

FINAL CHAPTER MAY BE WRITTEN TO OLD ROMANCE THAT INPIRED “LET ME CALL YOU SWEETHEART”

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NASHVILLE, Tenn., Jan 20 – “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” has been cupid’s popular theme song for nearly 30 years –

But the public never knew about the romance which inspired the late Beth Slater Whitson to write the lovely lyrics.

And the mysterious disappearance of her first sweetheart may mark the final chapter in the real life drama which began in 1906 at Nashville.

Claude King, once a swashbuckling young Tennessean who was long Miss Whitson’s “dream man,” has been missing for some two years. Relatives fear he died without identification.

Reunited at Last?

And if King has answered the final call, he may be reunited at long last with his boyhood sweetheart. An invalid for five years, the famous song writer died quietly in her sleep here in 1930.

It was just a lover’s quarrel which brought the couple to the cross-roads. After several years Miss Whitson married a distant cousin of the same name. But King always remained single wandering from job to job and state to state. He continued, however, to be a devoted family friend.

Mrs. Alice Whitson Norton, sister of the song writer, who lives at “Lookaway,” the old home in Nashville, failed to receive a Christmas card from King last month for the first time in many years.

“One of our dearest friends,” she observed. “I can’t understand why we didn’t hear from Claude – but I won’t believe he’d dead.”

King was always very generous with the entire Whitson family. Although Beth said dozens of lyrics to major publishing houses, she lacked the business shrewdness to press good contacts with hard-hitting commercial interests. So, the family was never well off financially and King’s gifts were always welcome.

King drew his dividends from the business world in his prime but like Beth he started at the foot of the financial ladder. It was while they were both ambitious, struggling young folk that the couple first met in 1906.

She Goes to College

A sweet-faced little country girl with a song in her soul, Miss Whitson had said goodbye to her parents in Hickman County to study writing at the Peabody college in Nashville.

Daily she boarded the city street car suburban college and daily a debonair young conductor smiled a friendly greeting to the lonely, homesick girl.

But it was an accident the Miss Whitson ever got acquainted with the fascinating, dark-eyed fellow. Fate derailed the street car and gave the frightened passengers a terrific shake-up.

Just as the pretty little red head was clambering to her feet, she felt a helping hand – and was surprised to find that the young conductor had forgotten the other passengers in rushing to her rescue.

“Thank you,” she stammered, smoothing her red curls and brushing the home-made suit.

This broke the conversational ice and the two introduced themselves. King was invited to visit the Whitsons at the family home in Hickman county and in the years to follow he became a frequent guest.

Although the couple had contrasting personalities, they clicked right from the start. King was gay and amusing, the life of any party. Miss Whitson was demure and dreamy with a sweetness that made her loveable.

He Sings Her Songs

King was greatly impressed with Miss Whitson’s talent and admired her sincerity. She was thrilled with this handsome fellow who sang her lyrics and set her in dreaming more.

And it was not long before King stepped from his street car job to make impressive strides in the business world. For years, he held a good position with a major oil company and later enjoyed his own private yacht.

Meanwhile, he encouraged Beth to bundle up her lyrics and try to the market in the big city. It was to Chicago in 1909 that she made her first venture to contact the major publishing houses. After three disheartening weeks, she sold several lyrics and launched her professional song-writing career.

Then followed the happiest years of Beth’s life. She continued to pour out lyrics and her friends and family were elated over her success. Claude kept in constant touch with Beth. He often visited the Whitson home, and Beth and her sister often when to the city for royal entertainment.

Her First Returns

In her autobiography in “True Confessions,” written five years before she died, Beth Whitson recalled, “Back at home I began turning out more lyrics. To little sister and me, the sum of \$25 seemed incredible wealth, even \$15 and \$20 thrilled us amazingly.”

“Two numbers sent to a New York house brought \$40 which we used to paint the little frame house; and another lyric paid for wall paper which we hung ourselves. I had the feeling that a fairy had passed through the house, transforming its drabness into astounding beauty, when we finished. I could not write anything for days. I wanted to feast my eyes on the loveliness that had come out of my gift.”

Miss Whitson’s first great financial shock came after she had sold the lyric “Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland” for \$15. Leo Friedman, the composer, brought the piece out and resold it to the publisher, Will Rossiter, for \$7,000.

However, Rossiter, making great profits from the song, assured Miss Whitson \$100 a month in royalties and invited her on an all-expense trip to New York. As a celebrity this time, she traveled in style and was nightly feted in New York as the “Dreamland Girl.”

A Great Moment

Miss Whitson was honor guest at the American Theater where the then popular Reine Davies sang her “Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland.”

At the peak of her career, Miss Whitson wrote “Let Me Call You Sweetheart.” published in 1910. Then Beth’s lyrics began to flood the market but the returns gradually dwindled. King’s work kept him far away and the couple began to have their troubles. Sometimes, Beth wouldn’t hear from him for weeks.

Hoping to swell her income and brighten her life by better contacts in the city, Beth persuaded her family to move to Nashville in 1913 – but later she regretted the decision.

“Perhaps, if I had not left the little frame house in the valley, and assumed heavier and heavier obligations that forced me to go back to the old habit of selling out everything I wrote, the end of the story might have been different.”

Nerves Gave Way

Her nerves cracked under the strain and the doctor informed her that she had been working for three years on borrowed energy. It was then that Miss Whitson married her distant cousin – G.M. Whitson, and closed her precious song tablets. Ill health finally put her in bed for five years before her death.

Strangely enough, fortune began to play tricks on Claude King about the time his old sweetheart passed away. His own income began to dwindle and he developed a throat ailment which may have claimed his life.

And although Beth and Claude have left the scene, the spirit of their romance will live forever in the beautiful melodies of “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” and “Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland.”

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