

The Free Press' Short Story

THE FAIRFAX TRADITION

ANNA BROWNELL DUNAWAY

Running out from the station to the Ladywood Private School for girls, Nancy noticed the ring on the finger of the girl opposite. It was a striking ring with a silver inlaid gold band studded with thirteen diamonds.

"Can you imagine such an ordinary looking girl wearing a ring like that?" thought Nancy curiously. She herself did not possess a ring with thirteen diamonds, and Nancy Beaton could trace her ancestry back to Mary Beaton, one of the four Marys who were ladies in waiting to Mary, Queen of Scots.

The girl opposite wore a straw hat, although it was the first of September. She was a square built young person, who seemed far removed from family crests and heraldic bearings such as Nancy possessed. Nancy was inordinately proud of herself. Nancy was inordinately proud of her ancestry, for a crest was something one could not buy; either one had it or he did not.

"Pardon me," said the girl opposite, leaning forward. "Do you know if we are anywhere near Wentworth Avenue?"

"The next stop," answered Nancy briskly.

"Thanks." The girl began hastily to assemble her belongings. "I've never been off this way before. I'm going to Ladywood."

Only her breeding kept Nancy from betraying her surprise. "Probably one of the newly rich," she thought, turning her back and collecting her luggage.

When the car stopped in front of the imposing grounds, Nancy alighted and hurried through the great iron gates. She heard running footsteps behind her, and the girl of the ring caught up breathlessly. "So we're going to be schoolmates," she said with a merry laugh. "Quite a coincidence, isn't it? I'm Harriet Fairfax of Downer's Grove."

She paused expectantly.

"My name is Nancy Beaton," Nancy's voice was as cool as an ice cube.

After that, conversation seemed to lag. Harriet made one or two attempts, and quit "Snobbish," she thought, with unerring judgment.

"Very ordinary," decided Nancy.

Having formed these snap judgments, the two girls parted in the lobby. Nancy was assigned to a double room on the second floor. When she was shown to it a few minutes later, she found that her roommate had preceded her. A girl bent over an open suitcase. Nancy all but gasped audibly. She was no other than the girl of the ring!

"Oh, hello," called Harriet, with a little amused laugh. "So we're roommates." She stood with a hanger in either hand. Her blue eyes, in her small square face, seemed to be looking Nancy through and through. There was no pretense or sham about her. She was blunt as her finger tips, but genuine as the stone flashing from the strange ring.

"It seems so," said Nancy, recovering her poise, the boasted poise of a lineal descendant of a blue-blooded ancestry. She could only make the best of it. After all, a lady was a lady.

"I imagine," said the other bluntly, "that you never would have picked me out for a roommate."

"Why, I—"

"Nor I you," continued Harriet good-humoredly. "We might as well be honest with each other. You think I am ordinary."

"Really?" stammered Nancy. "Really—"

"And I think you are snobbish. Now we're even. But you know, first impressions are not always lasting. I think we shall like each other."

"Of course," murmured Nancy. "I am sorry I seem snobbish."

After all, noble birth imposed the obligation of noble conduct. It seemed superfluous, however, to tell Harriet about Mary Beaton. The girl simply would not understand such subtle distinctions. Nancy began unpacking. There was her note paper with its crest, her silver toilet articles.

"What's this we have here?" Harriet's voice broke in on the silence. She had picked up a crested silver-backed brush and was studying it amusedly. "Well, well, heraldic bearings! No wonder!"

"Our motto," said Nancy proudly. "is Semper Fidelis."

"And so Mary Beaton, of the old song is one of your ancestors?" Harriet began humming. "Let's see, how did it go?"

There was Mary Beaton and Mary Beaton.

And Mary Carmichael and me.

"The four Marys, poor dears. They were all imprisoned in the Tower, weren't they, or did they lose their heads?"

"Of course not." Nancy's voice was coldly furious.

Harriet put down the brush and laughed. "Speaking of a coat of arms," she said, "I know of a family who got one because one of their ancestors, who was chaplain to Henry I., had the ability to get through his prayers in a hurry."

"Really?" said Nancy coldly.

"I know I'm democratic," went on Harriet, "but to me it seems kind of funny. Courage, character, will power, brains—I'd rather have those gifts than some bauble from an ancestor. Oh, you mustn't mind me. I'm speaking general-

ly. You have a right to be proud of your crest."

"Proud of it, for what? Nancy found herself wondering honestly. It was true that she could count the names of eight grandmothers, and the family had paid an enormous research fee, but, after all, what did it prove? Merely that she was descended from a lady in waiting to a queen! Viewed in the light of Harriet's plain dress, there really seemed little to be vainglorious about. Still, the best people had crests, and Harriet had not, despite her unusual ring and her sturdy nobility of character.

One day, for the first time, Nancy noticed that the ring was missing from Harriet's finger. "You haven't lost your ring?" she exclaimed.

"No, I left it to be cleaned when I went home last week-end."

"It's such a beautiful ring."

"Yes, it is. And thereby hangs a tale. It says mine, you know, really—"

She sprang up as a bell jangled. "Oh, my math! I have to hurry."

"I was excused," said Nancy. "You know I'm going home this week-end."

"Oh, you are?" Harriet paused in the doorway.

"Yes, it's my dad's birthday to-morrow."

"I wonder if you would mind bringing my ring back with you?" asked Harriet. "I really don't know when I'll be going again. It's at Peacock's. Just call for it."

"But what if I should lose it or something?"

"Nonsense," laughed Harriet. "Well, I'll be seeing you. Thanks a lot, Nancy."

Coming back on the omnibus from Chicago with the ring, Nancy held the velvet box tightly clasped in her hand. She was afraid even to trust it to her purse for fear some pickpocket might snatch it. So she sat, with it in one hand, a letter she had forgotten to mail in the other, and a book in her lap. The omnibus would take her to Peru Corners, and then she would have to trust to luck to get a taxicab out to the school.

"What if I should have to walk the two miles," Nancy shivered, "with this valuable ring?"

The omnibus was taking on more passengers. A young man dropped down in the vacant seat beside her. The girl's fears deepened. With a ring like that in her possession, Nancy trusted nobody. She was trying to read when the omnibus lurched suddenly throwing her against the seat ahead. Book, letter, and ring slid to the floor. Nancy stooped to retrieve the ring just as the young man in the seat beside her did likewise and their heads knocked together violently.

"I beg your pardon," he said, smiling. "Is this yours?" He was holding out a small square package.

"Oh, thank you," Nancy seized it thankfully.

He handed her the book and the letter. "Pretty rough road," he remarked.

"Very," agreed Nancy.

"I travel it quite often."

"Nancy murmured, "Do you?" and opened her book at random. She was rather disconcerted by her flashing smile and democratic manner. She wondered if he had observed the crest on her stationery. Yes, he was even now bending over to examine it.

"Semper Fidelis," he read aloud.

"Always faithful. A very good motto."

He laughed. "Shall I tell you mine?"

"What is it?"

"Oh, Oh, and Oumpton. I don't happen to know the Latin for it."

Nancy flushed. She had the uncomfortable feeling that he was laughing at her. "I never heard of that motto on a coat of arms," she said coldly.

"Probably not. I have no coat of arms. I never thought much of this idea of resting on the laurels of your ancestors," flashed Nancy.

"In family, yet. But not in family trees. After all, everyone who reads his Bible can trace his ancestry back to Adam and—"

Suddenly, above the whir of the motor, came the conductor's voice shouting, "Peru Corners. Pe—roo Corners!"

Nancy sprang up and made a frenzied dash for the exit. The omnibus made only a brief stop. Already she heard the warning siren note of the starter. The conductor swung her down impatiently and left her standing alone at the intersection of two dusty roads. Suddenly she remembered that she had left her bag, nor was that all. In her mad rush the ring had slipped from her fingers!

"Stop!" she shrieked, running after the omnibus. "Stop!"

Already, however, it was disappearing. "Oh," moaned Nancy. "Oh, oh, oh! How could she ever face Harriet! How could she hope to regain the ring? Somebody, anybody, could pick it up and keep it. Perhaps she had dropped it when

she alighted. Although she retraced her steps, however, digging over every inch of the road, the small square package eluded her search.

There was nothing to do but to telephone every omnibus stop along the route, asking the conductor to look out for the ring. She spent almost twenty dollars telephoning in the station at Indianapolis. When she finally staggered into her room at Ladywood, white and disheveled, it was after midnight. "It's gone," she cried wildly, shaking Harriet by the shoulder. "Your ring is gone!"

"What are you raving about?" mumbled Harriet sleepily. "Let me be—"

"Listen, Harriet, I lost your ring!"

"You would have to wake me up to tell me," scolded Harriet. "After all, it's just a ring. Come to bed, can't you?"

She was asleep again before Nancy's head touched the pillow. Nancy, however, lay awake toasting half the night.

"You look like a wreck," Harriet told her the next morning. She was surprisingly serene and sensible about her loss. "Forget it, can't you? I'm sure it will turn up some time. We'll advertise in the *Lost and Found*. I don't think an heirloom as well known as that can escape the police. It's not only heavily insured, but marked and fingerprinted, as it were. You see, it once belonged to George Washington."

"What?" gasped Nancy.

"Well what of it?"

"What of it?" Nancy burst out incredulously. "Why, everything! Do you mean to say that you belong to the famous Fairfax family, and never told me?"

"I happen to be the eldest unmarried Fairfax girl to date," said Harriet. "Of course you know the story of the ring?"

Nancy shook her head.

"Well, it goes something like this. It seems George Washington had it designed for his half brother, Lawrence. On his death, the Father of his Country gave it to Lawrence's widow, Anne Fairfax Washington. Anne willed it to the eldest unmarried girl in the Fairfax family upon condition that when she forfeited the Fairfax name through marriage, she must also forfeit the ring to the eldest unmarried Fairfax girl."

"Harriet," cried Nancy humbly, "you make me ashamed of all my little shams and pretenses. You are absolutely the finest girl I have ever known. But that doesn't alter the fact that the ring is gone. And how can I ever replace it? I might be able to in money, but never in tradition."

"Tradition fiddsticks," laughed Harriet, snapping her blunt pink fingertips. "I don't care a fig for tradition nor for the fact that I'm a Fairfax. You're what you are, not what your ancestors were."

A week went by without any news of the ring. One day, then, Nancy received a bulky package by parcel post, and a letter. She opened the latter first. The handwriting was unfamiliar. Nancy read it with growing amazement:

I am taking a chance in mailing a package to the return address I noted on the letter you left behind when you left the bus at Peru Corners. The parcel contains your bag, your book, and a small square package I found on the floor.

The return of those has been delayed because of urgent business in another state. You will doubtless remember me as your seatmate on that memorable ride to Peru Corn-



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AIRCRAFT RADIO SIGNALS NOT AFFECTED BY AURORA

"We are operating very conservatively until we can determine the behavior of the radio range under all meteorological circumstances," W. A. Strath, Pilot Instructor for Trans-Canada Air Lines, told an aviation convention here in describing the progress of training flights now being conducted across the Canadian Rockies.

Strath revealed that the mighty electrical discharges of Aurora Borealis, so common in Western Canada, have seemingly no effect on the Canadian radio range signals that guide aircraft along the Federal airway. He told of flying a Trans-Canada plane between Regina and Winnipeg recently when the whole North sky was brilliant with Northern Lights.

"The radio range signals cut through perfectly, even when other forms of transmission were affected," he said.

A Canadian pilot, with long experience flying commercial transports, the speaker declared the Canadian radio range was second to none on the continent.

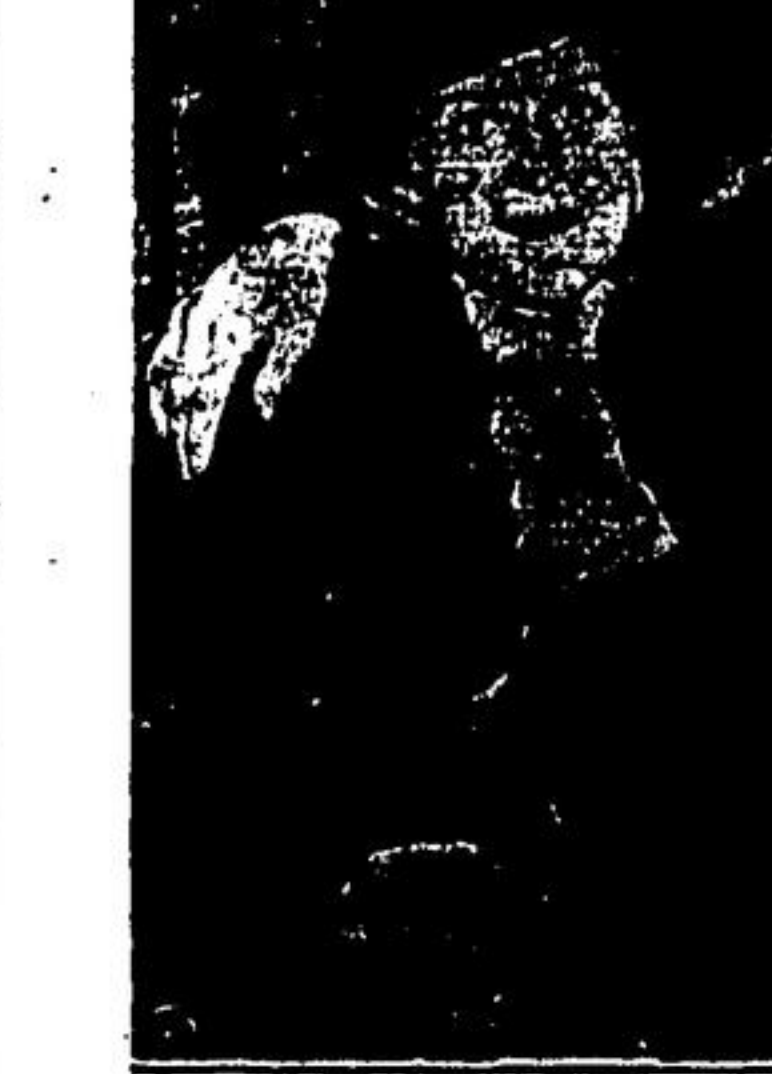
FEAT

The kindergarten teacher was telling her class about the canary bird.

"Can any little boy tell me what a canary can do that I can't?" she asked. A hand went up.

"All right, Marvin."

"He can take a bath in a saucer."



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HE GOT IT
A young boy, undergoing an examination for a position, came across the question: "What is the distance of the earth from the sun?"

He wrote his answer as follows: "I am unable to state accurately, but I don't believe the sun is near enough to interfere with a proper performance of my duties if I get this clerkship."

A POOR START
"So this is the theatre where you made your first appearance as an actor?" "Yes, eggs marks the spot."

VAIN ENDEAVOR
"Do you ever play cards for money?" "I sometimes think I do, but the other fellow always gets it."

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