



Where There's A Will

by *Sherry Ellerboff*

“**B**ESS! We'd almost given you up.”

The comment was directed at the last person to walk into the lawyer's office. Bess looked around the crowded room for a chair. The only one left was in the front next to Mr. Bigsby's desk. Chairs squeaked aside to allow passage of her bulk. Nodding to the familiar faces, Bess made her way to the chair and sat down.

Mr. Bigsby's long bony fingers played with the papers in front of him as he waited for the room to get quiet.

“We will proceed with the reading of the last will and testament of the late Mrs. Q. S. Mendle, better known to many of us as Pearl.”

His lemon colored face was lighted by a brief look of mystery. He wrinkled his beak-like nose in effort to keep his glasses from slipping as he raised his chin and lowered his eyes to see through his bifocals.

Looking around, Bess took everyone into account. She twisted in her chair as if she were looking for a certain person. Her eyes lighted up. The object of her search was sitting in the darkest corner of the ill-lighted room.

So Valerie did come —

Mr. Bigsby suddenly raised his voice. Bess jumped and for the first time since her arrival gave him her full attention.

His nose again wrinkled. The hair sprouting from his nostrils swept his long upper lip which twitched and revealed the fact that he really did have an upper set of teeth.

“— and body, hereby bequeath —”

Mr. Bigsby droned on. Bess nodded and the pile of pink flowers on her hat bobbed as she breathed more deeply. Thinning white hair scraggled from under her hat as it slid to one side. With a jerk she awakened. Blinking, she looked around to see if anyone had noticed her inattention. Everyone’s eyes were glued on the lawyer, so she settled herself to retrieving a strap that had slipped from its moorings. She squirmed, looking like a bowl of jello, as she tried to find a more comfortable spot on her hard, straight-backed chair.

The musty smell of old law books filled the warm, humid air. Yawns were politely stifled. Bess felt her eyelids grow heavy. Her shoulders slumped.

The months rolled back to the night of the Ash Wednesday supper at the church.

“Honestly, Bess, I don’t see why you can’t ever be ready on time.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Pearl — it just seems like I have so much to do and not enough time. The King’s Daughters are having —”

The touring car rolled into the driveway and stopped at the Parish House door. The chauffeur jumped out and handed the two elderly ladies out of the car. He then picked up Pearl’s runny-eyed Pekinese and snapped on the leash.

“Here, George, give Cynara to me — if you want to you can take the rest of the evening off.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Mendle.”

Pearl turned to Bess, “I’m sure that we can ride home with someone,” she reassured.

Feeling unusually gallant, George opened the Parish House door with a flourish and the two friends, plus dog, sailed in.

The foody smells of the supper filled their nostrils as they climbed the steps.

The ill-lighted stairs cast shadows on Pearl's chiseled features which were accented by her clear blue eyes. Her black crepe dress was set off by her ropes of pearls which hung from her long sagging neck. A gold watch was pinned to the area where her breasts should have been — they had withered away as had any curves. Her shoes were remnants of the Twenties and her walk was as sprightly as it had been then.

"Who is giving the speech tonight, Bess?"

"I'm not sure, but I think it's that Valerie Foster." Bess shuddered. "Honestly, she's the biggest social climber I know. She's made everything but King's Daughters, and I'll be damned if she'll get that!"

"Shhhh, Bess! Someone might hear you," reprimanded Pearl.

Cynara pulled on her leash. Suddenly a small head appeared around the corner. Two big brown eyes looked up from under a shock of unruly brown hair and a pink tongue darted through the space where the two front teeth should have been.

"Come along now, Cynara!"

As they entered the brightly lighted hall, heads turned and greetings rang out. Smiling and nodding, they edged their way up to the head table and their customary seats. Two gallants of the grandfather set pulled out the ladies' chairs and they sat down.

"Bess, what's on the menu tonight?"

Bess peered around the table, "I think we're having catfish."

Pearl rolled her eyes toward heaven and quivered.

"God!" she whispered. "If there's anything I simply detest it's catfish the way they fix it in this part of the country. When Q. S. and I were in —"

She was cut short by the arrival of the food. Her bejeweled fingers slid her napkin past the edge of the table and she shook it.

"Good Lord, Bess, look at this napkin."

Pearl held the linen napkin high enough for everyone

to see. Dead center there was a huge hole. The room grew quiet.

"Pearl, for God's sake, put that damn thing down!" Bess choked. "It's one of the ones you gave to the St. Kathryn's Guild."

Pearl paled.

"Oh, hell," she sputtered. She stood up and announced in her gravel-like voice, "There will be 400 more napkins delivered to the church tomorrow morning."

Another napkin was produced and the two friends proceeded silently with their meal.

The other diners were affected by the incident for a few minutes, but soon the room again buzzed pleasantly.

Pearl nonchalantly picked bones out of the fish and fed it to Cynara who would take it and then go under the table and spit it out.

It wasn't until the last bite of apple pie was eaten and the last drop of tea was drunk that either woman said anything. Their silence was honored by those around them.

"How did you like your catfish, Mrs. Mendle?"

Pearl was saved from lying by the rap for silence by the speaker of the evening, Valerie Foster.

"Oh, no," groaned Bess, "It is Valerie."

"This day has been celebrated by Christians everywhere since —" Valerie's high nasal voice resounded through the oak beamed hall.

Pleasantly full from her meal, Bess felt her muscles relax. Valerie's voice faded farther and farther away.

"Bess, Bess," whispered Pearl as she elbowed the slumped form beside her. "Bess! Wake up the speech is over."

Bess shook her head to clear it and stretched her fingers as a cat does upon awakening.

"Is she done already? I thought she'd drag it out at least an hour."

"She did. Shhhh, I think she's coming over."

Valerie started to edge her way over to where Bess and Pearl were sitting. Her gray-green eyes narrowed as she planned how to present her news to them. She fingered her French roll to see if there were any stray hairs and then she

smoothed her skirt over her slim hips. A trail of "My Sin" followed her through the crowded tables. She stopped a short distance from her destination to make a last minute check of her appearance. Deciding that she was as close to perfect as possible, she stepped up to the elderly women.

"Bess and Pearl, how are you?" Both cringed at the use of their first names.

"I'm so glad that you could come tonight to hear my speech."

"It was very well given, don't you think, Pearl?"

"Oh, yes, I would say it was one of the better ones given this year."

Neither woman could look at the other so they both stared at Valerie.

"I think I have some information that might interest you two as collectors of antiques."

Two sets of age-lengthened ears perked up at the word "antiques." From the mention of the word a stone wall was erected between the two friends.

"I have a friend who was digging in her attic the other day and she found a table that her great-grandmother brought over from France." Valerie paused and looked searchingly from Bess to Pearl. Both faces were masked by curious indifference. Valerie continued, "She looked it up at the library and found it to be French Provincial of the Baroque period. She asked me what to do with it, and I told her that I had a couple of a—uh—friends, one of whom might be interested."

Neither Bess nor Pearl wanted to be the first to speak.

Finally Bess could stand it no longer, "That's very interesting Valerie. You know my home is furnished with French Provincial."

"I have heard that it was, though I've never seen it inside."

Pearl picked up her dog and stood up.

"Bess, I think that we should be getting home."

"Would you girls like a ride?" Valerie's eyes filled with hope as she awaited their reply.

"That would be very nice, Valerie. I gave George the night off—"

Bess broke in before Pearl could continue. "You can drop Pearl off and then come see my home."

"I'll go get the Caddy and pick you up at the door." Valerie departed holding her head high with new-found confidence.

Pearl and Bess waited on the edge of the parking lot outside the door. A small dark figure with a shock of unruly hair appeared on the driveway. Skepticism filled Pearl's chiseled features as she watched the little boy come closer. Her hand grasped the thong of her hand-tooled leather walking stick as she prepared to defend her dog. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other and set her ropes of pearls swinging like a pendulum. The little boy stooped down to pick up some pebbles.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, young man."

The iciness of her tone made the little boy shiver. He jerked up and blinked as if had just seen her. Stones flew up as he beat a fast retreat toward the back of the church.

"Your mommy wouldn't let that nasty boy throw stones at her Cynara," she purred as she stretched down to fondle the only child she'd ever loved.

After they had dropped Pearl off, Valerie and Bess drove to the latter's home.

"Just pull up in the driveway and we'll go in the back door."

Bess fumbled in her over-stuffed purse for the keys.

"Oh, damn! I just remembered that I left them on the counter of the sink. We'll have to go back to Pearl's and get hers."

"All right."

Valerie deftly swung the car around and coasted down the driveway.

"How much did you say your friend wanted for her table?" Bess casually asked.

"Oh, she didn't know how much it was worth. I think she'll just take offers for it." Valerie looked straight ahead as if she were concentrating on her driving.

"Has she had many offers?"

"Not that I know of."

Bess looked out her side window.

"You know, even though Pearl is my best friend, I absolutely wonder about her sanity," she lowered her voice, "The way she carries on about that sniveling dog of hers is absolutely insipid."

A slow smile crept around Valerie's lips as she swung into Pearl's drive.

"Do you think that this — er — friend of yours would consider a price of about, oh, say in the neighborhood of seven hundred dollars?"

Valerie pulled the car to a stop and turned off the ignition. "Well, Bess, I could ask her. You don't have to get out, I'll just run in." She practically jumped out of the car.

"May I see Mrs. Mendle, please?"

"One moment, Madame. Your name please."

"Valerie Foster."

The white starched apron over the black cotton dress crackled as the maid shuffled down the hall.

She returned a few minutes later.

"This way, Mrs. Foster."

Valerie followed the maid down the walnut paneled hall to the last room.

"Yes, Valerie, what is it?"

Pearl was silhouetted by the flaming fire in the large stone fireplace. Her face was grotesquely shadowed as she bent over Cyara's bed and fluffed the velvet pillow.

"Bess locked her keys in her house and would like to use yours."

"Oh, that Bess!"

"Janet, go get my purse. I think I left it in my bed room." She turned to Valerie, "Just sit down, she'll be a minute."

"Oh, thank you."

Valerie sat in one of the plush chairs by the fire. A gleam of silver on the table next to her caught her eye.

"Pearl, this is a lovely piece of work!"

"Oh, that. One of Q. S.'s friends brought it back with him. It's a solid silver back-scratcher." A calculating look came into Pearl's eyes.

"Who is this friend who has the table?"

"Oh, I don't think you'd know her." Valerie concentrated on twirling the silver back-scratcher.

"Well, then you tell her that I'm willing to pay seven hundred dollars for it. — By the way, has Bess mentioned it?"

"Let me see, she did say something, but that's neither here nor there."

Pearl stood up and walked over to stand directly in front of Valerie.

"What did she say?" she demanded.

Valerie hesitated a moment, "Well she said that she, oh — well — that she thought you were — a — slipping a little," she blurted.

Pearl writhed as though she had been struck. In a moment she regained her composure.

"Well, I'll have you know something about Bess. She told me that if you thought you would ever be admitted to King's Daughters, you were crazy!"

Pearl clenched her teeth and tightened her fists.

"I'll give you one thousand dollars for the table, take it or leave it."

"Well, Pearl, I see that you jumped at your chance!"

"Bess! How long have you been there?" Pearl's pale face turned crimson.

"Long enough to know what a true friend really is."

Bess' head jerked up and her back straightened with a crack.

"— And to my best friend, Bess Barton I bequeath my house and all its furnishings."

Bess opened her eyes at the sound of her name.

Mr. Bigsby read on, "Although we had our share of spats, I have never found a more loyal person. I'm sorry that I can't give her the table personally, but antiques were the one thing we were rivals for, and I couldn't be the one to give in."

Bess felt the warm tingly glow of victory fade into hollowness. The loss of Pearl was greater than the gain of the table.

"— Twenty thousand dollars should take care of Cynara whom I entrust to my loyal chauffeur, George. In the event of her death, my casket is to be opened so that we can spend the future tomorrows together."

Mr. Bigsby's dead eyes came to life for a fleeting second and he almost smiled.

“To Valerie Foster, I bequeath the only exception in Bess’ grant. She is to have the solid silver back-scratcher.”

Bess could hardly contain herself. She twisted around to see Valerie’s face, but Valerie had sunken down behind the fat man in front of her. *I really feel sorry for her, but not sorry enough to let her in King’s Daughters.*

“Careful — careful, I say! Don’t hit the legs on the door jam.” Lovingly Bess watched the man carry in her table.

“Put it over here, by the stairs. Careful now!”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Gingerly Bess dusted off the dark wood as she examined it for scratches. Then she walked over to a chair where she had put a cut-glass bowl filled with roses.

Pearl loved roses. —

The muscles in Bess’ arm twitched as she lifted the heavy bowl. Slowly she set the bowl down so that the water wouldn’t splash on the table.

The table gave a groan and collapsed.

Awakened

by James Wickliff

The wind beat his fists against the window pane,
 And groped with prying fingers at the eaves.
 He tried the door, heaving hard against the chain.
 Then I heard him shuffle off through dried leaves,
 And I lay back, relaxed, and slept again.