

HIS BANNER OVER ME

by

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PERFECT SECRETARY

IT WAS JUNE and the housecleaning was all done. The entire family had assisted at it, taking out the tacks from the ingrain carpet and carefully keeping them in a jar for further use. Then Father had put the carpet over the clothesline and had attacked it time after time with a wire beater, until the clouds of dust no longer arose.

Meanwhile Mother and we three girls had washed the woodwork. Then layer after layer of newspapers had been spread over the floor. The carpet was then brought back and while the assembled family held its breath, it was laid tenderly over the papers. Next the job of tacking it down; and on the last half, of stretching it. We liked that part and gladly took turns standing on one foot and scraping with the other to make the carpet taut.

There was a fresh lingering odor of yellow soap and varnish. Even though there was not much furniture, it was my opinion that our dining room was not a bad-looking room. While it was regrettable that the big drop leaf table had to have one leg propped up, still nobody would notice it. The half dozen chairs, all different, were stained and varnished the same shade. Years ago Mother had made a "Secretary."

It was just a big box wearing a ruffled percale petticoat. In our younger days we girls had stored our toys in the bottom part but lately it had been a receptacle for newspapers, wrapping paper, etc. The petticoat was now freshly washed and a new oilcloth top completed the refurbishing of our desk. Even the pencils were newly sharpened and arranged neatly in the small box which also contained pen, ink and writing paper.

Admiring the walls, I remembered the difficulty of last Christmas: "I thought we'd never get the wreaths and evergreen boughs tacked over all the stains on the wallpaper, but now since it has been repapered, it looks lovely."

I felt a special thrill of pride over the curtains of Nottingham lace. Mother had said they would not stand another washing and there was not money just now to get new ones. But I could not reconcile myself to bare windows. I had fretted so about them that finally Mother had told me that I might try to mend them. And I had done it. I had used up almost a whole spool of thread, but there they hung—my handiwork. To be sure, Mother's lips had twitched a bit as she looked at them. But to me they were beautiful.

Just at present my mind was occupied with something my sisters and I had seen the day before, when we were out for a walk. We were passing a secondhand shop a few blocks from home when we all stopped as suddenly as though brakes had been applied.

There in the window was the most beautiful, the most elegant piece of furniture we had ever seen. A perfect secretary. Immediately I could visualize it in our dining room, replacing the old homemade secretary. It was out of the question, of course. It probably cost a great deal of money. But I was one who expected miracles to happen—and for me they often did.

Down in the garden, we girls plotted to show our discovery to Mother and Father.

Looking up at the sky through the branches of the cherry tree I whispered, “Maybe, just maybe.”

The next day was Sunday. As usual we all walked to church, Amy and I going ahead holding hands, and Cathie bringing up the rear with Mother and Father. As we approached the store window, my heart began to beat suffocatingly. Suppose it had been taken out of the window! Then the moment arrived. Amy and I stopped in front of the store and pointed.

“Look at that!”

There was a long pause as we all gazed.

I volunteered, “See the carved curlicue on top. I’ll bet it is tall enough to reach to our dining room ceiling.”

“Ladies don’t bet,” murmured Mother automatically. Her eyes were scanning the secretary. Then she said, “See the three drawers. I could keep my table linen in them.”

Cathie chimed in, “And Papa could keep his account books behind that tall narrow door.”

Amy added, “And the tea set or books on the shelves behind those lovely glass doors.”

After studying it for a while Mother finally remarked thoughtfully, “I think—now mind you, I just said I think—that it opens up in some way to make a writing desk.”

This sent us into a fever of excitement.

Father said nothing, for he loved to give to his family but this was obviously out of reach.

“Oh, Papa,” we begged, “please go in and ask how much it costs. That would do no harm.”

“They probably wouldn’t be open on Sunday,” Father replied. But my eyes had detected someone walking about the rear of the store. So Father went in to inquire.

He came out in just a moment and spoke briefly: “Seventeen dollars.”

Obviously there was nothing more to be said. But we paused a moment longer, a wistful row gazing at the object of our dreams; and then, all but I relinquishing it . . .

As we walked along soberly, Mother said after a block or two of silence, “You girls understand, we are not poor. We are thankful indeed that your father has a good position in the post office. As you know, he gets sixty dollars a month, which is a good deal of money, but a quarter of that goes every month for food, for we will not have our children stunted. And we are buying a home and then there are taxes and clothes and doctor bills, besides many other things. Perhaps after while we can buy something, but you can see that just now we cannot afford such an expensive piece of furniture.”

The girls agreed. But I still could visualize that perfect secretary in the corner of our dining room.

So the next day I spent a long time under my favorite cherry tree. I tried to figure it out: there were three ways to get money—save it, earn it, or sell something. The first two seemed impossible. The last—what was there to sell? I looked at the slender ring with the tiny pearl, on my finger. Uncle Charles had given it to me. It was no doubt valuable but it seemed as though I could not part with it, and besides he might be hurt.

What else did we have? Then it struck me! We had loads of fruit; apples, plums, pears, prunes and cherries, besides the raspberries and currants! The yard was just full of fruit. Every summer we picked and put up quarts of it, a task which we girls did not enjoy.

I flew into the house. “Mother, Mother, can’t we sell currants and get some money to buy the secretary?”

Mother looked thoughtful. “Who would buy them? All the neighbors have fruit.”

“Not currants, and you know how large ours are.”

“Would you girls be willing to do all the picking? You know how you hate to do it.”

I called Amy and Cathie and they agreed excitedly. We planned to deliver the currants by borrowing the little express wagon from Freddie, next door. Mother explained that this was a serious undertaking and if we began it, we must carry it through. Moreover, she warned us that we would have to be content next winter to go without our favorite currant jelly, except for a few glasses for company.

In that beautiful Puget Sound country the evenings are long. It was hard to spend them picking currants while the other children played. The call of “Run, sheep, run” often fell upon very wistful ears under the currant brushes. But we girls worked faithfully. Mother and Father were pleased and surprised at our initiative. Though at first our knees shook after ringing strange doorbells, we learned to hold out a couple of boxes of the beautiful globes, red and white.

I used to pretend they were rubies and pearls. And always the lady at the door would exclaim, “Oh what beautiful currants! How much are they?”

We had only one crate of boxes. This we used over and over, delivering the crate with the boxes filled, and then emptying them and refilling for the next customer.

We girls worried constantly lest someone else would buy the prize for which we toiled. But Father did not feel that it was wise to pay anything down, as he feared the project would not go through. However, after five dollars had been collected, he made a down payment. We girls breathed more easily after that.

Then at last came the day. The currants had just lasted. The bushes were nearly bare—and hidden in the old sugar bowl were the twelve dollars still due. Carefully we planned. Across the alley lived Mr. Rooter, the drayman. He agreed, since it was on his way home anyhow, to meet Father at the store and together they would load up the secretary and bring it home.

Mr. Rooter would charge only twenty-five cents and Father said he would pay that. Father, of course, did not take the twelve dollars to work with him in the morning—that was too large an amount to carry around. He always came home to eat his heavy noon meal, climbing up and down the steep hills of Tacoma.

It seemed that he would never get through eating. And then he asked for a second helping of potatoes and bacon gravy! I, myself, would have eaten nothing all day were it not that Mother issued a stern command.

But at last we took the money out of the sugar bowl, Father put it under his handkerchief in his pocket, and off he went down the street, turning at intervals to wave to his eager girls clustered at the gate.

After a long wait, during which we never stirred from the gate post, we heard the clatter of hoofs on the wooden blocks of the pavement. And up drove Mr. Rooter and Father!

“Whoa,” called Mr. Rooter. “Back there, Jinny. Get around, Blackie.”

Then the horses were still. With hushed hearts we watched Father and Mr. Rooter carry the secretary into the house. Mr. Rooter carried the heavy end, and Father—as he wasn’t so very big—carried the lighter end, which was prettier anyhow.

Mother, stationed in the doorway, held the door open for them. Through the living room they went, and into the dining room. The old secretary had been taken down and put into our room; the new one was up ended and there it was!

“Elegant-looking article, Mr. Snell,” said Mr. Rooter, “elegant indeed, Ma’am. Oh, thank you,” as Father handed him the quarter saying, “Now we are square, aren’t we?”

“Yes, indeed. Good day.” And out he clumped and drove away, but we girls were too absorbed to hear him.

“Mother, you open the place you think might be for a desk.” So with fingers that shook just a little, Mother pulled it forward. Oh, the oh’s and ah’s of admiration that went up!

There was a row of cubbyholes, waiting to be filled with pencils, pens, ink and paper.

Mother pulled again, and out came a board just right to be used for a desk!

Amy brought in the large China teapot. We all agreed it was wonderfully effective behind the glass doors. I ran to the living room bookcase which was overloaded, picked out an armload of books and put them on the second shelf behind those precious shining glass doors.

Father finally installed what he termed his “day books” behind the narrow little door below; and it was understood that that was Father’s special property.

Then we all stepped back to take a view. I looked at the clean carpet, the great table with the wobbly leg, allowing my glance to linger for a proud moment on the mended curtains; and back again to that beautiful perfect secretary.

Then I flung myself into Mother’s arms exclaiming, “Oh, aren’t we rich, Mother?”

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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