

Vandercook Margaret

The Camp Fire Girls in After Years



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CHAPTER I

The Inaugural Ball

FACING the hills, the great house had a wonderful view of the curving banks of a river.

Half an hour before sunset a number of workmen hurried away across the grounds, while a little later from behind the closed blinds glowed hundreds of softly shaded electric lights. The lawns were strung with rows and rows of small lamps suspended from one giant tree to the next, but waiting for actual darkness to descend before shedding forth their illumination.

Evidently preparations had been made on a splendid scale, both inside the house and out, for an entertainment of some kind. Yet curiously there seemed to be a strange hush over everything, a sense of anxiety and suspense pervading the very atmosphere. Then, in odd contrast to the other lights, the room on the third floor to the left was in almost total darkness save for a single tiny flame no larger than a nurse's covered candle.

At about half-past six o'clock suddenly and with almost no noise the front door of the house opened. The next moment a slight form appeared upon the flight of broad steps and gazed down the avenue. From behind her came the mingled fragrance of roses and violets, while before her arose the even more delicious tang of earth and grass and softly drifting autumn leaves of the late October evening.

Nevertheless neither the beauty of the evening nor its perfumes attracted the girl's attention, for her expression remained grave and frightened, and without appearing aware of it she sighed several times.

Small and dark, with an extraordinary quantity of almost blue-black hair and a thin white face dominated by a pair of unhappy dark eyes, the girl's figure suggested a child, although she was plainly older. In her hand she carried a cane upon which she leaned slightly.

"It does seem too hard for this trouble to have come at this particular time," she murmured in unconscious earnestness. "If only I could do something to help, yet there is absolutely nothing, of course, except to wait. Still, I wish Faith would come home."

Then, after peering for another moment down the avenue of old elms and maple trees, she turned and went back into the house, closing the door behind her and moving almost noiselessly.

For the present no one else was to be seen, at least in the front part of the big mansion, except the solitary figure of this young girl, who looked somewhat incongruous and out of place in her handsome surroundings. Notwithstanding, she seemed perfectly at home and was plainly neither awed by nor unfamiliar with them. The hall was decorated with palms and evergreens and festoons of vines, and adorning the high walls were portraits, most of them of men of stern countenance and of a past generation, while here and there stood a marble bust. But without regarding any of these things with special attention the girl walked quickly past them and entered the drawing room on the right. Then at last her face brightened.

Surely the room was beautiful enough to have attracted any one's attention, although it was not exactly the kind of room one would see in a private house, for it happened to be in the Governor's mansion in the state of New Hampshire.

In preparation for the evening's entertainment the furniture had been moved away except for a number of chairs and divans. The two tall marble mantels were banked with roses and violets and baskets of roses swung from the two crystal chandeliers.

With a murmured exclamation the girl dropped down on a low stool in the corner where the evergreens almost entirely concealed her and where she appeared more like an elf creature that had come into the house with the green things surrounding her than an everyday girl. For a quarter of an hour she must have remained there alone, when she was aroused from her reverie by some one's entrance. Then, although the girl did not move or speak, her whole face changed and the sullen, unhappy look disappeared, while oddly her eyes filled with tears.

There could have been nothing fairer in the room than the woman who had just come quietly into it. She must have been about twenty-eight years old; her hair was a beautiful auburn, like sunshine on certain brown and red leaves in the woods in late October; her eyes were gray, and she was of little more than medium height, with slender hips, but a full throat and chest. At the present moment she was wearing a house gown of light blue cashmere, and although she looked as if life might always before have been kind to her, at present her face was pale and there were marks of sleeplessness about her eyes and mouth.

Apparently trying to summon an interest in her surroundings which she scarcely felt, she glanced about the room until her eyes rested on the silent girl.

"Why, Angel, what are you doing in here alone, child? How lovely everything looks, and yet I am afraid I cannot come down to receive people tonight. All afternoon I have been trying to make up my mind to attempt it and each moment it seems more impossible."

Then with a gesture indicating both fatigue and discouragement the woman sat down, folding her hands in her lap.

"But the baby isn't any worse, I heard only half an hour ago," the younger girl interrupted quickly, and in answer to a shake of the head from her companion went on: "You simply must be present tonight, Princess. This is the greatest night in your husband's career and you know the Inaugural Ball would be an entire failure without you! Staying up-stairs won't do little Tony any good. And think what it would mean to the Governor to have to manage all alone! You know you promised Anthony before his election that you would attend to the social side of his office for him, as he declared he didn't know enough to undertake it. So you can't desert him at the very beginning."

Swiftly Angelique Martins crossed the room and seated herself on the arm of her friend's chair. "I promise you on my honor that I shall sit just outside little Tony's bedroom the entire evening and if he is even the tiniest bit worse I shall come down and tell you on the instant."

There was a moment of silence and then the newly elected Governor's wife replied: "I suppose you are right, Angel, and I must try to do what you say, for nothing else is fair to Anthony. Yet I never dreamed of ever having to choose between my love and duty to my baby and my husband! But dear me, I am sure I have not the faintest idea how the Governor's Lady should behave at her first reception, even if I have to make my *début* in the character in the next few hours."

Then, in a lighter tone than she had yet used in their conversation, Betty Ashton, who was now Mrs. Governor Graham, smiled, placing her hand for a moment on that of her companion.

For the friendship between Betty Ashton and the little French girl whom she had discovered at the hospital in Boston had never wavered even after the Betty of the Camp Fire days had become Mrs. Anthony Graham, wife of the youngest governor ever elected to the highest office in his state. Moreover, Betty and Anthony now had two children of their own, the little Tony, a baby of about two years old, who was now dangerously ill on the top floor of the Governor's mansion, and Bettina, who was six.

Angelique Martins was almost like an adoring younger sister. She was approaching twenty; yet on account of her lameness and shyness she appeared much younger. But she was one of the odd girls who in some ways are like children and yet in others are older than people ever dream. After her mother's death, several years before, she had come to live with Betty and Anthony and held a position as an assistant stenographer in the Governor's office. Ordinarily she was strangely silent and reserved, so that no one, not even her best friend, entirely understood her.

"But you must not miss the ball tonight, Angel," Betty now continued more cheerfully. "You and Faith have been talking of it for weeks, and so I can't have you sacrifice yourself for me. Besides, one of the nurses can do what you offered and send me a message if I am needed. Don't you remember that your dress is even prettier than Faith's? I was perfectly determined it should be." And Betty smiled, amused at herself. She was always a little jealous for her protégé of Faith Barton. It was true that since their first meeting at Sunrise Cabin the two girls had become close friends. But then Betty could seldom fail to see, just as she had in the beginning, the painful contrast between them. Faith had grown into a beautiful girl and Dr. Barton and Rose were entirely devoted to her; and she had also both charm and talent, although still given to impossible dreams about people and things.

Angel now shook her head. "You know you would feel safer with me to stand guard over Tony than if you had only one of the servants," she argued a little resentfully. Then with her cheeks crimsoning: "Besides, Princess, you know that I perfectly loathe having to meet strangers. No one in the world except you could ever have induced me even to think of it. I am ever so much happier alone with you and the children or pegging away at my typewriter at the office. I believe people ought to remain where they belong in this world, and you can't possibly make me look like Faith by dressing me up in pretty clothes. I should never conceive of being her rival in anything."

There was a curious note in the lame girl's voice that passed unnoticed, for her companion suddenly inquired: "By the way, dear, do you know what has become of Faith? I passed her room and she was not there. I hope she is not out alone. I know she has a fashion of loving to go about in the twilight, dreaming her dreams and composing verse. Still, when she is here visiting me I would much rather she did not."

"But Faith isn't alone. She is with the Governor's secretary, Kenneth Helm," Angel answered. "Mr. Helm came to the house with a message and Faith asked him to go out with her."

Betty smiled. Faith Barton scorned conventionalities and felt sure that she was above certain of them. "Oh, I did not know Kenneth and Faith had learned to know each other so well in two weeks' time," she replied carelessly, her attention wandering to the little Tony up-stairs. "However, Faith is all right if she is with Kenneth. I know Anthony has the greatest possible trust in him or he would never have selected him for his secretary in such troublesome political times as these. I don't believe you seem to like Kenneth as much as you once did. But you must not be prejudiced against so many people. He used to be very kind to you."

Without waiting for Angel's reply Betty walked away. If she could have seen her expression she might have been surprised or annoyed.

For sometimes Angel had wondered if it would be wise for her to take her friend into her confidence. Surely she had reasons for not being so sure of the Governor's confidence in his secretary. But then what proof had she to offer against him? Besides, people often considered her suspicious and unfriendly. Moreover, in this case the French girl did not altogether trust herself. Was there not some personal reason in her dislike? It was entirely true that she had not felt like this in the beginning of their acquaintance.

With a feeling of irritation against herself, Angel started to leave the drawing room. This was plainly no time for worrying over the future; she must go and have something to eat at once so as to be able to help watch the baby. There was only one regret the girl felt at her own decision. She was sorry not to see Betty receiving her guests at the Inaugural Ball tonight. For her friend remained her ideal of what a great lady should be in the best sense. Moreover, there would be other old friends whom she had once known at Sunrise Cabin. However, some of them were guests at the mansion, so she could meet them later.

Out in the hall the little French girl now discovered Faith and Kenneth Helm returning from their walk. The Governor's private secretary must have been about twenty-four or five years old. He was a Yale graduate and had light-brown hair and eyes of almost the same color. He had the shoulders of an athlete, a clear, bright complexion, and as Angel watched them she could not deny that he had

a particularly charming smile. However, he was assuredly not looking at her. It was absurd to care, of course, yet nevertheless even the humblest person scarcely likes being wilfully ignored. And Angel was sure that the young man had seen her, even though he gave no appearance of having done so.

The next moment, after her companion's departure, Faith Barton turned to her friend. Faith's cheeks were delicately flushed from her walk in the autumn air and her pale gold hair was blowing about her face. Her blue eyes were wide open and clear and she looked curiously innocent of any wrong or misfortune in the world. Surely there were seldom two girls offering a more complete contrast than the two who now tiptoed softly down the long hall together.

"I am going to rest a little while," Faith said at parting. "But do let us try to have a long, quiet talk tomorrow. I want to tell you a secret that no one else in the world must know for the present."

CHAPTER II

New Names for Old Acquaintances

THERE was a shimmer of silver and blue on the stairs and then the man with his eyes upturned saw his wife moving toward him in a kind of cloud.

The next moment with a laugh of mingled embarrassment and pleasure Betty Graham put up her hand, covering her husband's eyes.

"You must not look at me like that, Anthony, or you will make me abominably vain," she whispered. "Wait until the girls and the receiving party appear and then you will see what an ordinary person the new 'Governor's Lady' is and repent having raised humble Betty Ashton to such an exalted position."

Arm in arm the husband and wife now moved toward the drawing room.

"How little we ever dreamed of this grandeur, dear, in the days when I had to work so hard to persuade you to marry me."

"Perhaps if I had known I never should have dared," Betty went on, still half in earnest. "But I mean to do the best I can to help in our new position, although I must confess I am dreadfully frightened at having to receive so many distinguished people tonight. However, nurse says Tony is really better. And I shall have you to tell me what I ought to say and do."

Now under the tall crystal chandelier the young Governor lifted his wife's hand to his lips with a smile at her absurdity. In spite of his ordinary origin Anthony Graham had a curious courtliness of manner. It was amusing to hear Betty talking of being afraid of people. All her life she had had unusual social charm, winning friends and admiration in every circle of society almost from her babyhood. Naturally in the years since her marriage, during her husband's struggle from the position of a successful young lawyer in a small town to the highest office in the state, both her charm and self-possession had increased. Indeed, it was well known that she had been her husband's chief inspiration and aid, and there were many persons who declared that it had been the wife's beauty and money that were responsible for the husband's success. However, this remark was made by the Governor's political enemies and not his friends and was of course untrue.

Nevertheless Anthony did look somewhat boyish and insignificant tonight for his distinguished position. He was of only medium height, and although his shoulders were broad, he had never lost the thinness of his boyhood due to hardships and too severe study. Yet there was nothing weak or immature about his face with its deep-set hazel eyes, the high, grave forehead with the dark hair pushed carelessly back, and the firm, almost obstinate, set of his lips.

Indeed, the young Governor already had gained a reputation for obstinacy, and once persuaded to a policy or an idea, was difficult to change. This trait of character had been partly responsible for his election to office. For there had been serious graft and dishonesty in the politics of New Hampshire, and led by Anthony Graham the younger men in the state had been able to defeat the old-time political ring. Whether or not the good government party would be allowed to remain in power depended largely on the new Governor. He had promised to stop the graft and crime in the state and to give positions to no persons who were not fitted for them. Of course this meant that he must have many enemies who would do their best to destroy his reputation. Already they were aware that the young Governor's one weakness was his devotion to his beautiful wife.

But Betty used often to be amused at the outside world's opinion of her husband's character. For never once in their married life so far had he ever refused any request of hers. Therefore the real test was yet to come.

Five minutes later and there was once more the sound of movement and laughter on the stairway when the re-opening of the drawing room door admitted six persons, who were to form the first members of the receiving line.

First came Doctor and Mrs. Richard Ashton. Already Dick had made a reputation for himself as a surgeon in Boston, while Esther was one of the plain girls who so frequently grow handsomer as they grow older. Her tallness and pallor with her abundant red hair and sweet yet reserved manner formed tonight as striking a contrast to her sister's grace and animation as it had in the days when they first learned to know of the closeness of the tie between them.

Mr. and Mrs. William Webster had come all the way from Woodford to Concord, leaving three babies at home, to assist their old friends at the Inaugural Ball. You must have guessed that Mollie O'Neill, as Mrs. William Webster, would have grown plumper and prettier during the busy, happy years of married life with her husband and children on their large farm. For Mollie now had a small daughter "Polly," named for her beloved twin sister, and a pair of twin sons, Dan and Billy. She was more than ever in love with her husband and, many people believed, entirely under his thumb. Yet there were times when Mollie could and would assert herself in a surprising fashion just as she had in former days with her girl friends.

Tonight she was wearing a white silk which looked just the least bit countrified and yet was singularly becoming to Mollie's milk-white skin, pink cheeks and shining black hair. Yet in spite of never having changed his occupation of farmer, there was little to suggest the countryside in Billy Webster's appearance, except in his unusual strength and size. For he had fulfilled the prediction made to Polly O'Neill over a Camp Fire luncheon many years before. He had remained a farmer and a highly successful one and yet had seen a good deal of the world and understood many things besides farming.

Of the three Sunrise Hill Camp Fire girls who had within the last few moments joined Betty and her husband, the third was the most changed. For is it not difficult to imagine Meg Everett transformed into a fashionable society woman, Meg, whose hair never would stay neatly braided, whose waist and skirt so frequently failed to connect?

However, after a number of love affairs, to her friends' surprise Meg had married a man as unlike her in taste and disposition as one could well imagine. He was a worldly, fashionable man, supposed to be wealthy. Anyhow, he and Meg lived in a handsome house, owned a motor car and entertained a great deal. They had no children, and perhaps this was the reason why Meg did not look altogether happy. Sometimes her old friends had wondered if there could be other reasons, for Meg had always been a warm-hearted, impetuous girl, careless of fashions and indifferent to conventions, and now she was always dressed in clothes of the latest design and at least appeared like a fashionable woman.

Nevertheless Meg had always been more easily influenced than any other of the Camp Fire girls, hating to oppose the wishes of any one near to her heart. Her husband, Jack Emmet, was an intimate friend of her adored brother John. He and Meg made an attractive couple, for although Mr. Emmet was not handsome, he was tall and had a slender, correct figure and sharply cut features with light blue eyes and brown hair. Meg's costume was quite as beautiful as Betty's, a soft rose silk and chiffon, and her golden hair was fastened with a small rope of pearls.

"You are as lovely tonight as ever, Betty, and I know Anthony is proud of you," Meg whispered, holding her friend's hand for an instant. "Remember when you once believed that Anthony was falling in love with me? Silly child, he never thought of any one except you! But then he and I have always been special friends since he believed I helped him win you. I want to tell him how proud I feel of you both tonight."

As Meg moved away, Mollie's plump arm, which was only partly concealed by her glove, slipped inside her hostess's.

"It is nice we can have a few moments to ourselves before the ball begins," she remarked shyly, glancing toward her husband, who was for the moment talking with Jack Emmet. The two men did not like each other, but had been forced into conversation by Meg's moving off with Anthony.

Betty kissed her friend, quite forgetting the dignity of her position on the present occasion.

"Dear old Mollie, it is good of you to have come to help me tonight! I know you don't like this society business. How I wish we had Polly here with us! She promised to come if possible, but I had a telegram from her only this afternoon saying that she is almost on the other side of the continent. It was dated Denver, I believe."

The same look of affectionate incomprehension which she had often directed toward Polly, again crossed Mollie Webster's pretty face.

"It is just as impossible as ever to keep up with Polly," she explained half complainingly. "She has been acting through the West all summer, but promised to come home for a visit this autumn. Now she writes she won't be here for some time. Dear me, I do wish that Polly would marry and settle down. Of course I know it is wonderful for her to have become such a distinguished actress, but I never think she is very happy and I am always worrying over her."

Betty laughed and then looked serious. "Polly never will settle down, as you mean it, Mollie dear, even if she should marry," she argued, forgetting for the moment the other friends close about her and the evening's ordeal. For her thoughts had traveled away to Polly O'Neill, who was to her surprise still Polly O'Neill. For at one time she had certainly believed that Polly had intended marrying Richard Hunt, the actor, and just why their engagement had been broken no one had ever been told. Possibly it was because Polly had wished to devote herself entirely to her work. She had always said as a girl that marriage should never be allowed to interfere with her career, and certainly it had not. For the Polly who had made her first success some ten years before in the little Irish play was now one of the best known actresses in the United States. Indeed, she had succeeded to the position once held by Margaret Adams, since Margaret Adams had married and retired.

However, for the present there was no further opportunity for mutual confidences, since in the interval Faith Barton had appeared and with her the Governor's new secretary, besides a dozen other persons, most of them political friends, who were to assist in opening the Inaugural Ball.

As Anthony joined her, Betty felt her cheeks flush and her knees tremble for an instant. Moving toward them, accompanied by his wife, was the man whom Anthony had defeated in the election for Governor. To save her life Betty could not help recalling at this instant all the hateful things this man had previously said against her husband. Yet she must not be childish, nor show ill feeling. Ex-Governor Peyton and his wife were much older than she and Anthony, and besides they were their guests.

Betty's manner was perfectly gracious and collected by the time the visitors reached them.

CHAPTER III

Idle Suspicion

SHE had sat huddled up in a chair outside the baby's room for several hours. Her self-sacrifice had been entirely unnecessary, as half a dozen persons had assured her, but Angel was by no means certain that she was not happier in her present position than if she had been down-stairs in the crowded ballroom unnoticed and perhaps in the way of the few people who would try to be kind to her.

Two or three times she had stolen in to look at Tony. He was sleeping quietly and peacefully, a big beautiful baby with Betty's soft auburn hair and Anthony's hazel eyes. But now a clock somewhere was striking twelve and Angel decided that she must have a look at the guests before they went away. She had put on the white frock of soft chiffon and lace that Betty had given her, but somehow it only made her look more childish and insignificant. Her face was pale now with weariness and her hair and eyes seemed so dark in comparison as to give her a kind of uncanny appearance. Perhaps waiting to gain more courage and perhaps for other reasons, immediately after leaving the nursery Angel, before starting down-stairs, went into another big room at the end of the hall.

As the girl leaned over to gaze at a little sleeper a small hand reached up and touched her face. It was that of Bettina, the "little Princess" as everybody called her. Nevertheless Bettina was not in the least like her mother. She had long hair that was gold in some lights and in others a pale brown, and her eyes were bluer than gray. Indeed, Polly had once said of her two or three years before, that Tina's eyes had no color like other people's, for they merely reflected the lights above them like a clear pool. The little girl was slender and quiet and many persons believed her shy, which was not altogether true. Possibly the oddest of her characteristics was her ability to understand what other people were thinking and feeling without being told.

Now she whispered: "Why don't you just find a place where you can see, Angel, without any one's seeing you? I shall want you to tell me everything tomorrow. Mother won't understand in the way I mean."

Of course that was just what she should have been doing for these past two hours, Angelique thought to herself as soon after she slipped away. But it was like Bettina to have suggested it. Already she knew the exact place where she might have been in hiding all this time.

On the second floor toward the rear of the house there was a kind of square landing which faced a small room that was oddly separated from the other apartments. For this reason the Governor had chosen it for his private study. Only one servant was allowed to enter this room and very rarely any member of the family. For in it were kept a number of important letters and papers.

But concealing the entrance tonight were a number of palms and other tall plants, and by placing a small camp chair behind them one could see through the railing of the balustrade down into the big hall. The music was there and many beautifully dressed people were walking up and down.

The little French girl stared for ten minutes without moving. She had a curious, almost passionate love of beautiful people and things, inherited from some far-off French ancestor, who may have been a great artist or perchance only carried a great artist's longings in his soul. Indeed, Angel had real talent of her own and whatever her hands touched she could make lovely, whether it was designing a dress, decorating a room or even making a sketch of a scene or a flower, anything that had appealed to her imagination. Through her Camp Fire training she had learned to make remarkable use of her hands, especially in the days before she was able to leave her wheeled chair. Indeed, Betty and all of her friends had been disappointed when she had failed to follow some artistic profession. Betty had urged and pleaded with her to become an artist or designer and had offered to pay her expenses, yet as soon as she was well enough Angel had insisted upon studying something through which she could at once make her living. By this time the little French girl had been brought too close

to life's realities not to understand its difficulties. To make her living as an artist or a designer would take years and years of study and work before she could hope to succeed. Besides, Betty, in spite of Judge Maynard's legacy, was not so rich as she was generous and there were always other people to be thought of. For the Princess had never ceased her generousities, and even if her husband had become a distinguished man it would be difficult for him ever to be a rich one unless something unforeseen happened. Therefore Angel had been happy enough with her stenography and typewriting and with her new position in the Governor's office. For in her heart of hearts it was her philosophy that duty could be done every day and beauty kept for certain exquisite moments.

Now, however, she felt that one of these perfect moments had come. Only she wished that Betty or some one whom she knew might appear within her range of vision. It was entertaining, of course, to watch the strangers and to decide whose clothes were prettiest and guess their names.

Angel drew her chair farther away from the landing so she could peep squarely through the banisters and was now some distance from the study door. Moreover, the following moment she had caught a glimpse of a friend whom she had wished to see almost as much as Betty. There stood a tall girl with pale gold hair, wearing a frock of white and blue, and talking to a young man in as absorbed a fashion as if they had been entirely alone. It was difficult to see her companion and yet the French girl felt that she might have guessed before she finally discovered him. For Faith's face wore the same rapt, excited expression it had worn that afternoon on returning from her walk. What could it mean? Angel pondered. Surely Faith and Kenneth Helm did not yet know each other well enough for Faith's secret to have anything to do with him. Their acquaintance had started only about ten days before.

Surely in her absorbed interest Angelique had no thought of spying on her friend, for two people could not be seriously confidential when hundreds of others were close about them. Nevertheless the watcher felt her own cheeks flush guiltily as she saw the young man below her whispering something in his companion's ear. The next instant, however, Faith had left the hall with some one else. Then to her intense consternation Angel observed Kenneth Helm coming alone straight up the broad stairs. Could it be possible that either one of them had seen her and that Faith was sending Kenneth to bring her down to the ballroom? With all her heart Angel hoped not. She would like to have gotten up and run away to shelter, yet knew it was impossible for her to move without making a noise. By remaining silent there was just a chance that Kenneth Helm was on his way to the men's dressing room and would not notice her. Moreover, if Faith had not sent him to find her probably he would not even speak to her.

It was quite true that the girl in hiding need have felt no concern. The young man certainly did not see her, nor did he pass her by. For some odd reason he stopped for a moment at the top of the landing, glanced quickly about him and then disappeared inside the Governor's private study, opening the door with a key which must have been given him for the especial purpose.

"What could Kenneth wish in there tonight?" Angelique wondered idly, somewhat relieved because his errand plainly had nothing to do with her. Moreover, there was too much that was absorbing below stairs to give a great deal of thought to anything else just at present.

The next instant Angel started, uttering a little gasp of anger and dismay, as a hand was laid rudely upon her shoulder.

"Whom are you spying upon now, 'Angel in the House?'" the young man's voice asked mockingly. "Don't you think that perhaps you are rather an uncanny person anyhow?"

The girl flushed and found it impossible to keep her lips from trembling. When she had first gone to work in Anthony Graham's office, Kenneth Helm had also been employed there and had been unusually kind to her. Recently, however, he seemed to have avoided and almost to have disliked her. This she knew had caused a change in her own attitude, so perhaps her prejudice against the young man's position as the Governor's private secretary was largely due to this. Nevertheless she had done nothing to deserve the change in his treatment of her, and if a human being is disloyal to one friendship, why not to another?

However, at the present moment the girl only wished to be left alone, so she merely shook her head, explaining: "I didn't mean to be spying upon any one, and I am sorry if you think I am uncanny." Then she glanced pathetically down toward the cane at her side, and this time her companion blushed.

"Oh, I did not mean that, Miss Martins. That is not fair of you," he remonstrated. "But please don't mention to the Governor or any one that you saw me go into his private study tonight, will you? You see, I had forgotten something that I ought to have attended to at the office. My memory is not so good as yours. Won't you let me take you down-stairs?"

The lame girl rose slowly, not knowing exactly how to refuse the young man's offer. Besides, she remembered what Betty had said to her. "She must not be so suspicious and prejudiced against people."

"Certainly I won't speak to Mr. Graham of your having gone into his office. Why should I?" she conceded, laying her hand lightly on her companion's arm. "Besides, do you think I talk to the Governor about his affairs just because I live in his house? He is so quiet and stern I am dreadfully afraid of him. It is Betty, Mrs. Graham, who is my friend. If it is not too much trouble to you and she is not too busy I would like to have you take me to her now for a little while. Never in my life have I seen anything so splendid as this reception tonight!"

When the little French girl talked she was not half so homely and unattractive, Kenneth Helm decided as he made his way with her through the crowd. Moreover, he must not turn her into an enemy, for assuredly Mrs. Graham was her devoted friend and what his wife desired was law with the Governor.

Kenneth Helm intended to succeed in life. This was the keynote of his character. He wanted money and power and meant to do anything necessary to attain them.

CHAPTER IV

Ties from Other Days

ONE morning, a few days later, Mrs. Jack Emmet was ushered into Betty's personal sitting room. Betty was writing notes and Bettina was curled up in a big chair near the window with a book of fairy tales in her lap.

Both of them rose at once, Betty kissing her friend affectionately. But her little girl, who showed her affection differently from other children, sitting down by Meg's side, slipped her small hand inside hers.

Meg was beautifully dressed in a dark blue broadcloth and black fox furs with a velvet hat and small black feather curled close against her light hair. Yet the hat was the least bit awry, one lock of hair had come uncurled and been blown about by the wind, and a single blue button hung loose on the stylish coat. Noticing these absurd details for some reason or other, Betty felt oddly pleased. For they brought back the Meg of old days, whom not all the strenuous years of Camp Fire training had been able to make as neat as she should have been, although since her marriage she seemed to have greatly changed.

Therefore, in observing these unimportant facts of her friend's costume Betty failed to catch the difference in her expression. They began their conversation idly enough in discussing the ball of a few nights before, the Governor's health and just how busy he was and what people were saying of him in Concord. For, although Mr. and Mrs. Graham had only been installed in the Governor's mansion a few weeks, Mr. and Mrs. Jack Emmet had been living in Concord ever since their marriage about five years before.

Nevertheless, if Betty had not observed the change in her friend, in some unaccountable fashion Bettina had. Not that the little girl realized that Mrs. Emmet had dark circles under her eyes and that instead of gazing directly at her mother as she talked, her glance traveled restlessly about the pretty room. Nor did Bettina know that Meg's cheeks were not a natural pink, but flushed to uncomfortable redness; no, she only appreciated that "Aunt Meg," for whom she cared a great deal, was uneasy and unhappy and would perhaps enjoy having her keep close beside her.

"You will stay and take lunch with us, won't you, dear?" Betty urged, moving forward to assist her visitor in removing her wraps. "You see, we shall probably be all by ourselves. Anthony is too busy to come home, Angel is at the office and Faith asked to be left alone for the day. The child is probably scribbling away on some story she desires to write. Then after lunch we can see little Tony. The baby is well again, only the nurse wants him kept quiet."

Affectionately Betty placed her hands on Meg's shoulders and standing directly beside her now for the first time looked closely into her face. To her shocked surprise she discovered that unexpected tears had started to Meg's eyes.

At once Betty Graham's happy expression clouded. For she was no less ready with her sympathy than in former days, and the Camp Fire girls of the old Sunrise Club seemed almost like real sisters.

"You came to tell me of something that is troubling you and I didn't dream of it till this minute!" Betty exclaimed, slipping off Meg's coat and unpinning her hat without waiting for permission. Then, pushing her friend down into a big, soft armchair, she took a lower one opposite.

"Isn't it good fortune that we are living in the same place just as we used to long ago?" She continued talking, of course, to allow her companion to gain her self-control. Then she glanced toward Bettina, but Meg only drew the little girl closer, hiding her face for an instant in her soft hair.

"I'm absurd to be so nervous, Betty," Meg whispered apologetically. "Please don't think there is anything serious the matter. Only – only I have come to ask you a favor and I don't know exactly how

to begin. Of course, we used to be very intimate friends and all that, but now you are the Governor's wife, and – and – "

Before she could finish a somewhat hurt voice interposed. "And – and – I am Betty Ashton Graham still, very much at your service, Sweet Marjoram, as Polly once named you. Dear me, Meg, don't be absurd. I can't say I feel particularly exalted by my position as wife of the new Governor, though of course I am frightfully vain of Anthony. Besides you know if there is anything I can do that you would like, I shall be happier than I can say." With a laugh that still had something serious in it, Betty put her hand over her friend's. "I still insist that I owe Anthony partly to you," she ended.

But this time Meg did not trouble to argue the absurd statement.

She began talking at once as rapidly as possible, as if glad to get the subject off her mind.

"It's about John, I came to talk to you, my brother, John Everett, Betty," Meg explained. "I don't know whether you have seen much of him lately, but you were devoted friends once and I thought perhaps for the sake of the past you might be interested."

"John Everett? For the sake of the past I might be interested! Whatever are you talking about?" Betty was now frowning in her effort to understand and looked absurdly like a girl, with her level brows drawn near together and her lips pouting slightly. "Why, of course I am interested. I used to like John better than any of the other beaux we had, when we were girls, except Anthony. Tell me, is John going to be married at last? I have wondered why he has waited such a long time. But I suppose he wanted to be rich first. It has been about two years since we met by accident in a theater in New York, but I thought he had grown handsomer than ever." This time Betty's laugh was more teasing than sympathetic. "I wonder why sisters are so jealous of their big brothers marrying, Mrs. Jack Emmet? You are married yourself – why begrudge John the good fortune? I don't believe Nan has ever entirely forgiven me for capturing Anthony. I am convinced she would have preferred any other of the Camp Fire girls. There is only one of us, however, whom she would have really liked, and that is Sylvia. Yet who would ever think of Doctor Sylvia Wharton's marrying?"

This time Meg's voice was firmer. "But John isn't going to be married, Betty. It is quite a different thing I wish to talk to you about. Instead of John's getting rich on Wall Street, as you think, he has gotten dreadfully poor. And I am afraid it is not just his own money he has lost, but father's savings. Now Horace will have to give up his college and I really don't know what will become of father. He is too old to begin teaching again since his resignation several years ago."

Her voice broke, but then her friend's face was so bewildered and so full of a sudden, ardent sympathy, that it was difficult for Meg to keep her self-control. However, she said nothing more for a minute, but sat biting her lips and wondering how to go on to the next thing.

Fortunately Betty helped her. "I expect John will have to come back home and take care of your father. Horace is too young and it is more John's place than your husband's. I am sorry, for I'm afraid things will seem pretty dull for him here after his gay life in New York."

All at once Betty's face cleared a little and she leaned back in her chair. "But you remember, Meg, that when you first spoke you said you wished me to do you a favor. Is there anything in the world I can do? I am sure I can scarcely imagine what it is, yet if I can in any way help you out of this trouble – "

"You can," Meg whispered shyly; "that is, perhaps not you, but Anthony, and you are almost the same person."

In answer to this rather surprising statement Betty Graham merely shook her head quietly. However, this was scarcely the time to argue whether or not marriage merged two persons into one or simply made each one bigger and more individual from association with the other. She wanted to do whatever was possible to assist Meg and John Everett too in this trying time in their affairs. Besides, as a little girl she had always been fond of old Professor Everett, whose life had been given to the wisdom of books rather than to the living world. But most of all, being a very natural woman, Betty

was now keenly curious to know how she could possibly be expected to be involved in the present situation and what she could do to help out.

"You are right. John does mean to come home, or at least he wishes to return. He says he is tired of New York and all the fret and hurry and struggle of life there. But you see, Betty dear," and Meg spoke quickly now that she had finally come to the point of her story, "there is no use John's returning unless he has something to do. There is where you and Anthony can help. I didn't think of this myself, but when my husband and I were talking things over he said that Anthony and you and I were such old friends and that the new Governor had so many appointments he could make to all sorts of good positions. So we thought perhaps you would ask Anthony to help John. I know Anthony does anything you wish."

"Oh!" Betty replied somewhat blankly. For never had she been more surprised than by Meg's request. Of course she knew that Anthony was making a number of changes in positions held by people whom he thought unworthy of trust throughout the state. Often he talked about what he felt he should do, but really it had never dawned upon Betty until this minute that she or her friends could be in any way concerned. Still, why not? John was a good business man, Betty thought; he was not dishonest or dishonorable and the Everetts were her old friends. If Anthony could help them in their present trouble, surely he would be as glad as she was to have the opportunity.

Yet Betty hesitated before answering. However, as she did not wish to make Meg uncomfortable she slipped from her own chair and put her arm sympathetically about her friend's shoulders, while she endeavored to think things quietly over. Finally Betty returned:

"I can't *exactly* promise what you first asked, Meg dear. You see, I have always intended not to interfere in the things that did not seem altogether my affair. But somehow, since you have asked me and for John's and your father's sakes, who are such old friends, why I don't feel as I did before. I tell you, I *will* ask Anthony this very night, so let's don't worry any more. Tina darling, run and tell the maids we would like our luncheon up here. Our dining room is so absurdly big."

As she talked, as if by magic Betty's expression had changed and again she was her usual gay, light-hearted self. Of course she and Anthony together would be able to clear away Meg's troubles. Never before had she entirely realized how fine it was to have power and influence.

Moreover, Betty's confidence also inspired Meg, and for the first time in weeks Mrs. Jack Emmet felt like the Meg Everett of the old days in Woodford, who used to keep house for her father, kiss her small brother Horace's (surnamed Bump's) wounds and help and encourage her big brother John in all his ambitions and desires.

Just as Meg went away, however, she insisted quite seriously:

"Betty, I often think that even if our old Camp Fire Club did nothing more for us than to bind our friendships together in the way it has, it would be dreadful for all girls not to have the same opportunities in their lives. Talk of college friendships, surely they are not to be compared with those of Camp Fire clubs!"

CHAPTER V

Something Unexpected

DINNER was tiresomely dull! Again Anthony did not return, but telephoned that he would be in as soon afterwards as possible. Several times during the meal Betty almost wished that she had accepted an invitation for the evening without him. For they had been invited to a dinner party and dance, but as Anthony had declared he would be too busy to attend, Betty had declined without any objection at the time. She had made up her mind never to go out into society unless accompanied by her husband.

Nevertheless, tonight the young wife of the new Governor felt somewhat differently. If Anthony was going everlastingly to be kept at his office must she always sit alone during the evenings? Always as Betty Ashton she had loved people and gayety and still loved it quite as much as Betty Graham. Moreover, her only two companions at dinner, Angel and Faith, were both in extremely bad humor and unwilling to confess the cause, for Faith looked sulky and annoyed and Angel undeniably cross. Of course, the two girls must recently have had a quarrel. Their hostess wondered for a few moments what the trouble could have been. But then they were so utterly different in their dispositions and tastes, it was not surprising that they sometimes disagreed. Besides, she decided that they were both unlike the intimate friends of her youth and far harder to understand. In fact, though she was scarcely much more than a girl herself, Mrs. Graham concluded that "girls had changed since her day" and determined as soon as dinner was over to leave them to themselves. Naturally, if they had wished her society Betty would have been glad enough to have remained and received their confidences. However, neither Angel nor Faith showed the slightest sign of desiring her society.

In a pale blue silk dinner gown Betty wandered disconsolately about her big house waiting for her husband. He had promised to come home early and it seemed not worth while to settle down to any task beforehand. The babies were asleep and she did not feel like writing letters either to Esther or her mother. Several times she thought of Polly. But Polly was so far away out West that she really did not know where to find her at the present time. Betty wondered if her best friend was happy with no home or husband or children, nothing intimate in her life but her career as an artist. She had always been puzzled to understand why Polly and Richard Hunt had never married after an engagement lasting over several years. But since neither of them had cared to explain their separation, it was, of course, useless to conjecture again after all this time.

The drawing room was too hopelessly big and formal! After Betty had walked around inside it for half an hour perhaps, sitting down in half a dozen chairs and then pacing up and down, she grew even more restless. Surely it was no longer early in the evening, and why did Anthony not keep his word and come home at the time he had promised? It would be ever so much more satisfactory to have her talk with him in regard to giving John Everett a good position, with a comfortable salary, early in the evening, before they were both tired and wanting to sleep.

Suddenly, with an impatient stamp of her foot, Mrs. Graham fled from her state apartment. She was homesick tonight for her old home in Woodford, where she and Anthony had lived ever since their marriage until his election as Governor, and where her mother still lived.

Passing through the hall, more and more did Betty become convinced that Anthony was not keeping his word, for the tall clock registered quarter to ten. The upper part of the house looked dark and quiet as if the rest of the family had already gone to bed. Besides it was lonely enough on the first floor, for the servants had their sitting room and dining room in a big old-fashioned basement and were nowhere to be seen. Of course, one of them would come at once if she desired anything, but Betty could not think of anything she wished at present except society and amusement.

In the library back of the drawing room a few moments later she decided that things were not so bad. There was a little wood fire in the grate, kept there for its cheerful influence and not because the steam-heated house required it; but Betty had not been a Camp Fire girl for half her lifetime without responding to the cheerful influence of even a grate fire.

Sinking down into a comfortable chair, she picked up a magazine and began reading. The clock in the hall ticked on and on and she was not conscious of the passing of time. The story was not particularly interesting – an absurd tale of a husband and wife who had quarreled. It was, of course, perfectly unnecessary for people who loved each other to quarrel, Betty Graham insisted to herself, and yet the writer did not seem convinced of this fact. Toward the close of the story she grew more interested and excited.

Then, without actually hearing a sound or seeing a figure, Betty suddenly looked up, and there in the open doorway of the library stood a strange man. Like a flash her mind worked. She was alone on the first floor of a big, rambling old house and uncertain of how late the hour. Must she at once cry for help, or should she try to get across the floor and ring the bell furiously? – for that would be more certain to be heard. Yet for the moment her knees felt absurdly weak and her hands cold. However, with a stupendous effort Betty now summoned her courage, of which the shock of the moment had robbed her. For her Camp Fire training had taught her the proper spirit in which to meet emergencies. Quietly Mrs. Graham rose up from her chair.

"What is it you wish? I think you have made some mistake," she remarked stiffly. For in spite of her terror the man in the doorway did not look like an ordinary thief. Besides, if he were a thief why did he remain there staring at her? Why had he not committed his burglary and gotten away with his spoils without alarming her?

But he was now advancing a few steps toward her and there was no light in the library, except from the reading lamp.

"Anthony!" Betty cried instinctively, although she knew that the Governor could not be in the house at the time, else he would have come straight to her.

Then to her immense amazement, almost to her stupefaction, the intruder actually smiled.

"Betty," he answered, "or rather Mrs. Graham, have I startled you? Yes, I know it is dreadfully informal, my coming upon you in this fashion and not even allowing your butler to announce me. But I ran down from New York today to spend the night with Meg and Jack Emmet. A few moments ago we began talking of you. Well, as I've got to go back to town in the morning I decided that nothing would give me more pleasure than seeing the wife of our distinguished new Governor, so here I am!"

Positively the stranger was holding out his hand.

Moreover, the next instant Betty had laid her cold fingers inside it.

"John, John Everett, how ridiculous of me not to have recognized you! Yet, though I was thinking of you, you were the last person in the world I expected to see at present. And I confess you frightened me." Betty made her visitor a little curtsey. "Remember how you boys used to try to terrify us when we were in camp just to prove the superiority of Boy Scouts over Camp Fire girls? I would not have been frightened then! But do let us have more light so that we can really see each other."

Betty touched the electric button and the room was suddenly aglow.

Then she again faced her companion. It had been foolish of her not to have recognized her old friend, John Everett. He did look a good deal older, but he was a large, handsome man with blond hair, blue eyes and a charming manner. Moreover, he was undoubtedly returning Betty's glance with undisguised admiration.

"You won't mind my saying it, will you, Mrs. Graham, but you are more stunning than ever. I suppose it sounds a little impertinent of me, but you know even though I always thought you tremendously pretty as a girl, really I never believed – " John began.

Betty shook her head reproachfully and yet perhaps she was a little pleased, even though she recognized her visitor's compliment as extravagant.

Motioning to another chair, she then sat down in her former one. For a few moments there was a kind of constraint in the atmosphere, such as one often feels in meeting again an old friend with whom one has been intimate in former years and not seen in a long time.

Under her lashes Betty found herself studying her visitor's face. At first she did not think that he appeared much discouraged by his misfortunes, but the next moment she was not so sure.

"I am awfully pleased the world has gone so well with you, Mrs. Graham," John Everett began, to cover the awkwardness of the silence. "You were a wise girl to have known that Anthony had so much more in him than the rest of us fellows. I hear he is making things hum in the state of New Hampshire."

Betty looked a little shocked. "Oh, I did not care for Anthony because I thought him cleverer than other people. I – oh, does one ever know exactly why one cares? But do tell me about yourself, John. You don't mind my knowing of your present difficulty? Meg has just told me, but I am sure things will be all right soon again."

Half an hour later the young Governor, coming in very tired from his long day's work, seeing the light burning in the library, walked quickly toward the door. He was worn out and hungry and wanted nothing so much as supper and quiet talk with his wife. For Anthony had never gotten over the pleasure he felt at returning home to find her there to receive him. Already it seemed ages since he had said good-bye at breakfast.

However, just before he arrived at the open door he heard the sound of Betty's laughter and some one answering her.

Of course it was selfish and absurd of him to feel a sudden sense of disappointment. He knew that he should have been glad to find Betty entertained.

Before entering the library the new Governor managed to assume a more hospitable expression. He was also surprised at finding John Everett their caller. But then he too had known him in their boyhood days in Woodford and was glad to see him. Certainly they had never been friends as boys. The young Governor could still remember that John had then seemed to have all the things he had wanted as a boy – good looks, good family, money enough for a college education. Yet with all these advantages John had not been able to win Betty. Now was Anthony's chance to feel sorry for him. Lately he too had heard that John Everett was in some kind of business trouble. He hoped that this was not true.

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