

Family Secrets

Donald J Plefka

Sunday is supposed to be a day of rest and tranquility but when Belle Fenton arrived for church services she found little of either. The knots of people gathered near the church entrance where all were jabbering about the murder that was visited upon the town at the Fireman's picnic the day before. The worst part was that it was one of the town's most prominent citizens, Atticus Bingahamson, who was the victim of the brutal attack. Belle was shocked, to say the least. She had met him several years back. She knew him to be a kind and generous businessman.

Belle had heard that the family had fallen victim to some bad times lately with the death of Mr. Bingahamson's wife from diphtheria a few years back and then the confinement of his mother to the sanitarium. She now recognizes no one most of the time and remembers only events long past. And now, this!

The annual picnic was a fundraiser for the Volunteer Fire Department and always drew large crowds, functioning also as the big summer social event for the town. As darkness descended, most of the revelers who had not gone home, as did Belle, had retreated to the pavilion to enjoy the music and dancing. Late in the evening, a couple had wandered out to the ball field to "look at the moon" and discovered the lifeless form of Mr. Bingahamson who had obviously been bludgeoned with a bat which was found nearby. His head was a bloody mess ... but Belle turned away from the friend offering the gory details. She did not want to hear these things. There was even more talk after the services since the news had spread even more.

When Belle approached her flat she was surprised to see a young student from the University sitting on the front porch of the building. His bicycle was laying nearby. He queried, "Miss Fenton?" as she approached, and to her "Yes." he announced, "I have a message for you from Attorney Jonathan Roberts. He instructed me to deliver it to your hands and wait for a reply." With that he handed to her a sealed envelope which she dutifully accepted and then opened.

"Dear Miss Belle Fenton, ... Your presence is requested at my office (address above) at 10:30 A.M. on Monday (date) for the reading of the last will and Testament of Atticus Bingahamson, Jr. Be assured that your presence is of utmost importance to you and all concerned." It continued; "Please give your verbal acceptance to this request to my messenger so I may be assured of your presence. ... Please excuse the Sunday delivery of this request but time in this matter is very important. ... Thank you ... Your humble servant, (signed) Jonathan Roberts, Attorney at Law."

Needless to say, Belle was baffled and surprised and if it were not for her innate curiosity would have declined the invitation outright since the time specified conflicted with her duties at the library. But then, thinking of the library, she considered that there may be a gift, and possibly a major one, to the library which is why she should be there. She told the messenger to inform Attorney Roberts that she would be at his office at the appointed time. She watched the messenger peddle off toward the business district and several questions came to mind. Why was it so critical for the will to be read so soon after the man's death? Who killed him? Why?

The following day, Belle was at the library early. She informed the dean that she would be absent for part of the morning and why, and then left instructions with her student helpers before leaving. It was a brisk walk to the attorney's office and others were already there when she arrived. She needlessly introduced herself to Mr. Roberts, ... she was the only female there ... and asked why it was so important for her to be there, to which he replied, "Yes Miss Fenton, all in due time. Please be seated." Presently, the lawyer, after shuffling through some papers and looking at those assembled said, "I see we are all here so we can begin." He summoned his secretary and instructed her, obviously not for her benefit, but as notice to the others, that she should carefully record the proceedings. Then to record the names of all present, and as an introduction to each other, he stated the names of those attending the reading. They were, Miss Belle Fenton, University Librarian; Mr. Thomas Longley, Treasurer of the Bingahamson Foundry Company; Mr. Seth Packard, Plant Manager and Vice President of the Bingahamson Foundry Company; Mr. Francis Cooper, Personal Secretary to Atticus Bingahamson, Jr, and Doctor William Bush, representing the interests of Mrs. Leticia Bingahamson, the mother of Atticus Bingahamson, Jr.

Mr. Roberts then proceeded to read the will of the deceased and after the preliminary paragraphs came to the meat of the matter ... " I leave my entire estate, including my home, personal belongings, bank accounts, investments, properties, and ownership of The Bingahamson Foundry Company to ... my daughter ..." "He had no daughter!" exclaimed Tom Longley! He was on his feet. Belle, Seth Packard and the doctor were perplexed. Only Frank Cooper sat quietly and somewhat dejected. Attorney Roberts asked everyone to "Please let me continue." When Mr. Longley sat down, he continued, "... my daughter ... Belle Fenton ..." Bedlam erupted! The four men all looked first at Belle and then Roberts and back to Belle and Belle herself was as incredulous as the rest.

Roberts shouted, "Please, I must continue and then an explanation will be forthcoming!" When order was restored he continued, "... my daughter, Belle Fenton, with the stipulation that she provide for the care of my mother, Mrs. Leticia Bingahamson, for the remainder of her natural life." Roberts then informed the group that the rest of the will included details of interest only to Miss Fenton and he would now go to the explanation of her relationship to the deceased but first he needed to ask her what she knew of her parentage.

The secretary brought Belle a glass of water and assured her that all was well. If she could compose herself she could answer Mr. Robert's question. Belle, still shocked by this turn of events, related that she had been raised by her aunt, her mother's sister. Her mother had died in child birth and her father had died in a construction accident shortly before her birth. Mr. Roberts affirmed it was all true except the part about her father. Her mother, in fact, and unfortunately, was unwed. Atticus Bingahamson, Jr. had a liaison with her in the early days of his marriage and she came to be with child. He told her mother that he would give her financial help and his involvement was kept secrete. When she died giving birth to Belle, he could have been freed of his promise to her because he knew the sister was not told who fathered the child but instead, every month an envelope with a note, "For Belle" and a sum of money, was sent to Belle's aunt. At this point, Belle said, "Yes, I remember, my aunt getting that money every month but I didn't know what the note said." "My aunt always said it was 'the annuity'." She then added, as an afterthought, "... and then there were those mysterious dolls and toys that just came in the mail to me."

The attorney then explained that he had invited the Doctor to be present so he would be assured that the mother of the deceased would have her care funded. He told the other gentlemen that they needed to be there to establish the new ownership of the company and let them know that Mr. Bingahamson had provided a retainer for him to handle legal matters for his estate as well as the affairs of the foundry and he would serve at Miss Fenton's pleasure. Also, that Mr. Cooper's salary would continue until Miss Fenton decided if she needed his services. He further informed them all that Mr. Bingahamson had left instructions that in the event of his death, the will should be read as soon as possible and prior to making funeral arrangements so that his daughter could, if she wished, participate in those arrangements. He suggested that all other questions or concerns of the gentlemen could wait and that he needed to discuss certain matters with Miss Fenton. The men were dismissed.

They all offered Belle their condolences on the untimely and tragic death of her father and at the same time offered to cooperate fully in the transition of ownership. She was assured that the company would operate as if her father was still in charge until she deemed otherwise. Mr. Cooper further offered to assist her in any way he could. As the men were leaving, Mr. Longley held back until the others were out the door and then making sure that Roberts heard, told Belle, "I would like to mention that the relationship between your father and Mr. Cooper has seemed to be quite strained in the last several months." And then he left.

Roberts then offered his personal condolences and suggested that he could make the funeral arrangements as he was aware of her father's wishes in that regard, ... with her approval, of course. She agreed with the suggestion and subsequently with the arrangements and was glad her "new" but deceased father had placed his confidence and her life in such capable hands. She did not feel capable of making any decisions at this time and was quite overwhelmed with everything. Roberts had her father's automobile waiting and the driver had been appraised that he was henceforth in Belle's employ. She went back to her flat to try to make sense of all that had transpired and regarding anything else that day, decided not to decide anything.

Of course, the news spread like wildfire and Jennie Royce, Belle's best friend, was at her door as soon as the news reached her. Belle was grateful to see her and they talked well into the night. Jennie was a calming influence

and stayed with her during the intervening days and through the funeral. She provided the support that only a loving friend could. Belle was grateful to have her as she was the closest thing to family she had. Belle also took leave of her job at the library, intending to return to work when she got everything figured out. The University sent the assistant librarian from the main campus to fill in for her while she was absent.

The wake was held for two days in the parlor of her father's spacious home and you could hardly get to the casket for all the flowers in the room. Belle met business associates, suppliers and customers as well as friends and distant relatives, all of whom were very gracious to her. Fortunately, Jennie was by her side and made note of the names of many people. Belle was still in awe of everything and would have not remembered a fraction of the people who offered their sympathy. She was again assured by the people from the foundry that all would be taken care of and she need not concern herself with the company until things had settled down and she was disposed to get involved. Her friend, Constable Albert Wagner, assured her that the police were diligently investigating the murder, although they as yet had no solid suspects nor any motive. Mr. Cooper hovered about incessantly, offering to help her with anything but not with anything specific. It was again Thomas Longley who, in a quiet moment, mentioned that he was not sure exactly what Francis Cooper did for her father and although he was on a generous salary he was seldom at the foundry. When he was, his relationship with her father was all business and to his knowledge they never saw each other socially.

Belle reviewed both in her mind and in conversation with Jennie, her past meetings with her father, all but forgotten as insignificant at the time. They became acquainted when he, as owner of the Bingahamson Foundry, had generously provided the mechanical devices for the movable book stacks in the old college library. He had gone out of his way to insure that the equipment he provided for the project was according to design and worked as intended. During the course of construction they had many conversations and he seemed genuinely interested in, not only the project, but in her personally. After the disastrous outcome of that book stack affair ... that is another story ... he visited the library several times concerned with her wellbeing. Even in the following years, he had shown interest in her in a considerate manner and she thought him to be a gentle and caring man.

Attorney Jonathan Roberts was most helpful throughout this ordeal and after the funeral suggested that Belle should consider moving into her father's house. There were many practical reasons including the fact that she now owned it, the car and driver, who both resided in the coach house would be always at her disposal, and she would need the use of his, or rather her, study to conduct business. Jennie helped convince her to make the move adding several other practicalities to the argument. Belle decided that living in his home would provide an opportunity to learn to know her father better. And so she and Jennie went there to speak with the housekeeper, Miss Bridget O'Flarity, and make the necessary arrangements. A few days later, several workers from the factory, using a company truck, moved Belle's few belongings to her new home and she settled into the bedroom, formerly occupied by Mrs. Binghamson.

Belle spent considerable time in the study. One wall was occupied with floor to ceiling book shelves with many interesting volumes. She would have no lack of reading material. She quickly became comfortable with the big ornate desk and the comfortable leather chair. Soon either Seth Packard or Thomas Longley were visiting, bringing contracts, orders and other papers which needed the signature of the owner of the company. These visits gave her the opportunity to learn more of the company and of her father. She also made some visits to the foundry taking a guided tour and having the opportunity to meet and speak with many of the employees, who seemed to be very happy in their jobs, in spite of the very dirty and hot conditions which are the nature of foundries. They all had good words concerning both her father and the other managers, particularly Mr. Packard, the plant manager.

One of the last rooms Belle inspected in the house was her father's bedroom. It was like an invasion of a shrine to her. But, she had been curious about the small plain writing desk in the room. There was a pen, a bottle of ink, but strangely, no writing material. She asked Miss Bridget if he ever used it since there was the desk in the study. Yes, indeed he did. Bridget often brought him a cup of hot chocolate late in the evening as he sat there and wrote in a book or ledger of some sort with a blue cover. But where was the book kept? was Belle's inquiry. Miss Bridget had no idea and often wondered herself about that.

Besides the small desk, which had but one small drawer, empty save for a spare pen, the chair, and the large plush bed, the room held a chest of

drawers and a large, ornate wardrobe. The wardrobe contained several suits and a number of shirts. After several visits to the room, Belle became curious about the large space at the base of the wardrobe and eventually discovered that there was a well hidden compartment in it and there was, not one book, but several. They were journals, hand written by her father and spanning a good part of his life. At first she didn't even tell Jennie about them but in her solitude began scanning through them eventually discovering some of her father's innermost thoughts and details of many important events of his life, and it turns out, hers.

Concerning herself, Belle learned that at first, only he had held the secrets of his fatherhood and he sent the money to her aunt without the knowledge of anyone else. After several years, remorse over the deception began to bear down on him and he confessed his infidelity to his wife. She of course was hurt and at first, angry. But she had come to know and respect the man he had now become and not only forgave him but joined in his concern for his secret daughter's wellbeing. She insisted on sending little gifts for little Belle. However they would keep the secret to avoid any scandal to the family. Belle could not keep this from Jennie and told her of the discovery.

But then, there was something that disturbed Belle very much. Francis Cooper was a friend of her father in their youth. He knew of his indiscretion and eventually figured out that he had fathered a child and was supporting it. When Atticus Sr. died and Jr. became owner of the foundry, Cooper demanded to be placed on the payroll or he would expose his friend to his wife and the world. Atticus did not tell Cooper that his wife already knew of it but did not want to cause her or anyone else embarrassment so he acquiesced to the demand. It was little price to pay for his sin. And so it went for many years. However, after the death of Mrs. Binghamson, Atticus told Cooper that he was going to discharge him and let the chips fall where they may. He knew that Cooper did not know the identity of the child so she would not be hurt and he hoped that rather than expose himself as a blackmailer, Cooper would just go away. They argued, Cooper insisting that Atticus' social life would be ruined and the scandal may well impact the business. Time went by and the situation festered.

Belle, being quite disturbed, went to her friend Constable Albert Wagner and related the entire thing. The journals were evidence, if of nothing else, blackmail. And the two agreed that Cooper, being afraid of being exposed as

a blackmailer, may well have been motivated to do away with her father. He had been suspect anyway since he could not account for his whereabouts during the time when the murder occurred but he was one of several who were questioned at the time. He had been seen leaving the pavilion prior to the murder and had not returned. Albert consulted with detectives and the states attorney's office and decided to bring Cooper in for questioning.

When confronted with the information from the journals and when it was suggested that he may be the murderer, Cooper admitted to the blackmail but used it as the reason he could not have murdered his victim. "Why would I kill the goose that was laying my golden eggs?" was his defense. "Because you were in danger of being exposed as a blackmailer." was the reply. He was taken into custody on the blackmail charge and that gave the police the opportunity to search his home. During that search, a hat and a pair of shoes were found with traces of blood though an attempt had been made to wipe them clean. It was assumed that any blood splattered clothing had been disposed of.

Francis Cooper was soon charged with the murder and subsequently convicted for both crimes. He languished in prison for the rest of his life.

Belle, after some considerable thought, assumed the position of Chairman of the Board of the foundry. Seth Packard was the second generation of his family to work there. His father, Shepard Packard had been hired by her grandfather, Atticus Sr. as a mold maker in the early days of the company. Belle named Seth as President of the company, a position he well deserved and of which he was eminently capable. That relieved Belle of the need for her signatures on company documents and contracts while providing a substantial income. She still retained control for major decisions regarding capital expenditures for the company. With that income and the many social and charitable activities in which she found herself involved, she gave up her position at the library. She and Miss Bridget, as she preferred to be called, became more like family than employer and employee and Fred the driver soon was another of her trusted circle. She soon became accustomed to the luxury of having a car and driver. This was especially convenient when she decided to visit her grandmother at the sanitarium. She found that although Leticia required constant care and seemed to be unresponsive most of the time, she had brief moments of lucidity. She thought Belle was her deceased daughter and was pleased to have her visiting. Belle made these visits a

regular event and on rare occasions Leticia told her little snippets of the family's life in the early days.

Belle's life was transformed and expanded beyond her wildest dreams. She could not imagine what more was to come but became fascinated with the Bingahamson family genealogy which was both long and interesting. Belle didn't regret anything of her birth, childhood or life to that point but she wished she had known her father better. She found that she loved him very much, as she did her mother although she knew very little about her since her aunt had been reluctant to speak of her. A new world had opened for Belle Fenton.