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HEART BEWARE
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Chapter 1

It was a glorious day in October, one of those rare sun-drenched days with colored leaves setting the hillside ablaze with glory and splendor. A hint of frost was in the air and the pungent odor of burning leaves was everywhere. It was a good day to be alive.

I was happy as I helped Aunt Louise put the final touches to the evening meal.

The parsonage phone jangled noisily, jarring me abruptly out of my daydreaming. Undoubtedly, it was for Father. He would answer it from his study at the far end of the hall, I reasoned. It continued to ring. Hurriedly, I picked up the receiver. "Rev. Keener's residence," I said. "Janet Keener speaking" "Janet! How good to hear your voice! Fancy you answering the phone!" a man's voice exalted -- a bit overdone, I thought.

For a long while I was silent, then sudden recognition dawned.

"Brock Westcote!" I exclaimed. "Where are you?"

"Near enough to come and see you," he answered. "That is, if you will permit me to come."

Permit him to come! How utterly ridiculous, I thought. My heart was pounding a wild staccato to his voice. It had seemed ages since I'd seen Brock.

Trying to sound calm and not overly excited, I said shyly, "I guess it would be fine for you to come over."

"Good. I'll be over soon."

"But . . . but it's suppertime," I said dryly, "and you know what that's like at the parsonage. . . ."

"Your father still taking in every stranger and all the outcasts and "

"Father's wonderful," I defended quickly, interrupting Brock. "I'd be disappointed if he ever changed."

"And you haven't changed either, I can tell."

Was there a hint of sarcasm in Brock's voice?

"Oh, Brock!" I said, pained deeply by his remark.

"Forget it. I'll see you soon."

After I hung up, I stood for a long while in the hallway, thinking. What was the matter with me? Why should Brock Westcotte send thrills of excitement through me and get me so flustered? I hadn't seen him for four years and couldn't be sure of his intentions now. Where had he been all that time? How had he lived away from Riverview? Was he sinner or saint?

A shudder escaped me and I shivered slightly when recalling his remark about Father. Saint? I was convinced he was not.

Why had he suddenly called and broken into my little world? When I thought I had forgotten him, too?

Sudden realization dawned upon me . . . I was still in love with Brock, or fancied I was!

"Supper about ready?" It was Father. Gently he rested his hand on my shoulder. "Something bothering you, Janet?"

"I . . . I . . . Yes. It's Brock," I stuttered. "He's back in town. He wants to see me."

A dark shadow crossed Father's tired-looking face. He seemed worried.

"What did you tell him?" he asked.

"Oh, Father!" I was in tears. "I told him it'd be fine if he came."

Father said nothing. Gently he patted my long, dark hair, then hurled down the hallway toward the kitchen and Aunt Louise. I followed quickly.

"It's about time you were getting in here," Aunt Louise scolded. "Scuttle along to the china closet and set a couple more plates. Your father just informed me he invited two more 'unfortunates' . . . as he terms them. I'll never know how your mother tolerated this. In fact, I'm sure this was a prime factor in her premature death."

I didn't argue. No one ever argued with Aunt Louise. Obediently, I set the table accordingly my own mind too preoccupied with the prospect of seeing Brock. I wanted to see him; then I didn't want to see him.

"What a grand mess you got yourself into!" I scolded my heart while I worked.

Brock was noted for being carried away where attractive women were concerned. For sure, I was not at all glamorous. This is what puzzled me. Why would Brock suddenly be coming back to Riverview? And to me?

The more I pondered it and tried to reason it out, the more confused I became. I didn't like it one bit. I knew the Lord wasn't the author of confusion, so I was sure it had to come from the devil. But how does one associate the devil with the one she feels she loves!

"Janet! Stop daydreaming and get busy. I need your help."

Aunt Louise was a dear old soul; extremely fussy and precise, though.

"Tonight you're behaving like a sixteen-year-old rather than a young woman of twenty-three," she accused.

"I . . . I'm sorry, Aunt Louise," I apologized, as I set the bowls of steaming food on the long table.

Supper went along as usual. Father, seated at the head of the table, looked a bit more tired and haggard than he ordinarily did. Between making soft, warm conversation with the two "unfortunates" he had invited to supper he cast an occasional hurried glance in my direction.

Aunt Louise fluttered and fussed over the table and its load of delicious food like a flustered hen over her brood of chicks. I smiled inwardly. The door chimes rang musically through the house. I jumped.

"Janet Keener, you're as jumpy as. . . ."

But Aunt Louise's words were lost to my ears as Brock, not waiting to be asked inside, emerged through the doorway.

Aunt Louise froze instantly in an all too obvious freeze. She never did trust Brock. Father rose from his chair. In a voice totally unnatural and unlike him, he asked, "And what brings you back to Riverview after all your flings?"

I stared at Father in utter disbelief. But I had heard him rightly. Flings, had he said? Did he know something about Brock that I didn't know?

"Well, if you must know," Brock said icily, "I came back to see your daughter." An almost defiant smile played viciously at the corners of his mouth.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" he asked, coming toward me and plating his hands on the back of my chair.

"Oh, Brock . . ." was all I could say.

I missed seeing the warning glance my aunt tried to convey to me; nor did I see the lines of disapproval in Father's face nor the look of pity and concern in his tired, faded but kind, blue eyes.

I saw only Brock. Brock with his sandy-colored hair, blue, blue eyes and suntanned face more handsome than I had ever remembered it. Brock was back in Riverview and he said he came to see me!

"Let's go where we can talk," he was saying. "This is certainly not the place."

"But, Brock," I said defensively, "I wouldn't think of leaving until after the supper dishes are washed and put away; and . . . and I promised our ladies' trio we'd practice here tonight"

"You could postpone it," he said tersely, much annoyed by my answer.

"I always keep my word." I searched Brock's face, hoping for understanding.

"What about tomorrow night then?"

"I . . . I'm going calling with Father. We make sick calls that night . . . especially rest home calls."

"Oh, well, have it your way. Your father can't have you by his side forever. You. . . ."

At mention of Father, I stood to my feet.

"Look, Brock, I'm sorry you don't understand. My fathers a wonderful man. He isn't forcing me into his way of life nor its duties: I go willingly. I love humanity and find great joy and satisfaction in helping to relieve some of their sufferings and miseries and. . . . "

"Exactly like your father!" he huffed. They were ugly words. Cutting words.

Aunt Louise was more flustered than ever. The color drained completely from her cheeks. While she frequently chided her brother -- my father -- for taking in every stranger and outcast, she resented any uncomplimentary statements and remarks made by strangers. Brock especially.

"Is this not commendable?" I asked, my voice strained and hurt.

"Call it what you like; . . . and lose your life in the busy rounds of charity from imposing persons. . . ."

"Oh, but they don't impose!" I interrupted. "Love, Divine love, compels Father and me to do what we do."

"Fine! Fine!" Brock ejaculated, motioning with his hands, "but let me warn you, Janet Keener, there's many a girl who would jump at the chance to go out with Brock Westcotte. Good evening" With that, he flung himself out of the house

The parsonage resumed a normal atmosphere after his departure and supper was finished in pleasant conversation.

As I washed the dishes, my mind wandered back to the year Brock had attended Fathers church He had paid much attention to me although I had never accepted a date with him. Every now and again he whispered that I was his girl. He even went to the altar for prayer on one occasion and

thereafter seemed to enjoy the evenings at the parsonage and the singing of the young people who frequently gathered there.

My first real jolt came when he disappeared from Riverview . . . at the same time Marlene Davis disappeared. Rumor had it that they had eloped. The Davises denied this; and when, a month later, Marlene came home married to an out-of-state man, we knew it was untrue. I felt glad and relieved. Brock had said I was his girl and I wanted to believe him, although I could never bring myself to go out with him.

Within three months after he disappeared, Brock was back in Riverview, acting natural and self-confident like always. Nothing more was said about him and his strange disappearance.

Then, four months later, he again left Riverview. This time he was not heard from until our phone jangled and he announced that he wanted to see me.

I had strange misgivings about going out with Brock . . . ever! And something inside me sent warning messages through me. "Beware! Beware!" they seemed to plead. Recognizing this as the Holy Ghost, I prayed fervently and strove diligently to heed and nurture the warnings -- in spite of my fluttering heart.

For two weeks Brock ignored the parsonage like a wise mother ignores the sick child's pleas for the wrong kind of food.

Then one day when the air smelled deliciously of apples and wild grapes and wood smoke, when the trees in our valley were ablaze with garnet and gold and cinnamon-browns and deep wine of oaks, the phone jangled. It was Brock. Father took the call.

"She's busy." I could hear his answer as I made the bed in the bedroom next to the study. I paused with my work and listened intently.

"Just a minute," Father said. The next instant I heard my name called.

"Janet. A call for you."

With trembling hands I took the receiver. "Janet!" It was Brock. He sounded exalted.

"Yes," I managed feebly.

"Let's go out for a drive this evening. I've got to see you. After all, I didn't come back to Riverview for nothing."

"Brock," I said, my knees shaking, "I . . . I . . . can't."

He was angry. I could sense it over the phone. "Why can't you?" he asked. "A fellow's not going to wait forever, you know."

"No, Brock. I'll not go," I answered as I placed the receiver back in place.

Passing through Fathers study, I heard a long sigh escape him. I turned and looked at him.

"You . . . you don't trust Brock, do you, Father?" I asked.

He merely surveyed me with a look of pride. "Do you, dear girl?"

I bowed my head. Tears stung my eyes. "I . . . I'm . . . dare I say scared of him! Yet my heart does crazy little flip flops every time he calls. Why, Father?" I asked the question easily and simply.

Father thumped his fingers mechanically on the pages of the opened Bible before him. When he looked at me, his eyes were kind and full of understanding. "Your reactions are quite natural," he said simply.

"You . . . you . . . mean . . . you think I'm . . . in love?"

"Hardly" He managed an understanding smile. This was, I knew, one of the many things that had so endeared him to the church people. He was never pushy nor unduly curious. His flashes of perception continually amazed me. He seemed to be so quixotic and impractical, so lacking in worldly wisdom but abounding lavishly in heavenly wisdom He was disarmingly ready to believe the best of everyone, that I was, at times, inclined to regard him as a babe in the woods. Yet he frequently noticed things which had escaped me. He had a kind of intuitive insight.

He spoke softly to me. "You may be infatuated, Janet, but not in love." He studied my face carefully. "Love is not afraid, my dear, like you are afraid of Brock. And good reason you have to fear, too! Real love . . . such as your mother and I shared for nearly forty-six years . . . is most rewarding and wonderful. It's worth waiting for, dear girl."

Infatuated! I recoiled involuntarily. I hated that word. Was I, at twenty-three, infatuated? I had seen too many cases of this to like it. Or was I, like many a teenager, merely in love with love?

I patted my father's bowed head and gave him a wan smile. "Pray for me, dear Father," I said, as I passed through the study into the hall, deep in thought. God knew I wanted only what was His will for my life. I would go slow . . . and wait!

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Chapter 2

Days became increasingly crisp now and the longer nights called for an applewood fire on the hearth. Flights of geese flew overhead, the long wedge of their flight arrowing the sky with mystery; their cry a lonely but breathtaking sound.

On just such a night, as Father, Aunt Louise, myself and four of Father's "unfortunates" sat around the fire eating shiny apples and munching on freshly popped corn dredged with butter and salt, the phone broke into our peaceful and serene evening. It was Brock.

"I'm coming over!" he announced boldly not asking whether he could or couldn't. It was a statement.

Before I had time to reply, there was a heavy thud at the front door.

Dropping the receiver onto Father's desk, I ran to the door and opened it. A man slumped across the threshold of the door; his head rested in the palm of one hand.

"Father! Father!" I called. "Come quickly."

I could have saved my breath. Already Father was bending over the man, feeling anxiously of his pulse.

"We'll put him in the bedroom at the end of the hallway upstairs," he said. "Bring a pan of water right away" he ordered, lifting the man inside and doing the door. With the help of the men seated around the hearth-fire, they soon had the stranger in bed.

I hurried to the kitchen for a wash pan. Thinking some hot bouillon might be good, I proceeded fixing it.

"It seems we're forever having strangers in this house," Aunt Louise scolded, not nearly so unkind as her tone of voice would lead one to believe. "Your father and you take to strangers like the kind-hearted farmer accumulates stray dogs and cats," she accused.

"Sh-h!" I warned pouring boiling water over the bouillon. "Don't let those poor men hear you."

"Sometimes I wish somebody would hear me and pay a little attention to what I say," she exclaimed, watching as I started up the stairs.

Poor Aunt Louise. I felt sorry for her. She was a dear, and I didn't see how we could get along without her again, but she was as unlike Father as daylight was from darkness. Brother and sister were poles apart.

Father's great heart, so like the Master's, was always reaching out beyond self to others, searching for ways to help those less fortunate than he and to bring them eventually to his dearest Friend and Savior. Conversely, Aunt Louise was extremely self-centered and self-righteous. Both Father and I centered many a fervent prayer around her.

Entering the bedroom, my eyes fell upon the face on the pillow. It was pale and the eyes were dazed.

Wringing a washcloth out of the water, I began bathing the man's face gently. I noticed a deep gash near the right temple. Blood trickled and oozed from the wound.

"Stay here," Father ordered, "while I call Doctor Merchant."

He made a hasty retreat down the stairs, followed by the "unfortunates" who excused themselves and retired to the little house Father had erected at the far end of the lawn for just such men. A "Rescue Mission" we called it, much to the disgust and dislike of Aunt Louise.

More than one human wreck was helped and saved by Fathers kindness and went home to live a changed, Christian life. Some became ministers of the gospel who patterned their lives after Fathers and used persuasive love, acts of mercy and deeds of kindness and compassion to reach many for Christ.

I heard muffled voices downstairs. Then I heard hasty footsteps. They were coming my way.

The man on the bed moaned, a sort of muffled moan. I bent over him anxiously. Gently I laid my hand on his forehead. It felt hot.

At the same instant I was jerked roughly about face. So abruptly, in fact, that my arm caught the pan of water and spilled it over the man on the bed.

"Get out of here!" It was Brock. He it was who had swung me about.

"Let your father care for this . . . this . . . tramp!" He hurled the words out.

"I'll do nothing of the kind," I said firmly, facing the angry Brock. "Look what you made me do!" I moaned.

"Serves the fellow right!" Brock ejaculated angrily. "Too bad it didn't drown him. Now come! You're going with me tonight!" There was urgency in his voice.

"I'm not going with you, Brock," I said firmly and decisively. My eyes and heart were now fully opened. "Be on your way and don't ever bother me again. This man needs help."

He stood for a brief moment surveying me, the color rising and falling in his face. Then, grabbing me roughly and nearly dragging me with him, he

shouted, "You're going with me! Come! I'm not taking no for an answer tonight."

He was angry. Terribly angry. Something was bothering him.

I managed to stand on my feet and face him. "I'm not going with you, Brock. Now nor ever!"

With all the strength I could muster, I made a quick lunge forward and nearly fell into Father's arms. I was frightened. Terribly frightened.

"Keep your hands off my daughter" Father said sternly and commandingly, standing like a towering giant between Brock and me. Brock started to say something, then sucked his breath in, quick like. The words were never uttered.

Flinging himself past Father and me he raced down the stairs and out into the night.

After the mad roar of his car faded away into the crisp, cold night, I looked at Father. His eyes were upon me. Sad eyes they were. Eyes filled with pity and longing to help . . . longing to reach Brock's soul.

"I know how you feel," I said, numb with shock.

"He's a mad man, Janet. A mad man on his way to hell."

"Why should he be so insistent that I go with him?" I asked, trembling with fear, no longer awestruck by his handsome outward features. The real man had been portrayed. Exposed.

A low moan from the bed sent me scurrying to the sick man's side. He was trying to say something.

"You're all right," I crooned softly to him, stroking the hair back from his forehead. "You're among friends. Try to rest."

"Don't . . . let . . . him . . . deceive . . . you . . ." the voice trailed off into silence. Again the breathing deepened.

"We'll have to change the bedding" I explained, marveling at the words of the stranger and pulling the tucked in sheet out around the edges and laying a dry one in its place. "Fortunately the mattress has a rubber liner over it," I said.

Just as Father and I finished changing the bedding, Doctor Merchant arrived. Unsolicitously, Aunt Louse led the white-haired man up the stairs to the room. She stood for a brief moment and cast unpitying eyes upon the bedridden man, then made a pompous exit, shaking her round little head ruefully.

"Anything serious?" Father asked anxiously of Doctor Merchant.

"Could be," was the curt reply. "He's in a state of shock, among other things. Know the man, Pastor?"

"Can't ever remember having set eyes on him before tonight . . . when we found him slumped across our doorstep," Father answered. "Know of any relatives? They should be notified."

Involuntarily, I gasped. "Is . . . is it that serious, Doctor Merchant?"

Ignoring my question, the diligent little doctor turned and faced me.

"Search the man's clothing, Janet. Something of his identity may turn up in his coat pocket."

Obediently I went through the clothes which Father and the four men had removed and hung in the closet.

"No wallet, Janet?" Doctor Merchant, a close and dear friend of our family for many years, asked the question briskly and curtly.

I shook my head no.

A short dissatisfied sort of grunt escaped the doctor's lips.

In spite of the seriousness of it all, a smile played at the corners of my heart. Doctor Merchant wasn't satisfied. That was all there was to it. I could read him like a book. We all loved Doctor Merchant for what he was, not for

his brusqueness and apparent indifference and unconcern. Beneath the veneer of callousness and hardness was a heart as soft as jelly and as tender-kind as any saint's.

Feeling inside the suit coat, my fingers touched something. I brought it forth quickly.

"Here are several pictures," I said, feeling much like a trespasser.

Suddenly, I gasped.

Before me, in my hand, was a picture of Brock. Beside him was a beautiful young girl.

"Any names?" Doctor Merchant asked.

I flipped the pictures over to the back side.

"None," I replied in a stunned voice, putting the pictures quickly back in the pocket from which I had removed them.

Doctor Merchant turned to me. "Janet," he said, "the man needs rest. Lots of rest and tender care. Here's the medication he'll be needing. Follow all directions strictly and precisely. You will have to be his private nurse. I know I can depend on you. Follow all my orders carefully and, with God's help, we'll work together at pulling the poor man through. I shall be back in the morning Good night"

As Doctor Merchant and Father left the room I walked quietly over to the bed whereon the man lay. How did he happen to have a picture of Brock Westcotte in his pocket? What was the meaning of his faltering words? Did they have any significance or was he speaking in delirium? Question after question kept pouring through my mind. I felt almost dizzy from wondering.

The man tossed weakly on the bed and uttered a low moan.

"You're going to be all right," I soothed.

He turned his face toward me but his eyes were closed. Did he hear me? I wondered.

Seeing streaks of blood on his forehead, I took the washcloth and very gently began to wash it away.

"Don't deceive her ." the voice whispered pleadingly as he rolled and tossed fitfully upon the bed.

What was bothering him? What did he mean by those words? And, worse still, what had happened to this man? Doctor Merchant had said something had struck him on the head. Who had done it? And why?

"Doctor Merchant said one of us will have to stay up all night with him," Father said, entering the room silently and startling me dreadfully. "You run on to bed, daughter. I'll stay by his side."

I laid a restraining hand upon Father's arm. "I'll stay here, Father. You go to bed and get some much needed rest."

I noticed for the first time how gray my father's hair was turning. I noticed, too, the tired look in his kind eyes. Without thinking, I spoke spontaneously: "Oh, Father, you are such a wonderful man. I thank God for you and Mother and for your stern but careful training and upbringing of me. I love you, Father. You have taught me Christ by example and godly living."

Father smiled down upon me. His eyes brimmed over with tears. "Thank you, Janet," he said, "but your dear mother had a larger and greater share in making you what you are than I did."

"I'll not argue who did the most," I teased, "for God gave me two of the best parents a girl ever had. I just wanted you to know that I thank God for you. Now run along to bed and if I need you during the night I'll call for you."

"Sure you can manage?" he asked with no little concern in his voice.

"Positive. Doctor Merchant left full and detailed instructions. All I need to do is follow them. Good night, dear Father. May God give you rest."

He disappeared down the stairs to his bedroom next to the study and the house settled down to silence.

Checking my patient's pulse and blood pressure and making sure that I was to administer no medication for the next two hours, I turned off all the lights except a small night light on the dresser. By this light I was able to observe the man on the bed.

Wearily, I eased my tired body into the overstuffed chair close to the bedside of the stranger and tried to relax.

My mind was in a turmoil of confused thoughts. So much had happened in such a little time.

I thought of Brock and how he had tried to force me to go with him. With thinking, I shuddered. Cold chills raced up and down my spine.

"He's a mad man," Father's words echoed through my weary brain "A mad man on his way to hell!"

I saw again that look of yearning in Father's eyes . . . yearning, to help Brock toward God and truth and righteousness and nobler things.

"Don't... let..., him..., deceive you " That's what my patient had uttered in a faint, faltering voice.

What did it all mean? And why did the man come to our door? And with not so much as a billfold on his person, either? Oh, it was all so confusing!

I looked anxiously at the stranger. For the first time I noticed that he was young. Fine looking, too. He was certainly not a tramp, like Brock had hurled at me, of this I was sure. His face bore a manly look. A noble look! Suddenly, my heart went out in sympathy to him. Suppose he were married? His wife should be notified. Or, if not married, what would the dear mother think when her son failed to return home?

I slipped out of the chair to my knees and began to pray, drawing new strength for both soul and body as I waited upon the Lord.

How long I knelt I do not know, but I was brought rudely and abruptly out of the heavenlies by a muffled footstep in the room. I arose in time to see a man step into the room. My hand flew to my throat. I stifled a scream. "Lord, help!" I prayed aloud. It was a simple prayer, but earnest and fervent.

The man advanced a few steps, then stopped deathly still. We faced each other I stood between my patient and the intruder. He dare not advance. He dare not! God had promised a guardian angel to His children. Surely, surely, His angel would take care of the man in the bed and myself!

With my hands raised to heaven, I prayed and claimed the promise of God.

When I had finished, the intruder was gone. All I heard was footsteps running a hasty retreat down the stairs.

"Thank God!" I exclaimed joyfully as the footsteps faded away and once again everything was silent. Oppressive silence now.

Then a new concern took possession of me. What if the man tried to harm Father! Would I dare venture downstairs and see that all was well down there?

I turned and looked into the face of my patient. He seemed to be resting. Perhaps I should look in on Father

"You all right, honey?"

I jumped I hadn't heard Father come into the room.

"I... yes. Thank God!" I gasped with relief. "Why are you up? Haven't you been asleep?"

"I was in the study praying. I thought I heard someone come down the stairs."

I burst into tears then. All the pent-up emotion gushed out of me like a mighty cloudburst. As quickly as it broke it receded and was gone. "I feel better now," I said, drying my eyes.

"Wh--what happened, Janet? Was there... ?"

"Yes, Father. There was a man here. Right in this room a few minutes ago. But the angel of the Lord chased him. It had to be "

"Oh, my daughter!" Father sat down in the chair, weak and limp. "Why didn't you call or . . . or scream?" he asked.

"I wouldn't have dared to, Father. Aunt Louise might have died with a heart attack. And then I didn't want to frighten you nor disturb my patient. Doctor Merchant said he must have plenty of rest."

"But, Janet, what would anyone want in our house? We have nothing of value that a thief would want. And why would he have come into this bedroom? Did you recognize him?"

* * * * *

Chapter 3

At this question, I gasped. "Oh, Father, it . . . it . . . can't be! But it is!"

"Not one of the men we're trying to help? Surely not!"

I shuddered. "It all comes back to me now. Vividly. I . . . I'm sure it was Brock!"

"Brock Westcote!" Father's mouth flew open wide and he stared at me.

"I hadn't given the man's description too much thought at the time," I explained. "I was too concerned over my patient's well-being and safety and the intruder wore a mask over his face, but the hair was Brock's and the body structure was his, too. What does it all mean, Father?"

My father merely shook his head in profound bafflement.

I was puzzled, too. At length I spoke. "There's something strange here. Just a few hours ago Brock demanded that I go with him. He called this man a tramp, Father. But he isn't. Look at his face. It's a noble face. A manly face, and honest."

"I noticed, my dear."

I stood over my patient, looking down into his face. Then I turned to Father.

"I found a picture of Brock and a girl in my patient's coat pocket when Doctor Merchant asked me to search his clothes for some bit of identity."

"You what?" Father was on his feet now.

"You heard me right," I said. "The girl is young . . . very young, and pretty in a dark, elfish fashion. She has thin piquant features and a cloud of thick, dark hair hanging loose and cascading well below her shoulders. She is smiling in the picture; a gay, unselfconscious smile, and the dear, direct glance of her narrow dark eyes, the soft curves of the parted lips, and the poise of the dark head all add up to a perfectly nice young woman. I . . . I can't imagine anyone so clean, pure and innocent-looking going out with Brock."

Then I remembered my own heart and its reaction to seeing Brock and hearing his voice and I felt suddenly ashamed. How I could ever have fancied myself caring for anyone so selfish, self-centered and rude and undisciplined as Brock Westcotte, was suddenly a distasteful thought of staggering propensity. "A lovely looking creature," I added.

Father paced back and forth. Then he hurried to the front window and stared out into the darkness.

"There's a connection of some kind between these two," I said, turning a table light on and getting my patient's prescribed medication. "If only we knew what it was!"

Father came to the bedside and stared for a long while into the face of the man between whose lips I was forcing the medicine.

"Swallow," I urged softly, patting the cheek a little more than gently, trying to rally the man sufficiently enough to make him swallow. "Can you hear me?" I asked. "Now swallow. That's it!" I exclaimed joyously when he obeyed and the medicine was gone.

"You'd better go to bed and let me remain here the remainder of the night," Father urged.

"Indeed not, dear Father. You need your rest far more than I."

"I'll not leave you alone again, Janet. Suppose. . . ."

"I'm not alone," I interrupted, my heart full of faith and confidence in God. "'The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.' He proved it tonight again in a great way!"

"God bless you, my child," Father said brokenly. "How true it is! 'There shall no evil befall thee; nether shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling'"

"Hadn't we better check the doors downstairs, though?" I asked.

"I'll do just that. I can't figure how the intruder got in."

"Brock's been here a good many times with the young people," I reminded. "The house is not totally unfamiliar to him."

"Right you are," Father said, making his way downstairs.

I turned back to my patient and found his eyes were open. He was looking at me.

"Thanks," he whispered weakly.

"For what?" I asked lightly, kindly, taking his blood pressure then checking his pulse as Doctor Merchant had ordered.

"For so much!" It was a whisper, barely audible. He gave me a wan smile, then closed his eyes. His hand went to his head.

"Hurt?" I asked, laying my hand on his forehead. He nodded in the affirmative.

I hurried to the bathroom for cold water and laid a wet washcloth on his forehead, repeating the process over and over again and again.

Father stepped into the room just then.

"The window by the pantry was forced," he said, "and the back door unlocked. Indicating of course, that the entrance was made through the window and the exit via the door."

I put a restraining finger over Father's lips, motioning to my patient. Father caught the signal and the meaning.

"Suffering?" he asked.

"His head," I answered, being careful to keep the washcloth cold and conversation between Father and me casual.

"Go to bed, please, Father," I urged. "Your days are always so full and busy and you must get some rest."

"If you insist," he said softly. "But I think I shall sleep in the bedroom next to this . . . in case you need me. . . ."

"All right," I answered. "Just so you get rest."

Shortly after Father retired, I heard his heavy breathing, indicating that he was asleep. I thanked God and asked Him silently to restore full strength to the dear, overworked body.

The night tiptoed by on silent feet without further interruptions and I was amazed, when the first gray streaks of dawn appeared, at how rapidly the time had flown. My body was weary but not overly so. As usual, my joy at being able to help another seemed to far surpass, and more than compensate for, any sleep I may have lost.

In the stillness of that easy hour Aunt Louise's voice reached my ears. "You're too soft, Janet! A sentimental fool just like your father! Both of you will kill yourself with kindness. Surely God doesn't expect this from any of His creatures. . . ."

With her speech made, she bristled her plump, neat figure almost noiselessly out of the room in as haughtily and airily a manner as she had bristled in. I heard her steps beat a hasty retreat down the stairs.

A faint smile curved my lips. I hoped my patient hadn't heard. He wouldn't understand.

Her words struck me then. Was I too soft: too easily moved by human suffering? If I was, I couldn't help it. Pain -- the pain of a human being or an animal or a bird or anything alive -- seemed to go right through me, so much so that I would do anything in the world to assuage it.

"Don't allow your aunt's words to cause you undue concern and grief," Father said, coming into the room, looking rested and relaxed. "What is justice? 'Be ye merciful . . .' is more to our taste, isn't it, my dear girl?" he spoke softly, and glanced at me appealingly. "If the dear man is in trouble -- and indeed he is -- how could we turn him from our door?"

"We couldn't of course!" I exclaimed with the mixture of compassion and admiration which Father so often aroused in me. "But why are you up already?" I asked. "Did Aunt Louise awaken you?"

"That she did," Father laughed. "But it is time for me to be up and doing. I'm an early riser, or have you forgotten?"

"I know you are," I answered, "but I had hoped you'd sleep late this morning. Do you feel rested?"

"Very," he answered. "What about you? How's our friend? Did he have a bad night?"

"He seems to be doing very well and I think his fever's gone down considerably. I shall try to coax a bit of warm milk into him this morning" I added.

"You shall have to rest, Janet."

"Not until I hear Doctor Merchant's 'well done,' I won't," I teased, laughing lightly. "Every dedicated nurse has a special concern for her patient, and I am no exception."

"I have a dutiful daughter indeed!" Father laughed, stepping into the hallway and making his way to the study downstairs for his early morning

private Bible reading and prayer. Again I thanked God for the heritage of godly parents and Christian examples in everyday life.

I began tidying the room and moved the overstuffed chair away from the bed, closer to the window, when the man on the bed stirred. Immediately I was beside him, feeling of his head, his pulse.

His eyes fluttered briefly then opened and rested on me. They were the bluest blue eyes I had ever seen. They were kind eyes. And tender.

"Feeling better?" I asked.

He nodded weakly.

"Do you think you could drink some warm milk?" I asked softly "Doctor Merchant and I would be highly pleased if you could."

There was no reply Still the eyes rested upon me.

Again I coaxed. "You will try drinking just a very little for me, won't you?"

It was barely a whisper; but in a weak, tired voice he gave consent

"I'll go down to the kitchen and fix you some milk; then I'll be back quicker than you would dream possible," I teased. "Rest and relax now until I get back."

As I hurled down the stairs I noticed a shiny-bright object lying on the living room floor. I rushed over and picked it up. It was a pen. I knew we had none like it and wondered who had dropped it and to whom it belonged when my eyes were drawn magnetically to two initials in gold design . . . B. W. Then I knew! In his haste to escape, the pen must have dropped out of Brock's coat when he fled down the stairs last night!

My mind again became a turmoil and whirlpool of strange thoughts. Why had Brock broken into the parsonage during the night? And why had he come to the bedroom where the injured man lay? What was he planning to do, and who had hit my patient over the head? Or what had happened to him?

I shivered as I started into the kitchen. I suddenly felt cold, but I knew that I was chilled inwardly rather than outwardly. Distrust, like a fog, was seeping into me. My instinct was to fight it, but how did one fight fog?

Brock had been so insistent that I go out with him last night. Why? Why? Why? And he acted as if he held claim to me, all but demanding that I comply with his whims and wishes. Again I shivered. Then, breathing a prayer of thankfulness to God for opening my eyes to the real Brock, I entered the kitchen.

"I should think you'd be in bed," Aunt Louise said, not too unkindly.

"I'll rest later on, Auntie," I answered pouring milk into a small pan and setting it on the stove to warm. "Right now I'm going to try a bit of persuasion on my patient. He needs nourishment."

"Your parent" Aunt Louise exclaimed, throwing her ample arms into the air and gesticulating furiously. "Your patient! Janet Keener, where is your dignity? Have you none at all?"

"I don't know too much about dignity, dear Auntie, but I know a lot about duty." I laughed softly as I placed a hasty kiss on her flushed face. "Duty demands my loyalty and undying devotion and aid. "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me. . . ."

"I know what else you're about to say, but don't say it," Aunt Louise protested. "Surely the Lord can't expect your father and you to defend and befriend everybody! Surely not!"

I made no further comment. I felt the utter futility of it. The unconverted couldn't possibly see through the eyes of the converted! His eyes were withholden so he could not see spiritual things. Eternal things.

Putting the milk on a small tray, along with a cup and spoon, I started for the stairway.

"Why the pen, Janet?" Aunt Louise asked. "Must you write letters for your patient, too?"

"Not really, Aunt Louise. But if, when he is well enough to dictate them to me, and so desires, I shall do it willingly and gladly."

"I might have known! You are utterly ridiculous. You and your father!"

I smiled as I carried the tray with its sparse fare up the stairs. Poor Aunt Louise! She didn't know the joy she was missing by being selfish and self-centered. She couldn't be happy. Not possibly!

"I'm back," I said softly as I entered the room. "I hope you're not utterly famished, for your doctor's orders were 'warm milk only.'" I teased, laughing.

The man on the bed smiled again . . . rather, he tried to smile. I knew it took effort for even an attempted smile, what with a wounded head and shoulder and a body and mind well medicated with Doctor Merchant's prescriptions.

"Are you ready to be a partaker?" I asked, reaching some of the milk toward him.

"I . . . I'll . . . try," was the weak reply.

Slowly the milk disappeared, spoonful by slow spoonful. But I felt it was an accomplishment. A sign of improvement too; and I sensed again the same feeling of satisfaction and well-doing that I felt after I had nursed a sickly, wounded dove back to life and health some months earlier. My elation was complete and fulfilled the day I saw the crippled bird soar away into the heavens . . . and to freedom.

It was a great feeling . . . this feeling of helping to restore life. I could imagine -- in a very small but real way -- the Savior's great joy over transforming and recreating a lost sinner into a godly saint -- a holy being.

"I could ask you if you're still hungry but it wouldn't do any good," I said, trying to make relaxed conversation, "for you have a doctor who expects his orders carried out in the strictest fashion. Perhaps there'll be more on your sheet after he comes this morning, though."

The man's hand reached out and found mine. Giving it a weak little squeeze of thanks he closed his eyes. He looked so tired. I wished for Doctor Merchant to come.

* * * * *

Chapter 4

At nine o'clock promptly, Doctor Merchant arrived.

"Fine job! Fine job, Janet!" he complimented, as he checked the man. "Now, if you'll come with me into the hallway I shall leave a few instructions for you."

As I followed the white-haired doctor, he began, "I'm sorry to sound imposing but this may be a lengthy case."

I gasped, not from fear of work or loss of sleep but out of concern and pity for the patient.

"The man received a severe blow," Doctor Merchant continued, "and bed rest is a definite must. Along with medication, of course. It may be exhausting on you, but I know your gentleness and kindness and love will help pull the man through. By the way, you didn't learn his name, did you?"

"No, sir. He's been too weak to talk," I answered.

"Certainly! Certainly! But I wish I knew what happened, and how. He seems too fine a fellow to get a beating. Doesn't look that sort at all."

"Occasionally good people are maltreated," I reminded.

"True enough. Now follow my orders closely and continue with the liquid medication every three hours. If he'll drink it, get more milk down him. A little hot tea might be good, too, but nothing heavy just yet."

"Thank you, Doctor. I shall follow your orders stringently"

"Good girl! I know I can depend upon you. Now, why don't you rest this morning? The man's going to need a dependable night nurse for several more nights."

"Thank you. I will. Father said he'd watch over him today. It may be good for Father. At least he'll not be going on his busy round of duties all day. It will afford him time to rest and read . . . with feet on a footstool. God does all things for our good and for His glory, Doctor."

The old doctor took a skilled surgical hand brushed a hasty tear aside. "You and your father look at things in the nicest ways!" he exclaimed as he bid me good-bye.

Between Father and me, we managed nicely, and by the end of the first week our patient had made remarkable improvement. So much so that Doctor Merchant felt it unnecessary for me to stay up with him nights anymore.

I didn't know whether I was glad or unhappy over this bit of information, for my heart was full of fear and distrust over Brock. Suppose he should break into the house again and do harm to my patient, whose name, by now, we had learned was Thomas Bradbury, a young unmarried theology student from out of state.

I expressed my fears to Father who pondered them deeply. At length it was decided that a dim light should be kept burning all night in the hallway just outside my bedroom door with an improvised burglar alarm rigged up by Father so that any stranger crossing the threshold into Thomas' room was sure to set the contraption off in a frenzy of wild alarm.

As I prepared for bed that same night, I remembered suddenly that we hadn't heard from Brock in days I was thankful but wary. More and more there was an increasing aura of mystery surrounding him.

Several days later, while I was giving Thomas his dinner, he spoke softly to me.

"Janet," he said, calling me by my first name, then, noticing my blushing cheeks he added quickly, "you don't mind me addressing you in such an intimate way, I hope." He searched my face, eagerly waiting for my reply

"Of course not," I said, laughing lightly. "Miss Keener sounded odd and strange . . . even if I am your 'special nurse,' using Doctor Merchant's phrase, of course"

Thomas relaxed and smiled broadly at me.

"Good" he commented "Janet it shall be then forever and always."

He grew suddenly very still and silent. A deep frown furrowed his brow. I wondered why the sudden change.

"Pain?" I asked involuntarily.

"No," he answered in the straight-forward way which Father and I had come to appreciate and admire greatly. "Not physical pain, as such," he continued, his blue eyes seeming to pierce my very soul. "Mine is a far different pain now."

"I guess, in that case, no doctor's medication can reach or help."

"Exactly so."

Raising himself slightly and supporting his weight on one elbow, he reached out and took my hand in his.

"Janet! Janet!" he cried, "don't allow Brock Westcotte to deceive you. To make merchandise of you." I pulled free of his hand.

"Thomas Bradbury! I . . . I don't understand," I gasped, weak with fear and anxiety. "Brock means nothing to me. Absolutely nothing"

A sigh of relief and a low cry of thanks to God escaped Thomas' lips. He fell back on the pillow, limp. Perspiration broke out freely on his forehead.

I hurried to the bathroom and wet a wash cloth in cold water, then sponged his head and face with it.

His face was pale and his eyes were closed. I grew unusually anxious for him.

"Thomas" I said gently. "Thomas, are you all right?"

His hand reached out and found mine. For answer he gave my hand a tight little squeeze.

I continued sponging his face and forehead. Gradually and slowly the color returned.

"More dinner now?" I coaxed. "Doctor Merchant asks daily about your intake of food."

"I'll try. But I'd far rather talk to you. I have so much to say, Janet."

"After you've finished your dinner," I ordered in a light tone of voice "Not before."

"All right, Nurse," Thomas teased weakly.

"Doctors orders," I reminded.

When the last bite of custard was eaten and the tea drained from the cup, he spoke again.

"My turn now. This time I'll not stop till I'm finished. I must talk to you."

I set the empty tray on the dresser, then seated myself in the chair by the bed.

"Go ahead," I said. "It may do you good. But are you sure you feel strong enough?"

"Positive." His eyes were focused on me again in that searching piercing way.

"You have no idea how very much it grieves me to have to say what I am about to." His voice sounded grieved and hurt.

"If it's about Brock," I volunteered, "set your mind at ease. He's obnoxious and. . . ."

"But there was a time when he wasn't"

"Ho . . . how did you know?" I gasped, feeling suddenly weak and limp.

A sad look crossed his handsome face.

"My . . . sister told me about it."

"You . . . your sister? Bu . . . but . . . I don't understand. I . . . I never met you till you came here and . . . and I didn't so much as know whether you had a sister even."

Thomas moaned. He closed his eyes as though wishing he could forget.

I wanted terribly to help him, to soothe his mind like I did his fevered brow, but my own mind was in a flurry of turmoil just then. It was all so very confusing!

What had he meant when he cried out, "Don't let Brock deceive you . . . make merchandise of you? Suddenly the words were beating at my ears in a slow, heavy cadence. I tried to drown them by turning my thoughts to pleasanter things. It was no use. They drummed away at me till I could scarcely sit still. Was he delirious, I wondered, and talking out of his head?

He brought me back to reality by reaching for my hand and fining it.

"Brock needs our prayers. Desperately" he said slowly.

He closed his eyes again, all the while holding onto my hand. For a long while neither of us spoke. The only sound heard was the slow, rhythmic ticking of the grandfather's clock in the hallway, the merry whistle of the steaming tea kettle in the kitchen downstairs, and our breathing.

Thinking Thomas had fallen to sleep, I tried very carefully to remove my hand from his.

"Don't please." His voice was soft and low and very tired sounding. "I'm not asleep I was praying . . . for strength and grace to tell you everything. But how can I? You are so gentle and good, and I . . . I hate to hurt you."

Hurt me! What did it all mean? I sighed heavily too confused to say anything.

"You saw my sister in the picture with Brock?" It was more a question than a direct statement.

"I . . . I . . . yes. You see, Doctor Merchant wanted some identification. . . ."

"You needn't explain, Janet. I realize this is only customary procedure when one drops in out of seemingly nowhere onto another's doorstep, like I did."

"But I felt like an intruder. A snoop and a . . . a . . ." I began.

"Never mind," Thomas soothed. "How else would one find out?"

"And I hated to do it," I confessed. "And I would not have, had not the good doctor been so insistent."

"I'm thankful you did. It may make things a bit easier to explain."

"You have a very beautiful sister," I volunteered. "She looks like a truly good girl. Like she's a Christian. I noticed her modest attire and the simplicity of it, as well."

Thomas smiled and a faraway look came into his eyes.

"Becky's a wonderful girl!" he exclaimed. "Too bad Brock Wescotte ever came into her life."

I gasped. My hand flew to my throat. I felt weak and faint.

"He . . . he . . . has Brock. . . ."

"Becky's fine," Thomas replied. "Brock tried to ruin her. To involve her."

"Ruin her? Involve her?" Shock registered in my voice.

Thomas dosed his eyes again He took a long, deep breath before he continued "Brock's a shrewd, smooth number, Janet. He'd have involved you, too. . . ."

"Involved me? But how? Why? What . . .?"

"Brock uses all the Christian girls he can in his racket"

"Racket? Did you say racket, Thomas?" I gasped.

Again I felt faint. My head was suddenly spinning crazily. I prayed for strength as I listened.

"Yes, racket And it's a big one," Thomas affirmed. "I know too much That's why he came here that first night I was here. To get rid of me, actually."

"You . . . you . . . how did you know?" I was astonished. This refined, quiet-spoken theology student knew many, many things More, in fact, than I had ever dreamed possible.

"I heard everything. In a dazed kind of way, I'll admit, for I was so terribly weak from the blow I received and the doctors medication had me pretty groggy and foggy minded But I heard and knew everything."

"I . . . I thought you were asleep or. . . . "

"Not really I was afraid for you and fought the medication."

"Afraid for me? But . . . I don't understand. I. . . ."

"I know it must sound most confusing to you, Janet, but I shall try to explain everything Brock Westcotte is out to get me. He is aware of the fact that I know his 'game' . . . if one dare call trafficking in dope a game"

I gasped Brock, mixed up in dope I felt the color drain suddenly from my cheeks. Thomas must have seen it, too.

"Don't worry, little nurse: Brock will never get you so long as I can prevent it. He's a fine looking chap all right. Handsome, would be the better word to describe him, but. . . ."

In a fleeting instant I saw again the real Brock . . . the inside Brock I trembled and shuddered then.

"When one knows the man, he isn't handsome. Not really," I interrupted.

"You are so right, Janet. The same applies to a pretty girl. A pretty face doesn't really make the girl. Prettiness is something else again Beauty is far rarer and more elusive. It comes from within the girl. It's not just a matter of features or coloring It's a look in the eyes, a turn of the head, a smile that lights up the whole face, a tender curve of the lips and a voice which is like haunting music," he said thoughtfully. "It's kindness, and goodness and patience and understanding. One can't hope to analyze it," he continued. "But all the things you are add up to beauty. That's the answer. And you are as different from Brock as daylight is from darkness. You are daylight; Brock is darkness. Deep, deep darkness"

I sat listening. Thomas' words, his deep, sincere tone, and the warm admiration in his glance were like cool, fresh water to a parched throat. He possessed a poise and assurance which seemed to indicate that he had never been afraid to look anyone in the face. Not even Brock Westcotte!

"You mentioned Brock's being here, Thomas. Why did he break into the parsonage? What was the real reason?" I had to know.

"For better than three years I have been observing Brock. He came into our town nearly four years ago and spasmodically attended the church we attended. He noticed Rebecca shortly after he arrived and tried to attract her attention but to no avail.

"Nine or ten months ago he went to the altar for prayer and feigned religion. I dare not say salvation for there is a great difference between the two. After his trip to the altar Becky accepted numerous dates with him. She has told us since, though, that each time she was with him she had strange feelings about him."

"God was warning her like He did me," I said, speaking from my heart. "Oh, He is so faithful!"

"Thank God, He is. And thank God that Becky listened and heeded the warning," Thomas said. "When she told Brock that she wouldn't go out with him any longer he flew into a devilish rage and tried to harm her physically. Fortunately, rather I should say, providentially my father was in the house when she told him and Father intervened."

All too vividly, I remembered the night we found Thomas on our doorstep. Brock's brutal treatment flashed before me with great impact. Again I felt him dragging me across the room. I winced with remembering.

Thomas was speaking: "Brock used Becky as a cover-up. Few, if any, would suspicion a church-going man, dating one of the finest Christian girls in town, of trafficking in dope. But this is what he did."

"Oh, Thomas!" I gasped. It was all so ridiculous and like a frightening nightmare!

* * * * *

Chapter 5

For a long while after Thomas had spoken of his sister Becky and her encounter with Brock Westcotte, we were both silent. Me, with my own memories and recollections of the past I was thankful to God for His faithfulness to my heart, to warn me like He had. And I was thankful, too, that I hadn't resisted those gentle warnings and proddings but, rather, that I had kept my heart and mind open to God and had obeyed Him.

I shuddered as I thought of what I might have gotten myself into had I disobeyed God. I praised Him for once again leading me safely around another of the devil's traps and snares. He was faithful and would remain that way if I would but follow.

"Am I tiring you, Janet? Is this too much for you?" The soft, comforting voice of Thomas brought me again out of my thinking.

"You . . . you're crying!" he said gently. "I . . . I'm sorry I didn't think it would upset you like this"

"It's just that I was remembering," I said, smiling through the unbidden tears "It's good to remember some things, Thomas. Mine are tears of thankfulness to the Lord for His faithfulness to me."

"I . . . presume you are making some connection with Brock and how things might have been?"

"Precisely," I answered. "He figured he'd get chummy with the preacher's daughter . . . if he could . . . to cover any and all suspicion against himself."

"Exactly. Only . . ." and Thomas paused before continuing, "he'd have used your purse or coat pocket or whatever was convenient, to conceal packets of dope until suspicions on him were cleared."

"Thomas! No!" I hoped my face wasn't as white as I felt it had turned.

"That's why he wanted you to go out with him He is under constant surveillance and observation, though I doubt that he is aware of the constancy of this But he wanted a good woman . . . a Christian woman . . . for his companion, to throw the police off his trail and to conceal the many small packets of dope somewhere on your person or in the house here. That way, when he is searched . . . and his belongings . . . nothing could be found as evidence.

"Becky discovered numerous small, mysterious packets in a drawer in the buffet. She asked her mother what they were and of course Mother had no idea what it was. Becky then remembered how Brock had remained in the dining room extra long one afternoon when he called to see her.

"We have a good friend who is on the police force and Father suggested that we take the packets to him. This we did. Very shortly we discovered that our house was a storage place for some dope pusher . . . mainly Brock."

"How horrid!" I exclaimed impulsively. "What did Brock do?"

"He came to the house to see Becky again He acted highly agitated and nervous when he was there for only a very short time and Mother and Becky saw to it that he could easily get into the dining room . . . they made way to leave him alone. All the while they observed his every move. He walked into the dining room and when he thought no one was looking nor around, he opened the drawer where the packets had been hidden. Not finding anything, he grew angry and irritable and insisted that my sister go out riding with him.

"She refused. This infuriated him. And it is then that he again tried to do her bodily harm. He would have, too, had it not been for Father who stepped in and took a hand in the matter. Brock left in a violent temper. I know he suspicioned what happened. So he left our town.

"When I knew he was headed back here, I had to come, to warn you, Janet"

"But how did you know about me? I mean, why such great concern over a perfect stranger?" I queried softly.

"Perfect stranger! Ah, no. I have watched you, known you and . . . and . . . will you not think me unduly bold to say, I loved you? for nearly three-and-a-half years."

"Impossible!" I exclaimed steadily. "It's incredible! You must have me confused with someone else. Some other person who looks like me."

Thomas laughed then, a soft, relaxed kind of laughter.

"Impossible, did you say? Why, Janet Keener, I couldn't confuse you with anyone. You have the kindest looking face and the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen They're like a deep, clear pool on the moors, with a spring running into it, and the light and shade reflected in it. Most refreshing to gaze into, and a great deal more eloquent than words," he said, in a low, honest tone of voice. "With those eyes, you could never deceive anyone . . . and that's very rare in a woman. Your eyes mirror your every thought . . . and you don't know it."

"Thanks," I said, matter-of-factly, "that's quite a compliment."

"It's more than a compliment, really. Someday, Lord willing, I shall make you realize that you see, Janet, I have been greatly concerned over you and have prayed daily for you since I saw you with your father at our General Conference in Mid-City some better than three years ago."

A smile of remembrance parted my lips.

That had been a great and glorious church meeting and I would never forget how the fire fell and how the glory was manifested in every service.

"I shall always remember that gathering" I said softly.

"And I shall too!" Thomas exclaimed. "I was too busy with committee meetings and church business to make your acquaintance but I prayed daily that, God willing, He'd lead us together. And He has!"

I laughed softly, remembering the man on the doorstep. "Quite an unconventional way to meet!" I exclaimed Then I sobered. "And quite hazardous on your part, Thomas!"

"Nothing's too risky nor hazardous where you're concerned, Janet. Becky wanted me to come, too."

"Becky?"

"She remembered that night your father preached at the conference and how beautifully you sang as God helped you. And I shall never forget that night to my dying day. It awakened my heart to love . . . for you. And when Becky insisted I come here to warn and protect you, I didn't need much prodding, I confess."

"That's sweet of her. You must tell her how very much I appreciate her concern over me. But God long ago warned me and showed me the real Brock and what I saw was ugly and frightening. Constantly, the Holy Spirit within me kept saying, 'Heart, beware! Heart, beware!' I heeded, thank God. But I am truly thankful over Becky's concern for me, too."

"Someday you will be able to thank Becky yourself, Lord willing. She's a wonderful sister."

Already I felt as if I had known Rebecca Bradbury for a long long time. If she was anything like Thomas, and I was sure she was, I knew instinctively that I'd love her.

My thoughts turned again to that night when Brock called and insisted that I go out with him. That night when I heard the dull thud at the door and, rushing to open it, found Thomas on the doorstep

"Who hit you over the head, Thomas? Do you know or have any idea?"

"Brock," was the frank, plain-spoken answer.

"Are you sure?" I questioned. "He was on the phone when I heard you drop against the door"

"It was Brock, Janet. He knew I was in town And I'm sure he knew why. He followed me that night to within half a block of the parsonage, when he stepped out from behind a bush, grabbed me, took my billfold and knocked me over the head. You know too much!' he muttered angrily.

"I went down I was stunned. But gradually I got my bearings and stumbled toward the parsonage. He must have known I was coming here, so called, to get you out of the house But it looks like I beat him to the door."

"You brave, brave man!" I exclaimed, looking into the kind face before me. "I shall someday make you feel that it was not a worthless nor futile risk."

"I know that. Not presuming either: much conversation with my Heavenly Father has given me the answer Meanwhile, I can wait I have a half year of Bible School yet and there'll soon be another General Conference. . . ."

He was smiling . . . clear into my heart.

Father came into the room just then.

"Looks like the curtain's dropped for Brock," he announced sadly.

"What do you mean?" I asked eagerly.

"He's behind bars -- peddling dope, the chief of police told me. Too bad! Too bad!" Father said, seating himself in a chair nearby Thomas and me.

Thomas closed his eyes. "Do you suppose he'll listen to the gospel message now?" he asked of Father.

"I can't say, Thomas, my boy," Father said affectionately, "but I'm certainly going to try again. I talked to him much these past few weeks. That is, whenever I could find him; he's like a 'will-o-the-wisp.' So elusive. I told him to turn himself in and to repent of his sins and seek pardon from a merciful Savior. He laughed at me.

"He took off for some other city and the police caught him in the very act of selling the stuff."

"You . . . you . . . mean you know about Brock, Father?"

"I've been suspicious of the poor boy for a long time, dear girl. And when he broke into the parsonage that night, I knew there was something dark and sinister about him. Then Thomas told me about him. . . ."

"I told him something else, too," Thomas teased, his eyes shining and smiling into mine.

"And you both have my blessings," Father said softly, smiling. His faded blue eyes were laughing their way dear into my heart.

"Like Thomas told me, Janet, you're a born mother, a born homemaker and a born preacher's wife. You're domesticated without being dull, generous without being impractical, and kind without being weak-willed. Like he said, daughter, you add up to quite something."

"Thanks," I said, blushing. "If ever I'm in need of a reference, I shall appeal to both of you."

"As I stated before, Janet, you have my blessings. Thomas is a fine Christian gentleman with a clean, clear record and tremendous recommendations from our General leaders. Furthermore, he loves you and you love him. I saw it coming and it gladdened my heart. This is not

infatuation. It's the real thing. Just like your mother and I felt for each other and shared. I thank God for answering my prayer. "The real thing!"

I knew what Father said was true. For many days now my heart told me that I was in love., with Thomas Bradbury. And I was glad and happy, not at all afraid of this man who had brought a perpetual song to my heart. There were no gentle warnings from within, either, warning me to "beware"; nothing but a joyous consciousness that this was the will of God for me. Oh, the difference! The blessed difference!

I looked toward Thomas. He was smiling . . . a happy, contented smile that lifted my heart in song.

He found my hand and caressed it lightly. This time I answered the caress; and Father's dear, bowed gray head was like a sacred benediction on us.

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THE END