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SEAMAN***



***THE FIGUREHEAD
OF THE "FOLLY"***

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The Figurehead of the "Folly"

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CHAPTER I

WE MAKE A DECISION

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I SHALL never forget the night Mother and I made that important decision. It scarcely seems more than a year ago! Such a wild, stormy night, with rain dashing in sheets against the windows, sand beating in through every tiny crevice, and the furious sea raging beyond the dunes, out in the darkness!

It was during the Easter holidays (which happened to come in March) and I was home from boarding school for two weeks. The storm had been raging for two days, and we'd been kept very much in the house. It's impossible to tramp on the beach when the flying sand cuts you like a million needles!

I had noticed all day, ever since I'd come in with the morning mail, that Mother had seemed extremely worried and absent-minded, as if something were bothering her, something she hadn't told me about. Which is unusual for Mother! She'd been rambling about as if she couldn't decide just what to do, putting things down in the wrong places, answering questions as if her mind were a thousand miles away. Finally, after dinner, when we were sitting in the living room, listening to the shutters rattling and the howl of the storm and trying to read, I said to her:

"Something's wrong, Mum—I can see it! You haven't been like yourself all day. Won't you tell me about it?" She

put down the daily paper and looked at me rather curiously.

“Yes, something *is* wrong—has been for quite a while, if you must know, Joan,” she said. “I’ve been trying to make up my mind to tell you about it, but——”

“Is it the same old money matters?” I asked quickly, for I knew things had been in a rather bad way with us ever since the depression set in. “You needn’t be afraid to discuss *them* with me, you know.”

“It’s that—and something more,” she went on. “Things have come to such a pass that we can’t go on any longer, just sliding along and economizing more and more, but still living in pretty much the same way as we’ve always been used to. And that’s why I hate to tell you. It’s going to make quite a big difference to you—provided you’re willing to accept the situation.”

“Oh, do go ahead, Mum, and out with it!” I begged. “*You* know I’m willing to agree to anything—provided it makes things more comfortable for you. I hate to see you so worried all the time.”

“Well, here’s the whole matter in a nutshell,” she replied. “You’ve known all along that our income has been terribly cut down, but we’ve managed to keep this home intact and get you through your boarding school, which you’ll finish in June. But here’s what you don’t know: I haven’t been able to pay the taxes on this big house in three years, and they’re very heavy in this particular district. Each year I have hoped that things would improve so much by the next year that we could make it all up. But that hasn’t happened. Now, if they are not paid in a few months, this house will be taken from

us and sold—and we'll lose it. I had a notice just the other day. So you see it's pretty serious!"

It certainly was! I had no idea that things were as bad as that. We both loved this beautiful home on the dunes by the sea. It was one of the loveliest for miles along the coast. Mother had come here to live after she was married. I was born here. Daddy had died here. It was associated with all our life, and we both loved it and would have been heartbroken to have to leave it. We'd always had plenty of money to keep it up till the depression came. Then Mother dismissed all the maids but our faithful old Karen, the cook, who'd been with us the longest, and we had cut down on everything, except that Mother insisted I must finish with my boarding school and go to college afterward. She was willing to cut down on clothes and trips abroad and entertaining and everything, so that I could do that. And I'd thought everything was working out very nicely till she told me what she just had. It was a real shock!

"But isn't there something we can *do*?" I demanded. "Surely there must be *some* way out of it!"

"I'm coming to that," she went on. "It isn't entirely hopeless, but it's going to involve considerable sacrifice on our part. And I'm afraid it will be particularly hard on *you*."

"Never mind about me!" I cried. "Tell me what it is we can do!"

"It has been in my mind for some time," said Mother, taking up a book and putting it down absent-mindedly, "that we might rent this house for part of a year, at least, and probably get a very good price for it. It's right here on the ocean, in a very desirable locality, and people who come

here for the spring, summer, and fall season are often anxious to rent just such a house as this. In fact, I've had several offers in the past, which I always refused. But this year, I think we shall have to do it. And a week ago, those old friends of mine, the Leveridges, made me an offer for six months—May to October—at a generous sum, and are willing to pay the whole thing at once, which is rather unusual. That will cover the taxes and a little over. So I wrote them today and accepted."

"But that's perfectly grand!" I interrupted. "What are you worrying about, Mum, if you've got it fixed so nicely? Of course, we'll have to get out and go somewhere else, but we can both stand *that*—for just six months!"

"Unfortunately, that isn't all of it!" continued Mother. "And the rest is what I'm worrying about. I've had to borrow a good deal in advance on my income, and there won't be enough next fall for you to begin your college, and I'm determined you must do that—somehow. And to do this, I've accepted the position as secretary to a very wealthy society woman who makes her home in Bar Harbor every summer. What I receive for that will just about cover your tuition fees and board at college. I wish I could have you with me, but that isn't in the contract, and I do not feel I should suggest it. It will mean that we'll have to be separated—for the first time—during vacation. It won't be easy for either of us!"

"But what about *me*?" I almost wailed. "Where am I to be parked—after school's over?"

"There are just two things possible." She hesitated. "One is for you to go to Cousin Lucretia in Boston. She would be

glad to have you—though I expect you won't fancy it much!"

"Oh, Mumsy—don't, *don't* send me to Cousin Lucretia!" I begged wildly. "You know how I hate it! She's so fussy and peculiar, and her house is so dark and dreary, I'd die of lonesomeness. I couldn't stand it. I'd rather do *anything* than that! What's the other proposition?"

"I rather thought you wouldn't care for that, but the other may not be any more attractive," smiled Mother. "Here it is. I have an old college friend, Miss McKeever—Elsie McKeever—who has a home in Mapleside, New Jersey. Her parents died shortly after she graduated from college and left her with a big, roomy house and very little money, so she's made a living ever since by keeping the house as a very exclusive boarding house, with the kind of people who stay year after year. We write to each other frequently, though we meet very seldom. Lately she wrote that she had recently taken into her home a little niece of twelve, whose mother died a while ago and left no one to take care of her. She is a little crippled child, who had a serious illness in her babyhood and has never recovered the use of her legs. Of course, she is quite a care, with all her aunt's other duties, and Miss McKeever wrote that she did so wish she could find some nice young girl who would be willing to be a companion for, and tend to, this child for a while, at least during the summer, after which she hopes to place the little thing in a good hospital for treatment. She has a trained nurse with her now, but finds it very expensive, and the nurse can, at present, do little that a strong, sensible, able young girl could not do. Also she thinks a younger

companion would be pleasanter for Mary Lou. She says the child is most attractive and interesting—and lovable.

“It somehow occurred to me that this might be something *you* could do—provided you were willing to try—so I wrote her, suggesting it as a bare possibility. And she seemed delighted with the idea. She wrote back—I just got the letter this morning—that she could pay you a moderate sum a week, and of course you would have your room and board without charge, if you would consent to come. She said Mary Lou was simply thrilled to think it might be possible that she would have a young companion. She has never been able to be with children of or near her own age. This money would help a lot toward your clothes and spending-money for college; for this year, at least, I shan’t be able to do much more than pay your tuition and board. I know that you would have nice quarters and a good, kind friend in Miss McKeever, or I shouldn’t consent to the arrangement. Well, there is the proposition, my dear! Think it over. You are to please only yourself in this matter.”

I had sat perfectly quiet, listening to all this, and somehow I felt rather stunned with the idea. It was so different from anything I had ever done—or thought of doing! Being a companion to an invalid child—in a boarding house—among perfectly strange people! How could I ever endure it? I didn’t dare let Mother see how I really felt about it, but she must have guessed.

“You don’t *have* to do it, Joan, remember!” she suggested. “If you can’t ‘go’ it, you can make the best of things at Cousin Lucretia’s.”

A sudden idea struck me, then.

“There’s one other thing, Mother,” I faltered. “I meant to tell you when I first came home. My roommate, Betty Cavanaugh, has invited me to spend a month with her at their summer place on Long Island, this year, if you’ll agree. She told me to be sure to ask you. I might go to Cousin Lucretia’s for a while, and then spend the rest of the time with Betty. But that wouldn’t be earning me any money!” I thought Mother’s face changed at this, just the tiniest bit. But she only said:

“Of course you can go to Betty’s if you wish, dear. It would at least be a pleasant thing to help pass the time. As for the money, if you can get along with the clothes you have, for next fall and winter, I guess I can manage a little allowance. But you must do the deciding yourself.”

And as Mother said that it suddenly dawned on me what a selfish pig I was. Trying to plan it so that I, at least, would have some good times, while Mother was working hard. And next winter she would skimp herself to death to give me spending-money and no doubt clothes too, while I was in college, and never say a reproachful word about it! I just threw myself into her lap and hugged her and sobbed:

“Oh, Mumsy dear, don’t you worry another minute! I’ll go and take that job and be glad of it. But I don’t mind saying I’ll be pretty lonesome, with not a soul I know for a hundred miles in any direction!” And Mother gave me a big hug and said:

“I don’t mind saying I’m glad you’ve decided as you have, Joan dear. I think the experience will be rather good for you. But I’ve a little surprise for you. You won’t be as lonesome as you think, with no one you know around. And

I'll tell you why: I've been sort of puzzled what to do about Karen. The people that have taken this house have their own cook and maids, and she has nowhere she can go. Fortunately, Miss McKeever told me she was losing her cook and dreading trying to get a new one, and so Karen has consented to go to her for the period we'll be away from this house. So you'll feel sort of at home with Karen right near you, won't you? You've always been very fond of her."

At that I fairly wept with joy. Karen has been with us as long as I remember, and has always petted and babied me, and I've come to feel as if she were a member of the family. If Karen was to be in the same house with me, I felt I could stand anything!

Well, we talked and planned about the thing for hours, that stormy night. I asked Mother what kind of a place it was, what sort of people, etc., so that I'd know more about what I was in for. Mother said she'd never happened to be there, except once, a number of years before. But said she thought they were all more or less elderly people, and some of them rather queer, from what she'd heard, but the kind that stayed on and on in a place like that and made a home of it.

"But you'll have Mary Lou, and you'll probably find her companionable," Mother ended, "and no doubt there are other pleasant young people near by, so I wouldn't worry about it. You'll get along!"

Before we went up to bed at last, we stood in the darkened living room, looking out at the furious storm and the wild ocean. It made my heart ache to think how long it would be before I should see it again, after I left this time,

for Mother had arranged to turn over the house to its new tenants before school closed, and I was to go straight to Miss McKeever's at Mapleside. I think Mother was feeling the same way too, for she hugged me again and whispered:

“Never mind, my dear! We'll enjoy it all the more when we get back to it next winter!”

But I little guessed in what strange things I was going to be entangled at Miss McKeever's before I got back to this house again!

CHAPTER II

MISS MCKEEVER'S BOARDING HOUSE

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I 'VE never felt so lonely in all my life as I was that first night at Miss McKeever's. It had been such a delightful, exciting graduation day. Mother had come down from Bar Harbor the night before and stayed overnight in the hotel right near the school, and had of course been at all the graduating exercises. I had, quite unexpectedly to us both, won the English and French prizes and stood next to the highest in the class, and naturally Mother was very proud of me. I tried all the while to put out of my mind the thought that she had to take the train back to Bar Harbor that night, after taking me to Miss McKeever's. The other girls all had such lovely plans for the summer, and Betty was so hurt because I wouldn't—or couldn't—come to her, as she'd planned, and it all made things more difficult for me. But I'd made my decision long before, and I wasn't going back on it.

We reached Miss McKeever's in the late afternoon, and then Mother had to rush away. I had no time for many good-byes, and perhaps it was just as well, as that would have been too hard on us both. Her taxi drove out of sight half an hour after she had landed me there, and I was left alone, in a perfectly strange place, among perfectly strange people.

And I was pretty glad Mother couldn't know how utterly forlorn I felt.

But Miss McKeever was an absolute dear! A little, gray-haired, brown-eyed woman, with a face full of worried wrinkles, but with the most charming manners, and somehow a very understanding way about her. She put her arm around my shoulder, after the taxi was out of sight, and said:

"I know exactly how you feel, my dear—just too lonesome for words, in this strange place. But let's get acquainted right away. First place, I was your mother's best friend in college. We were like sisters—and always have been. I want you to call me 'Aunt Elsie.' No 'Miss McKeever' from this minute on! And I'm going to be like a real aunt to you, if you'll let me."

"Oh, Miss McKeever—I mean—Aunt Elsie, I'll be *so* glad!" I sobbed and stuttered. "I do miss Mother horribly. I've never spent a summer away from her before. But you understand, I guess!"

"Certainly I do!" she cried. "And now let's pretend we've always known each other. I'll take you right up to your room and let you get settled, and then you shall see Mary Lou. I think you're going to like each other. She's crazy to meet you. I'm having rather a mixed-up time here in the house today, but you won't mind if things are slightly upheaved, will you? Mrs. Rowland is on the rampage again, and dear old Mr. Doane has been having one of his spells, and that wretched little Fraser boy tried to climb down the rose trellis from a second-story window this morning and fell and broke

his collar bone! The whole thing has made me more or less rattled today! Well, here we are!”

I didn’t in the least know what she was talking about, just then—but I was to find out soon enough! She led me to a little room on the third floor of the big house and told me it was to be mine, and that Mary Lou’s room was next door. Then she excused herself, saying it was nearly dinner time and she must hurry down to see that everything was all right, and that she would be back a little later, introduce me to her niece, and so on. And then I was left really alone.

It was a nice little room, tiny but very comfortable and prettily furnished. I took off my hat, sat down in the one big comfortable armchair and—I’ll have to confess it—had a good cry! I guess Miss McKeever, or I mean “Aunt Elsie,” had known it was coming and left me alone to get it over. Afterward I somehow felt better, washed my face and bathed my swollen eyes, and set about unpacking. And presently she came back. She was good enough not to remark about my face, which certainly showed I’d been crying, but suggested that we go right in to see Mary Lou.

Of all the dears I ever *did* see, Mary Lou is the sweetest! I’ll never forget that first sight of her, sitting forward in her wheel chair, her pale but beautiful little face framed in lovely curly dark hair, her enormous blue eyes fairly flaming with excitement.

“Oh, I think it was *sweet* of you to come to me!” she cried, giving me a shy, thin little hand. “I know we’re going to like each other, Joan!” It was easy to see we were. I could feel it from the first moment. After her aunt had chatted a bit with us both, she left us together, saying that for this

evening we could both have our dinner together up in Mary Lou's room and get better acquainted. I felt, too, that kind Aunt Elsie was planning in this way to spare me the agonies of a first meeting with all those new faces in the general dining room. And as a crowning kindness she presently sent—who but Karen herself! up with the big tray. I just fell on her neck and hugged her as if she'd been a long-lost sister! After seeing *her*, in this strange house, I felt so much less lonely and forsaken by all my own folks.

"My! but I'm glad you're going to be with me now," chuckled Mary Lou, as we began our dinner, "instead of that old Miss Crosley. I couldn't bear her—so starchy—and fussy—and prim! Most trained nurses are nice, but she's just tiresome. She'd have gone for good today, only Boots Fraser broke his collar bone and his mother begged her to stay a few days and help with him. He's a *terrible* child!"

"Won't you tell me a little about the people in this house?" I asked her. "You see, I'm completely strange here, and it would help a lot if I could get some idea beforehand of the folks in the place."

"Of course I will!" cried Mary Lou delightedly. "I haven't been here so very long myself, but I know all about them already. Some of them are awfully nice—and some awfully *queer*—and one is *both*!"

"What do you mean by that—'one is both'?" I demanded, laughing at the odd expression.

"Well, it's *true*!" she said, giggling a little. "I mean old Mr. Gilbert Doane. He's Aunt Elsie's 'star boarder'—been with her years and years. He has the great big room over the living room. He's both nice *and* queer! But mostly nice."

“Oh, he’s the one your aunt Elsie told me was having ‘one of his spells’ today!” I interrupted.

“Yes, it’s awfully strange.” Mary Lou’s voice sank to an excited whisper. “He has them every once in a while. He isn’t ill, but it just seems as if something *scares* him—somehow! It always happens when he gets a letter—a certain letter! Do you know, I think there’s some *mystery* about him! I’m terribly interested in it. I love mysteries. He got one of those letters this morning at the breakfast table. Aunt Elsie said he never even opened it, but got up, sort of tottery, and went upstairs to his room and hasn’t left it since. Asked if he could have just a cup of tea and some toast for the rest of his meals today. Auntie worries a great deal about him when he gets like that. He’s such a dear old thing too—he looks like some character out of Dickens. And he’s so old. Aunt Elsie says he’s eighty-nine at least. You ought to see his room!—it’s filled with old books and ship models and one great big ship’s figurehead fastened on the wall over the mantel.”

I saw, right here, that May Lou was getting so excited and talking so much that she wasn’t eating any dinner, so I said:

“That’s terribly interesting, but suppose we finish our salad and dessert” (I recognized some of Karen’s delicious Danish pastry!) “and then we can go on about all these people when we’re through.”

“Now you sound like Miss Crosley!” chuckled Mary Lou, but she took the hint and finished the meal, and then I asked:

“What about the others? You’ve told me a little about old Mr. Doane. I think I’m going to like him!”

“Sure you will!” said Mary Lou. “But you won’t like Mrs. Rowland. She’s an old pest!”

“Is she the one your aunt said was ‘on the rampage’ today?” I queried.

“And *what* a rampage!” grinned Mary Lou. “She makes me think of a wasp—stinging and buzzing and making things generally disagreeable every once in a while. This morning she started by complaining about the toast at breakfast. That’s always a bad sign! Then, later, she rushed downstairs to say the plumbing was out of order in her bathroom, and made a terrible fuss. Auntie sent for a plumber and found it was only because Mrs. Rowland had let a lot of hair and matches and things go down the pipes, but that didn’t stop the old wasp scolding about it! She’s been at it ever since—one thing after another—till it’s nearly driven Auntie crazy.”

“But why does your aunt stand for it?” I demanded.

“Because Mrs. R. has one of the best rooms and pays quite a lot—and Auntie just can’t afford to have her leave. We call her the ‘Wasp,’ Auntie and I!”

“Don’t think I’m going to like that particular person!” I chuckled. “But I’ll try to keep out of her way. Who else is there here?”

“Well, there are Mr. and Mrs. Fraser—and that terrible child of theirs—‘Boots.’ I think his real name is ‘Clarence’—but nobody calls him that. His father and mother are nice, but he is certainly a nuisance. He’s into everything—every minute of the day. They’re only staying here for a while.

Their house here in town burned down a couple of months ago, and they're staying here till they've finished building another. Auntie won't be sorry when they go. She says a padded cell is the only safe place for that boy!"

"I hear he had an accident today," I remarked.

"It scared us all to death!" chuckled Mary Lou. "He tried to climb out of his bedroom window down the rose trellis. It broke, and he fell into the flower beds and howled as if he'd been murdered. But the doctor said it was only a collar bone. I guess that'll keep him quiet for a while!"

"Well, is that the end of the list?" I wanted to know.

"Only two more," went on Mary Lou. "One is Miss Melissa Markham. She's a sort of middle-aged lady—very musical—and keeps to herself a lot. She has a grand piano up in her room and practices on it a good deal. Sometimes she plays for us all in the evening, on Auntie's piano, downstairs. She plays beautifully. I love to hear her. I wish I could play the piano myself, but my legs won't work the pedals. Miss Markham is very nice. We all like her. Then the only other one is a Mr. Conroy. He just came lately and says he is only staying for the summer. He's a queer, dark, sort of sinister-looking man. Hardly says anything to anyone. He's away all day in New York and only comes back at night. Auntie and I don't like him much, and we don't just know why. He always looks as if he were plotting something—sort of desperate—or underhand—if you know what I mean! And the funny thing is, old Mr. Doane simply hates him—won't speak to him at all! But he never says why or makes any complaint about him. Auntie's rather puzzled about it. She says she's glad Mr. Conroy isn't going to be here long, or Mr. Doane

might get dissatisfied. Now, that's absolutely all about the people here. Tell me all about yourself, won't you, Joan? That's what I'm most interested to hear!"

We spent the rest of the time talking about Mother and myself, and my school and graduation. Mary Lou was thrilled to hear that I was planning to study writing and journalism in college, and perhaps be an author later on. She said she wished the house were an interesting sort of place, so that I might have something to practice writing about, but guessed I'd find it all pretty dull there. We little dreamed, either of us, what wild excitement it was going to provide us with later, or that I *should* make it the subject of my first try at a story!

Then Aunt Elsie came up and said it was time to get Mary Lou to bed and showed me how to give her an alcohol rub and make her comfortable for the night. When she was all tucked in we went off to my room and sat there talking a long while and getting better acquainted. I told her that Mary Lou had given me a detailed account of all the boarders, and she laughed, and said:

"There isn't a thing escapes that child! She's as bright as a button. And I know she's just going to love you and your companionship. You're just the right one to be with her."

"Well, I love *her*—already!" I declared. "And after I get over this first lonesomeness, I'm going to enjoy it a lot."

"You're dead tired—that's what's the matter with you. And I want you to crawl right into bed." Aunt Elsie announced. "Good-night, my dear. You're going to be a blessing to both Mary Lou and myself."