

Friends in America

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Margaret hurried down High Street with her basket. It was Friday, and all the farmers brought their goods to Philadelphia. Margaret often went shopping with her mother. Today, Mama was sick in bed so Margaret had to go by herself. Even though she had just turned twelve, Margaret didn't mind. It had been a year since her family had come from Germany, and she knew the city.

It was early in the morning, but the marketplace was very busy. Margaret went straight to the place in the market where the sellers sold meat. Old Mr. Ober, who raised the best chickens, always sold out early. In fact, when Margaret arrived, she found two women poking the chickens that hung by their legs from a pole.

Mr. Ober was impatient. "You want it or not?" he said to one of the women. "Stop poking and start choosing."

"The day's just begun," the woman replied. "Don't be in such a rush."

"I want to finish and go to the dock," said Mr. Ober. "A Ship arrived late last night, and I'm going to look over the redemptioners. If I find one who I think will be a good worker, I'll pay for the ticket. Then my wife and I will have the help that we need."

Margaret shivered at the thought. She knew that redemptioners were passengers who could not afford to pay for their trip. They had to stay on board until someone paid for their ticket. In return, they had to work for that person for a number of years.

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Margaret was glad that when her family left Germany, they could afford to purchase their own tickets. Someone Margaret's age would have to work until he or she was twenty-one years old. Imagine having to obey Mr. Ober for the next nine years!

"I thought you had a redemptioner helping you already," one of the women said to MR. Ober. "Wasn't there a young man working for you?"

Mr. Ober nodded grimly. "That's right, but he ran away several weeks ago. I probably should have punished him more."

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When he turned his eyes on Margaret, she reminded herself not to be frightened. She didn't want him to think that he could give her the worst chicken just because she was young. "I'd like to see that one in the back, please," said Margaret, pointing.

"Why that one?" he asked suspiciously. He took down another chicken and held it in front of her. "This will be a nice roasting one."

"No, I'd rather have the other chicken," Margaret responded, shaking her head firmly.

With a frown, he reached out and took down the chicken she wanted. She handed him a shilling and waited for the change. The two older women watched as he handed the chicken over to Margaret. "We were here first," one said. "Why are you giving her the plumpest one?"

Margaret slipped the bird into her basket and hurried on to her next stop, the fruit stalls. Mama had told her to purchase some apples for a pie, if she saw any good ones. The fall crop was just starting to come in. A young man, looking around for customers, stood next to a wooden cart full of apples. Margaret recognized him. His name was Albert. He and his wife had crossed the ocean together to make a new life in America, but the weather didn't agree with her. She was weak and always had a bad cough. Mama had told Margaret that Albert's wife probably wouldn't last long.

*Perhaps she is getting better,* Margaret thought, because Albert greeted her with a smile.

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"Where is your mother today?"

"She's not feeling well, but I'm sure some of your apples will make her feel better," said Margaret.

"These apples are not the best, I'm afraid," he replied. "Next week I should have better ones."

*Few merchants are as honest as Albert,* thought Margaret. *Most would say their apples were the best in all of Pennsylvania, no matter what they looked like.*

Margaret purchased some of Albert's apples and then decided to walk home along Front Street. It would take her out of her way, but new ships always brought interesting things to see.

The shipyard was as busy as the marketplace. Burly dockhands were unloading crates and boxes from the ships. A Quaker merchant, wearing a broad-brimmed black hat, watched over the workers with an eye as sharp as an owl's. No doubt, some of the boxes belonged to him, and he wanted them treated with care.

Suddenly, Margaret heard someone calling her name. She looked up and saw a very familiar face. She could hardly believe her eyes. There, standing at the rail of the ship, was Gretchen Schmidt! In the little German town where Margaret was born, Gretchen had been her best friend.

"Are you coming ashore?" Margaret called to her.

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"The captain won't let me!" Gretchen cried back. "Come up so we can talk."

Margaret made her way up the gangplank to the deck of the ship. "I always hoped you'd come to America," said Margaret giving Gretchen a big hug. "Where are your parents?"

Gretchen lowered her head and began to cry softly. "There was a terrible sickness aboard this awful ship," she whispered with tears in her eyes. "Mama, Papa, and lots of other people died while crossing the ocean."

Margaret gave her friend another hug and took her hand. "I am so very sorry," she said.

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Gretchen brushed away her tears. "The captain says I must stay here until someone pays for my voyage. Then I must go and work for that person until I've paid the money back. Is this true?"

Margaret nodded her head. "Some people choose to come to America that way. It is a way of getting started here. Now that you..."

She stopped, not wanting to remind Gretchen that she would have to work for someone until she was twenty-one. Instead, Margaret said, "Many people treat their servants kindly."

But just then she happened to look down at the dock and saw Mr. Ober approaching the ship. *Oh, I mustn't let him pay for Gretchen's ticket!* She thought.

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Margaret quickly took her friend by the hand once again and pointed over to the side. "See that man?" she asked Gretchen. "If he comes aboard, stay away from him. Refuse to answer any questions he might ask. Just don't let him. Refuse to answer any questions he might ask. Just don't let him think you'd make a good servant while I go and find somebody else to pay your ticket."

Wide-eyed, Gretchen nodded. "Is he a bad person?"

"No time to talk," said Margaret. She rushed off and slipped down the gangplank, ducking behind a crate as Mr. Ober passed by.

She hurried back toward the market, wondering who would have enough mooney to purchase Gretchen. *It would be no use to go to Papa, because he already complained of having too many mouths to feed.* Thinking hard, Margaret didn't watch where she was going and bumped into someone. Blusing she mumbled an apology and tried to move on.

"Why are you in such a hurry?"

She knew the voice and, looking up, saw that it was Albert. "Oh, she replied, " a very good friend of mine is in trouble."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked.

Margaret didn't think it was likely because Albert never seemed to have much money. However, she explained anyway.

"My friend is aboard the ship that just arrived from Germany, and she needs someone to pay her ticket. I'm worried she may become a servant for someone who wouldn't treat her fairly."

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"And the reason I'm in a hurry," Margaret finished, "is that Mr. Ober may get her. Gretchen's young and strong-just what he's looking for. I have to find someone else to pay for her ticket. Do you know anyone who needs a servant?"

"Let's go see your friend," said Albert.

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When they reached the ship, she saw Mr. Ober and the captain standing together on deck, and Gretchen was beside them! Margaret rushed up the gangplank. When she reached them, she said to Mr. Ober, "You haven't paid for this girl's ticket yet, have you?"

"I wouldn't have her in my house," he said firmly.

"You wouldn't?" Margaret asked, pleasantly surprised.

"No, for she is a lazy and disobedient girl."

Margaret exchanged glances with Gretchen, greatly relieved that whatever Gretchen had said to Mr. Ober had worked.

Just then Albert caught up with Margaret. "How much does this girl owe for her ticket?" he asked the captain.

"Ten pounds," the captain replied, and Margaret gasped. That was as much as her family spent on food and supplies in six months. Her eyes widened as Albert took a small leather bag full of coins from his jacket.

"I must warn you," Mr. Ober mumbled in a gruff voice, "you are wasting your money, young man."

"I'll be the judge of that," interrupted Albert. "I want a trustworthy person to help my wife. I've saved this money just for that purpose." Smiling at the two girls, he continued, "If she is a friend of Margaret's, I know she will be just the kind of person we need."

The girls hugged each other. Now, they would be friends again-friends in America.

