

Chapter XXIV

A Stretcher Please

In her self-appointed role as Joan of Arc for the community, Martha Upton was still waving banners for "Walkways! More walkways!" I was no longer troubled by the rumble of her drums. In fact, I secretly relished the idea of an encounter in which I could inform her that the alley belonged to me.

But it didn't, a neighbor told me one day. The alley wasn't closed, had never been closed. The Board of Supervisors of Fairfax claimed that it couldn't be closed without their approval. I was mystified and went immediately to my lawyer, expecting him to brush away the report. But I was disappointed. Although it wasn't the way he had interpreted the law, the Board had grounds for their stand and we would have to abide by it. That was his verdict, but I couldn't let the matter rest there.

I felt it was up to our group, belatedly, to get the Board's approval. That wouldn't be easy, maybe impossible. Mr. Babson, the supervisor for our district, would have to present our petition for us. He was already committed to the faction working to get another walkway. Most of us knew Mr. Babson only slightly as a nice-looking young fellow reputed to be an able lawyer. My impression from the gleam in his eye, was of a school boy, possibly up to some mischief. Fortunately, we found a friend of his who agreed to talk to him about our problem.

In a few days, we had Babson's favorable reply. It seemed too good to be true. Possibly he welcomed our request as an excuse for a change of heart, since the walkway faction had just lost a condemnation suit for crossing Mrs. Marster's lot about half way up on Woodlawn.

Mr. Babson had promised to bring our petition before the Board, if we would let him handle it in his own way. "His own way" was made clear to me the following week.

As I went down the receiving line at a reception given by Mr. Babson, I thanked him for his effort in our behalf. I could have embraced him when he replied, "Yes, Miss Dial, I will bring it up at the first meeting possible, probably this week." But he continued, "We'll set a date then for a hearing."

"A hearing?"

"Yes, a public hearing. We will advertise it several weeks in advance so that you will have time to gather up your friends for it." Without doubt there was an added sparkle in his eye as he continued, "It seems the only thing to do, so everyone can come and have his say."

Maybe it was the fair thing to do, certainly the diplomatic one. But the thought of another public hearing, possibly with an adverse decision, sickened me. I felt quavery all over. If there were only a stretcher handy to carry me out!

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My stellar constellations at the time must have been in reverse. In addition to prospects for a public hearing, I had received notice from my health insurance company that they were cancelling my ten-thousand-dollar major medical policy because of my "health history."

However, my health history seemed good enough for them to offer me, in the next paragraph, a higher-priced policy with fewer benefits. Since cancellation because of health would prevent me from getting insurance elsewhere, they probably reasoned that I would be forced to buy the new policy. Both a lawyer in my family and a friend in insurance advised me to accept the policy they offered and forget the whole matter. Maybe I would be compelled to, I thought, but not without making an effort to keep my same coverage.

At retirement I had cancelled two other policies to concentrate on one with a national teachers' agency, which I hoped would be adequate for the rest of my life. Before retirement, I had been hospitalized only two or three times, and in the five years since I had made only the claim for the expenses from my fall down the basement stairs. These facts made the local agent admit that the cancellation was general for all retired policyholders on reaching a certain age, and was not because of my health.

When we received only evasive replies to my doctor's favorable

reports, I began seeking help from friends on Capitol Hill, from my educational associations, and even from the White House. Each of these responded either actively or with advice as to measures I should take.

The date of the expiration was due just about the time the Board would decide on the day for the public hearing. The double anxiety left me with no appetite, unable to sleep, and almost overwhelmed with dread. But with telephone calls, letters going back and forth about my insurance, and numerous errands to make about the alley, I had no time to be sick.

My lawyer gave me serious counsel about the public hearing. If there were enough pressure, he said, the alley might even be opened! My own panic was enough without alarming my Rixey Estate neighbors until necessary.

Regretfully, I admit that my prayers at this time became frantic petitions. Except for moments of calm in times of meditation, I was in a state of fearful uncertainty.

My minister kept telling me, "It will all work out." But I was consumed with doubts.

I am sure now that the prayerful vigil of my friends is what sustained me throughout this crisis.

I had reached the deadline for making payment on my insurance policy. That same day a call came from Paul Peter, Executive Secretary of the Fairfax Educational Association, who had put up a good fight for me. The Virginia Educational headquarters in Richmond had just reported that I was being continued under my same policy.

For my success in this insurance bout, some friends suggested awarding me a merit badge, but I gave the credit to those who had busied themselves in my behalf. I found reward enough in the speed with which payment for my next claim came back.

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Early on the morning after the Board meeting, when I answered a telephone call, I couldn't believe that I was talking with Mr. Massey's secretary and the next moment with the Manager of Fairfax County, himself. He wanted to know who was the lawyer for the property owners of the Rixey Estates. Mr. Babson had brought up our petition the day before and the Board, which acted on hundreds

of such cases, needed to know who was handling ours.

I told him, then quavered, "Was a date set for the hearing?"

"That is one thing we need to find out about, if you will have Mr. Gibson call me."

Would I?—As fast as I could get to his office. There I was fortunate to waylay him as he hurried through the waiting room. The sweetest words he ever uttered to me were that a public hearing was not necessary. In a few minutes he had Mr. Massey on the phone. The manager told him the Board was ready to act on our petition as soon as Mr. Gibson could get the legal papers ready. One was the easement for drainage rights—drainage only—which I would have to sign and present with the chart and other papers at the time the Board would close the alley. According to the manager, the Board expected to act on it the following week.

Anxious to have all the papers correctly done and ready for their Wednesday meeting, I got busy. When the chart, awaited since August from Carlson Engineers, finally came it showed the drainage right of way as extending up under my porch on one side of the stream and with no footage on the other. The width of the drainage easement also needed to be reduced, since I objected to granting a forty-foot easement for it in addition to the existing twenty-foot easement for the sanitary sewer. This Public Works finally reduced to thirty-five feet, and the chart was returned to the draftsman to be changed, speedily, we hoped. For once, he complied.

The last-minute delay of the legal papers on Tuesday afternoon was an added frustration. After obtaining them from my lawyer, I fumed away three hours waiting for the signature of a property owner at his office in Arlington. As soon as he had signed, I hurried away, trying to reach Mr. Massey's office before it closed, but I was too late!

When I handed all the documents to the manager in his office the next morning, I said, "I haven't spoken to Mr. Babson about bringing it up today."

"That's all right," Mr. Massey assured me. "He seems anxious to take care of the matter. We appreciate your bringing the papers to us on time and, if you care to stay for the meeting, we'll schedule your case as early as possible. Getting it passed will probably be just a matter of form."

Since our lawyer was out of town, it seemed well for some of us to be on hand, so I followed Mr. Massey into the Board Room. It was of comfortable size for a small gathering, oak paneled with a fenced-in rostrum for the board members and the County Manager.

Relieved that my responsibility was over, relaxed and comfortable, I slipped into a seat near the rear. As Mr. Massey and the board members took their places, I casually looked around the room, having no idea that my presence there was of the utmost importance. As it turned out, if it hadn't been for the exasperating delay the previous afternoon, I wouldn't have taken part in one of the most momentous climaxes in my life.

Our Rixey Estate petition for "Deed of Vacation" came up first, and the proceedings moved along smoothly, with Mr. Massey presenting our charts and papers. When the time came for Mr. Babson's motion for passage of the "Deed of Vacation" after a lengthy pause, he said deliberately, "This case is on the agenda for a public hearing."

I couldn't believe what I had heard. It was like an electrical shock. I grew more tense as he went on to explain that he saw no reason for the alleys not to be vacated, but as a safeguard to the board members, he felt that those who wanted another walkway should be given a chance to be heard.

This was practically what he had told me at the reception, but I thought he had given up the idea. After Mr. Massey had said that the passage was just a matter of form, I felt stunned by this announcement.

Mr. Babson next stated that not wishing to deprive those who wanted another walkway of this opportunity, he had put it on the agenda for a public hearing.

Half-smiling, he concluded, "It is a controversial matter on which I, Tom Gray and Bob Cotton"—former supervisors of our district—"have all been impaled."

A snicker went through the Board Room, but it was no joke to me. I was still being impaled, painfully so, confronted with a second public hearing.

But Mr. Babson was asking, "Does anyone in the audience have anything to say?"

With no idea of what I would say, I replied, "Yes, I do."

Still feeling stunned and confused, I obeyed a voice which directed, "Step up to the front and give your name."

As I stood before the Supervisors, I knew that I must collect my thoughts. I felt I was up almost for trial of my life. Certainly my life's work was in the balance.

At last, words began to flow and I told the board members about the many delays; that I was giving drainage rights in exchange for the alley footage; that we were anxious to get on with the work which would be further delayed by a public hearing and that, according to legal counsel, it was not necessary.

Back in my seat, nervously alert, I heard Captain Porter quietly verify what I had said. He stated that for a year and a half—it was really twice that long and seemed like a lifetime to me—Public Works had been trying to start improvements in our area. The work would begin at Rosemary Lane, for which he already had the right of way. They needed mine also. It would soon be too late to do anything this winter unless they started right away.

No one else had anything to say. My heart may have skipped a few beats before I heard the second to Mr. Babson's motion for passage of the "Deed of Vacation"—then its unanimous carriage.

The alleys of the Rixey Estates went on the records of Fairfax County as "Forever closed, vacated, and discontinued"—after my sixteen years of anxiety and struggle.

Chapter XXV

My Coming Out

The minute the alleys were closed, I felt liberated, like a butterfly suddenly metamorphosed, free to explore a new world, absorbing sweetness from flower to flower. I had found clearance from restricting bonds; I no longer carried a weight on my heart; I was free from imprisoning fear. Each breath now became a pure delight and I seemed to be in love with the whole world, even encompassing those who had caused me so much distress. They were the means of my experiencing that depth of frustration which now enabled me to rise to the opposite heights, so buoyed in spirit that I felt I could tread air with the astronauts in space.

My metamorphosis on that day of days, with its magic spell and widening horizons, has been lasting. Christmas, a few weeks later, was the happiest one of my whole life. From a glimpse of my yard one would have wondered why. Piled high with tons of rubble from displaced pavements, with the trunk of a huge tree lying on the bank and my bridge set crazily on one side of the stream, the place looked as if an earthquake had hit it, and in a way one had. At last Fairfax County was building the kind of wall I wanted! An upright wall of pebble-textured concrete rubble was beginning to line the banks, adding its rustic charm. This was a Christmas gift beyond expectation.

Unbelievable as it had seemed at the time, after many months of frustration, here was fulfillment of the words of my inner oracle, "What the county does will be to my advantage."

The day the alleys were closed Captain Porter asked me to list all the items upon which we had agreed regarding the work his department was to do on my property. The next day the workmen, in blue coveralls, began swarming over my grounds. With my list as blueprint, everyone seemed eager to please me. Bronzed, pleasant Mr. Blair was supervisor; his foremen, Wilson, Fletcher, and Johnson

taking turns on the job. Even the laborers, I heard, were specially picked, not only for their efficiency but for their gentility in the presence of a lady. Whatever brainwashing they had undergone must have been thorough, for no Sunday school class could have maintained higher standards of speech and conduct. Having the ready assistance of so many men at one time almost went to my spinstered head.

They worked with painstaking care even under difficult conditions, sometimes with icy water over their ankles. Sometimes they trundled wheelbarrows, heavily loaded with slushy concrete, down steep embankments; sometimes they drove trucks through openings that didn't appear wide enough for even a compact car. Some of the boys seemed proud of their green thumbs as they transplanted shrubs and trees, some added jollity with their boyish pranks, and one boasted that he preferred the work he was doing here to a position he had



Dewey Peyton and Johnny at work on the wall.



"I wanted steps down into the stream."

formerly held in a bank. Gray-haired, slightly stooped Dewey Payton may not look like an artist, but the wall he fashioned with those rough stones is proof of his gifts. He had tall, lanky Johnny and some others as his able helpers.

Mr. Johnson managed his "backo" machine with the skill of one long experienced. Working like a bulldozer in reverse the backhoe looked as if it might be a revived dinosaur stalking the banks or groveling along the stream bed, drooling sediment as it scooped up dirt. It saved many hours of back-breaking labor as it nuzzled and loaded stones, then obligingly delivered them to the men working on the wall. At times the machine reminded me of a playful child with a dripping nose, but as a rule I regarded it with such awe that I would make a hasty leap for safety if it headed my way.

After the bridge had been removed to make room for the backhoe's trips up and down the stream, I had no way to cross until little stream "did it again." From the stream's muddy depths the machine un-

earthed a little three-rung aluminum ladder, just the thing to help me get up and down the steep banks. The men became so accustomed to having me around, hovering on the banks or sloshing in the creek, that when I stayed away they accused me of taking annual leave.

As the wall progressed from the rear of the lot toward my favorite poplar, I had to reconcile myself to its loss. It seemed almost as hard as parting from a human friend, yet its position at the narrowest part of the stream made its sacrifice imperative. Then, too, it towered dangerously toward the house. Nevertheless, I wretchedly watched its dismemberment as the tree surgeon cut its sheltering limbs. Finally, its sound, many-ringed trunk was taken down in twelve-foot sections and stacked on the bank. For two days the backhoe, in its effort to dislodge the stump, strained and ripped at the tenacious roots. At times I feared the monster machine would capsize before the last root was severed. I found comfort in the thought that somehow sacrifice of that tree served as propitiation for the rest of my forest, which was spared.

Because of the winter weather, it took a long time to finish the wall. Some days were so cold that the ground remained frozen as hard as pavement, and the men had to stop frequently to thaw out by the fires they kept going. On such days they had to heat water and put chemicals in it to keep the concrete from freezing. There were periods when the weather was too severe for any work at all. When the wall was finally finished during the latter part of May, and the sloping banks had been filled and graded, I planted beds of ferns, lilies of the valley, cover vines, shrubs, and flowering plants.

A few weeks later I was delighted to welcome a group of visitors sent by some of the county authorities to see my grounds as a sample of one of their conservation projects.

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As I walked in my garden after the wall was finished, I longed to have Selma with me, to sit beside the stream again and to enjoy all the improvements. The wall with its mellowed tones would delight her, and she would love the sight of the tiny chipmunk skimming along over the top of it, of the birds having their baths, and squirrels cavorting in the trees. Neither would she overlook the things I had planted. All our surroundings would claim her loving attention.

But this was a futile wish. For months she had been confined to her room in her daughter's home.

A few weeks later she grew much worse—critically so. The end came in June at the time of the summer solstice. I had lost my most cherished friend, one who had never failed me, in trials or triumphs. I knew no one could ever replace her, yet I was thankful to have her freed from suffering. My recent liberation enabled me to bear my loss, grateful for a companionship so rare and for the blessings Selma had brought to her world and to me.

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A little later, a guest arrived as if by “heavenly timing”—Arthur Burwick, a building contractor from Texas. The new brick wing extending toward the stream is a monument to his cleverness, skill, and versatility. He not only helped me plan it, but did the construction work himself, including the tedious interior finishing.

Expansive windows in the new dining-sitting room bring the outdoors inside as well as provide easy exit for spirit's delight. The



The annex with the sun deck and patio to the water's edge.

room is furnished with old pieces well polished and padded for charm and comfort. This room opens from the living room and kitchen, both now modernized.

Wide glass doors lead to the sundeck which overlooks the length of the stream. Spiral steps go down to the patio below. Laid with Tennessee flagstone of varied hue and extending to the water's edge, it makes a pleasant outdoor sitting room.

A step down from the patio leads to my pale gray paneled bedroom beneath the dining room. My private quarters include a study, bath, and dressing room, done in violet, blue and pink. Both floors are well supplied with roomy closets and storage space.

The addition gives me more space for entertaining and an inspiring atmosphere in which to write. At the same time it requires more care. In fact, it may necessitate my taking on a full-time maid or even a husband, depending on which could be counted on to give the most help and to prove the least costly.

A mossy carpet spreads out over the extensive lawn. Paths edged with rocks from the stream bed wind along the banks, with benches placed at intervals. The bridge is now restored on a foundation sturdy enough to withstand high waters and even severe battering. Another bridge upstream invites one to circle the grounds. In the picnic area there is a raised platform, handy for friends who wish to come camping, with the commodious grill nearby for cooking.

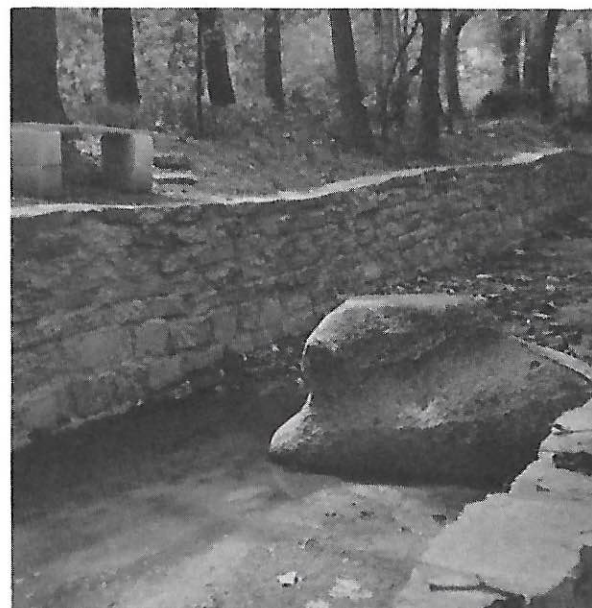
If I don't lose my visitor as we go by the hammock, swinging invitingly under the wisteria arbor, his reward will be a bouquet of primroses, violets, or daisies from the wildflower patch. The wooded section, a distance behind my house, is colorful with azaleas, laurel, and rhododendron. Here also, surrounded by rocky borders, are beds of ferns, cool and comfortable in their native soil.

The forest path leads back by the plot of many-colored day lilies. The water lily pond, now concrete-lined and freed of crayfish—I hope—delights with blossoms that rise above their floating pads. Goldfish, too, dart in and out and a chaise longue nearby suggests rest.

The treat of sitting on the elephant-shaped rock mustn't be missed. Having refused to budge an inch with backhoe's none-too-gentle persuasion, it still stands guard over the heart of Havenwood. Here secrets of even “The Being on the Bank” must surely lie hidden.



Views of the stream.



The big rock, standing guard over the heart of Havenwood.

Perhaps the school boy who spoke of my having "fenced God in" may have sensed its Presence. May others who linger to relax, to muse, to question, to listen be so rewarded. Certainly here I, finding the answer to my long search, finally claimed my divine heritage, "the Christ in me, my hope of glory." My precious package, spilling its treasure, was mine at last.

This now is my message for others—if proclaimed only from a mound of earth in my own back yard. As natural as metamorphosis of the tightly wrapped cocoon into the freed butterfly and as joyous is the release of the soul. May the incomparable delights of its "imprisoned splendor" escaping satisfy and richly bless other questing souls.