

Miss Anne

A Story of the Girl Who Waited.

By A. Maria Crawford.

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"WELL, Tom Marshall!" exclaimed Carrington Humes, meeting the new arrival on the hotel veranda. "It's good to see you in these old mountains again. It must have been ten years since you were here. Jolly crowd of ours in those days!"

"Yes," said the big fellow, reminiscently looking for familiar places about the hotel, "and I have never forgotten any one of you."

"Two or three of our old-time friends are here with their families. Funny, isn't it, that the very men who courted their sweethearts on the banks of the trout streams around here are now in the same places teaching their sons to fish? But they're angling with different bait these days and looking for a different catch," he laughed. "By the way, old man, Anne Trayner is here, and as pretty as ever."

It was the very news Marshall was hoping to hear.

"Anne Trayner, did you say?" His voice broke a little. He seemed to master himself with an effort. "Who—whom did she marry?"

"Anne? She wouldn't have one of us. Half the men I know have been in love with her. For a long time I thought she was ambitious to go into opera. Her voice is wonderful, but so far she has never attempted to shine behind the footlights." He surveyed the corduroy-clad figure before him reflectively. Gossip had maintained that this same splendid specimen of manhood had jilted the much adored Anne. "Ever care for her yourself?" he asked easily.

"Is she stopping at this hotel?" questioned Marshall evasively in return.

"No; oh, no." Carrington Humes held out his hand cordially. "See you again at dinner. I'm busy with a debutante this afternoon."

So Anne Trayner was in the mountains! He wondered how she would greet him, how she would bridge the years that spanned their river of youth. Ten years was a long time to remember, and yet every girlish charm Anne had possessed was stamped on his memory, although he had left her for Polly Neilson and her millions. He had felt an imperative need for money and, boy-like, without counting the cost, he had married the little heiress, keeping his father's honor inviolate before his business associates, but sacrificing his own youth and happiness in the effort. Marshall had aged suddenly, his wife had lived and died believing that her husband's heart was hers, and that business cares had touched his brown hair with gray and set the sad lines about his mouth that no gayety could quite take away.

Interested groups of women watched him leave the hotel, saw him pause and then take the road that led past a number of picturesque bungalows built on the crest of the mountain. He walked rapidly until he came in view of a little gray stone cottage perched like a gentle brooding dove, guarding the peace of the valley below. The spot had been his trysting place back in those years when youth and love made his heart beat high. The two had planned just such a mountain home. Scarlet trumpet blooms on the porch vines swayed like ringing bells in the breeze, ferns lined the gravel walks and, sweet, old-fashioned primroses grew beside the steps.

"Can you tell me who lives in that little stone house?" Marshall asked a

small boy who came swinging down the road.

"Can't you tell without asking? Why, that house just looks like Miss Anne. Everybody says so. My Aunt Kitty told mother that half the men come here just to see Miss Anne."

"Is she pretty?"

"Yes, she looks like an angel. Her best beau came yesterday. Mother thinks they'll get married. Won't those fellows over at the hotel feel bad about it? Why, honest to goodness," confided the small gossip, "they're all crazy about her. My brother Bob thinks she is the loveliest woman in the world. I heard him tell her so last night."

Marshall sat down on a big bowlder and lighted a fresh cigar.

"Who is the man she is going to marry?"

"He writes songs for her to sing, and she can sing, too. You'll hear her soon. She always sings about this time of day. I'm going for the mail. If you wait here, I'll see you again when I come back."

Far over the valley the setting sun burned crimson, tinting the windows in the little stone house the color of the trumpet blooms that rioted over the porch. A trim little maid appeared, and through the open door Marshall saw a blazing three-foot log in the old fire-place. It was a picture that his youth conjured up, and his fancy had caught and clung to it until the scene had grown to be his destined goal, elusive as a dream, yet always luring him on. The twilight deepened, and the evening star, radiant as the far-famed beacon of Judea, shone over the quiet valley. Lost in dreams, Marshall sat there, and presently, out into the peaceful stillness, came Anne's voice singing her old appealing love song for him, "I hear you calling me." So he had called her in his heart, ceaselessly through the years. Had she heard? Had she understood?

"I hear you calling me, though years have stretched their weary length between—" Annie's rich voice rang out in mellow sweetness across the mountain.

Lights flashed in the windows of all the houses along the road, but the little stone house remained unlighted save for the glowing hickory logs that made summer of early spring. "I hear you calling me." The words were almost whispered, yet Marshall heard, and getting to his feet, he started toward the singer as he saw Anne in the doorway, her white dress touched to color by the rosy flames behind her.

"Anne, dear Anne," he said humbly, "I heard your voice and it brought back such a train of tender memories that I feel just a boy again. The little dream house we planned together came true for you, didn't it?"

"It's very real, Tom. Won't you come in?" She had schooled herself for just such a meeting and had herself well in hand.

She lighted a lamp and so presented the little house, built according to their youthful dreams, for his inspection. His eyes took it all in quickly and then went back to the slender, beautiful woman by the fire whom Time had passed without taking his customary toll of youth.

"I have wanted to see you again, Anne," he began quietly and tensely, "to explain something to you which I hope you will be good enough to hear for my own sake."

"What is it, Tom?" She turned toward him and the firelight caught a little jeweled pin in the laces of her gown. It had been his last gift to her.

"You knew that I loved you and that I married Polly for her money. I acknowledged all that. There were, however, mitigating circumstances that seem to lessen my guilt.

I was young and I did not stop to consider that I was wronging three people to save one. My only thought was my duty to protect father."

"Protect your father?" Anne's voice was only a whisper. "How?"

"He became financially involved. I bought his honor at the expense of my own. There is only one thing that is not reprehensible in my part of it. Polly was happy. She lived and died without suspecting why my hair turned gray in a few weeks and why I forgot how to smile. I have heard your voice calling me through every day of those lost years. That was my penalty. I loved you then. I love you now and yet I cannot hope even for forgiveness."

"I, too, have paid a penalty, yet perhaps, it was for the best."

"Then you cared, Anne?" he cried brokenly. "If I could only have suffered for both of us!"

"I tried not to think of you, but a robin outside my window warbling a liting love song, sang of you; the wind sighed your name to me, and every orchard, sweet with May blossoms, was fragrant with memories of you."

"And whenever I saw or heard anything beautiful, I too, thought of you. When did you forget, Anne?"

A nightingale called plaintively to his mate in the dusk outside.

"I was calling you to-night when you came," she said softly. "I have

always known that some day you would come back to me."

And there in the little house of his boyish fancy he came at last to his destined goal that, elusive as a dream, had always led him on—to her.

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