

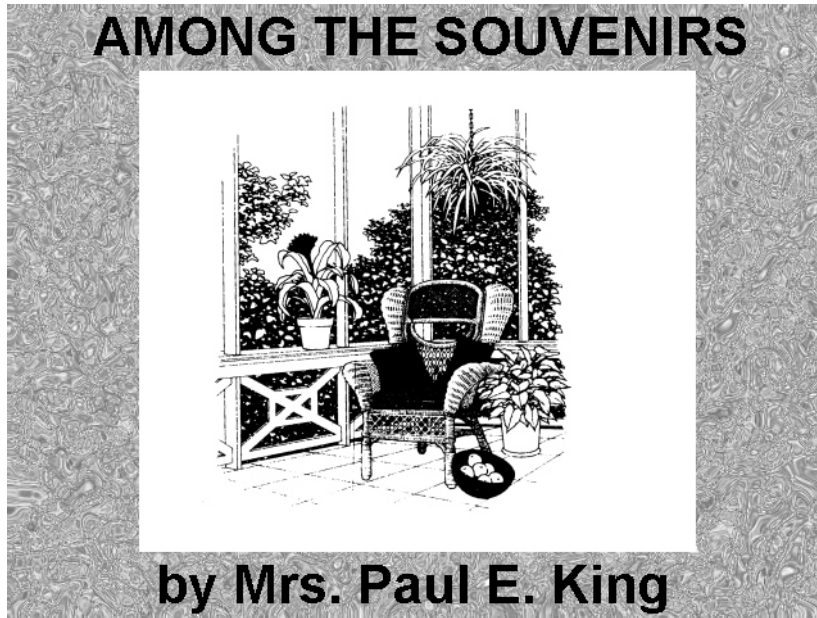
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Digital Edition 10/22/2001
By Holiness Data Ministry

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The Sunday School Beacon
March 30, 1997



AMONG THE SOUVENIRS
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Kirk walked to the porch swing in a dazed kind of way and sat down. Heat from the sun's earlier hot rays lingered in the pavement and the brick of the commodious three-story house even though the mantel clock had melodiously sounded out that it was eleven-fifteen p.m. Toads, crickets and katydids filled the night with song and off to the west, where the woods came to the front door of the orchard or the orchard to the front door of the woods,

whippoorwills called lustily and loudly to each other, singing the song which only the whippoorwill can sing. Sailing serenely and silently across the star-studded heavens, a crescent moon shone its gentle light down upon the spacious wrap-around porch where the lone figure sat humped over in the swing, totally and completely oblivious and unaware of either the sights or the sounds of the night.

A gentle breeze stole silently and stealthily through the wisteria vine, bringing with it not only the heady fragrance of the wisteria blossoms but of the fragrant night-blooming jasmine as well. It lingered for only a moment -- the breeze -- departing as quickly and as silently and stealthily as it had come, feeling like it was an intruder into a man's grief; a man's sorrow. Or so it seemed.

Fuschias, begonias, petunias and impatiens hung from planters above the porch's neat, white, freshly-painted railing; the gentle, subtle fragrance of their blooms was accented by the high humidity. Ferns, palms and ficus, all thriving and flourishing wondrously in their huge planters beside tables and among the many pieces of wicker furniture, looked like sentinels guarding the porch. Everything was the same as always, yet so different.

Running nervous, trembling fingers through his thick salt and pepper hair, Kirk got to his feet and paced back and forth on the wrap-around porch. Fatigue stalked his every step; sleep eluded him. He was tired; so very tired. Never in his life had a day been so tiring. Never. His body felt drained; exhausted and old. It was hard enough to find Evangeline's cold body beside the kitchen table when he came downstairs for breakfast; harder still to stand inside the undertaker's funeral parlor and pick out a casket in which to bury her. He'd felt he couldn't do it. But he'd managed. Yes, dazed, shocked, and nearly dying with grief and heartbreak, he'd managed, and now, dressed in the soft pink dress he'd loved best of all on her, her sweet form reposed on the satin lining inside her final "bed."

The night slipped away on silent feet, tripping daintily into the west just as the rosy tinted sky heralded the arrival of dawn. Kirk threw his weary body on a sofa in the family room and fell asleep in spite of the shock and grief he was carrying and bearing. Awakening hours later without the slightest inclination for food, he walked up the thickly carpeted stair steps to the bedroom. Everything whispered of orderliness and neatness. She was an

helpmeet of all helpmeets, keeping things as he liked them and wanted them. Had he been too demanding, perhaps?

For a reason beyond his comprehension, he walked from the spacious bedroom, down the hallway past the other three bedrooms and climbed the steps to the third floor. With sunlight filtering in through the curtained gable windows, he stood and looked around, savoring the tidiness and neatness of the attic. She was a meticulous housekeeper, no doubt about it. In all things, she had tried to please him and to comply with his request that their house stay in perfect order at all times.

Groaning within himself, Kirk dropped into a rocker nearby. He had been too demanding and hard on her, he realized suddenly, sensing keenly and cuttingly his great loss. The sunshine and joy and happiness of his life and of his home was gone; the light, too.

Like one in a daze, he saw the steamer trunk. She had brought it into their marriage; a gift from her beloved grandfather, to whom the trunk had belonged. She had given it a place of prominence in their bedroom, declaring it added dignity to the room standing on the floor at the bottom of their bed.

He winced now, recalling how he had told her that the outdated old trunk must go: it would look out of place in the fine, big, new house he had built for her. It had served its purpose in the house they lived in for five years after their marriage, but no way would it "fit in" with the big house and its lovely new furnishings.

"The window at the end of the upstairs hallway, Kirk," she had pleaded; "it will fit in perfectly well there."

"No way, hon; no way. I'll take it to the attic." Tears swam in her eyes as he had carried the cumbersome old trunk up to the third floor. How could he have been so heartless and selfish? he wondered now as he moved like a robot to the trunk and dropped to the floor on his knees. Burying his face in his hands on top of the trunk, he sobbed uncontrollably. Then, almost reverently, he lifted the lid. A great lump rose in his throat as he saw Evangeline's wedding gown, neatly folded between tissue paper and lying at the top of the trunk.

Fingering a slender sleeve of the gown, he broke into hard sobs. Thirty-four years ago, it had been, and not a single time in all those years had she deviated from her deep faith and trust in God. Hers had been a steady, fast-holding faith. He too had been converted then. Unlike her, however, he hadn't felt he needed to be sanctified wholly: he had thought it wasn't necessary, that being born again was all that was needed. Evangeline had pleaded with him to have the "old nature purged and cleansed," but he insisted that their new preacher was just overzealous and that conversion was all that was required and needful to make it into Heaven.

Tenderly and carefully, he now lifted the gown, and then he saw the box. It was old, like the gown, but still in good condition. Removing the lid, he looked inside. Keepsakes! 34-year-old keepsakes: a yellowed newspaper clipping, two napkins, a dainty little net bag of rice tied with a faded blue ribbon and a yellowed linen handkerchief with delicate rows of beautiful tating edging its borders in an old Victorian style and way. Keepsakes, every one of them, of the day when she changed her name and became Mrs. Kirk Brownstone! He trembled with emotion.

His fingers touched something hard. Removing the box of wedding mementos, he lifted the book. He was shocked: he hadn't known she kept a diary, but she had, even though it was more like a journal, since it was written on the pages of the black, hard-backed rectangular ledger. With trembling fingers, he opened the book and began reading, noting the month, date and the year of each.

"A cold day today for our area. But a wonderful day for me with the Lord. My soul was wonderfully fed and nourished by God's Holy Word; His presence was so near and my prayer time was absolutely glorious -- I've had a foretaste of Heaven and its glory. Only wish Kirk would make more time to experience the glory of His presence. He's so busy building and making money. I'm concerned about his spiritual life: when does he nourish his soul?"

"The magnolia trees are in full bloom! What a beautiful sight! The cold snap has departed and I do believe springtime has arrived. Since I have been sanctified wholly and the Holy Comforter resides and abides in my heart, I have a perpetual springtime in my soul. My joy is full and complete. What glory and bliss to be wholly and entirely His! I love this way of Holiness. I am ready for my Heavenly Bridegroom's arrival to take His Bride away. I'm

praying for my beloved husband: he's busier than ever. He missed church twice within three weeks. I'm so concerned about him -- spiritually."

"My dear, dear little baby! How empty my arms are, even though I was not privileged to hold you. Four months and two weeks you and I were inseparable. Oh, my precious baby, I wanted you! Prayed for you! My kind, Heavenly Father knoweth best. I repose my broken, aching heart in His wonderful love. You see, my beloved little one, your father's love and desire for little ones is not like mine: he has but one goal, and that is to make more money. He was so engrossed in drawing up the blueprints for the Brookings Estates that he merely grunted when I told him we were going to become parents. I honestly don't think he ever did get the message that you were on the way. His values are so distorted.

"Today you left me. Oh, my grief, my heartbreak at your departure! Thank God for dear, sweet, kind, godly Mrs. Murdock! What a saint! What a midwife! She let me cry in her arms until my tears were spent. Your daddy was miles away on a big building project and couldn't be contacted. Mrs. Murdock and the minister and I buried you beneath the magnolia tree at the far end of our four acres here. I will see you someday, little one, and there I will love you and love you -- through all eternity. Oh, what a day! What a meeting! Look for me: I'll be there!"

Kirk struggled for breath. Vaguely, he remembered Evangeline having said something about "parents" and a baby. Oh, how selfish he had been! How utterly selfish and worldly minded and materialistic! But he hadn't wanted children; this was a very real fact and truth. He wanted Evangeline all to himself; he didn't want her sharing her love with anyone -- not even with children that may come into the home. Too, he didn't want finger marks on the walls and the furnishing of his fine home.

He sobbed brokenly, realizing with sudden awareness how comforting and welcome a grown child would now be. Instead of bearing his grief and sorrow alone, he would have had a shoulder to cry on, a pair of arms to hug him and someone to talk to.

Wiping tears, he noticed a pile of baby clothes in one corner of the trunk. Attached to the soft blue blanket on top, was a note. "Dearest baby," it stated, "today I said farewell to you, until I see you in Heaven. You too were laid to rest beneath the lovely old magnolia tree at the far end of our four

acres. For some strange but comforting reason, I felt you were a boy. At least I prepared -- in part -- for a boy, just as I had prepared the dainty little pink garments for baby number 1, whom I was convinced was my little girl. Gone, each of you, to that bright land where we shall be together forever. . . ."

Kirk was incredulous. Two! That must have been what she wanted to tell him that afternoon those many years ago when she had nearly begged him to give her just a half-hour of his time so she could inform him of an exciting, upcoming event. And that must have been why Mrs. Murdock, upon meeting him on the village street shortly after, had told him that his day of reaping was coming and that he would weep when it was too late.

Clutching the diary-journal in one hand and the soft blue blanket with the attached note in the other, Kirk prostrated himself upon the floor in front of the old trunk and wept until he could weep no more. With a sudden rush of enlightenment and fear, he realized that he had pushed aside everything that was of value and worth and had grasped hungrily, greedily and lavishly all the things that would pass away; things that would have no absolute worth except for their money value. And what good was money when one's true love was lying cold and still and silent in her casket bed; could it bring her back and give speech to her tongue and put a smile on her face? What could it do for a heart that felt like it was crushed, broken, and ready to die from grief?. Could it lift the burden? Could it assuage the grief and comfort the heart? No. No! A thousand times no.

"Vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity."

Ecclesiastes 1:2 seemed to shout its message to his aching heart. Distorted values, she had written in the journal. How true! How very true! But maybe there was still hope for him: and help too. Yes, maybe. . . .

Getting up from the floor, he placed the souvenirs -- her souvenirs -- lovingly, carefully and ever so tenderly back into the big old steamer trunk. Then, pulling the wedding gown close to his heart as he made a solemn vow, he placed it back into the chest and closed the lid. He would go to the preacher -- Evangeline's preacher. He could help him if anyone could. Maybe there was hope for him even yet. Yes, he was sure of it; sure that there was hope for him. And help. Easter was resurrection time. Yes, resurrection! He was sure it wasn't too late for him to experience a spiritual resurrection.

With quickened steps, he hurried downstairs and out of the house to the study in the little white church where he was sure he'd find Evangeline's minister -- and God!