

Vandercook Margaret

The Ranch Girls in Europe



Margaret Vandercook

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CHAPTER I

BIRDS OF PASSAGE

"IT seems incredible, girls, but I simply can't find her."

The young woman who made this remark was standing on the deck of an out-going ocean steamer. The great boat was ploughing its way through the Ambrose channel, leaving the long nose of Sandy Hook a thin line of white on one side. Fading away into the background like dim gray ghosts were the giant towers of New York City. The speaker was wearing a long, gray traveling coat with a blue lining, and a felt hat of the same colors rested close against her ash-brown hair.

Immediately three girls turned to face her. The minute before they had been leaning against the ship's railing. One of them revealed a suspicion of tears in her curiously dark eyes; the second had her lips shut unnecessarily tight to hide her emotion; while the third showed only rejoicing.

"Dear me, Ruth Drew," this girl now began in mock tragic tones, "you don't suppose that our infant has fallen overboard already, do you? Or do you suspect some one of having run away with her? At this present moment I presume that Frieda Ralston is in our stateroom. But it is possible that she is engaged in making the acquaintance of some one on shipboard whom she has decided she is crazy to know. The most probable supposition, however, is that she is trying to persuade a steward to give her something to eat. For over an hour ago she informed me that she was starving to death and wished to open one of her boxes of candy before leaving the New York pier. She is sure to turn up in a moment or so. Do please stay here with us and help Jack and Olive mourn. They are shedding tears over having to say farewell to the 'Stars and Stripes,' and incidentally to our best-beloved friends. But I can't even show a polite amount of emotion I am so happy over starting off on our trip at last."

Here Jean Bruce, one of the four Ranch girls from the Rainbow Lodge, abruptly ceased talking. She had been noticing for the past few minutes that a stranger had been listening to her conversation with a kind of well-bred amusement. And as she happened to be the person whom Jean had most admired since coming aboard the Martha Washington, it seeming annoying to be the subject of her smiles. However, Jean should not have been offended, for her sallies had awakened the first animation in the young woman's face since the hour of their sailing. Until recently she had been standing in a listless attitude within a few feet of the Ranch girls, apparently uninterested in anything in the world. In her slender arms she carried what looked like an entire tree of American Beauty roses. And now and then she had pressed her face against them. The traveler's costume had first attracted Jean's attention – it was so beautiful and fashionable. The coat was of dull blue silk; the small hat emphasized the classic outline of the young woman's haughtily poised head with its crown of pale-gold hair, and at a respectful distance a maid and a courier waited in attendance upon her.

Jack and Olive, even in the midst of their absorption, had been brought to admit that the stranger's appearance was fascinating. While to Jean's more romantic fancy she suggested no less a heroine than the Princess Flavia in "The Prisoner of Zenda."

In the moment of Jean's silence Jacqueline Ralston drew their chaperon's arm through hers, giving it a reproachful squeeze.

"If you are going to begin worrying over us, Ruth, in the very first hour of what Aunt Ellen called 'Our tower,' whatever is to become of you before we are through? I am sure Frieda is all right. And this time Jean is telling the truth. Olive and I have been feeling low in our minds over saying

good-by to Jim and Ralph and Miss Winthrop and Peter and Jessica and a few others. But just the same we are as happy over the prospect of our trip as Jean Bruce is, every single bit!"

During this moment Ruth had again allowed herself to be silenced, but now she moved determinedly back from Jacqueline's detaining grasp.

"I don't think you girls understand the situation," Ruth argued a trifle impatiently. "Of course I have already searched for Frieda in every probable place on the ship and have had the stewardess helping me. She simply is not to be found! I don't like Frieda's running off from the rest of us in this fashion and I don't understand it. Where did you leave her, Jean, when you came on board the second time after going ashore for another farewell to Mr. Colter? I was so busy having our steamer trunks put into our staterooms that I could not join you." And for an instant, remembering that there were other reasons why she did not wish to be present at this final parting with Jim Colter, Ruth Drew hesitated and flushed. Would her New England conscience never allow her to be satisfied with telling only half the truth?

But Jean, forgetting the presence of her embarrassing audience, shook her head in protest.

"Frieda didn't come on board with me. I came on alone. Why, Jim and Ralph had fairly to shove me up the gang-plank before the last 'all aboard' was sung out! Frieda came on with Jack and Olive several minutes before. That is, I thought so. Surely you can't mean – "

In this same instant Olive Van Mater's arm slipped around Jacqueline Ralston's waist. For although almost a year had passed since Jack's recovery from her long illness and operation, she was not yet entirely strong. Frequently she had to use a cane in walking. Today, however, she had insisted that she was able to get along without it. So Olive feared that this sudden and surprising news of her little sister might prove too much for her. It was characteristic of the two friends' relations that Olive's first thought in this crisis was not so much for Frieda as for Jack.

Nevertheless her friend did not yet require her aid. Although at Jean's surprising words Jacqueline Ralston had turned pale, she was perhaps not more so than Ruth and the other two girls. However, she was evidently doing her best to hold on to her self-control and not to allow the moment's bewilderment and fright to overwhelm her.

"No, Frieda did not come on the ship with us the second time, Ruth," she explained, turning quietly toward their chaperon. "But please do not let us be alarmed. She must have come aboard by herself beforehand. For I can remember hearing her say her last good-by to Jim while I was still talking to Peter. Frieda is nearly seventeen; why, it is ridiculous to suppose that she would be so foolish as to let the steamer sail off without her! Besides, wasn't Jim right there! And isn't he always possessed of the idea that we will be late for things and that unknown catastrophes will overtake us? If necessary he would have put Frieda on board by main force. So let's go find her."

Very quickly, then, the little party of four turned from their former places. And Jean's face, which had been the gayest in the group at the beginning of this conversation, was now the most terrified.

"If Frieda Ralston isn't on board the Martha Washington with us, she most certainly is not on land with any of our friends," Jean insisted, "for I know that Frieda left them on the pier before I did. So if she isn't on this ship something dreadful must have happened to her; some one must have stolen her away. Oh, what on earth shall we do?"

Jean was following the others in such a complete state of panic that she hardly knew what she was saying. So at first she scarcely heard the low voice sounding close to her ears. Only one thought occupied her mind. Frieda was lost before they had fairly started on their journey. If she could not be found on the ship, what were they to do? Of course they could send Marconigrams back to Jim Colter and Ralph Meritt, who had come all the way from the ranch to New York City to say farewell to them. But if Frieda should happen not to be with them or with any of their other friends, must there not be days and days of horrible waiting and anxiety before they could return home? Each moment the

great steamer was carrying them farther and farther away from the United States and not all the gold in the Rainbow Mine could persuade her to alter her course or to stop until they reached Gibraltar.

The voice spoke again. Evidently its owner must have pursued Ruth and the three girls.

"I am afraid you are in some difficulty. If my maid or courier can be of any service to you I shall be most happy. Evidently you have not crossed before."

This final suggestion, even in the midst of her anxiety, made Jean flush uncomfortably. Immediately she stopped and turned around, recognizing the young woman who had previously both attracted and annoyed her. Something in Jean's expression must have betrayed her irritation, for the stranger smiled again.

"I hope I haven't offended you," she apologized. "I only wished to be useful. You *are* in trouble, so you must let me try to serve you."

In their overwhelming anxiety Ruth, Olive and Jack had continued on the way to their staterooms, leaving Jean to answer for all of them. Now, to her chagrin, the tears began overflowing her eyes like a frightened baby's.

And only a few moments before had she not secretly hoped to make a favorable impression upon this most interesting of their fellow voyagers?

Jean had believed that she was looking unusually well herself. For her blue silk dress with its touches of red embroidery, her blue chinchilla coat with its scarlet lining and her hat with the single red wing in it had been considered the most effective of the Ranch party's going-away costumes.

So why should she be making herself so ridiculous before a total stranger?

Jean did not realize that the emotion of parting with her friends and of leaving her own country had been greater than she cared to admit even to herself. Then this sudden overwhelming worry about Frieda had left her nerves completely unstrung.

Therefore she was extremely grateful when the older woman led her to a more secluded part of the promenade deck. New York was now out of sight, and most of the passengers were hurrying off to their rooms. Jean and her companion were almost entirely alone.

"We – we have lost our little sister," the young girl began incoherently. "Or at least we have been unable to find her and do not feel altogether sure that she came aboard with the rest of us. Oh, I realize that this must sound absurd and impossible to you. It does to all of us. But what can have become of her?"

With a slight but imperious nod of her head, which, even in her excitement, Jean did not fail to observe, her new acquaintance summoned her courier. And although she spoke to him in Italian the girl was able to understand. The man was told to await their return. Then if ordered he was to see that the ship was thoroughly searched for a missing passenger without unnecessary notoriety.

A little later the young woman moved away with Jean. "Your sister is probably in her own stateroom by this time. However, if she is not and is on the ship we shall find her in a few moments." Her tone was that of absolute authority, as though the great vessel were her private yacht. Jean wondered how any woman not more than twenty-eight could give such an impression of poise and experience.

Notwithstanding Frieda had not yet been discovered in any one of the staterooms. She had been expected to occupy a room with Jean. Olive and Jack were to be together and Ruth to sleep alone. However, in Ruth's stateroom, which the girls had chosen as being specially attractive, Jean and her new friend found Jacqueline Ralston waiting alone.

"I have promised to remain here while Miss Drew and Olive have gone to speak to the proper authorities," Jack explained, with the curious self-control which she was almost always able to summon under special strain. "We hope my sister has simply mistaken her stateroom and may come to us at any moment. But if you will be so kind as to have your man assist us in our search, why we shall be deeply grateful. You see, we are rather too frightened to be sensible, besides being inexperienced travelers. And Frieda is so much the younger!" Here, with a break in her self-command, Jack dropped

unexpectedly into the nearest chair. She had forgotten even to ask their visitor to be seated, nor did she have the faintest idea of her name, nor the reason for her interest in their predicament.

An hour later and the Martha Washington had been thoroughly and quietly searched for the missing Frieda Ralston. Yet there appeared to be absolutely no trace of her. Of course her baggage had been brought aboard the ship with the other girls'. Even her silver toilet bag, Jim's parting gift, was safely stored in her stateroom. Frieda had been last seen ashore with nothing in her hands except a small gold link purse.

Finally when the news reached the Ranch party that Frieda was positively not to be found on the steamer, for the first time in her career Ruth Drew collapsed.

Not that she was more wretched than the girls over Frieda's disappearance, but because of her greater sense of responsibility. For almost a year, ever since their return from boarding school to the Rainbow Ranch, Ruth had been separated from the Ranch girls and living quietly in her old home in Vermont. In that time she had never heard from Jim Colter nor of him, except what the girls had written in their letters. Their meeting in New York had been entirely formal and without a word of private conversation. Yet now it was the thought of Jim's sorrow and indignation, should anything have happened to his baby, Frieda, that Ruth found the hardest thing she had to bear. For had she not once acted as Jim Colter's upright judge? What now must be his judgment of her?

Several hours of this interminable afternoon were spent by Jack and Olive waiting in the ship's office for answers to their Marconigrams. But, when the answers finally did arrive, the news was only discouraging: "Frieda had not been seen by either Jim or Ralph or by any one of their acquaintances since the sailing of the Martha Washington."

Yet, notwithstanding the many hours of searching and distress, Jean's new friend had never deserted them. She had not even gone to her own room to remove her coat and hat. Indeed, her whole time had been spent in encouraging Ruth, in making suggestions to the three girls, and in having her maid and man do whatever was necessary toward assisting them. Still no one of the Ranch party even knew her name.

Twilight had come and the lights were shining brilliantly everywhere over the big ship. A fog horn had sounded and suddenly Jean felt that she could bear the suspense no longer. She must break down, yet no one of the others must see or hear her. Slipping out into a dark passageway, she hid herself and cried for half an hour. Then making up her mind that since nothing more could be done toward finding Frieda, she might at least devote herself to comforting Ruth, she walked quietly back into Ruth's stateroom. There she found their new friend just in the act of leaving.

"You will be better by yourselves for a little while," she was saying, holding Jack's hand in one of her own and Olive's in the other, while looking sympathetically at Ruth. "My man will see that dinner is served in your room, and by and by I will come again to say good-night. You must not lose courage. The American girl never loses courage or ceases to fight while there is still work to be done."

Having for the moment forgotten herself and her own sorrow, Jean became more aware of their new acquaintance's unusual sympathy and kindness.

"You have been wonderfully good to us," she began chokingly, "and perhaps at some time we may be able to show you our great appreciation. But tonight, tonight –" and Jean could get no further. Then, summoning more strength of character, she continued, "I wonder if you would mind telling us your name? You must already know most of our history, as we have talked so much of ourselves in speaking of Frieda."

For a moment Jean's friend appeared to be hesitating. Perhaps she did not wish to talk of herself, for she was now looking as weary as Ruth and the Ranch girls.

"You must not think I am not a fellow countrywoman when I tell you my name," she replied slowly, and with the slightly foreign accent which the girls had neglected to notice in their distress. "I was once a western girl myself, oh, many years ago, in a little mining town. So I was able to recognize

you as soon as I saw and heard you talking. Now I am an Italian, however, or at least my husband is. My name is Beatrice, the Princess Beatrice Colonna."

Jean actually gasped out loud. Here she had been talking to a real live Princess without knowing it, when in her most romantic moments she had only conceived of a literary one.

If they had not been in such great trouble over Frieda, how thrilling this meeting would have seemed! Yet, except for their sorrow, they might never have spoken to the Princess. And now here she was standing right in their midst talking just like any one else!

A moment later and she had vanished with these parting words:

"Promise me not to be too unhappy while I am gone. And perhaps when I return we may have devised some better scheme for finding your little Frieda."

CHAPTER II

SALVE!

FOR several moments after the Princess' withdrawal no one moved or spoke in Ruth Drew's stateroom. Ruth was lying on her berth, almost in a state of prostration, with Jean kneeling on the floor by her, resting her head upon the same pillow. On the divan Olive and Jack sat close together, Olive trying her best to think of some new consolation to offer her friend. For although the four Ranch girls loved one another with almost equal affection, after all Jack and Frieda were own sisters.

For the past year the girls and Ruth had been planning this trip to Europe. When the school year at Miss Winthrop's had closed and Jack had concluded her trying experience at the New York hospital, the girls, escorted by Jim Colter, had gone home to the Rainbow Ranch. In the autumn they then intended to join Ruth again in the east and set sail. However, when the fall came around, Jack was not so well, affairs at the mine were in a kind of a tangle and Olive's grandmother desired her to spend another school term at Primrose Hall. So the European journey had been postponed until the following spring. Now it was early March and the Rainbow Ranch party was starting forth upon the Mediterranean trip. Their plan had been to stop over for a day in Gibraltar and afterwards to see Italy thoroughly before entering any other country.

However, on this, their first evening at sea, when they had anticipated so much happiness, there was but one question and one desire in the hearts of Ruth, Jack, Olive and Jean.

How could they bear the ten unendurable days before their ship reached Gibraltar and the second ten of their return journey to New York?

For Ruth and the girls had finally concluded that Frieda had never sailed on the Martha Washington. Of course a few passengers had been discovered who claimed to have seen a young girl answering Frieda's description. However, no one would swear to it. And even if Frieda had fallen overboard, surely some one would have seen or heard her. Her disappearance had taken place among a crowd of apparently well-dressed and well-behaved people. It hardly seemed possible that she could have been kidnapped. Nevertheless the steerage had been quietly investigated without the slightest clue having been established.

It was the old story that was once more repeating itself. Nothing seems more improbable than that any one whom we know and love can suddenly vanish without leaving a trace of his or her whereabouts. Yet when this actually does take place, no one has a sensible suggestion to make. All is confusion, uncertainty and at last despair.

However, neither Ruth nor any one of the three Ranch girls were making any noise, so that they suddenly became aware of a movement down the short hall leading to Ruth's room. And then followed a knock at the door.

Ruth turned over, facing the wall. "The steward is bringing our dinner. Do please do your best to eat something, girls, for we shall need all our strength," she pleaded.

Jacqueline shook her head. "Not tonight. If you will let me get away to myself for a few hours I shall be stronger by tomorrow."

For the first time there was something in Jack's voice that brought her chaperon, cousin and friend to a quick realization of their own weakness. For, although Jack's right to sorrow was certainly greater than theirs, until now, had she not been the strongest and most hopeful of them all? And this when two long years of illness had left her far from strong. Possibly through suffering she had learned a finer self-control.

As she moved toward the closed door with her face white as a sheet, suddenly Jean flung herself in her cousin's path.

"Don't go until you have tried eating something," she begged. "We can't bear to have you ill again besides our anxiety about Frieda."

Jean flung open the stateroom door, but stumbled back and was actually caught by Jack.

For there on their threshold stood the Princess, holding by the hand a young girl with a quantity of light hair tumbled loosely about a flushed face. Her blue eyes with their long lashes were looking indescribably sleepy and injured and in her other hand she held a small, gold-linked purse.

Jean sank down on the floor as Jack released her hold on her. Ruth started up with a cry; Olive rose quickly to her feet, only to drop back into her old place again. Therefore it was Jack who reached the figures at the door first. And there her long-controlled self-restraint gave way, as she flung her arms about the newcomer's neck.

"Oh, Frieda, Frieda Ralston," she sobbed. "Where have you been and what has happened to you? Who could have kept you away from us for all these hours. Hours – why you must have been away years!"

But Frieda had now come into the stateroom, with the Princess following her. And though she had kissed Jack dutifully and affectionately enough, she gazed with astonishment and some resentment from one white face to the other.

"I – I haven't been anywhere," she protested. "At least, I have just been asleep."

"Asleep!" Jean whispered the single word over several times. "Asleep!" Yet certainly everything in Frieda's appearance suggested this to be the truth. Her face was as calm and untroubled as a big wax doll's, her color and eyes as serene.

"But how, when, where?" Ruth Drew inquired, struggling between the hysterical desire to burst into laughter and tears at the same moment.

"I made a mistake in our stateroom," Frieda explained with that offended and yet apologetic air which the other girls knew so well. "You see, I came on the ship a little after Olive and Jack did and saw them standing together waving to people. I knew they would never stop until we got clear out of sight of New York. And I – I was so dreadfully tired! You remember we had been out to the theater two nights in succession and had just had the long trip from Wyoming to New York; so I thought I would lie down for a few minutes' rest. I couldn't find Ruth in our stateroom or in hers, but I supposed that she had gone up on deck. So I took off my hat and coat and lay down – and – that's all there is to it."

Olive started the laughter. The nervous tension of the past few hours had been too great for everybody. Now Frieda's voice, her manner, her explanation, had turned what had seemed a tragedy but a few minutes before into a ridiculous farce.

"Would you mind telling me, Frieda," (Olive struggled to be as serious as Frieda might consider proper), "how you could find a stateroom in which you could sleep for five or six hours undisturbed, when every single room, every spot aboard this big ship has been ransacked to find you?"

But here Jean's Princess, who had not spoken before, laughed gaily.

"Please, this is where I come in. Isn't that the American slang?" she queried. "I found Goldilocks asleep in my bed just as the little bear did in the old fairy story. Remember, my stateroom is the only one that has never been investigated, since I have spent the entire time with you. It is true that my maid and courier have been into my sitting room, which adjoins my bedroom, several times. But they have also been too worried over your loss even to have unpacked my trunks. Imagine what an odd sensation it was for me to discover two big, blue eyes staring at me from my very own pillow!"

And the Princess laughed as naturally and cheerfully as an ordinary American girl.

"I wasn't asleep *then!*" Frieda defended. Catching the expression of her cousin Jean Bruce's face, she realized that she would never hear the last of this escapade.

"Then why, baby mine, when you came back from dreamland did you not struggle into the hall and find out what had become of your family?" Jean demanded.

"Because I was cross," Frieda whispered. "You see, I thought it hateful of you to have let me stay such a long time by myself. And I meant never to get up until you came and found me, even if I starved!"

"And speaking of starving!" Jean exclaimed, clasping her hands together in a dramatic fashion and gazing at Frieda who now appeared as hungry as she had been sleepy a few moments before.

But although Ruth and the three Ranch girls had done their best to make her remain so, Frieda was not a baby. She turned to their new-found acquaintance. Something in her sister's face showed at least a part of the strain which her family had been under.

"I am afraid I hardly know how to thank you, Mrs. – Miss – " she hesitated.

"She isn't a Miss or a Mrs. either; she is a Princess!" Jean whispered, supposing that no one else could overhear her. However, seeing Frieda shake her head with indignation over her cousin's continued teasing, the four women, including the Princess, laughed in chorus.

"I am a Princess, really, Frieda, but my title does not mean anything serious in Italy. And I hope you may not like me any the less well for it."

The girls noticed that the Princess had spoken as informally to Frieda as though she were one of them, but now as she turned toward Ruth again her manner changed.

"For the second time let me bid you good-night and offer my congratulations," she said.

And there again was the coldness, the hauteur and the superiority, which Jean had resented before their misfortune had awakened the young woman's sympathy.

In the midst of a murmur of thanks from every one else in the room, Jean quietly opened the door for their visitor. But it was hardly possible for the Princess successfully to pass two large men bearing enormous trays of dishes in their outstretched arms.

"Dinner!" Jean murmured soulfully, forgetting her new-found dignity.

And the Princess' tired-looking, big blue eyes were immediately turned wistfully toward the food.

"I am dreadfully hungry too," she announced, speaking like a girl again. "I wonder if you would let me have some of your dinner. You see, it is too late to dress now and I shall be all alone."

Five voices answered and several hands reached forward to draw their guest down into the most comfortable chair. A little later the table was laid with a bunch of roses, which Ruth had received anonymously, to serve as the centerpiece. And seated between Jean and Frieda was a real live Princess; when in their fondest dreams the Ranch girls had only hoped to see one drive past some day in a coach and four.

CHAPTER III

NEW ACQUAINTANCES

AMBITION in this world is often gratified in a most unexpected fashion, and so it happened with Frieda Ralston!

For weeks before leaving the Rainbow Ranch she had discussed with Jim, with Ralph Merrit, who was still engineer at the mine, and with her sister Jack, whether or not they believed she would be able to make agreeable acquaintances aboard ship or during the months of their travel on the other side. For Frieda was certain that she should soon grow weary with nothing to entertain her but miles of salt water, hundreds of art galleries, thousands of pictures and statues. It was all very well for Jack and Olive to enthuse over these possibilities and for Jean to pretend to feel the same way. She wanted *people* for her diversion and hoped to be able to make a few friends in the course of their ocean crossing. Though how this was to be accomplished without a single introduction Frieda did not know. However, on the morning of the second day of their voyage the youngest Ranch girl made the discovery.

In a state of blissful unconsciousness and without reflecting on the events of the day before, she started down to breakfast with Jean and Olive. Jack and Ruth were a little too weary to care about making early appearances.

The morning was a perfect one, with a smooth sea, and the dining room was crowded with passengers. One would hardly have expected that the quiet appearance of three young girls could have attracted any special attention. For a few moments they waited for the head steward to be found, and were then led to their seats at the First Officer's table. It was all very quickly done, yet Jean and Olive were distinctly aware that a subdued murmur followed them; then that an entirely unnecessarily large number of heads were turned in their direction. Of course Frieda noticed this, too, but she merely presumed that their fellow travelers were curious and had not the good manners that they should have had. The idea that she or Jean or Olive could be exciting any particular attention never occurred to her at first, so deeply did the scene hold her attention.

Then, without warning, something took place which made Frieda flush and tremble. Except that she was holding a *ménu* card in her hand at the moment the tears would have shown in her eyes.

Seated just across the table opposite her was a large, middle-aged woman, dressed in black and wearing a quantity of handsome jewelry. She stared hard at Frieda for the first few moments after her arrival. Then, turning to the young fellow who sat next her, she announced in a loud enough voice to be heard from one end of the table to the other, "It was the plump, yellow-haired one, wasn't it, created such a stir? Seems like it ain't possible she could have been asleep in some one's stateroom. Much more likely she was in some kind of mischief! I am going to ask her what she *really* was doing?" Then she leaned half-way across the cloth and, except for the young man's agonized protest, most assuredly would have asked her question of Frieda.

But in an instant Jean grasped the situation. She was quicker than any of the other girls to understand social matters, and now realized that something must be said and done at once. Not only must she cover up the awkwardness of the present moment, but save Frieda from further discussion later on. They had believed that their search yesterday had been conducted quietly, and yet questions must have been asked of many passengers aboard and the whole business of the lost girl thoroughly gone into. Frieda herself should speak now and right the whole matter. Of course this would have been the better way, Jean thought. And yet one glance at Frieda showed this possibility hopeless. Should the strange woman ask her a single question or say another word concerning her escapade, it was apparent that the youngest of the Ranch girls would burst into tears before the many strangers at the breakfast table!

Frieda was not feeling very well. Perhaps because she had slept so long in the afternoon, or, perhaps, for more sentimental reasons she had lain awake several hours during the night past worrying over the events of the afternoon. Not that she dreamed then that she might be talked about aboard ship, but because she was sorry for the girls' and Ruth's anxiety. Yet evidently persons had been commenting upon her! Moreover, had she not just been called plump before everybody at their table? Frieda was extremely sensitive on this subject and no one of her family or friends dared mention it. It was because Jack and Olive were both so absurdly thin and because Jean had a remarkably beautiful figure for a girl of eighteen that Frieda might seem a little large in comparison. The real truth was that she had only a soft roundness of outline, which put attractive dimples, and curves in the places where you might have expected angularities.

Therefore, in the pause following the older woman's speech, Jean looked across the table with an air of quiet amusement. Immediately she held the attention of the persons nearest them and at the same time gave the embarrassed young man a reassuring smile.

He was not a young man, however. Jean decided from the weight of her eighteen years of masculine experience that he was a college boy probably in his Freshman year and certainly far more refined in his manner and appearance than his ordinary-looking mother.

"If you were kind enough to be interested in our difficulty of yesterday, I should be glad to explain to you how it had a happy ending," she began in a friendly voice. "I suppose it was foolish for us to have been so frightened."

And then in detail Jean went through the history of the entire occurrence, beginning with their discovery of Frieda's absence, closing with the moment of her appearance, and neglecting nothing to make her story a good one. This in spite of Frieda's hot blushes and imploring although unuttered requests for silence. In the end, however, every member of the audience laughed, and Frieda determined never to forgive Jean's unkindness, while Jean and Olive were both silently congratulating themselves that any mystery surrounding her proceedings had been so soon and so easily cleared up. They were fully aware that their story would soon be circulated among a number of their fellow passengers.

Yet for a long time afterwards Frieda Ralston would always recall this first breakfast aboard the Martha Washington as one of the most uncomfortable meals of her whole lifetime. More than anything she hated being laughed at. And even the young man, whose mother had started the entire unpleasantness, had the impertinence to forget his own responsibility and to smile and exclaim "Great Scott" over her ability to sleep so long and well in the midst of such great excitement. Later in the meal he attempted smiling at Frieda once or twice, hoping that she might have come in time to regard the situation more humorously. But she had returned his glances with a reproachful coldness that apparently had reduced him to a proper state of silence and humility. One thought, however, upbore Frieda until she was able to withdraw from the dining room. At least, she need never again recognize the presence of the two objectionable persons across the table from her. For not only should she never speak to them, she would not even incline her head in recognition of their existence at meal times, although she had heard that this was a polite custom among even the most exclusive of ocean travelers.

Seated in her steamer chair next her sister Jacqueline half an hour later, with a veil tied close about her little scarlet velour hat, Frieda was dumfounded to observe this same objectionable young man stopping calmly before them.

Looked at closely he had a well-shaped head with almost too heavy a jaw, a bright color, brown eyes and hair that he was vainly trying to train into a correct pompadour. His shoulders were broad and athletic, of a kind the younger Miss Ralston had previously been known to admire.

First the young fellow bowed politely to Jack. Then he turned as directly toward Frieda as though they had already been properly introduced.

"I am awfully sorry my mother made you so uncomfortable this morning," he began bravely, and turned so crimson that Frieda felt her heart relenting.

"Mother is an awfully good sort, but she hasn't been around much and did not guess how you would feel. And – oh, well a fellow can't be expected to apologize for his mother! Only as she asked me to come and talk to you, I am trying to do my best."

Then, answering a nod of invitation from Jack, who had liked his straightforward manner, he sat down in the vacant chair next Frieda and pulling out a box of chocolates from his pocket began to tell her the story of his life. His name was Richard Grant. He and his mother came from Crawford, Indiana, where his father had been a candy manufacturer until his death a few months before. Richard was in his second year at Princeton when his father had died, so, as his mother felt a trip abroad might help her, he had dropped behind his class for half a year in order to do what she wished.

He seemed so straightforward and so good-natured that by and by Frieda forgot to remain angry. So when he begged her to come and be introduced to his mother she hardly knew how to refuse.

Nevertheless Frieda found her first conclusion had been right. Mrs. Grant was as impossible as she had previously thought her. Could she ever endure the mother's acquaintance for the sake of the son's?

Still, Frieda continued walking the deck with her newest acquaintance until Ruth was obliged to send Olive and Jean to look for her. And a number of persons aboard had been watching the youngest of the Ranch girls with a good deal of pleasure. For Frieda had never looked more attractive than she did in her scarlet steamer coat and cap, with her blue eyes as wide open and as deeply interested in everything about her as a clever baby's and her cheeks, without exaggeration, as deeply pink as a La France rose.

CHAPTER IV

THINGS PRESENT AND THINGS TO COME

THE ensuing week at sea was one of the most delightful in the Ranch girls' lives and in many ways illustrative of their future history.

An ocean steamer filled with passengers is in itself a miniature world, so many different types of people are represented, there is such freedom of association, such a leveling of artificial barriers that often exist on land. Frequently a fellow traveler reveals more of his character and history to some stranger whom he may meet in crossing than ever he has confided to a life-long friend.

Until the present time the four Ranch girls and their chaperon, Ruth Drew, had lived singularly sheltered lives. First brought up almost like boys under the care of their overseer, Jim Colter, three of the girls had known only the few neighbors scattered within riding distance of their thousand-acre ranch. While Olive's acquaintance, owing to her curious childhood, had been even smaller and more primitive. Then had come the year for Jean, Olive and Frieda at Primrose Hall under Miss Katherine Winthrop's charge, when their horizon had broadened, admitting a number of girls and a few young men to be their friends. But this could hardly be called real contact with the world, since always they were under Miss Winthrop's wise guidance. While as Jack had spent exactly the same length of time at a hospital she had had even less experience with people. The last ten months with three of the girls again at the Rainbow Ranch had meant a return to the same kind of quiet everyday existence, varied only by the interests of the working of the mine. Olive's six months apart from the others had simply been devoted to further study with Miss Winthrop with week-end visits to her grandmother at The Towers.

Then, although Ruth Drew was almost ten years older than any one of the Ranch girls, in many ways she was fully as ignorant of the world. It had never yet occurred to her that there were persons capable of misrepresenting themselves, nor of pretending to be what they were not and using innocent friendships for purposes of their own. Nor had it occurred to her that the reputation of the four girls for having suddenly acquired great wealth might place them in danger.

From the time Ruth had been a little girl she had never had the disposition for making many friends. Always she had been timid and retiring, devoting herself to her father until after his death. Except for the year spent at the Ranch and the winter at the hospital in New York with Jack, Ruth had never known anything outside the narrow circle of a Vermont village life. Not that a village does not furnish almost all there is to learn of human nature, but that she had shut herself in from most of it. The freedom of the wonderful ranch life, the contact and friendship with Jim Colter, which for a while had looked like something more than friendship, had widened the little Vermont school teacher's horizon. Then had come the break with Jim, and the past winter at home she had shut herself up even more completely. During the many evenings alone in her small cottage there had been plenty of opportunity for Ruth Drew to regret her decision against Jim, but whatever passed in her mind she had kept to herself. Not even to Jacqueline Ralston, who at one time had been her confidante, had she made any confession.

So perhaps from the standpoint of worldly wisdom the Rainbow Ranch party was none too well equipped for a long journey or for the meeting with many different types of people and the making of friendships which might be of grave importance in after years.

And, notwithstanding the fact that Ruth and the four girls were singularly devoted to one another, there was no question but that they were five widely unlike characters, and that their interests must often lie in as many different directions now that their opportunities were to be so much broader.

For a disinterested observer (if ever there is such an one) it would have been difficult at this time in the Ranch girls' lives to have decided which one was the most attractive – beauty and charm are

in themselves so much a matter of personal taste. But perhaps to older and more thoughtful persons it was now Jacqueline Ralston who would make the strongest appeal.

Jack was only a few months older than her friend, Olive Van Mater, less than a year older than her cousin, Jean Bruce, and yet looked a good deal more mature and felt so. This was true, not only because after her father's death she had been in a measure the head of the Rainbow Ranch, but because her year of illness had given her more time for introspection than is allowed most girls of her age. Sometimes she believed that this whole year had been completely lost, and then again came the knowledge that she could have learned certain lessons in no other way. Yet now she was determined to waste no further time, but to get as much as possible out of each passing day and to live fully and completely.

Jacqueline Ralston did not look entirely like the brilliant, vigorous Ranch girl who three years before had ridden alone across the prairie to search for her lost cattle. She had less color in her cheeks, perhaps, except under the pressure of some unusual excitement, but her hair was a deeper bronze, her eyes a clearer gray, and her rather full lips a brighter crimson. There was something about her expression not always easy to understand. The old wilfulness was still there, the old habit of knowing her own mind and wishing to have her own way, but with it a greater power of self-control than most girls of nineteen have – and something else. What this other trait was neither Jack herself nor her friends yet knew. This trip abroad might mean more to her than to any one of the other four girls. In spite of her lameness, which was never apparent except when she was greatly fatigued, Jack was tall – five feet seven inches – and held her shoulders with the erectness of other days. Slender, Jack would always be, but not thin, for sixteen years of outdoor life had given her too fine a beginning.

In each person's atmosphere or aura, if you prefer to call it so, there is usually a suggestion of some one distinctive quality, some characteristic that shows above all others. With Jacqueline Ralston it was purity. She was straightforward and unafraid, without cowardice and without suspicion. Having once believed in you, Jack would stand by you through thick and thin. More than anything in the world she hated a lie. For some reason she had always been and always would be what for want of a better word is called "a man's woman," meaning that men would understand and sympathize with her point of view and she with theirs.

Olive Van Mater was just the opposite of Jack. Although the story of her strange early life was now fully explained, she would never lose her shyness and look of gentle mystery. Nor would she ever be able to make friends among strangers so readily as the three other girls. Many persons there would always be who would explain her shyness as coldness and a lack of interest. Still she could reveal herself more easily to girls and to women than to men. And although her peculiar beauty and sweetness could not fail to win her admirers because of her sympathy and self-forgetfulness, all the days of her life her own sex would make the strongest appeal to her.

In Jean Bruce the two types were mingled. Jean wanted to attract people. She wanted to make everybody like her and she always had and always would. It did not matter to her who the people were, whether they were young or old, girls or boys, she simply had the desire to be liked and went about accomplishing it on shipboard just as she had at Primrose Hall and everywhere else. This proved that Jean had the real social gift, but then her talent had never been disputed by any member of her family.

With Frieda Ralston, however, the question of type was at this time not important. She was two years younger not only in years but in a great many other things, and when it did not interfere with her pleasure she meant to keep so. There was only one thing at present that Frieda was interested in and that was having a good time, and certainly she was accomplishing it. When Dick Grant was not dancing attendance upon her, and very often when he was, there were a dozen other girls and young men of about Frieda's age aboard, by whom she was constantly surrounded. It worried Ruth a great deal, but then, unfortunately, Ruth was the only member of the Rainbow Ranch party who was seasick. And the three girls simply did not take the trouble to spend much time looking after Frieda.

Though neither of them wished her to know it, both Olive and Jean tried to be especially careful of Jack. And this was particularly hard since Jack resented any suggestion that she was not as strong as they were. She was under the impression that she could walk without difficulty in spite of the rolling and pitching of the ship. Nevertheless she did finally promise Ruth to remain in her steamer chair unless one of the girls could be with her, and though she did not see any sense in her promise, meant to keep her word.

On the fourth afternoon out, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, the weather became unexpectedly heavy. Ruth had long ago given up and gone to her room. Frieda was playing games in the salon, but Jack, Olive and Jean were on deck watching the approach of the storm. Jack adored the water. She had wanted the ocean to look altogether different from her prairies, to bring a wholly new impression into her life. But until today the calm, gentle, even roll of the waves at a sufficient distance had not been so unlike the far-off rippling of the prairie fields. Now, with the approach of a storm, with the blackness, everything seemed different.

The three girls had been wrapped in their steamer rugs sitting quietly in their chairs, Jack supposing that Olive and Jean were as interested in the storm as she was.

Suddenly Jean sighed. "The face of the waters gets a bit tiresome after a while, don't you think so?" she asked. "Remember the Princess asked us to come and have tea with her some afternoon. Suppose we go now. Seems as though she is a chance that ought not to be neglected. Who knows if the Princess takes a truly fancy to us she may do something thrilling for us when we get to Rome. Ask us to a court ball perhaps!" Jean laughed at the absurdity of her suggestion.

But Jack frowned a little. She was grateful to the stranger for her interest and former kindness to them; yet she rather resented the air of mystery and seclusion surrounding her and her haughty attitude toward the other passengers. A princess might of course be different from other human beings; Jack felt she had no way of knowing. Nevertheless the Princess Colonna had confessed that she was an American girl. Why should a marriage have made so great a change in her point of view? In a vague fashion Jack was a little resentful of the homage which Ruth and the three other girls offered their new acquaintance. Now she slowly shook her head.

"You and Olive go, Jean. Really I would prefer to stay by myself for a little while and watch the storm."

Five minutes afterwards the two girls had departed, leaving Jack comfortably wrapped up in her steamer chair, and insisting that they would return in time to take her down to her stateroom to dress for dinner.

CHAPTER V

A SOLDIER OF FORTUNE

JACK may have been asleep for a little while. She was not quite sure. Anyhow, when she opened her eyes, she was surprised to see how the storm had increased and how entirely the promenade deck had become deserted. There had been a few persons about when Jean and Olive had departed, but now she saw no one except a man walking quietly up and down as though the pitching of the ship in no way affected him. He was wearing an English mackintosh with the collar turned up past his ears, but neither his appearance nor his existence at present interested Jack. Her only thought was for the oncoming storm. As yet there was no rain falling, only a cold gray Atlantic mist enveloped the sky and the sea. The waves had curling borders of white foam as they rolled and broke. There was no relief in the sky. Once the thunder roared as though they were cannonading on the other side of the world and then a single flash of lightning split straight across the horizon. Jack had thrown aside her steamer rug and was sitting upright in her chair, her hands clasping both sides. The color had gone from her cheeks (the storm was so wonderful, almost it was taking her breath away), but her head was thrown back, showing the beautiful line of her throat, and her lips were parted with the intensity of her admiration. Then the boat dipped and half the ocean picture became obscured.

It never occurred to Jack that she would be running any risk of falling by moving from her place. Never had she been able to think of herself as an invalid, even after her two years' experience. Besides, was she not well by this time and the railing of the deck but a few feet away?

When the ship had righted itself she stepped forward without any difficulty, laying her hand lightly on the rail for support.

Then she became wholly absorbed. The plunging and tossing of the great steamer was fairly regular, so that Jack found no especial trouble in keeping her footing.

So unconscious was she that she did not glance over her shoulder at the solitary passenger pacing the deck, although in the course of his march he must have passed her at least half a dozen times. Nevertheless the man had not been so unmindful of his fellow traveler. He was possibly twenty years or more her senior.

Unexpectedly the ship gave an uneven lurch, almost twisting herself about, and at the same instant an immense amount of spray struck Jack Ralston full in the face. With a little cry of surprise straightway she lost her clasp on the rail and would have gone down in a heap if an arm had not immediately steadied her.

"I beg your pardon; you might have fallen. At the moment I happened to be passing." The man spoke stiffly.

In Jack's position, after her long suffering from a fall, one might have expected her to be frightened. However, although she was being kept on her feet by a perfect stranger with no one else in sight, while a storm raged around them, she was not even embarrassed.

Catching hold on her old support again, this time more firmly, Jack said "Thank you" in an even voice. And then, as though she must have sympathy in her enjoyment from some quarter: "Isn't this storm splendid? It seems to me that before I have seen nothing but land, land all my life! I thought I loved it, but somehow all this water gives one quite a different sensation. I feel as if I weren't a person, but just a pair of eyes and lungs!" Jack spoke these last words with little gaspings for breath. So hard was the wind blowing that it had wrapped her heavy coat close about her; her hat had slipped backward and her heavy yellow-brown hair whipped across her face.

Her courage and frankness made her companion smile. And, although until this moment Jack had not paid any special attention to her rescuer, she now observed that he had a skin so bronzed as to look almost like leather, that he had a closely clipped blonde moustache and equally light hair.

Also, that his eyes were of the deep blue seen only with that complexion, and that his bearing was distinctly military.

"But the sea is after all not so unlike a distant view of your American prairies," he replied. And in answer to Jack's expression of surprise:

"I know your name, Miss Ralston. Among many other things I have tried running a ranch in the west, although none too successfully."

Whatever the strange man's intentions, certainly his words succeeded in arousing Jack's attention. For at once, without liking to ask, she was curious to find out how he had discovered her name. Then she was always interested in any ranching experience. The people she had been meeting on board ship were most of them from cities and without any special outdoor knowledge. Only a few persons actually have kinship with nature, and they have usually spent their youth in the *real* country, in big, open, unpeopled spaces as Jacqueline Ralston had.

This time she smiled more shyly. "I thought you were an Englishman – a soldier." Jack hesitated. She did not think that a few words of conversation with a stranger, who had been kind to her, made any difference, but it would not do to talk on indefinitely.

Instantly, as though divining her thought, the man's hat was lifted, and he moved a few paces away.

But at this moment the storm broke. No rain had been falling up to this time, but now the clouds lightened, and from between two of them a heavy sheet of water descended, apparently straight on to the ship's deck.

Why did Jack not run to shelter? Still she stood clinging with both hands to the ship's rail, her head thrown back inhaling deep breaths of the salt spray air. She was enjoying the storm but actually was afraid to move. Surely now that the storm had fairly broken either Olive or Jean would come for her. Both girls had made her promise not to return to her stateroom alone and at the present time it was impossible. The decks were soaking wet and slippery and she was tired from too long standing and opposing her strength to the fury of the wind.

Yet the sailors were rushing about, lashing the tarpaulins to the balustrade, and in a few seconds she would be obliged to move.

Jack set her teeth. It was absurd to be afraid of falling just because of a former weakness. She turned, took a few steps forward and then the ship gave another sudden lurch.

It was Jean Bruce, however, who made the outcry. She and Olive were running down the deck without hats or coats and regardless of the storm for their own sakes. They were not yet near enough to save Jack from slipping. However, there was no need for them.

When Captain Madden turned and left Jack he walked only a few steps away and then as the rain descended swung himself about to enter the door of the saloon about midway the promenade deck. Naturally he expected the girl with whom he had just been talking to have run on before him, she was even less well prepared for the downpour. But to his surprise he saw that Jack had remained fixed at her place.

This was carrying a love of nature a little too far. Not only would the young woman get a thorough soaking, she would be in positive danger in a few moments should a wave break over the deck. It was odd that no ship's officer had yet suggested that she go inside.

Captain Madden did not wish to offend Jack by officiousness. He had still no idea of her lameness, although he had been watching her more carefully than any one dreamed for the past few days. However, he did not wish to see her hurt and so put an end to his scarcely thought-out plan.

The second time that the stranger held her up on her feet Jack could only stammer and blush. It seemed rather absurd to have been rescued by the same person twice in ten minutes and yet she did not even now wish to confess her difficulty in walking alone.

Jean and Olive saved the situation.

"Thank you ever so much," Olive began, arriving first and a little out of breath.

"We never can be sufficiently grateful to you!" Jean exclaimed. "And oh, Jack, I suppose you can't imagine what had become of us? We sent the stewardess for you half an hour ago. Ruth is dreadfully worried."

But Jean was not in the habit of forgetting her manners and so stopped speaking of their private concerns. She and Frieda had both seen and spoken of the man who was now with her cousin. He had his place at a table across from theirs and, possibly because of his soldierly appearance, had seemed unlike the other men aboard.

"My cousin isn't very well, or at least she hasn't been," Jean announced, remembering Jack's sensitiveness. And then as Jack and Olive moved quickly away she added with a gracious condescension that made the older man smile: "Our chaperon, Miss Drew, will express her appreciation to you in the morning." And fled out of the rain as though she had been eight instead of eighteen.

Notwithstanding, Captain Madden did not immediately leave the deck after the girls' withdrawal.

"Things have turned out rather better than I could have arranged them," he remarked thoughtfully, pulling at his moustache. "She is an uncommonly attractive girl. Lots of spirit, but I've an idea she has yet to learn a great deal about men and women. It's worth trying anyhow. It's jolly odd my having run across them in this fashion and recalling what I was once told."

CHAPTER VI

RUTH'S ATTITUDE

BY the next morning the storm had abated, and for the rest of that day and evening Captain Madden devoted the greater part of his time to making the acquaintance of the Ranch girls' chaperon. More than this he accomplished, for he inspired in Ruth Drew a genuine admiration and liking. And while she and the older man talked together Jack usually sat quietly by listening to everything that was said.

In all their lives Ruth and Jack had never known anyone like this Captain Madden. Here was a man who had traveled all over the world, who had fought in the Boer war and more recently in Mexico and had hunted big game in Africa. Indeed he had done most of the things and seen most of the people that had before appeared to them like events and figures to be known only through books. And yet he was modest, never once picturing himself as a hero or even a particularly important person, although there were times when both Ruth and Jack felt that he was being hardly fair to himself. And on those occasions, if the man observed any change in the young girl's face, there was no sign on his part. Captain Madden was not particularly good-looking, but had unusually charming manners and the soldierly carriage that can not fail to win admiration. Then, as he was forty years old and had attracted considerable notice on board, it was something for the Rainbow Ranch party to be singled out for his attention.

Frankly, however, Frieda Ralston thought her sister's rescuer dreadfully elderly and a bore. Olive and Jean, although agreeing to her first conclusion, could not accept the second. Nevertheless neither of the two girls from the beginning of their association liked Captain Madden particularly well. They both wondered why Ruth and Jack should find him so agreeable. Then after the passing of another twenty-four hours, there was not so much a question of Ruth's liking, as of Jack's enjoying talking to a stranger for hours and hours.

Actually before the Martha Washington had sighted Gibraltar Jean had already complained to their chaperon of Jack's intimacy with a stranger, besides almost quarreling with her cousin.

It was true that Peter Drummond and Jack had been and were specially devoted friends and Peter was as old as their new ship acquaintance. But then Peter had always seemed different somehow, and his fancy for Jack had been largely explained by her likeness to Jessica Hunt. For while Jessica was still teaching at Primrose Hall and no word had been spoken of an engagement between her and Mr. Drummond, the Ranch girls were still convinced that something would develop between them later on.

To Jean's grumblings that Jack was making herself conspicuous by seeming to prefer Captain Madden to any other one of their new friends on the ship Ruth explained that it was but natural. For while Jean and Olive and Frieda could walk endless miles with anybody who happened to please their fancy at the moment, Jack could only take short walks now and then and with some one who understood her difficulty. And while they danced every afternoon and evening in the saloon, or pitched quoits for hours on deck, Jack's only chance for amusement lay in conversation. It was only because Captain Madden knew more and talked better than their other new friends that Jack seemed to prefer his society. Since his discovery of her old accident he had shown her every consideration.

Of course if Captain Madden had had no introduction to the Ranch girls and their chaperon, save that of his having assisted Jack at a difficult moment, Ruth Drew would never have permitted their acquaintance to have taken so intimate a tone in a few days. However, half an hour after his first meeting with her, the mystery of his having appeared to guess Jacqueline Ralston's name in his first conversation with her had been explained.

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