

# PORTRAIT OF MARGARET

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MARGARET came to our house, a sprawling country rectory in the mountains, one windy December night, to "help" mamma through her seventh blessed event. Margaret was a diminutive creature, scarcely taller than Walter, who was only ten; her eyes were large and brown and luminous, her mouth soft, innocent of teeth, and pink and bowed as Cupid's. She came for three weeks, and remained for twenty years.

My father's stipend as a country parson did not include such luxuries as a maid, but neither did it include such luxuries as hospitals except in emergencies, so mamma usually just hired some one to help out for two or three weeks, and Margaret, recommended by some friend of father's, came up from the city. She might well have counted her years as from the day she arrived at our place, for she never referred to the past, and she brought with her no mementoes save a sterling silver brush and comb and mirror, which she displayed with pride, but without explanation, and a faded picture of an infant, which I found under her handkerchiefs one day when she sent me to her room on an errand. I knew I had no business to go searching in her drawer, so I never mentioned the photo to her and she never mentioned it to any of us, but it made me wonder much about her past.

Whatever her past had known of sorrow, the years Margaret spent with us knew much of affection and understanding, and as I stood by her coffin to-day and looked down at the tiny face the past kaleidoscoped in a hundred memories: the coffin rested before the altar in our little country church where she had worshipped every Sunday since she first came to us. One of my first memories of Margaret, though perhaps it is rather that my father recounted it so many times it seems as though I actually remember it, is of her upright little figure standing in my father's study the first Sunday morning after her arrival.

"One of the boys will walk you down to the Presbyterian church," my father was saying as Margaret buttoned her black cotton glove.

"That would be a fine state of affairs!" exclaimed the little woman. "I'm a Presbyterian by birth and persuasion, and I don't hold with all the fandangles of your faith, but far be it from me to show public disrespect to the man I work for by attending another church under his very nose. So I'll go to your

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church." And her expression read, "Even though I go to hell for it."

She was not to be budged from the decision, though father assured her he would be much happier if she would abide by her religious beliefs rather than by what she considered correct social behaviour. And at the last, when, as she said, her call had come she told him: "I'm still a Presbyterian mind you; you never were able to change me!" Triumphantly, as though she had won a signal victory. "But I feel at home here, and besides I couldn't abide for any one else to bury me."

Margaret had certain notions as to what was right for Sunday—the Sabbath she called it—amongst which was an idea that only black, or perhaps a very dark blue, was suitable for wearing to church. She was horrified at the bright dresses my mother permitted us girls to wear, or wore herself, to church. I can see Margaret bolt upright in her pew, dressed in her neat black, admonishing us to good behaviour with a glance of her eye, as we sat three on one side and three on the other side with Penny on her lap from the time Penny was baptised until Larry and Peter went away to college and left room for Penny on the seat beside her. Mother played the organ and didn't have time to keep us in order during the service, but we obeyed Margaret better anyhow: she had a hundred ways of making us obedient, but her favourite was the "toothbank." and though father and mamma tried to emulate her idea it was a grievous failure with them, and a howling success with Margaret. You see, Margaret had no teeth, and it was the one ambition (she said) of her life to buy herself a set of store teeth—therefore the "toothbank" in which her earnings were kept. And the forfeits. The forfeits came from us! We each had our tasks to do daily, but of course they were left undone as frequently as they had been done before Margaret came: she devised a plan whereby each time she had to do one of our tasks we had to pay her a penny, and it went into her "toothbank"! It was the recipient of many donations at first, but little by little we found it was unpleasant to pay for tasks we could quite easily do. Then, when we were naughty or disobedient, instead of a scolding or a spanking, into the "toothbank" went a certain number of pennies. Sometimes George, who was the most mischievous of all of us, was two weeks in arrears of his allowance—never very large I must admit. But whatever of pennies confiscated, Margaret returned us a thousandfold in kindness and tenderness, and in hard cash.

It was never really settled that Margaret should stay—she just sort of stayed, and father would give her her tiny wage and then say to mamma, "She's been here two months now dear—" And mamma would say "Well, Phin, she really saves us more than she costs us, what with mending the boys' clothes as well as a tailor, and making the girls' dresses: and she knows a thousand ways to save food, and the house is like a different place: and I've so much more time to help you." And father would say, "And you like her, and the kids like her." And mamma would reply, "And you like her Phin, don't you?" It was like that for over a year, and then the subject was more or less dropped. I think we'd have died if she had packed up her things and left.

I was five when she came, and I watched the "toothbank" with eager interest, waiting for it to fill, wondering what she would look like when she got her store teeth. Something always happened so that she never did buy them. The first time she emptied it was to buy Penny a baptismal gift, about two months after her arrival. Then it was not depleted (though occasionally bricks of ice-cream would appear mysteriously for Sunday supper, a treat father could not often afford; or candies would be found on someone's bed) until late in August, when John was stricken with appendicitis.

Poor father was frightfully worried about the bill: if he'd been a bricklayer he could have worked overtime and made the money, but clergymen work overtime anyhow, and don't get paid for it. Father was afraid he would have to go to the bank and borrow the forty dollars he still owed the hospital when he brought John home. Father had a habit of walking up and down the front verandah, pushing the accumulation of children's toys out of his way with impatient feet, and running his hand wildly through his hair. Margaret (and I can just see her doing it) would run behind him, remonstrating if he was too rough with the toys, moving things out of his way so his return could be unobstructed, all in a soft undertone, and quietly so as not to disturb his train of thought. This happened when father was worried about John's bill. Finally Margaret spoke out loud.

"Have a bit of faith, sir. Surely a minister like your self would not deny God the ability to get that bill paid. Stop worrying man, and come in and eat your supper."

"No one owes me any money," father said, with a sigh. "That'd clear up the trouble—if someone owed me forty dollars."

"There's many that owes you plenty more than forty dollars. I'll not doubt but it'll get paid."

"Well, I guess my name's good at the bank."

"Wait awhile before you go bothering the bank. Come in and eat your supper."

A few days later father received a receipt from the hospital. He and mother showed the bill to Margaret (How many times they've told the story to us!) Margaret looked at the bill, picked up the frying pan full of potatoes and began putting them into a vegetable dish.

"It's not me that should be preaching the sermons in this house. But it's a good thing to have faith in the Lord's goodness," she said.

"You wouldn't know anything about this?"

Margaret snorted.

"ME? How could I? I don't open your mail I hope. Get along to the table, or supper'll be cold."

The toothbank had been quite full only a few days before, but when father moved it from the shelf above the kitchen sink that night it was very empty. But to the day of her death Margaret never acknowledged that it was she who had paid the bill.

Larry and Peter were twins, and when they were fifteen they had an opportunity to go to Montreal with the Scouts, but father couldn't afford to send both, so he decided that the one who would score the most stars should go. It was a close race, but Peter won.

Peter and Larry were very close, but quite different both in temperament and looks. Peter had the brains and stability, Larry had the looks and gayety. But in Scouting, Larry had always been Peter's equal: neither boy had thought of giving quarter, or no doubt Peter would have given the lead to Larry since Larry was so proud of being his brother's equal in this one field. It was a blow to everyone that one had to remain behind: Larry minded less than Peter, who seemed to feel like a criminal; and everyone in the house, including Larry, was trying to cheer Peter up because he'd won. Our house was devoid of privacy, so we were all in the boys' room while Peter packed his bag, offering to lend him various useless things and assuring him we were glad he'd got the opportunity and that Larry didn't mind a bit. Larry was standing with his arm about Peter's shoulder, saying, "Now look here, chum, I expect you to do the town up red for me, and bring back all the honours," when

Margaret walked in, thrust an envelope into Larry's hand without a word, and walked out. In the envelope were his railway ticket and three dollars. There never was a moment's thought of not using the ticket. It was only a few minutes to train time, so in great excitement we threw Larry's clothes into a suitcase and jumped into the old car to go down to the station. Just as we all piled in after the boys had kissed mamma good-bye Larry jumped out, dashed back and gave Margaret an extra kiss, swinging her off her feet so that we could hear her quick gasp and "Larry—Larry you let me down at once, you bad boy." But it sounded like a love song.

When he returned from the city, having won the highest marks in the Province, Margaret's pink cheeks and bright eyes spoke whole libraries. Larry was her boy.

Larry was her boy, but Penny was the darling of her heart, perhaps because there was a haunting resemblance between her and the face in the faded photo Margaret kept hidden in her drawer. It was almost pitiful the way she loved Penny, though it was really a case of "not that she loved us less but that she loved Penny more." There was no stinting of her love and understanding. I remember in particular once when she healed my broken heart.

All the family except father and I have curly hair, mine is so straight it is painful, and red to boot—hence the name "Rusty," which started out as a nick-name and ended up by being the only one ever used except on insurance papers and such. As a small girl I prayed devoutly and fervently that God would turn it curly and a nice soft brown, but by seventeen I had given up in despair. One day Margaret found me weeping the strangled, brokenhearted sobs of young girlhood in the throes of wildest dejection. Unrequited love was twisting my heart and soul as a tornado twists the trees in its devastating path. And I laid it all to the fact of my straight red hair.

"Your hair is a beautiful colour: Cleopatra had red hair," stormed Margaret when I had divulged the whole sad story. She always had a fund of historical references with which to back up any statement, correct or not made no difference. "And if it's curls you want, that's easily remedied."

She disappeared for a few minutes, to return wearing her summer hat and her gloves (she would not go to the little corner store in the village without her gloves and hat, winter or summer) and marched me, tear-stained visage and all, to the one and only hairdresser. I emerged a couple of hours later with the most

divine head of curls I had ever seen and so much confidence that when I met my light-of-love on the street and he emitted a long, low whistle of approval, I simply turned up my nose and walked past, completely cured.

My sister Penny was a lovely child, and still a lovelier woman. When she was eighteen she married a young man who had come up to spend the summer in the village and had fallen in love with the village belle. Margaret was so excited one would think she was to be the bride.

No one could keep track of the hours she spent sewing on Penny's linens, and she almost wept when mamma let her make the lingerie for the wedding dress. No bride ever had more exquisite underthings, and I know that every stitch Margaret put into them was a prayer. When Penny was getting dressed mamma and Margaret and I helped her. Margaret could scarcely keep her hands off the dress, but every moment she would remember that she was not the mother and would step back to let mamma have the pleasure of straightening a seam or making sure one of the innumerable little buttons was not undone. When mamma lifted the veil out of the tissue paper, Margaret clasped her hands together and the soft lips opened in a softer sigh.

"It's my grandmother's," Penny breathed, as though the fact had not been mentioned twenty times a day for the past month.

"It's beautiful," Margaret said, as though she hadn't seen it a dozen times.

I saw my mother hold the veil close to her a moment and look at Penny, her last born, and the first to sever the ties of the family by this irrevocable step. Then she looked at the faithful woman who had loved Penny ever since Penny's first cry, and mamma did something that made me very proud of her.

"Would you put Penny's veil on Margaret? I'm really a little tired."

Penny's eyes and mamma's met in the mirror, with understanding.

"Please do, Marg." Penny said. She and Larry were the only ones who ever shortened Margaret's name.

I know that mamma's sacrifice was more than repaid by the glow that suffused the little woman's cheeks and it seemed to me that I could see a faint shadow by Penny's shoulder that did not quite materialize into a grown-up vision of the face in the picture—but I'm very imaginative.

Margaret gave Penny a sterling silver brush, comb and mirror for a wedding gift. "It's nice to have something you can keep always," she said, rather sadly, and I wondered again who had given her the set she owned. "Something that's good—no matter what happens. Something to remember by."

When Penny went away Margaret concentrated all her warmest affection on Larry. Larry had failed at college and he had been so miserable that father told him to come back home and be a farmer if that was what he wanted. It was, in a way. What Larry really wanted to be was a poet. He was shy with us, but he would go into the kitchen while Margaret was getting the supper or doing the dishes, and he would read his verses to her, and she would criticize them. I knew, for I listened once or twice. The verses were beautiful but sometimes immature, and Margaret seemed able to sense the trouble and (from her years and wisdom) straighten it out for him. They became very close. Larry would talk to her about world problems, for he was very upset about conditions in general as was every thinking man: only, being a rather emotional fellow, he was inclined to get very much excited and write violent verses denouncing everyone and everything. When the war broke out he enlisted immediately. In 1943 he was killed flying a bomber over Germany.

The blow was almost more than we could bear. It did not seem possible that Larry should be dead—he had always been so very much alive. He made everyone feel alive.

In her grief Margaret was strangely alone. There was only Peter at home on leave when the news came, and father and mother; all the rest of us were married or on active service. Father and mamma had each other, and Larry was their son; but Margaret was outside that charmed communion of theirs and there seemed no way to hold her to them. Peter tried, and he succeeded more than the others because, like Margaret, he too was alone. They comforted each other.

But Margaret began to fail. She was nearly seventy-five so far as we could make out, though she had never admitted her age to any of us, and resolutely refused to stop working. It had always amused us to watch her admonish mamma, who was a good twenty years younger than she, not to overtire, to lie down in the afternoon, while she herself refused help with the dishes and only allowed mamma (after a regular storm,) to get in a woman to do the washing and ironing and waxing. After Larry's death she slowly relinquished most of her tasks.

In the summer of 1944 Penny came home from Vancouver where her husband had been stationed, with beautiful twin boys, and Margaret seemed to come alive again. It was a heartening thing to see her on the rectory lawn with the two cherubs laughing and happy as if she were as young as they. It was a happy summer altogether, for we were all home—all but Larry, and no doubt but he was somewhere near at hand though we could not see him. Not for long would he leave his beloved Laurentians.

Mamma wrote me at Christmas that Margaret was failing again; the young life that had revived her in the summer was a tonic that could not withstand the ravages of winter. "She won't see the spring," mamma wrote, "and it breaks my heart. I know the old must go, and she has lived long and, I think, happily, but I shall miss her, and your father will miss her terribly." I thought it sounded as though mamma needed me. My husband said I had better go home. It was really better for me for I had been following him all about the country and now that we were expecting a baby, home was the place for me, especially as I could be a tower of strength to mamma.

I was alone with Margaret when she died three days ago on a Wednesday evening in Lent and father and mamma had gone to the next village for their regular service, leaving me with Margaret. It was windy, and snowing in fierce little gusts. Sitting beside the bed, holding the old, worn hand in mine I kept thinking of the thousand and one things she had done to make life happy for all of us.

"I told your father I wished to be buried by him, Rusty," she whispered suddenly, and the lips smiled the old sweet, mischievous smile, "even though I still don't hold with your fandangles. I'm still a Presbyterian. But they're to put me in the church yard. Remember?"

"I know."

"Sing for me, Rusty. You know the hymns we used to sing when we all went to church together; all of you, and Larry and Penny and me."

I started to sing, but she spoke again.

"Larry and Penny. I loved them. But I loved all the rest of you, too."

"I know Margaret. I know."

She fumbled under the pillow, and brought out the "tooth-bank."

"Buy something for the little one, when it comes," she whispered, thrusting the bank into my hands.

I began to sing for her; I sang softly all the hymns we had loved and sung for so many years that they were forever woven into the very woof and warp of our beings. After a while it seemed she slept and I became silent. Her breathing was very heavy. Suddenly she opened her eyes and looked toward the dresser. I rose softly and opened the handkerchief drawer and got out the faded photo and gave it to her, without a word. Margaret gave a long, tremulous sigh and held the picture to her breast, curling her fingers around the aged cardboard with a tender gesture. One hand groped for mine as I sat beside the bed.

"Tell Penny . . ." She fell asleep, without telling me what I was to tell my sister, but no doubt it was "I love her." The wind rose and fell; the clock downstairs ticked monotonously, measuring the short time left to all of us.

Unwittingly I slept. I was awakened by mamma, touching me gently on the shoulder.

"I didn't hear you come in," I said. "I guess I fell asleep. How is Margaret?" I looked at the small form, so still on the big bed.

"She is still sleeping," mamma said, and her eyes were full tears.

So Margaret has gone—or not gone, really, any more than Larry has. In this house that knew so much of her tenderness, her care, she must always live. Perhaps, now, if I lay down my pen and go to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee I'll see her familiar figure bending over the stove and hear her voice gently reproving:

"Now, Rusty, you know you shouldn't come sneaking down stairs—that means a penny for the toothbank. At this rate I'll have my teeth before the year's out."