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Digital Edition 10/22/2001
By Holiness Data Ministry

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The Sunday School Beacon
May 31, 1992



CONCEALED SNARE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Mary Ann cast one hasty glance in the full length door mirror on the hallway closet door. She was pleased with what she saw. The simplicity of the blue-green suit was almost elegant looking and accented beautifully the blue-green of her eyes. It emphasized, too, the delicate, natural pink of her full cheeks against an otherwise fair complexion. Her long, black, natural wavy hair was brushed till it shone like raven feathers at high noon.

"Mary Ann, do you suppose you. . . ?"

"Oh, Mother, let's not go over it again. Please!"

"But I don't feel good about it, dear. Kind of fearful, for some reason or the other. Pray about it again with an open and unbiased heart. Please, Mary Ann!" Tears stood deep in Mrs. Lannecker's eyes now.

"I'll make so much more money, Mother, and certainly there can't be anything wrong with that. I know how to handle myself."

"Money isn't everything, Mary Ann, and I don't like it. I'd rather you made less money and continued working with other girls around you."

"But, Mother, plenty of other girls work as a private secretary and they're not all bad. I'll be careful. Now don't worry," and she hurried out the door.

Poor Mother! She worried so needlessly! And Mary Ann quickened her pace. She must not be late -- especially her first morning!

Her pulse rate quickened as the tall new building came into sight. Stepping inside she noticed the pretty tinted windows, tall potted philodendron, and the beauty of the solid marble floors.

She made a quick search of the names on the roster -- not that it was necessary, for she had memorized it a week ago, after having been told that she was employed by Clifford Mannahem and was to report for work by eight on Monday.

A thrill of excitement rushed through her as she pushed the elevator button for the seventh floor. Carefully she smoothed her long black hair with gentle hand and shifted her purse slightly up her arm. Stepping off the elevator she walked down the spotlessly clean marble hallway to door number 721. An expensive gold plaque in big bold lettering bore the name -- Clifford Mannahem, Pres. Mayfair Products, Inc.

Trembling slightly, Mary Ann opened the door and walked inside. At a single glance she took in the elaborate furnishings of the office suite: green

draperies, made from imported brocade, hung tastefully at the enormous windows and paid outstanding compliment to the plush deep blue-green carpeting, while the furniture throughout was of costly wood and expensive upholstery.

"Good morning, Miss Lannecker," the boss greeted cheerily, a pleasant smile enhancing his darkly handsome face in something akin to sunshine. "You're right on time," he complimented. "If you'll be seated we shall begin. As you will recall from your training, all office dictation and/or business is strictly confidential matter." He searched her face thoughtfully.

"Yes, Sir," Mary Ann said softly, trembling lightly.

"You will find me trustworthy."

"You may call me Clifford."

"Yes, Si . . . I mean, Yes, Mr. Mannahem." She flushed deeply.

"No embarrassment intended, Miss Lannecker, but that pretty pink in your cheeks does enhance your . . . ah . . . beauty. But let us get busy." And he began rapid dictation. Mary Ann, excellent in shorthand, took everything down perfectly and after having typed the same she handed them to him for his approval.

"You . . . you're almost a genius, I dare say. And I'm most grateful for this. You see, the Company's expanding more rapidly than I ever fancied it would and there will be a great deal of work for you to do. There will also be some . . . ah business trips you may have to make with me."

Mary Ann gasped. "Not out of town," she said emphatically.

"Occasionally. But let us not worry about such things now. We have more important matters to take care of at the present."

Days progressed into weeks and Mary Ann, deeply absorbed in her work and thrilled with her weekly pay checks, became less and less interested in the secret place of prayer and the midweek prayer meetings.

"Don't forget, this is prayer meeting night," her mother reminded as she prepared to leave for work one morning.

"Oh, Mother, I can't be there tonight. I forgot to tell you that Mr. Mannahem has a very important client coming to the office and I must be there to take everything down."

"Not at night, Mary Ann!" her mother exclaimed, horror-stricken. "Prayer meeting's more important than your job."

"Once won't hurt, Mother; and this must be done. After all, I'm his secretary."

"But you'll be working your regular eight-hour day, dear. I don't like this setup, Mary Ann. I never have. Please go back to work in the credit office of Meijer's Department Store. You made good money there," and tears brimmed full in the wise mother's eyes and spilled carelessly out over her blonde eyelashes and ran freely down her troubled cheeks.

"Please don't worry, Mother. This may never happen again. But when a man has a business of his own he sometimes must see clients in the evening. This is the only time some men have free. Besides, I'll be getting well paid for this overtime. Just look at my bring home pay compared to when I worked at Meijer's."

"But I never worried about you when you worked there. And besides, how will it look -- you alone with two men!"

"It's all a part of my job, Mother. I'll see you sometime tonight. I don't know what time. His client's to be at the office by eight. Mr. Mannahem's taking me out to eat after my regular work hours, then we'll meet his client and as soon as the business is transacted I'll be home. It may be early and it may be late. But please don't worry," and she put a hasty kiss on the troubled looking face before her. "Oh, Mom, please don't look so worried and troubled," she pleaded. "Mr. Mannahem's a perfect gentleman and he's been wonderful to me."

"The serpent's trail is a crooked, subtle one, my dear. May God spare you the heartache, heartbreak, and remorse of a life dissipated by sin and

wrongdoing! There is a way which seemeth right . . . but the end thereof is the way of death. Be careful, Mary Ann. Oh, be careful!"

"I will, Mother. Now don't worry," and she hurried away.

More and more Mary Ann could hardly wait for each new day to dawn when she would take the elevator to the seventh floor and walk (like a queen in her palace) into the exclusive office suite where Clifford Mannahem always met her at the door, took her coat, and saw that she was settled comfortably across from him or near to his side for dictation and business matters, or anything else that might come up. Always, he wanted her nearby!

"You look lovely, Mary Ann," he greeted as he opened the door, "lovelier than ever." And he stood for a long moment eyeing her beauty. He sighed deeply as he helped her out of her coat. "Care for some hot chocolate? I made some," and he poured a cupful for her and one for himself. "Let's sit over here for a while," he suggested. "I... I'd like to talk to you. We can do business later."

Snow was falling gently, lazily outside and looked like downy feathers passing noiselessly by the enormous windows as Mary Ann settled herself by Clifford Mannahem's side and sipped the steaming hot chocolate. She had a feeling that what she did was not the proper thing for her to do, and her mother's tearful warning of just a few minutes ago came back to her; but she pushed the troublesome thought aside, trying to make herself believe there was nothing at all wrong with her conduct.

"You . . . you're wonderful, Mary Ann!" the boss said between sips of the steaming chocolate. "I can't stand being away from you. I'm sure you have realized this for some time, my dear. Fortunately I'm not married. But I want to be, Mary Ann... to you. Will you?"

"Please, Clifford. Shall we get to business? You hired me as your secretary," and Mary Ann arose. Putting the empty cup on a counter top in an inner room she hurried to her chair behind the enormous mahogany desk, trembling from head to foot. She was afraid; terribly afraid.

"You think you're better than I, huh?" and he paced the floor now, anger showing in every part of his face.

"Oh, no. No. It's not that. But I couldn't marry you."

"Why couldn't you marry me? Why, may I ask?" He stood across from her, his angry face red and flushed. Always, she had seen him only at his best; but this, this beast-like nature, never! She was shaking violently.

"My folks would never consent. You see, we are deeply religious people. Not just my immediate family, but as far back as the family tree can be traced there have been preachers, missionaries, evangelists, song evangelists and Sunday school teachers. I . . . I've been raised differently from you, that's all."

"I'm not ashamed to admit it, my family's never been religious." And he sneered frighteningly. "We're business people . . . through and through. Business, and nothing else."

"You'd be a poor risk for marriage," Mary Ann said softly. "A man who is 'business through and through,' and 'business, nothing else!' should never even think of marriage. My father and mother have the kind of marriage that will last and last and keep on lasting. Theirs was begun upon, and is still continuing upon, Christ, the solid Rock."

"So that's how you feel, eh? Well, I can see that it would be sheer folly for me to make my next suggestion of your moving into one of my fashionable, completely-furnished apartments at Manor House on the Boulevard. I thought we might be able to share some quiet moments together there, but. . . ." He left the sentence unfinished.

"The serpent's trail . . . crooked, subtle."

"A way which seemeth right . . . the end . . . the way of death!"

"Mr. Mannahem," and Mary Ann rose hastily, "I . . . I'm leaving."

She was crying as she hurried into her coat. "I'll not be back. If clean morals and wholesome thoughts mean no more to you than you have expressed in words and actions a moment ago, I want no part in being secretary to an individual who has no respect whatever for the high and noble things of life. Good day, Mr. Mannahem." With chin held high she walked down the corridor to the elevator. It was wonderful -- now that the fog

of fantasy was clearing and the real things were coming into large, clear focus!

All the way home she felt free, free. How had she ever become so entangled, so blinded! Clearly, the pattern unfolded before her. She had disregarded her mother's godly counsel first of all, arguing with herself that she was old enough to make her own decisions. Next, she had failed miserably in secret prayer and Bible reading.

As she opened the door to her beloved old house she felt wretched, miserable, and undone. No one was home. Mother would be over at the church today. This was the day for morning prayer, for all who could come! Weeping brokenly she slipped up to the neat bedroom. She knelt by the bed and buried her face in the sweet-smelling spread, begging God's forgiveness and mercy on her soul. She prayed on and on until she knew the Lord was once again her very own wonderful Savior. She was shouting and laughing for joy when her mother rushed up the stairs and threw her arms lovingly around her daughter.

"I knew He'd not fail Daddy and me. I knew He'd answer our prayers! I knew it! I knew it!"

"Oh, Mother, the Lord's so good, and you and Daddy are so wise! Forgive me for not taking your good, godly counsel, and forgive me for causing you to worry and to weep. I'm not going to work for Mr. Mannahem anymore. The Lord delivered me out of a snare the devil had set for me, and I praise Him for it. I'll try to get on at Meijer's again, the Lord willing."

"They called today . . . wanting you back. I told them I'd have you call when you got home."

"The Lord's will is the only safe abiding place and His Blood our only covering. Money isn't everything, dear Mother! The Lord's presence and His smile is everything! It's wonderful to be free again -- free from the devil's web and his snare!"

Hurrying down the stairs to answer the phone, the wise little mother knew that her daughter would tell her a tale that could oft be repeated -- only in sadder tones and more discordant overtures than that of Mary Ann's. "The

serpent's trail!" she exclaimed, shuddering. "May God deliver other mothers' daughters from his clutches and masculine power!"