

Vandercook Margaret

The Ranch Girls and Their Great Adventure



Margaret Vandercook

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CHAPTER I

KENT HOUSE

THE deep-rutted English lane was bordered with high box hedges. On one side was a sloping park with trees a century old and on the other side a wide field filled with meadow grass and scarlet poppies. It was in July.

"In all the world there is nothing so peaceful as this English country, is there? It is like another world when one first gets away from the turmoil of New York."

The girl who said this was undoubtedly an American, both in her manner and appearance, although her dark hair and eyes and her deep-toned olive skin were almost Spanish in coloring.

Her companion – in spite of the fact that her costume was a typical English walking one, a mixed brown tweed skirt, Norfolk jacket and high boots, – was equally an American. She smiled before replying.

"I don't know that I agree with you, Olive. Of course that is what people from home always say. Jim Colter declares he is half asleep the entire time he is in England. But that is because Americans, particularly my beloved westerners, don't understand England and the English. Things are not always peaceful just because they are quiet. We think so because we are noisy. Frank says there was never more unrest."

But at this Lady Kent, who a number of years ago was Jacqueline Ralston and one of the four Ranch girls at Rainbow Lodge, slipped her arm through her friend's, Olive Van Mater's.

"But, Olive dear, for goodness sake don't let us talk politics the day after your arrival. It is so English. Sometimes I feel scarcely fitted to play the part of an English 'Lady,' now that Frank has come into the title of 'Lord' and is a member of Parliament. I often long for a ride with Jim over my own prairies to search for lost cattle." Lady Kent laughed.

"Once a Ranch girl, always a Ranch girl, so far as I'm concerned, Olive; and yet I'm farther away from the old place than any of you. But, tell me, what made you decide to come abroad so suddenly without even writing? I have had letters from everybody at home except that lazy Frieda, and yet not one with a suggestion of your trip in it. Tell me about every member of my family – Ruth and Jim and their babies and Jean and Ralph and Frieda and her Professor. Funny, I never can think of Frieda really being married. You see, although it has been nearly four years, I have never seen her since we went over for the great event."

Jack ceased talking for a moment, for she was still "Jack" to her own family and the friends who knew her intimately. Olive never had talked so much as the other Ranch girls, but now it occurred to Jack that she was asking a great many questions, without allowing an opportunity for them to be answered.

Olive turned, apparently to glance through the opening in the hedge at the splendid mass of colour in the field.

"Suppose we sit down a while, Jack," she suggested. "Remember, I haven't had the English habit of walking for a long time. You told me Frank's train would not get in from London for another hour."

In spite of the fact that her tone was as casual as she knew how to make it, her companion understood at once.

"You have come to tell me bad news, haven't you? and I never dreamed of it until this instant. You have been brave, Olive."

In spite of her nervousness over having so suddenly guessed the reason for her friend's unexpected visit, Jack quietly looked about for a comfortable resting place, remembering that Olive had just had a long trip and was never so strong as the other Ranch girls.

A few yards farther on a gate led into Kent Park.

Lady Kent opened this and a moment or two later the two friends were seated under one of the great oak trees for which the Kent estate was famous – the estate now presided over by Jacqueline Ralston and the Frank Kent, whom we once knew as a guest at a neighboring ranch to the Ralstons' in Wyoming, but who were now Lord and Lady Kent of the county of Kent, England.

"Don't be frightened, Jack; my news isn't so bad as you may think. At least I don't know just how bad it is," and Olive smiled and then frowned the next moment. "The truth of the matter is that Frieda Ralston Russell has left her Professor. I was out in Wyoming having a peaceful visit at Rainbow Ranch when I received a mysterious telegram from Frieda telling me to come to her at once in New York city – not in Chicago, where she was supposed to be safe with her Professor husband. Of course I went at once to her. In New York I found a yellow-haired and not so miserable Frieda, who calmly told me she had decided that marriage was a failure. I could not find out her special reasons for thinking so, but perhaps she will tell you more herself, Jack. She is coming to you on the next steamer, only she preferred my first breaking the news to you and Frank."

Jack whistled, after a boyish fashion of her youth, which was not becoming to her present age and position.

"And you came, Olive dear, all the way across the ocean by yourself, just because my spoiled small sister wished to save herself the trouble of a confession? You are an angel, Olive. And I am afraid it is Frieda's selfishness – her remaining such a completely spoiled young person – that may be the answer to her present behavior. But I thought her husband spoiled her more even than her own family had in the past. Besides, I can't imagine the Professor doing anything wicked, can you, Olive? Oh dear, Frank and I always opposed Frieda's marriage. Professor Russell did seem too old and serious for her."

Just as she had always done whenever it was possible as a girl, Lady Kent at this moment took off her hat and flung it on the ground beside her. It was of brown cloth with a small green and brown feather to match her walking outfit; nevertheless she looked far handsomer without it.

Jack was no longer a girl. A good many years had passed since her marriage to Frank Kent, which was to occur soon after the close of the last Ranch girls' book, known as "The Ranch Girls At Home Again." Also in the final chapter, when the family had lately moved into their new home, built on the ranch not far from the old Rainbow Lodge, where the Ranch girls had first lived, their cousin Jean Bruce's engagement had been announced to Ralph Merritt, an old friend and the Rainbow Mine engineer. Then, as a great surprise to her family, Frieda Ralston, the youngest of the Ranch girls, at that time only eighteen, had insisted upon her own engagement to Professor Charles Henry Russell, a Professor of dead languages at the University of Chicago and more than ten years her senior.

"Oh, well, what is an old maid worth in a family if she is not to be made useful?" Olive answered. "But, of course, Jack, you understand I don't require a great deal of persuasion to come to you, and besides I was afraid if I did not come ahead, Frieda would not come at all. You are the only person who has any influence over her. If she goes back to the ranch, Ruth and Jean will only make such a fuss over her that she will become more and more convinced she has been badly treated. Jim, you know, never has approved of any of his Ranch girls being married, although he misses none of us as he does you."

Jack rose. "I hope you are rested, Olive, as we must walk on if we are to arrive in time to meet Frank. Oh, dear, what a business marriage is! I suppose we could not expect all the Ranch girls to be successfully married, although it is odd for it to be Frieda who is in trouble. As for you, Olive, don't congratulate yourself too soon on being an old maid; you'll probably yield some day. I do wonder what has happened to little Frieda? Perhaps things are worse than we imagine."

Olive shook her head.

She was recalling an extremely pretty Frieda sitting up in bed at midnight at the hour of her arrival in New York city, with a blue silk dressing gown over her nightgown and a box of chocolates open on the table beside her, which she must have been eating before going to bed.

It was true Frieda had cried a good deal when making her confession, and had insisted that she never intended to speak to her husband again. Why, Olive could not find out. She gathered that Frieda thought her husband unsympathetic and that their temperaments were too unlike for them ever, ever to understand each other. But the details of her love tragedy Frieda had declared she could tell only to her sister Jack.

Now, as Olive studied her companion's face, she believed that Frieda had decided wisely. When they were the four Ranch girls, Jack, Jean, Olive and Frieda, they had always relied upon Jacqueline Ralston's judgment. Now, as a woman, she seemed even finer than she had been as a girl. Well, fortunately Jack's marriage seemed to have turned out ideally happy, although there were reasons why it might not. Jack had never been fond of society or a conventional life, had hated the indoors and the management of even so small and casual an establishment as they had at Rainbow Lodge before the coming of Ruth as governess to take the responsibility out of Jack's hands. Now Jack was not only mistress of a great home, but must play "Lady Bountiful" to an entire village, as well as to the people on the Kent estate, and she was really the most democratic person in the world.

They were entering the adjoining village of Granchester now and Lady Kent had actually forgotten to put on her hat. Yet all the people they met along the little narrow streets bowed to her, as if she were not unpopular. Several times Jack stopped to inquire about sick babies and old ladies in the most approved fashion. However, Olive remembered that she had been great friends with all the cowboys on her own ranch and the adjoining ones in the old days, and was interested in their families, when they chanced to have them, which was not often. Nevertheless this new life of her friend's did seem extraordinarily different from her old life.

Only once since Jack's marriage had Olive visited her and then only for a few weeks, when her mother-in-law was alive and Frank's sisters had not yet married. Therefore she had never really seen Frank and Jack alone.

As they came to the little railroad station, covered with roses and surrounded by flower beds, Jack hastily put on her hat.

"Gracious! why didn't you tell me to do that before, Olive?" she asked "I must have looked ridiculous. Frank would have been discouraged if he had seen me. After all, you see, Olive, Frank is an Englishman and fond of the proprieties. At least I don't think he minds so much himself, but he does not enjoy having the country people talk about me, especially now that we have come into the title."

"But they don't criticize you, do they?" Olive demanded with a good deal of feeling.

However, Lady Kent only laughed, "Not more than I deserve." And then forgetting what she had just said, she took off her hat for the second time to wave it boyishly at the approaching train.

The next moment Frank Kent jumped out on the platform. He had changed much more than his wife. Olive saw that he took his new position and his responsibilities seriously, for he had only come into the title two years before. He looked far more like what one feels to be the typical Englishman, as he had an air of distinction and of firmness. Indeed, Olive thought he had almost a hardness in the lower part of his face which had not been there as a younger man. But he greeted her with the same old cordiality and friendliness.

"You and I seem often to meet Frank at railroad stations, Olive," Jack remarked. "Remember when he last came to Wyoming before we were married and we went together to meet him?"

Frank appeared so uncertain that Jack laughed.

"Husbands haven't very good memories for the sentimental past."

The next instant Frank protested.

"Of course I remember and how badly you treated me, Jack, so that Olive had to come to my rescue." And then: "Did you drive over? Where is the trap?"

Lady Kent shook her head. "No; Olive and I wanted a walk and it is much better for you. If you don't look out we shall both be growing as portly as a dowager duke and duchess."

Jack was a few steps ahead so that both her friend and husband looked at her admiringly, Olive appreciating, however, that Frank would have preferred his own wish to be carried out in this matter.

But it had always been a pleasure to see Jacqueline Ralston out-of-doors and it was no less so now. Although she now had two babies she had managed to keep as slender and erect as a girl – a most unusual characteristic in a woman.

Jack was walking on ahead so freely and so unconscious of her own speed that the others had to hurry to catch up with her.

When they finally joined one another, Frank slipped his arm through his wife's.

"Oh, I have a piece of news for you, dear. I forgot to tell you. I had a cable from Frieda's husband telling me that he expected to sail for England in about ten days. He did not give his reason, nor mention Frieda's coming with him."

"No," Lady Kent answered apparently in a state of abstraction, "I don't suppose he did." But at the moment she made no mention of the information Olive had brought her concerning Frieda.

As they reached Kent House and were entering the broad hall, Jack said to her husband under her breath, so that Olive who was a little in advance of them, did not hear:

"There is something else you have on your mind, isn't there, Frank – some news you have not yet told me?"

Frank Kent nodded.

"Yes, Jack, something so serious that I dare not speak of it even to you. Perhaps it will all blow over though, and I may be able to discuss the subject with you in a few days."

CHAPTER II

FRIEDA'S RIFT

"DID Frieda say on what ship she would sail? It is odd she does not cable."

The two friends were coming down from the third floor of Kent House where the babies' nurseries were. Jack and Frank had two children – the oldest a small boy, something over three years old, and called Jimmie, in honor of Jim Colter, the Ranch Girls' guardian and the one-time overseer and now part owner of the Rainbow Ranch. The baby, who was only a year old, had been named for Olive Van Mater, who had never seen her until her present visit. But there would be no confusion of names, for almost immediately the small brother had rechristened his tiny sister with the charming little name "Vive," which was used for her always. And since Vive was the gayest and liveliest of babies, this name with its translated meaning, "Life" was supposed to be particularly appropriate.

"No, Frieda did not say," Olive Van Mater returned. "But I presume she will cable in a day or so. Frieda will expect you to be in London to meet her. I am sure she will feel much aggrieved if you do not, but I think I won't come along, Jack, if I may stay with the babies."

Lady Kent opened the door of a room.

"Just as you like, Olive, only I hope Frieda will let me know in time. Frank is in London most of the week while Parliament is in session, and I'll have to ask him to make arrangements for us. The season is over, of course, but the hotels are filled with tourists. It has been a wonderful English summer. I don't think there were ever more travelers. Well, Frieda's rooms are at least ready for her. I hope she may enjoy having the same ones she had when she came over to visit the first year after Frank and I were married. I wonder if she ever thinks these days of how hard I tried to persuade her to believe she was too much of a baby to think of marrying so soon? We should never have allowed her to marry the first person who ever seriously asked her. Oh, I know Frieda thought she had already had a great deal of experience with her college boy admirers, particularly the one we used to call 'The Chocolate Drop Boy.'"

In the meantime the two women had entered the apartment which was being reserved for the expected visitor. The two rooms – a sitting room and a bed room – were furnished in heavy, old fashioned English furniture upholstered in delicately faded blue damask. The walls were also of the same blue, while the panelings of the rooms were of English oak.

Olive walked at once to a window in Frieda's sitting room.

"I don't see how she can well help liking these rooms, besides this window offers one of the most perfect views in the entire house."

Olive could see across the slope of the park down to a stream, which twisted its way along the base of the hill. Beyond were the tall towers of Granchester church and not far away the roofs of the houses which made up the village.

Then, to the left, one could acquire a charming view of the beginning of the Kent gardens – the low, carefully trimmed borders and the masses of blooms, with a sun dial at the end of the center path.

"Let us go into the garden for awhile, Jack," Olive suggested. "I think I enjoy it more in the morning than at any other time. Besides, I have been intending to ask if you suppose Frieda and her husband have informed each other that they are both sailing for England? It will be odd to have them meet each other here unless they do know."

Jack shook her head. "I haven't any ideas on the subject, but Frank will have to see that Professor Russell stays in London until we find out from Frieda. Sorry, but I can't go outdoors with you till this afternoon. I've hundreds of things to do and have promised Frank to write some letters which I have been putting off."

In return Olive said nothing, although, as she was walking about outdoors alone, she rather marveled at the change in her friend's life. As a girl Jacqueline Ralston's life had been entirely unordered; she had done each day, after the sun rose over her beloved prairies, whatever the day called her to do. Now, each of Jack's days seemed to follow an established routine. In the morning immediately after breakfast she saw her housekeeper; then she spent two hours with her babies, afterwards answering an immense amount of correspondence – and Jack had always hated letter writing more than any other task. In the afternoon she was supposed to be free for a few hours, and then there were guests to tea, or else Lady Kent was supposed to drive or motor over to make calls on her country neighbors.

Of course such an existence with money and a high position might be regarded as ideal by most women. But Olive was puzzled, because that kind of a life did not appear suited to the girl she remembered. However, as Jack seemed happy, Olive concluded that she must have changed, as most girls do after marriage.

This afternoon a number of friends had been asked to tea at Kent House in order to meet Olive. When they went down into the garden together, where tea was to be served, Olive felt that her decision of the morning had really been nearer the truth than she had then appreciated. Jack looked like one of the fairest types of society women. She was dressed in white – an exquisite embroidered material – and had on a big soft white garden hat, trimmed with deep toned pink roses. The soft, damp English air had kept her color as vivid as ever and given her yellow brown hair an even finer gloss.

On their way to the tea table in the garden, Jack stopped to pick for her companion a bouquet of lavender primroses and anemones and stars of the mist – flowers ranging from violet to pure white – for Olive was wearing a pale grey chiffon, which blended perfectly with her pronounced oriental coloring.

To the right of the garden, and a few yards from the flower beds, was a clump of trees. Because this July was warmer than is usual in England, Lady Kent had arranged to have tea here. There were small tables and chairs scattered about over the lawn, which was green as only an English lawn can be, but the tea table itself stood under the trees.

Jack and Olive had hoped to have a talk before their guests arrived. But they had not been outdoors more than a few moments before their guests appeared, the Rector and his wife, a Mr. and Mrs. Illington, and their two daughters, – charming, tall, blonde English girls. Afterwards, it seemed to Olive that Jack was constantly introducing her to people arriving every few minutes during the next hour, in spite of the fact that she had also to preside over the serving of the tea.

As Olive had never entirely recovered from her girlhood shyness, she was delighted to see how perfectly at ease Jack was. She appeared to be able to discuss church matters with the Rector, and the latest bill up in Parliament with an old gentleman who was the Earl of Granchester and as a Conservative was much opposed to the Liberal party of which Frank Kent was a representative.

Half an hour later, Olive wandered off with several of the guests to watch a game of tennis which was being started by the two Illington girls and two of their male friends who had come over to play.

When Olive returned, she discovered that most of the other guests had either scattered or gone home. In any case Jack was alone, except for a young army officer, who must have just arrived, since Olive did not recall having previously seen him. He was a splendid looking fellow, about twenty-five, with dark hair and eyes, and a skin which must have been tanned by other than the English sun.

As Olive approached them she thought he made a particularly handsome contrast to Jack's fairness. They were both laughing at the moment, but almost immediately Jack jumped up from the chair where she had been sitting and waved to Olive.

"Olive, dear, come meet the nicest kind of an Englishman – one who is half Scotch and the other half Irish," she called out. "Olive Van Mater, this is Captain Bryan MacDonnell – an old school friend of Frank's and sometimes a friend of mine."

Captain MacDonnell bowed gravely, making no effort to return Jack's challenge.

"Bryan is just back from shooting 'big game' somewhere – make him tell you about it, Olive, while I get rid of the last of these tiresome people." Jack made a grimace and shrugged her shoulders, her manner more like her old self than Olive had noticed before.

For about fifteen minutes she and Captain MacDonnell must have talked together, but Olive decided that Jack's description of him had been very nearly true, whether she had meant it or not. Then, observing that everybody else had gone and Jack was alone, they returned to her.

"I'm sorry you can't dine with us tonight, Bryan," Lady Kent remarked on parting. "Olive and I are to be alone. Frank only visits his family now and then, because he is so busy in town. No; I did not go up to London this year for the season. I only went for a few days at a time, as I was not willing to leave the babies. Besides, you know I don't care as much for society as I should anyway."

Then Captain MacDonnell said something which Olive did not hear. However, she did hear Jack's answer.

"Ride with you tomorrow? I should think I will just as hard and as fast as possible and jump all the fences and ditches in this part of the country. I'm awfully glad you are back, Bryan, to help me get rid of some of my surplus American energy."

That same evening, after a late dinner, Jack and Olive went into the library together. As is often the case in English homes of distinction, the library at Kent House was the pleasantest room in the entire house. The books were on low shelves encircling the four walls, except for the opening left for a huge fireplace. Above the mantel was the head of a stag. On one side hung a shield and on the other the Kent Coat of Arms with the motto "Semper Paratus" meaning "always prepared."

Above the book shelves were portraits of Frank's ancestors, who had been country people in Kent county for a number of years, although the title was not an old one.

In the places of honor were Frank's grandfather and grandmother – one of them a young man of about twenty in Court costume; the other a lovely girl with fair hair and dark eyes and a particularly bright expression.

"Frank likes to think Vive, the baby, looks like his grandmother," Jack declared as she stretched herself on a big leather lounge not far from a pair of French windows, which opened on the veranda at the side of the house.

"I hope you won't feel dull, Olive! As soon as Parliament closes, if you and Frieda like, we will have some people come to stay with us. I don't like the responsibility of visitors if Frank is not here. I have never learned to take guests so simply and easily as an English hostess does. It is one of the ways in which I am a social failure."

"Nonsense," Olive announced, without paying much attention to what Jack had said. She had picked up a magazine and was reading.

An hour passed and Olive believed that Jack had almost fallen asleep. Now and then she would close her eyes, although the greater part of the time she seemed in a reverie.

As a matter of fact Jack was really thinking of the old ranch and the people at home, whom Olive's coming had brought to mind more vividly than usual.

"I'm glad Jean and Ralph are at the ranch this year with Ruth and Jim," she said finally. "What a pleasure it must be to Jean that Ralph is such a successful engineer – one of the biggest in the United States, Jim writes. But Jim always liked Ralph better than any of the husbands. He never could altogether forgive Frank for being an Englishman."

"Oh Ralph has not been at the ranch much," Olive added, looking up from her book. "He has been working out on the coast and at Panama, but I think Jean is glad to have a rest because she has traveled with him so much."

In the ensuing silence Jack must actually have dozed, and certainly Olive found a more absorbing article in her magazine. But Jack must also have dreamed, for she woke thinking she heard a voice calling her from outdoors, "Jack! Jack!"

This was, of course, out of the question except in a dream. Kent House was a mile from any place other than its own Lodge. Besides no one whom she could possibly imagine would call out "Jack!" in such a fashion and at such an hour of the night.

Nevertheless Olive looked surprised, so she too must have heard some kind of a noise.

The second time the sound was heard, Jack started up.

"Please ring the bell for the servants, Olive. I am sure I hear a voice calling me. It sounds absurd and yet I must find out who it is. Even if the servants insist this house is haunted, no one has ever yet suggested that the lawn is also haunted."

Then, in characteristic fashion, and without putting a wrap over her white dress or waiting for any one to accompany her, Jack ran through the library and out into the broad hall. There was no one near, so she pulled open the heavy front door.

Leading up to Kent House was a winding avenue of trees. At some little distance down the avenue, Lady Kent thought she could see a dark object apparently standing still in the center of the road. Without pausing even long enough for Olive to join her, she ran through the darkness toward it.

"Jack! Jack! be careful!" she heard the voice call, and this time she recognized whose voice it was.

CHAPTER III

THE VOICE

"BUT, Frieda, how could you possibly have arranged to arrive in the middle of the night like this?"

Jack had reached the waiting taxicab, which stood transfixed in the middle of the road and had pulled open the door of the vehicle, only to find her sister sitting inside, almost completely enveloped in steamer blankets and bags and boxes.

"The cab broke down," Frieda remarked plaintively, evidently attempting to explain last conditions first. It seemed not to have occurred to her that even in the event of this difficulty, she could have gotten out and walked up to the house. But it was eminently characteristic of Frieda simply to sit still and call for her sister, as she always had done in any emergency when they were both girls.

The next moment Lady Kent, with the assistance of the driver, had helped her visitor to alight. If Olive and the butler had not arrived just then, she might again have forgotten her dignity and begun dragging out Frieda's bags. But instead, she and Olive, escorted Frieda up the avenue, leaving the two men to bring her possessions.

"I was lonely after Olive left me in New York," Frieda explained. "So when I read in the paper one morning that a particularly comfortable steamer was sailing, I decided not to wait an entire week, if I could get a nice stateroom. I thought Olive would not need but a few days to tell you. You have told, haven't you, Olive?" Frieda demanded, with a slight change of tone.

When Olive answered "yes," briefly, she went on:

"Please don't ask me any questions tonight, Jack. I'm most dead. No; I didn't have a rough crossing, but I have never arrived anywhere alone before in my whole life. I knew I could call up Frank at his club in London, but I did not wish to see him first. Still, I don't care what he thinks, since I have lost all faith in men. But I don't see why some one did not meet me at the station here. I telegraphed from Liverpool that I was on the way."

Jack shook her head.

"Curious dear, but we never received your telegram."

"Oh, well;" Frieda added more indulgently, "I didn't exactly telegraph myself, but I gave the money to a boy and told him what to say. Perhaps he made a mistake, or kept the money, or something," she ended nonchalantly. For they were now entering the great hall at Kent House and Frieda realized that she did not care very much for small things, so grateful was she to be again with her sister.

Impulsively she turned and embraced her.

Perhaps it was because Frieda was tired, but Jack could see that she was not so unaffected by what she had been passing through as Olive had imagined.

It is true Frieda looked as much like an exquisite wax doll as ever. Her eyes were as large and delicately blue, and her hair was a mass of soft yellow curls; yet there was a subtle change in her expression.

Olive had led the way into the library.

"We won't talk about anything until you like, Frieda," Jack whispered.

"Will you go up to your rooms now or have something to eat first down here with Olive and me?" she asked.

Frieda permitted Olive and Jack to remove her coat and hat. A few moments later, however, she announced that she preferred going upstairs to bed. So Jack finally bade her goodnight, after arranging that she was to ring her bell for breakfast, when she wished it the next morning.

When Frieda rang for breakfast it was nearly eleven o'clock and Jack went into her room with the maid who carried the tray.

Frieda ate her morning repast languidly, while her sister sat beside her talking of trivial things.

"Where is Olive?" Frieda inquired finally. And when informed that Olive was in the nursery with the children, protested: "I suppose you know I am jealous of your baby's being named for Olive. Of course I know you and she are very dear friends; but, after all, I am your sister."

"I felt that way about it too, Frieda, but Frank seemed not to wish a German name," Jack answered, "and Vive has her own name now anyhow. Maybe the next time."

Frieda frowned. "Don't talk of next time, Jack. I can't imagine your having a family. I hate being married." And without any other warning two large tears rolled down Frieda's cheeks.

"I'd rather tell you what has happened between Henry and me this minute and get through with it. And I'd prefer to tell you without Olive's hearing. I don't mean to be impolite, but Olive is almost an old maid and old maids always take the man's part."

In spite of her anxiety Jack was compelled to laugh. Frieda had always been such a funny mixture of babyishness and worldly wisdom.

She was now sitting up in bed with a number of white pillows piled behind her and wearing a light blue cashmere jacket over her gown. The English air was cooler than that to which she was accustomed.

"I hope nothing very serious, Frieda?"

"Nevertheless it is so serious that I never intend to speak to Henry Russell again, if I can avoid it. You see," Frieda sighed, "I suppose it is better to begin at the beginning and tell the whole thing. But, then, who knows when anything actually begins? At any rate during the first two years after Henry and I were married you remember we lived with Henry's parents. They were awfully nice to me and gave me hundreds of presents, but after awhile I became tired of living in another's house. Oh, the house was big and I had plenty of rooms, but you know it isn't like having a home of one's own is it, Jack?"

After waiting for her sister to nod agreement, Frieda went on.

"So I told Henry I wanted a house to myself, and I must say he and his mother and father were very nice about it – at first." Frieda made a dramatic pause.

"It was Henry's fault all through though. You know he is the only child and his mother and father are dreadfully rich. But what do you suppose Henry decided? When we went to housekeeping for ourselves we were to live on the income he made as a Professor! Did you ever hear of anything so selfish?"

"Well dear," Jack hesitated "maybe in a way it was selfish, because of course Henry's father and mother must have been disappointed not to be able to do for you. But, after all, it was self respecting of Henry. I suppose a man – especially an American one – likes to feel that he is able to be responsible for his own family."

"That is exactly what Ruth and Jim Colter wrote me," Frieda protested indignantly. "I suppose it never occurs to any one of you to think of me!"

"Yes, but you have your own income from our estate, Frieda," Jack added quickly, not wishing to offend her sister at the beginning of her confidence.

"I know," Frieda continued more amiably. "So, at first, when I saw how much Henry's heart was set on our being independent, I agreed to try. But you know, Jack, I never have had much experience in managing money, and even when we were at school at Primrose Hall I got into debt. So, although Henry told me just what we had to live upon, I couldn't seem to make things come out even. Then, as I didn't want to worry him, I kept using my own income till that gave out. And then –"

"Then what?" Jack inquired anxiously. Really she had been right in disapproving of Frieda's marrying so young. And more important than Frieda's youth was the fact that she, and all the people who had ever had anything to do with Frieda, had never treated her as a responsible human being. In

her entire life she had never had any real care, or any real demand made upon her. Jack felt deeply uneasy. But whatever had happened, whatever might happen in the future, Frieda was her own adored small sister, and she intended to stand by her.

"Oh nothing much," Frieda conceded, although her voice was less self assured, "only I told Henry's father. He used to be very fond of me before I left Henry; I don't know how he feels now," she murmured. "I believe he thought I was some kind of a joke, for he gave me a lot of money and told me not to worry. But he told Henry's mother and she did not think it was fair to Henry and must have let him know. Anyhow he was dreadfully angry and unkind to me."

"How unkind?" Jack demanded. For, of course, the fear that Professor Russell had been unkind to Frieda had been always at the back of her mind, since learning of her sister's unhappiness. However, when she recalled the Professor's shyness and gentleness, it was difficult to imagine him in the role of a brute. But Jack had learned enough of life not always to trust to exteriors.

"Oh, nothing very dreadful I suppose," Frieda conceded. "Henry fussed a lot and said I had not been fair to him and that it wasn't honest to keep things from him. He was always saying that I was very young and that I ought to confide everything in him."

"Was there anything else, dear?" Jack inquired gently.

Frieda nodded. "Yes. Oh, well, I might as well tell you the whole story since I have started. I was getting on a little better with the house, and Henry obtained some extra work to do, so that he made more money. But it kept him at home more in the evenings and besides he never did like to go out a great deal. He used to go sometimes because I liked it, but I never felt he was enjoying himself, and Henry never would learn to dance."

This struck Jack as a perfectly absurd reason for a vital difference between a husband and wife, yet she dared not smile, nor did she wish to smile, seeing how important this really appeared to Frieda.

But Frieda must have understood something of what was passing in her sister's mind, for she said:

"I know that may sound ridiculous to you, Jack, but it has made a lot of difference to me." There was a choking note in Frieda's voice. "A lot of our trouble has come from it. You know I dearly love to dance, so I used to go out in the afternoons as I didn't like staying at home by myself and did not want to trouble Henry to take me often."

"Not by yourself?"

"Certainly not," Frieda returned pettishly, "one can't very well dance alone."

"With any particular person?"

For a moment Jack held her breath.

At first Frieda shook her head. Afterwards she contradicted herself and nodded.

"There were three or four persons – young fellows – some of them students at the University, and most of the time other girls, too. At first Henry did not mind. Then he said people were beginning to talk and there was one person I liked especially, because he danced better than any one else, whom Henry said I could not go with at all. But I did go. Then I told Henry I was bored anyhow and wanted to be free. He was very disagreeable. So I ran away and just left a note. But I haven't been very happy for a long time, Jack, darling. I suppose you were right when you said I ought not to have married so young. Perhaps I am spoiled and selfish. Henry says I am, but some people like me anyhow."

Jack leaned over and took Frieda's chin in one of her firm white hands.

"There isn't anybody else, is there little, sister?" she demanded.

Returning her gaze straightforwardly, Frieda answered severely.

"Certainly not, Jack; what do you think of me? Don't you know I am married. I told you I didn't like men any more, and never intend to have anything to do with them again."

"Then I'll leave you now, dear, and send one of the maids to help you dress, if you like," Jack answered. "Let's don't talk any more today on this subject and please don't worry. You have lost all

your color shut up by yourself in that wretched New York hotel. Hurry and come out in the garden with Olive and the babies and me."

But when Jack had left her sister, she did not dismiss the thought of their conversation so lightly as her words implied. Perhaps Frieda had not made out a very good case for herself against her husband. It looked as if Professor Russell must have a story to tell as well. But the main fact appeared that Frieda was not happy in her marriage. Whatever the reasons, or whoever was at fault, it was the *thing* itself which worried Jack. It was plain enough that Professor Russell was too old for Frieda, and that his scholarly tastes were not suited to her girlish ones.

"A Professor of Dead Languages married to Frieda!" Jack whispered, blaming herself once again for allowing the marriage. Well, nothing could be decided for the present at any rate. One must wait for at least a little more light!

Out in the garden Jack and Olive and Frieda played all morning with Jack's two babies. Jimmie was a little fair haired, blue eyed, rose cheeked English boy. Vive was a different kind of baby; she had light yellow hair, and dark eyes unlike either Jack's or Frank's. Perhaps she was going to resemble the lovely old time portrait in the library.

Frieda spent several hours with Vive in her arms, although she never had been particularly interested in any baby before.

When lunch was over, Jack said unexpectedly:

"I hope you'll forgive me, Frieda, if I leave you and Olive for a little while. I promised a friend, Captain MacDonnell, to ride with him this afternoon before I dreamed you were coming, and I have forgotten to let him know. Besides," Jack added, since never even in small matters could she be dishonest, "I really want the ride. Captain MacDonnell is the one person who likes to ride as hard as I do. Oh, of course, English women ride marvelously well – far better than I, and there is nothing they won't attempt in hunting. But what I like now and then is just a straight cross country ride – as near like the old rides across the prairies as I can manage, though I must say this country does not look much like the prairies," Jack ended, as she glanced smiling out the window at her own beautiful, well kept English lawn. "Wait, Frieda, and meet Bryan won't you? he is one of Frank's and my dearest friends."

So Olive and Frieda were standing together on the veranda at the side of Kent House when Jack and Captain MacDonnell finally rode off, accompanied by a groom.

"I declare Jack looks better on horseback than any one in the world," Frieda announced admiringly. "Her costume is more stylish than the old khaki or corduroy things she used to wear at the ranch, but I don't think Jack herself is very much changed, except that she is more attractive."

At this instant Jack turned to wave her riding whip back at her sister and friend. She had on a perfect fitting tan cloth habit with a long English coat and short trousers and high riding boots. Her yellow brown hair was braided low on her neck and she wore a small derby.

"Captain MacDonnell is handsome too, isn't he?" Frieda remarked reflectively, before moving to go indoors. "I wonder if he and Jack are very intimate and if Frank minds her riding with him like this? I suppose not, or Jack wouldn't," she acknowledged.

Then she turned to Olive. "Don't look so cross, for goodness sake, Olive. I am not criticizing Jack. I don't suppose you imagine she is any more perfect than I do, only I was just thinking how you and the entire family will probably blame me for doing pretty much the same kind of thing that Jack is doing. Of course, I don't think there is anything wrong in it. It is absurd and horrid of people to believe there is."

Olive was about to reply, but before she could speak, Frieda interrupted her.

"Oh, I know exactly what you are going to say, Olive. Jack and I are very different persons! I know that as well as you do. I know, too, that Jack would never do anything except what was right. She could not if she tried. But she might do something silly. I don't suppose there is any human being in the world who fails to be foolish at one time or other in this life," Frieda concluded.

CHAPTER IV

A LATE ARRIVAL

FRANK KENT returned unexpectedly from London early in the same afternoon. He had not yet heard of Frieda's arrival, so that they at once spent an hour talking together.

Lord Kent, as most men did, treated his sister-in-law as a very pretty and charming young woman, who was not to be taken seriously. His wife had told him of Frieda's difficulty with her husband, but not of the cause. At that time she was not aware of it. Also she had instructed him not to mention the prospect of Professor Russell's appearance in England. So Frieda and Frank chatted and teased each other, as they had since she was a little girl just entering her teens, but neither referred to any unpleasant subject.

Lord Kent had seemed tired when he first came home and was disappointed to find his wife absent.

After his conversation with Frieda he relaxed and appeared more cheerful and good natured. This was the effect Frieda usually had upon masculine persons. She was so gentle and pretty, and her eyes were such a clear blue that one felt she could be easily influenced or persuaded. But the truth was that Frieda was no more easily controlled than a kitten. If ever one tries to train a little domestic animal, it will be discovered that a dog is far more quickly influenced than a kitten. As a matter of fact a kitten is probably the most unchangeable of all domestic pets.

Since the early afternoon the July day had altered. A soft rain had begun falling, so that tea at Kent House was served in the library.

Olive, Frieda and Lord Kent waited half an hour later than usual, thinking that Jack and Captain MacDonnell would return. Then they drank their tea slowly, still believing that the riders would surely appear before they had finished.

At half past five, when there was still no sign of his wife and friend, Lord Kent got up and several times walked back and forth from his chair to the big French window.

For the moment Frieda had gone out of the room, so that he finally spoke to Olive.

"I suppose it is ridiculous of me, but I am always more or less uneasy when Jack and Bryan go off for rides together. Jack is the most fearless horsewoman in the world and Bryan the most all round, fearless man. He has killed big game in Africa and India and Australia, traveled in the Congo and in other equally uncivilized places. He never used to stay for any length of time in England. Now and then I have an idea of forbidding Jack to ride with him, I am so uncertain of what reckless thing they may do together."

"Oh, I don't think you need worry, Frank," Olive returned, "Jack is fearless but I don't think she has been reckless since the accident she had when a girl."

Although she could scarcely speak of it, Olive was smiling to herself over Frank's use of the word "forbid." She never recalled that any one had ever forbidden Jack to do anything she wished so long as she had known her. But probably Frank's forbidding was of the gentlest kind. Olive felt she must remember that the English attitude toward marriage was not the same as the American, although when an Englishman marries an American girl they are supposed to strike the happy medium.

Entering the room again just as Frank concluded his speech, Frieda was even more startled when she recalled that the use of this very word had been one of the reasons for the most serious quarrel she had ever had with her husband. Henry had never used the word a second time.

Another hour passed. Still Jack and Captain MacDonnell had not returned. Moreover, by this time the rain had become a steady downpour. Olive and Frieda were also uneasy.

"If you will forgive my leaving you, I believe I will go and see if I can find what has become of the wanderers," Frank suggested. Then, without further explanation or discussion, he went away.

Ten minutes later, mounted on his own horse, he was riding down the rain-washed road. He had found that the groom, who had accompanied Jack and Captain MacDonnell, had gotten separated from them and returned home half an hour before.

Frank was uncertain whether he were the more angry or uneasy. It seemed impossible to imagine what misfortune could have befallen his wife and friend, which would have made it impossible for them to have either telephoned or sent some message home. Yet it was equally impossible to conceive that Jack would be so careless as to forget every one else in the pursuit of her own pleasure. Even if she had been uncertain of his arrival from London, there was Olive, who had been her guest only a few days and Frieda not twenty-four hours. But as a matter of fact Jack had known he would be down sometime during the evening although she did not know the hour.

July is one of the long twilight months in England. Nevertheless, because of the rain, the evening was a kind of smoke grey with the faintest lavender tones in the sky. A heavy mist was also rising from the ground, so that with the falling rain one could not see many yards ahead.

Lord Kent's plan was to leave word with his lodgekeeper at the lodge gate to follow after him in case any word came from Lady Kent, or if she returned home before he did. But a moment or so before reaching the lodge, while yet in his own avenue, although at some distance from Kent House, Frank heard laughter and low voices. There was no doubting the laughter was Jack's.

Frank pulled up his horse abruptly and stood still. The oncoming figures were walking and leading their horses instead of riding. That instant, because he was no longer uneasy, Frank discovered that he was angrier and more hurt than he cared to show.

All at once he overheard Jack say:

"Do hurry, please, Bryan; I'm afraid everybody at home may be uneasy."

But instead of hurrying, they must have stopped again. For the second time Jack murmured, "I don't see how I could ever have been such a wretch, or how I'll ever confess to Frank."

Then Captain MacDonnell's inquiry:

"What are you going to say?"

And his wife's answer:

"Why, tell the truth and face the music; what else is there to do, Bryan?"

In the past few years since his marriage, undoubtedly Frank Kent had either altered or simply developed. Sometimes it is difficult to determine which one of these two things a human being has done. Frank had always been quiet and determined. If he had been otherwise he would never have tried for so many years to persuade Jacqueline Ralston to marry him. But now that he had grown older, he certainly appeared sterner. He seemed to have certain fixed ideas of right and wrong, and they were not broad ideas, to which he expected at least the members of his own household to conform.

The two wayfarers were now in sight and Frank dismounted.

"I am sorry to have been compelled to play eavesdropper," he said curtly, when they also caught sight of him.

Jack was soaked with rain and her boots and riding habit were splashed with mud. A little river of water filled and overflowed the brim of her hat. But her cheeks were a deep rose color and her grey eyes dear and shining.

Frank would never have confessed that he felt a slight pang of jealousy at the good time his wife and friend must have been having, while he had been making himself miserable with the thought that a disaster had befallen them.

Jack's hand was resting on the nose of her horse, while Captain MacDonnell held the bridles of both.

"You have come out to search for us, haven't you, Frank?" Jack began penitently. "I am sorry; I did not know you could have arrived from London so soon." She was now close beside her husband. "The truth is, Frank, I have had rather a horrid tumble. For a person who thinks she knows how to ride, I seem to do the stupidest possible things."

"You don't seem to have hurt yourself seriously, Jack," Frank answered grimly. For in spite of her penitence, which did not seem very profound, Jack looked extraordinarily happy and glowing.

"No, I wasn't hurt in the least. I managed to get clear as we went down. But my horse's knee was sprained – not so badly as Bryan and I at first thought. Still I did not like to ride him, so we have been walking along through the rain for a few miles."

"How did the accident occur? I am rather surprised, Jack," Frank answered, now plainly more sympathetic because a little uneasy at what could have happened to his wife.

Jack turned aside and even in the dusk one could see she was embarrassed.

"Oh, I was disobeying orders," she said with a pretence of lightness. "I went over a rather high fence, which I had never taken before, without waiting until Bryan could get up to me. I made the jump without trouble, but the ground on the other side was so soft that my horse's forefeet went down into it. He stumbled and fell. That is why I am such a spectacle," she concluded, touching her mud-stained habit with her whip.

Whatever he may have felt, Frank would naturally not discuss a difference between himself and his wife before another person. He therefore made no comment, but instead suggested:

"Suppose you get on my horse, Jack, and ride up to the house. Frieda and Olive are uneasy. Bryan and I will come along together."

According to the English custom, Lord and Lady Kent occupied separate bedrooms, which opened into each other.

A half hour later Jack was dressing for dinner when she heard Frank enter his room. But he did not come into her apartment or call out to her, although they were usually in the habit of discussing various questions through their open door, while they changed their clothes.

Jack, of course, recognized that her husband was angry with her. Also she knew that he had a measure of right on his side. She had promised him not to attempt dangerous jumping in her cross-country riding. Her accident a number of years before had made him and all the members of her family more nervous about her than they would ordinarily have been, knowing that she had spent a large part of her life on horseback. Moreover, Frank had very rigid ideas about keeping one's word, not agreeing that one could swerve by a hair's breadth.

In a good deal of haste, since dinner was to be announced at any moment, Jack put on a white satin dinner dress. It was an old one, but chanced to be particularly becoming. The gown was simply made, with a square neck and a fold of tulle about the throat and a long, severely plain skirt. Only a woman with a figure as perfect as Jack's could have looked well in it. Her hair was arranged with equal simplicity, being coiled closely about her head and held in place with a carved ivory comb.

Half a dozen guests had been invited to dinner, nevertheless before going downstairs Jack went first into her husband's room.

Jack had always had a lovely nature. In the old days at Rainbow Lodge in any difficulty with one of the Ranch girls, although having a high temper, she had been quick to confess herself in the wrong. Since her marriage she had been more than ever inclined to do likewise with her husband. So it was but natural that Frank should be under the impression that she would at all times eventually come around to his point of view. He did not realize that under some circumstances Jack might be as inflexible as he was.

However, she waited a moment now with perfect good temper, while Frank pretended that he had not heard her enter his room. When he finally did look toward her, she went up to him and put her arms about him. Then, as he continued to frown, Jack smiled. She knew that her husband took small matters too seriously, having made this discovery soon after her marriage, just as all girls make similar discoveries. But Jack was wise enough to realize that she must try as wisely as she could to discount this uncomfortable characteristic.

"Don't be grouchy, please, Frank," she murmured. "I told you I was sorry, and you know that every now and then I have to get rid of some of my surplus American energy. After a hard ride with Bryan I can be a conventional English Lady for weeks."

In spite of her good intention, Jack's remark was not wise. No matter how devoted a man and woman may be to each other, there is obliged to be some difference of opinion in every international marriage.

Frank was extremely sensitive over the idea that Jack was not as happy in the English life he offered her, as she had been in the old days on her own ranch.

"That is unfortunate, Jack," he returned, "for I have made up my mind that it will be wiser for you not to ride with Bryan again. I am afraid you are both too fond of adventure to be trusted."

Then, as Frank had delivered his edict, his own good temper was restored. As he was already dressed, putting his arm across Jack's shoulder, he started for the door. He was really immensely proud of Jack and thought she looked unusually lovely tonight. In spite of the number of years he had been married he never introduced her to his friends, or saw her at the head of his table, without a feeling of pride. Also, Frank counted on Jack's sweetness of temper. It did not occur to him that she would disagree with his request, or rather with his command, since without intending it, he had expressed his wish in such a fashion.

Nevertheless Jack hesitated. She knew that Frank was not in an agreeable mood for a discussion then. Also, that they could not keep their guests waiting while one took place.

"I think that is rather arbitrary of you, Frank, since neither Bryan nor I are children and he is one of the friends I most enjoy. But perhaps we had better talk of this at another time."

Frank nodded, Jack's manner affording no idea that she would not ultimately give in to him, nor was she sure herself. It may be that Jack had become too much of a domestic pacifist – a woman who wishes for peace at any price.

On the landing of the steps, just before they went down to dinner, Frank remarked hastily:

"Oh Jack, I had a marconigram from Professor Russell. He must have heard of Frieda's sudden departure from New York. In any case his ship is due tomorrow, for he left the day after she sailed."

"Gracious, have you told Frieda?" Jack returned nervously, forgetting for the instant her own personal quandary. "Frieda announced that she never would agree to see Professor Russell again. In any case I had hoped we might have a few weeks of grace, to allow things to quiet down or perhaps to persuade Frieda to change her mind. The only thing now is not to allow Professor Russell to come to Kent House until Frieda gives her consent."

"Nonsense, Jack," Frank answered reassuringly, "Frieda cannot behave in any such fashion. You have not told me the trouble, but I suspect that Frieda has simply been a spoiled child. Besides, in any case, she has no right to refuse at least to see her husband and talk the situation over. Don't worry; I'll discuss the matter with Frieda myself in the morning and bring her around. You see, I telegraphed Russell at the dock to come directly to us, as I shall spend tomorrow at home."

"All right," Jack conceded, a good deal worried, but also slightly amused. If her husband wished to undertake to persuade Frieda to change her mind, she was glad that the task was his and not hers. Of course Frank thought it would be a simple matter, since he had yet really to know his sister-in-law. It was only natural that he should suppose Frieda would be easier to guide than his wife, judging by Frieda's manner and appearance! Men are not always wise in their judgment of feminine character.

CHAPTER V

AN APPARITION

THE next morning Frieda received a message from her brother-in-law asking her to give him half an hour of her time, whenever it was convenient to her.

In a way she had anticipated this request, although it had come sooner than she expected. Frieda knew that Frank was fond of her and regarded himself as her brother. She had no other. Also, she held a wise idea inside her blonde head, believing that men were apt to stand together in many difficulties of the kind in which she and her husband were now involved.

However, Frieda did not, of course, anticipate the news of her husband's having immediately followed her to Europe. She had not written to him or to any friend in Chicago since her sudden departure. But she had made up her mind that the last interview between herself and Henry was their final one. There could be no reason for their ever meeting again. She supposed, of course, that there were certain matters that would have to be arranged in the future, but Frieda was not given to troubling herself over details. Someone else had always attended to such things for her, in order that she might have her way. Later, Jim Colter, or Frank, or a lawyer – Frieda was entirely vague as to the method to be employed – would have to see that she was released from the cause of her unhappiness.

For since arriving at Jack's house not thirty-six hours before, Frieda had been happier than she had for several months. Therefore, during the night she had decided for the hundredth time, that her husband must be the sole cause of all the upsetting emotions which had been recently troubling her. So soon as she could learn to forget Henry and put the recollection of him entirely out of her mind, she would again become the perfectly care free and irresponsible Frieda of the old days at the Rainbow Ranch.

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