

A photograph of a misty forest path. The path is narrow and appears to be made of dirt or stone, winding through dense green foliage. In the distance, a person is visible walking away from the viewer. The atmosphere is hazy and serene, with soft light filtering through the trees.

***MARGARET WADE  
CAMPBELL  
DELAND***

***AN OLD  
CHESTER  
SECRET***

**Margaret Wade Campbell Deland**

# **An Old Chester Secret**

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Contact: [DigiCat@okpublishing.info](mailto:DigiCat@okpublishing.info)



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# CHAPTER I

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THERE was not a person in Old Chester less tainted by the vulgarity of secretiveness than Miss Lydia Sampson. She had no more reticence than sunshine or wind, or any other elemental thing. How much of this was due to conditions it would be hard to say; certainly there was no "reticence" in her silence as to her neighbors' affairs; she simply didn't know them! Nobody ever dreamed of confiding in Lydia Sampson! And she could not be reticent about her own affairs because they were inherently public. When she was a girl she broke her engagement to Mr. William Rives two weeks before the day fixed for the wedding—and the invitations were all out! So of course everybody knew *that*. To be sure, she never said why she broke it, but all Old Chester knew she hated meanness, and felt sure that she had given her William the choice of being generous or being jilted—and he chose the latter. As she grew older the joyous, untidy makeshifts of a poverty which was always hospitable and never attempted to be genteel, stared you in the face the minute you entered the house; so everybody knew she was poor. Years later, her renewed engagement to Mr. Rives, and his flight some ten minutes before the marriage ceremony, were known to everybody because we had all been invited to the wedding, which cost (as we happened to know, because we had presented her with just exactly that amount) *a hundred dollars!* At the sight of such extravagance the thrifty William turned tail and ran, and we gave thanks and said he was a scoundrel to make us thankful, though, with the exception of Doctor Lavendar, we deplored the extravagance as much as he did! As for Doctor Lavendar, he said that it was a case of the grasshopper and the ant; "but Lydia is a gambling grasshopper," said Doctor

Lavendar; "she took tremendous chances, for suppose the party *hadn't* scared William off?"

So, obviously, anything which was personal to Miss Lydia was public property. She simply couldn't be secretive.

Then, suddenly, and in the open (so to speak) of her innocent candor, a Secret pounced upon her! At first Old Chester didn't know that there was a secret. We merely knew that on a rainy December day (this was about eight months after William had turned tail) she was seen to get into the Mercer stage, carrying a carpetbag in one hand and a bandbox in the other. This was surprising enough—for why should Lydia Sampson spend her money on going to Mercer? Yet it was not so surprising as the fact that she did not come back from Mercer! And even that was a comparative surprise; the superlative astonishment was when it became known that she had left her door key at the post office and said she didn't know when she would return!

"Where on earth has she gone?" said Old Chester. But only Mrs. Drayton attempted to reply:

"It certainly looks *very* strange," said Mrs. Drayton.

It was with the turning of her front-door key that Miss Lydia made public confession of secrecy—although she had resigned herself to it, privately, three months before. The Secret had taken possession of her one hazy September evening, as she was sitting on her front doorstep, slapping her ankles when a mosquito discovered them, and watching the dusk falling like a warm veil across the hills. The air was full of the scent of evening primroses, and Miss Lydia, looking at a clump of them close to the step, could see the pointed buds begin to unfurl, then hesitate, then tremble, then opening with a silken burst of sound, spill their

perfume into the twilight. Except for the crickets, it was very still. Once in a while some one plodded down the road, and once, when it was quite dark, Mr. Smith's victoria rumbled past, paused until the iron gates of his driveway swung open, then rumbled on to his big, handsome house. He was one of the new Smiths, having lived in Old Chester hardly twenty years; when he came he brought his bride with him—a Norton, she was, from New England. A nice enough woman, I suppose, but not a Pennsylvanian. He and his wife built this house, which was so imposing that for some time they were thought of, contemptuously, as the *rich* Smiths. But by and by Old Chester felt more kindly and just called them the new Smiths. Mrs. Smith died when their only child, Mary, was a little girl, and Mr. Smith grew gradually into our esteem. The fact was, he was so good-looking and good-humored and high-tempered (he showed his teeth when he was in a rage, just as a dog does) Old Chester had to like him—even though it wished he was a better landlord to Miss Lydia, to whom he rented a crumbling little house just outside his gates. In matters of business Mr. Smith exacted his pound of flesh—and he got it! In Lydia's case it sometimes really did represent "flesh," for she must have squeezed her rent out of her food. Yet when, after her frightful extravagance in giving that party on money we had given her for the rebuilding of her chimney, Mr. Smith rebuilt it himself, and said she was a damned plucky old bird.—"Looks like a wet hen," said Mr. Smith, "but plucky! plucky!"—After that, our liking for him became quite emphatic. Not that Old Chester liked his epithets or approved of his approval of Miss Lydia's behavior (she

bought kid gloves for her party, if you please! and a blue-silk dress; and, worse than all, presents for all Old Chester, of canary birds and pictures and what not, *all out of our hundred dollars!*)—we did not like the laxity of Mr. Smith's judgments upon the Grasshopper's conduct, but we did approve of his building her chimney, because it saved us from putting our hands in our own pockets again.

In the brown dusk of the September evening, Miss Lydia, watching her landlord roll past in his carriage, gave him a friendly nod. "He's nice," she said, "and so good-looking!" Her eyes followed him until, in the shadows of the great trees of the driveway, she lost sight of him. Then she fell to thinking about his daughter, a careless young creature, handsome and selfish, with the Smith high color and black eyes, who was engaged to be married to another handsome young creature, fatter at twenty-three than is safe for the soul of a young man. Miss Lydia did not mind Carl's fat because she had a heart for lovers. Apparently her own serial and unhappy love affair had but increased her interest in happier love affairs. To be sure, Mary's affair had had the zest of a little bit of unhappiness—just enough to amuse older people. The boy had been ordered off by his firm in Mercer, at a day's notice, to attend to some business in Mexico, and the wedding, which was to have been in April, had to be postponed for six months. Carl had been terribly down in the mouth about it, and Mary, in the twenty-four hours given them for farewells, had cried her eyes out, and even, at the last minute, just before her young man started off, implored her father to let them get married—which plea, of course, he laughed at, for the new Mr. Smith was not the

sort of man to permit his only daughter to be married in such hole-and-corner fashion! As it happened, Carl got back, quite unexpectedly, in September—but his prospective father-in-law was obdurate.

"It won't hurt you to wait. 'Anticipation makes a blessing dear!' December first you can have her," said the new Mr. Smith, much amused by the young people's doleful sentimentality.

Miss Lydia, now, slapping the mosquitoes, and thinking about the approaching "blessing," in friendly satisfaction at so much young happiness being next door to her, hugged herself because of her own blessings.

"I don't want to brag," she thought, "but certainly I am the luckiest person!" To count up her various pieces of luck (starting with the experience of being jilted): She had a nice landlord who looked like Zeus, with his flashing black eyes and snow-white hair and beard. And she had so many friends! And she believed she could manage to make her black alpaca last another winter. "It is spotted," she thought, "but what real difference does a spot make?" (Miss Lydia was one of those rare people who have a sense of the relative values of life.) "It's a warm skirt," said Miss Lydia, weighing the importance of that spot with the expense of a new dress; "and, anyway, whenever I look at it, it just makes me think of the time I spilled the cream down the front at Harriet Hutchinson's. What a good time I had at Harriet's!" After that she reflected upon the excellent quality of her blue silk. "I shall probably wear it only once or twice a year; it ought to last me my lifetime," said Miss Lydia.... It was just as she reached this blessing that, somewhere in the



shadows, a quivering voice called, "Miss Sampson?" and out of the darkness of the Smith driveway came a girlish figure. The iron gates clanged behind her, and she came up the little brick path to Miss Lydia's house with a sort of rush, a sort of fury; her voice was demanding and frightened and angry all together. "Miss Lydia!"

Miss Lydia, startled from her blessings, screwed up her eyes, then, recognizing her visitor, exclaimed: "Why, my dear! What is the matter?" And again, in real alarm, "What *is* it?" For Mary Smith, dropping down on the step beside her, was trembling. "My dear!" Miss Lydia said, in consternation.

"Miss Sampson, something—something has happened. A—a—an accident. I've come to you. I didn't know where else to go." She spoke with a sort of sobbing breathlessness.

"You did just right," said Miss Lydia, "but what—"

"You've got to help me! There's nobody else."

"Of course I will! But tell me—"

"If you don't help me, I'll die," Mary Smith said. She struck her soft clenched fist on her knee, then covered her face with her hands. "But you must promise me you won't tell? Ever—ever!"

"Of course I won't."

"And you'll help me? Oh, say you'll help me!"

"Have you and he quarreled?" said Miss Lydia, quickly. Her own experience flashed back into her mind; it came to her with a little flutter of pride that this child—she was really only a child, just nineteen—who was to be married so soon, trusted to her worldly wisdom in such matters, and came for advice.