecided as to what he should do as he, J. T. was? he wondered. Had Uncle Jonathan thought -- or felt -- that he could help B. J.? Or that B. J. could help him? Or that they could help each other, perhaps?

He began a slow walk back to the rustic, spotlessly clean mountain house, praying for B. J., whose letter of response seemed almost like an echo of his own heart.

Chapter 2

J. T. walked back to his place of lodging with an unhurried pace. His mind was deep in thought. How he longed for a bit of communication with Uncle Jonathan; to sit once again by his side in the gathering twilight and, while a log burned brightly and warmly in the fireplace, to hear those words of wisdom from that saintly old man. Only, now that he was gone, J. T. was painfully aware of how much he had looked up to him and depended upon him for guidance and counsel.

He felt a sob tear through him somewhere inside his chest as Uncle Jonathan's voice floated to him from out of the past: "Dear boy," his uncle had said to him that morning at the breakfast table, "I appreciate the trust and the confidence you have placed in me, and I'll do everything I can to guide you, but you must never bypass and ignore our All-wise God, and seek in me the answers to decisions which only He can give and which He knows are best for you. Have you consulted God about this that is troubling you? Have you searched His Word, the Bible, for an answer? Not infrequently, when your dear Aunt Lois and I were faced with seeming insurmountable obstacles and questions for which we had no answers, we received the answer through the Holy Word or through earnest prayer."

His uncle was so gentle; so wise. He didn't openly rebuke or scold him, but in his kind, gentle way he had turned his thoughts to the One whose wisdom was infinite and flawlessly wonderful and marvelous and far above that of mankind.

He looked upward at the blinking, winking, twinkling stars. Up there, somewhere beyond the vast indigo blue of the sky, the stars, the moon, those whom he loved so deeply -- so dearly -- were dwelling. They would die no more; they were Home. Eternally -- forever and ever -- Home! Their earthly race was over; finished. They had kept the faith; they had finished the work which the Lord had assigned to them. They had looked to Jesus, the Author and finisher of their faith.

Looked to Jesus! Why, yes, of course. Looked to Jesus! He had looked to Jesus, to be sure; but he had leaned much upon his uncle, too. Too much, he now realized with a sense of pain.

In an instant, J. T. was on his knees. Beneath the boughs of whispering trees and the shimmering mantle of stars and moonlight, he looked heavenward. Tears marched down his cheeks, where moonbeams, catching them, transformed them into glittering diamonds. He vowed a solemn vow to God, recalling the scriptural invitation, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

"But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. . ." (James 1:5-6).

J. T.'s heart felt warm and light; God's presence was wondrously real. He remained on his knees for a long time, worshipping and praising the Lord. At the same time, he felt his great loneliness depart and take flight from his heart. It was as though a gigantic wave of heavenly joy and peace had washed over him, sweeping away the loneliness with its acute pain and hurt. It was gone forever; he knew this. He would miss his dear uncle and aunt, he knew; but never again would the loneliness overwhelm and oppress him like it had done. Almost, he had allowed it to drown him; to inundate and suffocate the peace of his soul. But never again.

Bill was sitting by the table reading when J. T. walked in. He looked up at the young man. "Thanksgiving's not far off," he said matter-of-factly.

J. T. sucked his breath in quicklike. He had been too absorbed in his grief and loneliness to take account of days and weeks. When Uncle Jonathan died it was as though the world had ceased to function for him.

"I . . . I guess you're right," he replied thoughtfully. "And we should do something, Bill. We can have a nice time, just the two of us, God willing. I'll run into town tomorrow morning first thing, the Lord willing, and buy a turkey and all the trimmings for a feast; a true Thanksgiving dinner. Uncle Jonathan and I learned a lot about cooking when Aunt Lois crossed over Home. Make a list of everything you think we should have and I'll get it. I need to go after the mail anyhow."

Bill pulled the glasses off the bridge of his nose and placed the open Bible lovingly on the table, then he eyed J. T. "Something happened to you," he said, and a smile twisted the corners of his mouth. "You've finally gotten above it, didn't you?"

J. T. felt tears, warm and comforting, come to his eyes. "God gave me victory over the crushing loneliness, yes. Only a short while ago, as I prayed beneath the stars and the trees, the Lord lifted it; it's gone, Bill. Praise be to the Lord!"

Bill did something most uncommon and unusual then; getting to his feet, he crossed over to J. T. Putting his callused, work-worn hands on the young man's shoulders, he said brokenly, "I love you, J. T. You have become like a son to me. In our sorrow, we now have a mutual understanding. A mutual bond. I know what it is like to have lost dear loved ones. At first, the shock of it all tends to numb one's senses and feelings. In some cases, it embitters the total man. But only if one allows and permits it to do so. Even in our sorrow and our pain, Christ is the bridge over troubled waters. Isaiah stated it in a way we could not have done when he said, 'He is . . . a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

"Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows."

"We suffer so much so needlessly and unnecessarily. But now that this is in the past, and since the Lord has given you His grace to rise above it, I want this Thanksgiving to be a special time of true gratefulness and a time of praise.

"The dear ones who die in the Lord are unspeakably happy and joyful. We will rejoice and be thankful that they have made the landing triumphantly and victoriously. This will be a happy Thanksgiving for us, J. T. I sense it in my being. We will have a feast; a real feast. Like you, I, too, have carried needless griefs and sorrows and burdens. Seeing you suffer and grieve as you did, opened my long-past griefs. I tell you, dear boy, it kept me on my knees to rise above them again. But, through Christ, I have triumphed victoriously and in the process I have attained new heights and depths in Him. Together we will celebrate this Thanksgiving as a time of victory. It will be a forever Thanksgiving."

J. T. stood for a long while studying the kind faced man, once so quiet and of few words, now seeming hardly able to contain himself and his apparent happiness. Then in a voice packed with emotion, he said, "I appreciate you, Bill, more than you will know. I guess, in a sense, you and my late Uncle Jonathan have been much alike."

The words, so simple but emphatically spoken, brought tears to the elder man's eyes.

"You have paid me one of the greatest compliments, my boy," Bill remarked in a voice that was barely audible. "Thank you."

For a moment their eyes met, then, brushing tears off his cheeks, Bill said, "We'd better get busy working on that grocery order." And he hurried away for a pencil and paper.

Chapter 3

The trip to town was both stimulating and exciting for J. T., who left the mountain house shortly after the breakfast dishes were washed and dried and put back into the cupboard. Bill seemed almost young as he handed the grocery list to him. Once, J. T. felt that he had almost persuaded the quiet man to accompany him on his journey, but in the end Bill decided to remain behind, stating that the noise and the hustle and bustle of cities and towns made him nervous.

For the first time in weeks, J. T. stopped the car in front of the house which was now his by inheritance, and went inside. True, the house was silent and still, almost oppressively so, but the extreme loneliness and the agonizing hurt was gone. In its place was a calmness and a peace so inexpressibly deep and real as to bring tears of joy to his eyes. Truly, no one but Jesus could perform a miracle such as this, he realized, as he raised his hands heavenward and praised God for lifting the cumbersome, joy smothering burden from him.

He went from room to room, sensing both God's wonderful presence and the sweetly-fragrant aftermath of his deceased loved ones. He would have to clean windows, he realized, once he moved back, God willing. And launder the curtains, too, he told himself with a smile. True, he had never done this before; but there was always a place of beginning for the "greenhorn" and the novice and he was not one of those whose pride and/or manliness would keep him from learning. No, he was not too proud to do the myriad menial jobs which he knew needed done as soon as he moved back. His pride was slain--crucified--and burned out that night at the altar when

God's cleansing fire purged his soul and his entire being then filled him with the blessed Holy Spirit. Oh, the blessedness of Pentecost!

As he walked through the dining room, he thought how wonderful it would be if he could persuade Bill to come to his house for Thanksgiving. But he was almost sure what the answer would be if he asked. Still, a change of scenery would be good for Bill.

Before leaving, J. T. knelt on the big, hand-crocheted rug near the stove in the kitchen. Aunt Lois had made it during one of the winter seasons from the good parts of old clothing. It added much to the decor of the neat kitchen and, besides, it kept the kitchen warmer. The bright tones picked up the tiny floral pattern of the wallpaper and added cheerfulness and coziness to the room.

As he prayed, J. T. felt a gentle stirring in his soul. He became quiet before the Presence. All too frequently he had done all the talking in his praying; now, however, he stilled his words and his racing thoughts and waited patiently and quietly for God's Voice. And then he heard it. O blissful, heavenly rapture! He knew now what his life's work was. At least, he knew. He would do it willingly and joyously. He would not be going abroad to labor on foreign soil; rather, he would be an arm that would support those who were already laboring there and those others yet to go.

He felt he was on holy ground, and for a long while he remained prostrate on his face before the Lord. The moment was too holy and too sacred to break. He marveled, now, at the fact that during his college years he had felt strongly impressed to take the courses which he did: Each was in order for the plan which God had had for his life all along, only he had not known it at the time. Now, however, it came back to him in clear and sharp focus, much like a puzzle when it falls piece by piece into its proper place.

It was late morning when he finally turned the key in the lock and left the house but the time spent in the beloved home place was time well spent.

He stopped by the post office on his way to the grocery store and glanced at the accumulated mail in his box, deciding to toss away all mail which was "junk" mail; those many envelopes filled with offers of insurance at the best prices and others begging for magazine subscriptions, et cetera.

While sorting and tossing, he discovered two letters from B. J. In haste, he opened and scanned the contents, beginning with the one bearing the earliest postmark and ending with the one having been mailed last,

"I'm coming into your village," B. J.'s hastily written last letter stated. "In fact, I've made it so that I'll be there over Thanksgiving. I have a relative living somewhere not too far from the village. Meet me at the train station on the 24th. I'll be coming in on the noon train, the only passenger train that stops there, I was told. I hope sincerely this will not be an imposition on you. I'll be eternally grateful to you --"

Sincerely,
B.J.

J. T. glanced quickly at the clock in the post office then just as quickly he folded the letter and put it with the other mail he would be taking home. The sudden realization that this very day was the 24th, and that B. J. Kyle would be expecting him to be at the station on time, seemed to give wings to his feet. By all means, he must get done with the grocery shopping before going to the railroad station.

He was amazed how much he enjoyed filling the order which Bill and he had so carefully written down. It had been such a long time since he had felt and experienced the pure delight which he was experiencing.

He felt almost boyish again, like when Uncle Jonathan and Aunt Lois and he all went grocery shopping together. Those were memory-packed days which he would never be able to erase from his mind. Nor did he want to do so. Some memories were woven and fashioned around things and faces and happenings and places and times to which no price tag could be attached: They were priceless and, above all else, sacred. The passing of time could neither dim nor diminish their beauty and value. If anything, it served only to enhance their beauty and increase their value and intensify their sacredness.

He felt tears dim his eyes and make a slow but sure runway down his cheeks but he didn't care; handkerchiefs were made for drying tears. And besides, the poignancy and beauty of those long-ago remembered times of togetherness now seemed as a healing emollient and balm to his soul. And to his entire person, really.

He felt young -- teen-agish young -- as he put the groceries in the truck of the car then pushed the cart back to the store's entranceway. He had missed so very much of life and of living by brooding over his losses, he now realized. And what a foolish thing to do! he thought. Death was an inevitable fact: the Holy scripture declared it was "... appointed unto a man once to die." And still another verse stated ". . . and there is no discharge in that war. . . ." Someday, unless he was raptured away -- caught up to meet the Lord in the air -his appointment with death would come.

A quick glance at this watch alerted him to the fact that the noon train would soon be arriving and with its arrival B. J. Kyle would be disembarking and would be expecting him.

He wished, suddenly, that he would know something about this perfect stranger by which to identify him. As it was, he knew nothing; only the fact that his situation and circumstances were similar to what he himself had passed through. Or so it seemed, by what the letters stated.

The short drive from the grocery store to the railroad station was pleasant. Always, the little village-town with its tree-lined streets bore an aura of neatness and cleanliness. Its houses, too, bespoke of tidiness, and their friendly looking window box planters were never empty or barren looking: From early spring till late fall, flowers bloomed in profusion from every planter, presenting a sight of such exquisite beauty as to make a casual passerby pause and gasp in awe and admiration. From late fall through the moderately-cool winter months, evergreens replaced the brilliantly-hued flowers for their more astute greens.

J. T. parked the car then hurried to the station platform just as the silver-gray streamliner pulled into the station, Half a dozen passengers boarded the train but only one got off, and she was a young woman.

He watched the coaches the length of the train, expecting to see, far down the line, a tall young man alight, with his luggage in hand, and come briskly along the platform to where he stood waiting. But when he saw the train pull smoothly away and glide easily and quickly over the shiny rails, he knew his waiting was over.

He watched until the last car faded from view then he turned and hurried inside, wondering if B. J. could possibly have called the station and

left an explanation with the ticket agent as to the why of his not coming. Seeing the young woman gazing intently toward the parking lot nearby, he said, "I see you are waiting for someone also."

She turned and looked at J. T. With disappointment and question marks showing on her face and in her eyes. "I was hoping my letter would have arrived in plenty of time for my correspondent friend to have know I was coming today. But I suppose she didn't receive it as yet. Oh, dear, now what will I do?"

J. T.'s brow was drawn together in a furrow. "You sent a letter, you say?"

"Yes, To a J. T. Banks. Do you know her?"

J. T. felt his strength fail him. He was speechless. Why had he never asked B. J. more about himself?. Herself? Embarrassment and surprise flooded his being.

"You . . . you . . . are you B. J. Kyle?" he asked, incredulous with shock.

"Yes sir. Betty Jean Kyle. But I've always been called just plain old B. J. And I guess I've gotten accustomed to it. But how did you know?."

J. T. smiled in spite of the shock. "We've been corresponding since my dear and much loved Uncle died," he said, breaking into a hearty laugh now. "And to think I always thought you were a young man!"

"And I thought you were a young woman!" Betty Jean confessed. "But I suppose this is what happens when one becomes obsessed with bitterness and self-pity and all such vile and evil traits. But thanks be unto God for His mighty deliverance!" she exclaimed joyfully.

"That's wonderful news, B. J. When did this happen?"

"Immediately after I received your last letter. I knew I had to be delivered or I'd destroy myself. With bitterness. You see, you helped me far more than you will ever know. Your letters preached and re-preached childhood messages back to me. Oh, not that you preached; it was the Holy Spirit using what you had written to bring back to me, in strong and mighty

recall, those once victorious and glorious days when I knew the Lord in saving grace and sanctifying power."

"Wh . . . what happened, that you . . . turned your back on Jesus?" J. T. ventured the question with caution and concern.

Betty Jean's eyes looked toward the ground. Tears fell. "Bitterness," she confessed sadly.

"Bitterness? But why would a lovely young woman like you become bitter?" J. T. was once more incredulous.

"That's the reason why I'm here," she admitted. "I want to make restitution, and ask my step-father if he'll forgive me for the heartaches and grief I caused him."

"You . . . your . . . stepfather? I . . . I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Bill Hanthorn is my stepfather. Do you know him? But I suppose you don't. He lives much the life of a hermit since my mother died, so I've been told."

J. T.'s knees felt weak and rubbery. Bill! Bill Hanthorn! He'd seen the man's last name on some mail lying on the table. He felt suddenly weak.

Chapter 4

Betty Jean studied the man standing before her, wondering what she had said to cause the color to drain from his face. "Did I say something to offend you?" she asked with grave concern. "If so I'm sorry. I ask your forgiveness. The old rebellious, stubborn Betty Jean is dead; the new B. J.'s heart is soft as melted butter. I no longer take delight in cutting and slashing people with my tongue. Words can be either a benediction/blessing or swords that kill, After my mother married Bill Hanthorn my words were all swords, it seemed."

"But why? I mean, well, it . . . it was quite unreasonable of you to . . . to do such a thing. Your father was dead, was he not? And didn't your mother have a right to happiness, B. J.? This Bill Hanthorn . . . well, he . . . he's a pretty special person to me"

"You've met him then?"

"Met him! I've been living with him ever since Uncle Jonathan passed away. I couldn't bear staying alone; I missed my aunt and uncle too much. And, too, it was uncle's dying request that I do so. What a wise man my uncle was! I've grown by leaps and bounds, spiritually, living up on the mountain with Bill, your stepfather. He's a wonderful man."

"Such an extremely quiet and soft-spoken man!" Betty Jean exclaimed with a far away look in her eyes.

"But a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost. I'm sure he treated your mother like a princess. He's such a kind, tender hearted and gentle person."

"This was one of the things that infuriated me," Betty Jean stated. "He loved my mother very much. And she loved him equally as much. They were so happy together, even though he was seventeen years older than Mother. He did treat her like a princess. And I despised both him and his kind, gentle and tender care and treatment toward my mother. I hated her for loving him; I felt sure she was a traitor to my father, who was dead only two years when Bill and Mother married.

"To say I made life miserable for them is putting it mildly," Betty Jean continued. "I tried my best to bring a wedge between them, using every little scheme and plan that came to mind; but none of them worked. If anything, everything I did seemed only to bind them more strongly to God and to each other.

"Panic and jealousy and envy boiled up inside of me. The harder Bill tried to help me, so much more I rejected him and hurt him. The same way with my mother."

J. T. stood as one dumb; it was hard for him to imagine anyone, much less this attractive woman before him, with such bitterness and wickedness inside who could live without committing some fiercely-wild atrocious act of crime. Little wonder that Jesus said whoever hated his brother (or sister) was a murderer. He was shocked at what he was hearing and, suddenly, tears filled his eyes; they were tears of pure gratitude and joy and thanksgiving to God for saving and sanctifying his soul at such a young and tender age.

"I was barely sixteen when I ran away with a young couple who were relatives of my best girl friend. Rather, I should say, we ran away, for Sheila and I both left with them. We wound up in Utah, where Sheila and I found work in a fast-food store. We rented a tiny little efficiency apartment and her relatives traveled on west to Washington.

"Two years later, Sheila married a man much older than she. Naturally, she moved in with him. By then, I was working in a department store and I realized that I needed to finish my schooling; so I took night courses and . . ."

"Pardon me," J. T. said, interrupting, "but didn't you tell your mother you were leaving?. I mean, well, you did let her know where you were, didn't you?"

Betty Jean sighed; tears shimmered in her eyes. "Oh, how I wish I could answer in a positive way," she cried, burying her face in her hands. "My mother never knew where I was. I broke her heart, I know. And the saddest of all truths is that I didn't care. Worse still, if this is possible, when she died fifteen years later, I felt she had what was coming to her -- for marrying again."

"Who told you of her death?"

"Sheila; her aunt had written her several months after Mother's death."

J. T. shuddered. "What grief and heartaches you caused you dear mother! And Bill," he replied, sadly.

"Bitter people never think of such things, J. T.; they are too absorbed and engrossed in their own bitterness and self-pity to give any concern to others. Especially those whom they think -- or feel -- have done them wrong. I was immersed so deeply in the well of self-pity, bitterness, and hatred that it's a marvel and a miracle that I have lived through it and survived. There were times when I could almost seem to taste the bitterness. I was insanely jealous of Bill, feeling my mother should have given all her love to me and not to anyone else; especially not to another man. I viewed Bill as an impostor intruder, although I knew he was anything but such."

"Did you never stop to think that someday your day of reaping would arrive, B. J.? It always comes. It's as inevitable as death."

"Not really. And had I thought about it, even, I could have cared less. I was obsessed with the thought that my mother had done me wrong by marrying again. I felt it was disrespectful to Daddy and . . . and even immoral."

"How very wrong you have been! Your mother had every right to marry any good Christian man whom she felt God had led to her; this included Bill Hanthorn. And frankly, she could never have married a more godly, saintly man. How fortunate you were to have had him as your stepfather, even though you thought differently. By rejecting him, you deprived yourself of much love and many a blessing. Oh, the foolishness of the carnal heart! Oh, the wickedness; the treachery of it!"

"Until your letters began arriving, I thought I was having a good time. I thought the past was just that; a thing of the past. I didn't allow myself to think about my mother; it only increased and intensified my horrible bitterness."

J. T. suddenly wondered how he could have thought that B. J.'s problems and his own were so alike, now that he was hearing the startling story. In all verity and actuality, there wasn't even the slightest similarity. And his uncle, bless him! had known the sad truth all along and had felt that he, J. T., could help this poor soul. How many nights of prayer had Uncle Johathan and Aunt Lois spent in behalf of Betty Jean's salvation? And Bill --

J. T. felt like sobbing when he thought of the soft-spoken, kind-hearted man whose heart much have been crushed by the selfishness and the cruelty of the heartless B. J. And her mother, too; what pain and anguish she must have endured!

"I'm so very thankful for you, J. T.; for writing as you did. Each word was a like a sword, piercing and convicting my heart. I felt wretched, wicked, mean, and hateful, which I was. God began working on my heart. Day and night His hand was heavy on me. I could scarcely work. My boss noticed that something was wrong; she asked me what it was. I told her I'd take off for Thanksgiving, that I had something to take care of back East. She gave me two weeks off with pay, so I'm here. Only I'm no longer the same; I came here all broken up inside, so ashamed of myself and of my past mean self.

My heart feels as gentle as a lamb and I feel as innocent as a baby. The Lord has not only forgiven me and saved me of all sins but He has cleansed and sanctified me wholly, as well.

"I am beginning a new life; a beautiful life. I'm only sorry my dear mother isn't here to have this long overdue love, which I feel for her, showered upon her. I want to go to her grave and tell her everything. I know she's dead; but I'll feel better confessing my wrong doings to her over her grave, and asking her forgiveness. But right now, I must see Bill. I'll never be able to undo the past, I know; but I'm going to do everything possible to make up for the years I caused him such extreme pain and hurt. This Thanksgiving marks a new beginning for me -- a forever thankful time. O please, J. T., will you take me to Bill? I must see him. My heart is so full. So joyful. It will be even greater still once I have made restitution to him and gotten this taken care of and out of the way."

"We'll go immediately, Betty Jean, and I know one man who will be the happiest man in the world."

As J. T. pulled away from the station, he felt that he finally was able to understand many of the things about Bill which heretofore seemed hidden from him. For one thing, he understood the deep grief and the heartbreak which was hidden so well behind the ready and patient smile. He understood, too, the meaning of Bill's words, "I know what it is like to have lost a dear loved one."

Tears rushed from his eyes and spilled warmly down his cheeks. A love, greater than he had ever known before, enveloped and embraced his heart for the dear man whose suffering was borne in total silence and sublimest patience and faith in God. Oh, that he, J. T., might be able to duplicate the man, whose silent suffering bore the image of Christ.

"Why are you crying?." Betty Jean asked. "Perhaps I should not have told you this."

"Oh, but you should have. I'm glad you did. And now, starting today, you are going to give that dear man a continual year-round Thanksgiving Day."

"What if he won't forgive me . . ." Betty Jean's sentence trailed meaningfully.

J. T. cast a quick sideways glance at the young woman whose beautiful face and features seemed totally out of place with the heart and the inner person which she had revealed and uncovered.

"Not forgive you!" he exclaimed, incredulous. "Bill Hanthorn has a holy heart; holy people find it easy to forgive. You will have the harder time over forgiving yourself. But now that God has forgiven you, and cast all you sins into the sea of His forgetfulness, never again to be remembered or held against you, you must ask Him for grace to forgive yourself."

Like a helpless child groping for strength to walk, Betty Jean cried out imploringly, "You will pray for me, J. T., will you not? I will need it. Oh how I'll need your prayers!"

"You can count on me," came the immediate reply. With an overflowing heart, he lifted his voice in praise to the Lord as he drove on, more eager than even B. J., he felt, to see the surprise on Bill's face. Or maybe he already knew: He was a great man of great faith and of earnest prayer and, often, God revealed His secrets to the real intercessor. Yes, maybe Bill Hanthorn already knew the answer and would be waiting patiently for the penitent, repentant Betty Jean Kyle. In an ecstasy of joy, he accelerated more heavily.