

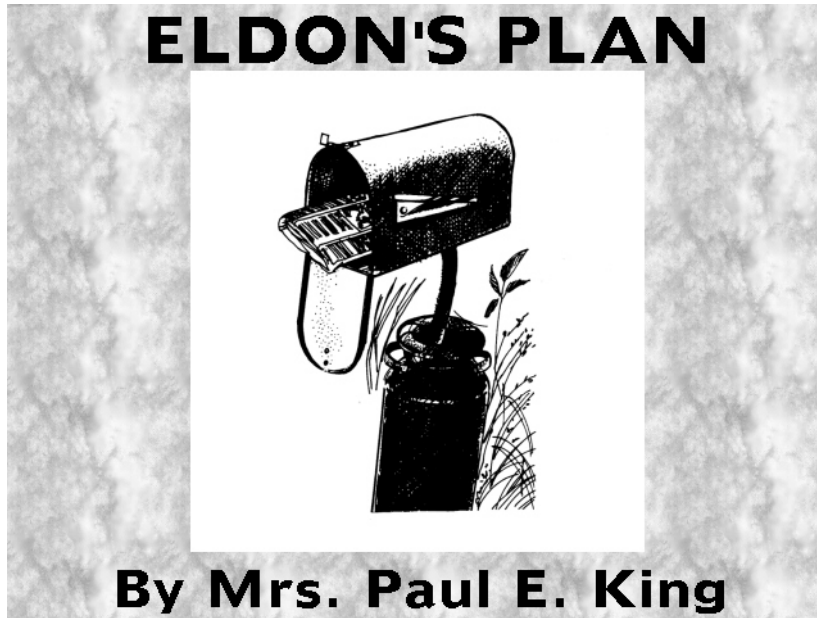
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ELDON'S PLAN
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Mr. Beesom drove slowly and thoughtfully up the lane to the Thornberry farm, knowing full well that Matilda Thornberry would be watching for him from her kitchen window and waiting for him on the front porch rocker when he drove up to her mailbox. And he knew what she'd ask him, too. Yes sir, he knew. For better than four years she'd been asking him the same question, day after day, and for better than four years he'd have to smile like it didn't

hurt him or bother him and tell her, "No, the letter from Tom didn't come today, Matilda."

She'd sigh then and say sweetly, "Thank you, Eldon. Thank you, kindly. Maybe tomorrow Thomas will have a letter here for me."

The tomorrows came and the tomorrows went and now, better than four years passed by and still that letter from Tom hadn't come.

Eldon Beesom wiped the moisture from his eyes as he gathered Matilda's few pieces of mail together. Inwardly, he felt like he was being torn apart. How Thomas Thornberry could be so uncaring and heartless was almost more than he could take. He'd known Tom from boyhood and, to his way of thinking, Tom was selfish and downright bigoted and vain and proud. He'd always thought of himself above the farming level and way of living, a thing that grieved and hurt Isaac Thornberry greatly, since he had hoped that someday, in God's timing and His plans, Thomas would follow in his footsteps and would till the land and love it so deeply that he would sink his roots down and live there so long as God gave him breath and life.

Eldon sighed heavily, recalling how life used to be on the Thornberry farm and how it was now. There had been one tragedy after another for the dear, sweet couple, whom he could never remember being any other way than sweet and kind and God-fearing, even in and during and through each tragic happening. They had lost both daughters and a son to a severe flu outbreak in one year, and Matilda herself came near to dying with it. But God had spared her, she said, for some purpose, to be used by Him to help somebody else who needed her help. Thus she went about doing good and helping out wherever she was needed.

The year Isaac died was especially hard on Matilda, since Thomas was away finishing up his final year of schooling in preparation for becoming a lawyer. Matilda, now a widow and alone, had all the decision making to do: should she sell the farm and buy a small house in the nearby town? Or would it be better and wiser to keep the farm and rent the land out to be farmed and shared? She chose the latter, and was never sorry that she did so. And for more than thirteen years now, Matilda lived alone in the big white farm house, once known lovingly to young and old alike as Thornberry Place.

Eldon again dabbed at his eyes with his big handkerchief, recalling the days when both Isaac and Matilda were in the prime of life. Always generous and big-hearted, their home was the central gathering place for teenagers, until the year of the flu plague, which took the three young Thornberrys as well as numerous friends of theirs. Then, with so many fun-filled voices stilled and silenced by the grim reaper death, and the cemeteries giving painful evidence of the same by the multiplicity of newly-made graves, Isaac Thornberry seemed to have aged overnight -- his once-dark hair turned silver-white.

'Morning, Eldon. Did you bring me that letter from Thomas today?" she asked, coming down the steps to the mail box that stood in front of the white gate where brightly-colored holly hocks nodded at him in greeting.

"Nothing from Thomas today, Matilda. But I see you've got another catalog. And here's some advertisement."

She smiled; but Eldon saw the shimmering tears that were held at bay by her eyelashes. He felt his heart knotting inside his chest and for a brief moment he felt like he couldn't breathe. How, he wondered, how could Tom do this to his mother? How? Didn't he know that someday he would become old? How could this son of Isaac and Matilda Thornberry be so cruel, so heartless and . . . and, yes, so brutal to his widowed mother, who had done nothing but good for him and whose influence was one of unwavering, unswerving love and loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ whom she had served for so long as he, Eldon, could remember.

He got out of the car and took her gently by the arm, saying lightly, "Today I am going to visit with you, Matilda Thornberry. Your porch looks so inviting, and since I am making good time on my run, a few minutes respite will be just the thing I need. Do you mind?"

With a quick dab at her eyes, Matilda's countenance brightened up like a light. "Do I mind? Eldon Beesom, does the drought-packed earth mind rain? Or does a starving man mind food? Come up here, my boy, and sit a spell. It will make my whole day bright and sunny. Do I mind! Oh my boy, God sent you along. I am blest. Blest, I tell you. Each weekday He sends you to brighten my day, just by stopping in front of my gate at the mailbox. And now today, to have you visit with me. . . . Oh, I am blest, I tell you! Sit down, while I get us some hot chocolate and a freshly-baked sticky cinnamon roll."

Eldon raised a hand in protest, saying cheerfully, "I want to visit, Matilda. V-i-s-i-t. Like I used to do when Matthew and Tom and I were young."

"Good! We'll visit over cocoa and buns. . . ."

In a very little while she was back on the porch with her gifts of love, sipping the steaming-hot cocoa and listening to Eldon talk. Her eyes looked bright and sunny now and the tears were gone, the mailman noticed. And Matilda Thornberry was smiling. And laughing! It was as though springtime and summer had suddenly come back into her life in a warm, glad rush.

Eldon could scarcely believe the change. Just a few minutes of sharing and caring; such a very little thing. But oh, what joy and sunshine it brought to a lonely widow, forsaken and forgotten by a godless and selfish son! What was wrong with Tom? Was he totally without feeling? Eldon wondered, as he compared this self-centered, selfish son of the Thornberrys to Matthew, the brother who died in the dreadful flu plague.

Matthew and he, Eldon, had shared innumerable good times together. They were more like brothers than friends. Maybe it was because Matthew had led him to the Lord and explained scriptural portions to him which he, at the time, couldn't understand. Or maybe it was simply because Matthew was helpful and compassionate and kind, like his parents were. Whatever the reason, or reasons, they had been good friends for all of their natural lives. He blessed Matthew's memory now; he knew he'd see him again.

The twelve minutes of pleasant visiting did something for Eldon, too. It was as though he had recaptured a part of his growing-up years. He felt young again; almost youthful, and not at all fortyish and the father of five offspring. It was refreshingly wonderful, his time spent with Matilda. And before leaving, he asked her to pray with him like she used to do.

They parted with tears in their eyes and summer in their hearts. And all that day, on his long run and far route, Eldon Beesom prayed and planned and "schemed"; something pleasant and worthwhile was forming inside his head; his brain seemed to reel with joy and happiness. He couldn't understand why he'd never thought of it before.

Matilda deserved better than Tom was doing her. Rather, not doing to her and for her. So, his Mary -- bless her, she was a wife of all wives! -- would contact women who knew Matilda Thornberry, and each and every work day of the week, one, two, or more of the women would write Matilda a letter. He would be the overjoyed and happy dispenser of those posted letters. True, they wouldn't be from Tom. Little matter: Matilda Thornberry would be receiving something of meaning and value in her mailbox daily, God willing, instead of the few pieces of "junk" mail that he placed there. And knowing Matilda like he did, well, he knew those letters would meet a need for that good woman. And too, they would fill the void of not receiving Tom's letter. They would make a good substitute; a very pleasant and cheerful substitute.

Eldon's heart beat wildly with joy and excitement. He could hardly wait to tell Mary: she would take care of it immediately for him, he knew.

Feeling as light-hearted as a lad going fishing, Eldon Beesom began to whistle.