

Morrison Gertrude W.

**The Girls of Central High
in Camp: or, the Old
Professor's Secret**



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CHAPTER I WHERE, OH, WHERE?

Field day was past and gone and the senior class of Central High, Centerport's largest and most popular school, was thinking of little but white dresses, bouquets, and blue-ribboned diplomas.

The group of juniors, however, who had made the school's athletic record for the year in the Girls' Branch Athletic League, had other matters to discuss – and in their opinion they were matters of much greater moment.

"Boiled down," stated Bobby Hargrew, "to its last common divisor, it is 'Where, oh, where shall we spend our vacation?'"

They had decided some weeks before – Bobby herself, Laura Belding, Jess Morse, the Lockwood twins and Dr. Agnew's daughter, Nellie – that a portion at least of the long summer vacation should be spent in camp. The mooted question was, where?

"No seashore resort," Nellie said, with more decision than she usually displayed, for Nellie was of a timid and peaceful disposition.

"No," agreed Laura Belding. "We'll eschew the three S's – 'sun, sand, and 'skeeter-bites.' That is the slogan of the seashore resort. Besides, it costs too much to get there."

"That's an important item to take into consideration, girls, if *I'm* to go," said Jess Morse.

"I thought you were a millionairess?" laughed Bobby. "Where are the royalties from your play?"

"Those won't begin till the producer puts the play on next season," returned Jess, who had been fortunate in writing a play for amateur production good enough to interest a professional theatrical manager.

"Well, we've got to have *you*, Jess," said Bobby (otherwise Clara) Hargrew. "For we're depending upon your mother to play chaperon for the crowd, wherever we go."

"Let's find a quiet spot, then," said Jess, eagerly. "Mother wants to write a book this summer and she says she would love to be somewhere where she doesn't need to play the society game, or dress—"

"Back to the Garden of Eden for hers!" chuckled Bobby. "Eve didn't have to dress – that is, not before *Fall*."

"Aren't you awful, Bobby?" cried one of the Lockwood twins – but *which* one it was who spoke could not have been sworn to by their most familiar friend. Dora and Dorothy looked just alike, dressed just alike, their voices were alike, and they usually acted in perfect harmony, too!

"Well," pursued Laura Belding, "if we are going to spend the first weeks of the summer vacation in camp, we must decide upon the spot at once. Are we all agreed that we shall not go to the salt water?"

"Oh, yes!" cried her particular chum, Jess, or Josephine, Morse.

"None of the troubles of the seaside boarder for ours," Bobby announced, hurriedly groping amid the rubbish in her skirt pocket and bringing forth a crumpled newspaper clipping. Bobby insisted upon having a pocket in almost every garment she wore (it was whispered that she wore pajamas at night for that reason) and no boy ever carried a more heterogeneous collection in his pockets than she did.

"See here! here's one seaside visitor's complaint," and she intoned in a singsong voice the following doggerel:

“Why don’t red-headed girls get tanned?
Why does a collar wilt?
Why is the sea so near the land?
Why were the billows built?
Why is the “crawl-stroke” hard to learn?
Why is the sea bass shy?
Why is the nose the first to burn?
Why is the stinging fly?

“Why do mosquito nettings leak?
Why do all fishers lie?
Why does the grunter-fish always squeak?
Why do they feed us on clam-pie?
Why does the boardwalk hurt the feet?
Why is the seaweed green?
Why can’t a bathing suit look neat?
Why won’t straw hats stay clean?
“Why—”

“Stop it!” shrieked Jess, covering her ears. “How *dare* you read such preposterous stuff?”

“Whys to the wise,’ you know,” giggled Bobby.

“I vote we refuse to allow Bobby to go camping with the crowd unless she positively refrains from quoting verse on any and every occasion,” drawled Nellie.

“Hardhearted creature!” cried Dora Lockwood. “Poor Bobs couldn’t live without that ’scape-gap.”

“By the way, girls,” Laura Belding asked, briskly, “are we going to let any other girls join this camping party – or is it to be just us six?”

“Who else wants to go?” demanded Bobby, quickly.

“Lil Pendleton—”

“Always that!” ejaculated Bobby, in disgust.

“Why, Bobby!” cried Dorothy. “I thought you and Lilly kissed and made up?”

“Oh, yes – we did,” grunted the smaller girl. “That is, we kissed. Lil was already made up.”

“Now, Bobby!” admonished Laura.

“That’s horrid of you, Bobby,” Nellie declared. “You are incorrigible.”

Yet they all had to laugh. Bobby Hargrew *was* just a cut-up!

“I’m worse than the long word you called me, Nell,” said little Miss Hargrew. “But we’re not going to have any such spoil-sport as Lil Pendleton along.”

“But Chet and Lance say that Prettyman Sweet has begged so hard to go camping with *them*, that they’re going to take him – just for the fun they will have at his expense, I s’pose,” said Laura.

“That’s why Lil wants to go camping,” Dora said. “She’s got such an awful crush on Pretty Sweet that she wants to do everything he does.”

“That dude!” scoffed Bobby.

“He and Lil make a good pair,” said Jess.

“Wait a minute!” cried Dorothy Lockwood. “Where are the boys going to camp this year, Laura?”

“On the shore of Lake Dunkirk, somewhere.”

“Say, Mother Wit,” cried Bobby, addressing by her universal nickname the leader of the crowd of Central High girls. “Wouldn’t it be fun to camp near – That is, providing the boys are all nice.”

“Well, beside Chet and Lance and Pretty Sweet, there’ll be Short and Long, Reddy Butts and Arthur Hobbs, anyway. I don’t know how many more,” Laura said. “But you know that Chet and Lance wouldn’t have any but nice fellows in their crowd.”

“Barring Pretty,” said Bobby, “they are all good chaps – so far. We wouldn’t mind having them for neighbors.

“And why can’t we?” she added, suddenly. “Why, girls! Father Tom has recently bought into the Rocky River Lumber Company and that company owns Acorn Island.”

“Acorn Island? Great!” declared Jess.

“That’s the big island in Lake Dunkirk, you know,” explained Laura to the Lockwood twins, who looked puzzled.

“Acorn Island is just the finest kind of a place for a camp,” said the enthusiastic Jess. “It’s just like a wilderness.”

“Right! The company isn’t going to cut the timber on the island till next winter. Father Tom says so.”

“I’ve been to picnics on Acorn Island,” said Nellie Agnew. “It *is* a beautiful spot.”

“Acorn Island it is, then,” cried Bobby. “Hurrah! We’ll spend our vacation there!”

She almost shouted this declaration. The girls had been lingering to talk in the high school yard and were now at the gate. Nellie suddenly tugged at Laura’s sleeve and whispered:

“Look there! *what* do you suppose is the matter with Professor Dimp?”

Bobby spun around at the word, having heard the sibilant whisper. She likewise stared at the rusty-coated gentleman who had just passed the gate, having come from the main entrance of the Central High building.

“Gee!” exclaimed the slangy Bobby. “What’s got Old Dimple now? What have *I* ever done to him – except massacre the Latin language? – and that’s a ‘dead one,’ anyway!”

The Latin teacher – the bane of all careless and ill-prepared boys and girls of the Latin class – was a slightly built, stoop-shouldered man who never seemed to own a new coat, and was as forgetful as a person really could be, and be allowed to go about without a keeper.

He often passed the members of his class on the street without knowing them at all; the boys said you might as well bow to a post as to Old Dimple!

But here he had taken particular notice of Bobby Hargrew; indeed, he stopped to turn around and glare right at her – just as though she had said something particularly offensive to him as he passed the group.

“Goodness!” murmured Jess. “If you’re not in trouble with Gee Gee, Bobs, you manage to get one of the other instructors down on you. What have you done to the professor?”

“Nothing, I declare!” said Bobby, plaintively.

“If you’d murdered his grandmother he couldn’t look any harder at you,” chuckled Dora Lockwood.

The professor suddenly saw that he had disturbed the party of schoolgirls. He actually flushed, and turned hurriedly to move away.

As he did so he pulled a big, blue-bordered handkerchief from the tail pocket of his frock-coat. That pocket was notably a “catch-all” for anything the poor, absent-minded professor wished to save, or to which he took a fancy. Once Short and Long (otherwise a very short boy named Long) dropped a kitten into the professor’s tail pocket and the gentleman did not discover it until he reached for his bandana to wipe his moist brow when he stood up to lecture his Latin class.

However, it was nothing like a kitten that followed the blue-bordered handkerchief out of the voluminous skirt-pocket. A crumpled clipping from a newspaper fell to the walk as Professor Dimp strode away.

Bobby Hargrew’s quick eye noted the clipping first, and she darted to retrieve it. She came back more slowly, reading the printed slip.

“What is it, Bob?” asked Jess, idly.

“Why, Clara!” exclaimed Laura Belding, “aren’t you going to give it back to him?”

“Look here, girls!” ejaculated the excited and thoughtless Bobby, looking up from the newspaper clipping. “What do you think of this? Old Dimple must be secretly interested in modern crime as well as in the murdered ancient languages. This is all about those forgeries in the Merchants and Miners Bank, of Albany. You know, they say a young fellow – almost a boy – did them; and he can’t be found and they don’t know what he did with the money obtained by the circulating of the false paper.”

“My! Our Aunt Dora lost some securities. She just wrote us about it,” Dorothy Lockwood said, eagerly.

“And he wasn’t much but a boy!” murmured Nellie. But Laura said, sharply: “Bobby! that’s not nice. Run after Professor Dimp and give the clipping to him.”

“Gee! you’re so awfully particular,” grumbled the harum-scarum. But she started after the shabby figure of the Latin teacher and caught up with him before Professor Dimp had reached the end of the next block – for Bobby Hargrew had taken the palm in the quarter mile dash at the Girls’ Branch League Field Day and there were few girls at Central High who could compete with her as a sprinter.

When she returned to the group of her friends, still eagerly discussing the plane for their camping trip, her footsteps lagged. Laura noticed the curious expression on the smaller girl’s face.

“What *has* happened you, Bobby?” she demanded.

“Why! I’m so surprised,” gasped Bobby. “I must have done something *awful* to Old Dimple. When he saw what it was I handed him, he grabbed it and just snarled at me:

“Where did you get that, Miss Hargrew?”

“And when I told him, he looked as though he didn’t believe me and had to search his pocket to make sure he *had* dropped it. And he looked at me so fiercely and suspiciously. Goodness! I don’t know what I’ve done to him.”

“He’s odd, you know,” suggested Mother Wit.

“That’s all right,” said Bobby, somewhat tartly; “but what the mischief he wants to bother himself about where we go camping–”

“What do you mean, Bobs?” demanded Jess, while the other girls all looked amazed.

“Why he said to me just now,” answered the disturbed girl, “you girls better keep away from Acorn Island. That’s no place for you to go camping.’ And then walked right off with his old clipping, and without giving me a chance to ask him what he meant,” concluded Bobby Hargrew.

CHAPTER II

PLANS FOR THE SUMMER

Bobby Hargrew came to school the next morning with rather a sour face for her. "What's the matter, dear?" asked Nell Agnew, sympathetically.

"I wish I were a bird," grumbled Bobby.

"So you could soar into the circumambient ether and leave all mundane things below?" queried Jess Morse, with a chuckle.

"No," said Bobby, in disgust. "So I wouldn't have a toothache. I was up with one of my old grinders half the night."

"Have it pulled," suggested Laura.

"Say!" cried Bobby. "That's the easiest thing in the world to say and the hardest to do. And you know it, Mother Wit! You can have an old toothache that will make you feel like committing suicide; and when you get to the dentist shop you wish you *had* committed suicide before you got there," and jolly little Bobby began to grin again.

"Suicide is a serious matter," said Nellie, gravely.

"Surely, surely," the cut-up replied, dropping her voice to a gruesome pitch. "Listen!

"Beside a sewer a man lay dead,
A dagger in his side;
The coroner's decision read:
"He died of suicide."

'Now if this man at home in bed,
Had in this manner died,
Then could the coroner have said:
"He died of homicide"?'

"Never joke about serious things, Nell."

"Hush, Bobby!" commanded Laura Belding. "Tell us, do, if your father has agreed to let us go camping on Acorn Island?"

"Of course," replied the younger girl. "And he says there is a cabin there that can be made tight for ten dollars. It's all right to camp under canvas; but if a big storm should come up he says we'd be glad of that cabin."

"Great!" announced Jess Morse.

"The cabin shall be your mother's particular shelter," said Laura. "Eh, girls?"

"If she is kind enough to go with us," said Nellie, "she should have the very best of everything."

"She can have *my* share of the wood ants and red spiders," chuckled Bobby. "But it's all right, girls. Father Tom says we can have the island to ourselves. And believe me: this bunch of girls of Central High will sure have a good time!"

Which was a prophecy likely to be fulfilled, if the past adventures of these same girls were any criterion of the future.

For more than a year now the girls of Central High, together with those of the other two high schools of Centerport and the high schools of Lumberport and Keyport – all five – had been deeply interested in the Girls' Branch League athletics. In following the various games and exercises approved by their instructor, Mrs. Case these six girls introduced above, had engaged in many and varied enterprises and adventures.

In “The Girls of Central High; Or, Rivals for All Honors,” the first volume of this series, Laura Belding (“Mother Wit”) was enabled to interest one of the wealthiest men of Centerport in girls’ athletics so that he gave a large sum toward the preparation of a handsome athletic field and gymnasium for Central High.

The second volume is entitled: “The Girls of Central High on Lake Luna,” and the third is “The Girls of Central High at Basket Ball” – the titles of which tell their own story.

“The Girls of Central High on the Stage,” the fourth volume, tells of the writing and first production by her mates of Jess Morse’s successful play, while the fifth of the series is entitled: “The Girls of Central High on Track and Field; Or, Champions of the School League.”

Laura, Jess, Nellie, the Lockwood Twins and Bobby were girls of dissimilar characters (that is, if we count Dora and Dorothy as “one and indivisible” like the Union of the States). Laura’s brother Chetwood, his chum, Lance Darby, Billy Long, and some of the other Central High boys were usually entangled in the girls’ adventures – sufficiently to give spice to the incidents.

So, all considered, it was only reasonable that the girls should have eagerly agreed upon the site of their summer camp – Acorn Island. They knew that the boys would probably have their own camp on one shore or the other of the lake, and within sight of the island.

Chet, who seldom failed to walk home with Jess and carry her books – unless the gymnasium called the girls after the school session – and Lance, who filled like office of faithful squire to Laura, joined the girl chums on this afternoon.

“Got it all planned, have you?” Chet said. “I hear Acorn Island is going to be overrun with a gang of female Indians right after graduation.”

“We have got to go up there to keep watch of you boys,” laughed his sister. “But it’s nice of Bobby’s father to let us camp there.”

“Pull – sheer pull,” grumbled Lance. “We fellows tried our best to get permission to camp on the Island.”

“Well,” said Jess, demurely. “You can come to the island visiting. It will be perfectly proper. My mother says she will go to chaperon us, now that she knows there is a cabin there.”

“And Bobby’s father is going to send a couple of men up from Lumberport to make the cabin tight and fix things up a little for us. We’ll pitch our tents on the knoll right by the cabin,” Laura said, eagerly.

“Pretty spot,” agreed Chet. “We’ll probably have our camp in sight of it and the lake between the south shore and the island is only about two miles broad.”

“Oh! we’ll have a bully time,” his chum agreed.

“Say!” Chet said, suddenly, addressing Lance Darby. “What was professor Dimp saying to you about camping? I heard a word or two. Something about going to the island?”

“Why! I forgot to tell you about that,” returned Lance, quickly, while the two girls cast enquiring glances at each other. “Old Dimple is certainly an odd stick.”

“As odd as Dick’s hat-band,” agreed Chet.

“And no-end forgetful. He’s been worse than ever lately. There certainly is something worrying him.”

“You boys,” laughed Jess.

“Something worse than boys,” Lance returned. “It’s a shame how forgetful he is. Say! did you hear what he did at Mr. Sharp’s the other night?”

“No,” said the others, in chorus.

Lance began to chuckle. Mr. Franklin Sharp was the principal of Central High, and was very much admired by all the pupils; while Professor Dimp, because of his harshness and his queer ways, was the butt of more than a few jokes.

“It was night before last when it rained so hard,” resumed Lance. “He was there going over Latin exercises or something, with the Doctor. Mrs. Sharp asked him to stay all night, when it came on so hard to rain, and the old Prof thanked her and said he would.

“Mr. Sharp went into his office to do something or other and left Old Dimple in the library for a while. The family lost track of him then. Right in the middle of the hardest downpour, about eleven o’clock, the front door bell rang, and Mr. Sharp went to the door.

“There was Old Dimple, under a dripping umbrella, his pants wet to the knees, and his pajamas and toothbrush under his arm—”

“Oh, Lance!” ejaculated Laura. “That is too much to believe.”

“Fact. He’d gone home for his nightclothes. I got it from our hired girl and she got it from Mrs. Sharp’s maid. So, there you have it!”

“But you didn’t tell us what the old Prof was saying to you about camping,” reminded Chet, when the general laugh was over.

“Why! that’s so. And it was odd, too, that he should take any interest in what we fellows were going to do this summer.”

“What about it?” Jess asked.

“He wanted to know if we were going to pitch our camp, too, on Acorn Island? He seemed to know you girls were going there.”

“How odd!” murmured Laura and Jess, together. And the latter added: “Bobby said he seemed mad when he found out *we* were going to Acorn Island.”

“Well,” drawled Lance, “he seemed sort of relieved when I told him we fellows were going to camp on the mainland.”

“Funny he should trouble his head about us out of school hours at all,” Chet said again.

His sister made no further comment upon the professor’s queer actions. Nevertheless her curiosity was aroused regarding the old instructor’s sudden interest in anything beside Latin exercises and Greek roots.

CHAPTER III

VISITORS' DAY

The afternoon preceding the closing exercises of Central High was Visitors' Day at the girls' gymnasium. This was an entirely different affair from the recent Field Day when Laura Belding and her particular friends had so well distinguished themselves.

On *that* occasion the general public had been invited. Visitors' Day might better have been called "Mothers' Day." Mrs. Case personally invited all those mothers who had shown little interest, or positive objection, to their daughters' athletic activities.

For to the Centerport ladies the fact that their daughters were being trained "like prize-ring fighters," as one good but misled mother had said in a letter to the newspaper, was not only a novel course but was considered of doubtful value.

"And you must come, Mother," begged Laura, when Mrs. Belding seemed inclined to make excuses. Mrs. Belding was one of the mothers who could not approve of her daughter's interest in athletics.

"Really, Laura, I am not sure that I should enjoy myself seeing you crawl about those ladders like a spider – or climbing ropes like a sailor – or turning on a trapeze like a monkey – or otherwise making yourself ridiculous."

"Oh, Mother!" half-laughed Laura. Yet she was a little hurt, too.

"Aw, Mother, don't sidestep your plain duty," said Chet, his eyes twinkling.

"Chetwood! You know very well that I do not approve of many of these modern dances. I certainly do not 'sidestep'"–

"That isn't a dance, Mother," giggled Laura.

Her husband chuckled at the other end of the table. "My dear," he said, suavely, "you should keep up with the times–"

"No, thank you. I have no desire to. Keeping up with the times, as you call it, has made my son speak a language entirely unintelligible to *my* ear, and has made my daughter an exponent of muscular exercises of which I cannot approve."

"Pshaw!" said her husband, easily. "Basketball, and running, and rowing, and the exercise she gets at that gymnasium, aren't going to hurt Mother Wit."

"There you go!" exclaimed his wife. "You have begun to apply to Laura an appellation which she has gained since all this disturbance over athletics among the girls, has arisen.

"I can no more than expect," went on Mrs. Belding, seriously, "that, dissatisfied with basketball and the like, the girls will become baseball and football – what do you call them, Chetwood? Fans?"

"Quite right, mother," Laura hastened to answer instead of her brother. "And all we girls of Central High are fans already when it comes to baseball and football. I'd like to belong to a baseball team, myself, for one–"

"Laura!" gasped her mother, while her father and Chet burst out laughing.

"It's the finest game in the world," declared Laura, stoutly.

"Hear! hear!" from Chet.

"I've been to see the games a lot with father Saturday afternoons," began Laura, when her mother interposed:

"Indeed? *That* is why you are so eager always to spend your forenoons with your father on Saturday?"

"Oh, Mother! I really *do* help father in the jewelry-store – don't I, Dad?"

"Couldn't get along without you, daughter," said Mr. Belding, stoutly.

“And he always takes me for a nice bite in a restaurant,” pursued the girl, “and then if there’s a game, we go to see it.”

“Runaways!” said Mrs. Belding, shaking an admonishing finger at them. “So you encourage her in these escapades, do you, Mr. Belding?”

“Quite so, Mother,” he returned. “You’re behind the times. Girls are different nowadays – in open practise, at least – from what they were in our day. Of course, I remember when I first saw you—”

“That will do!” exclaimed Mrs. Belding, flushing very prettily, while the children laughed. “We will not rake up old stories, if you please.”

Any reference to the occasion at which her husband hinted, usually brought his wife “to time,” as Chet slangily expressed it. She agreed to be present at the girls’ gymnasium on that last day when the girls used the paraphernalia as they pleased, with Mrs. Case standing by to direct, or admonish, or advise.

Mrs. Belding found in the gallery overlooking the big gymnasium floor many of her neighbors, church friends, or fellow club-members.

“I’ve been trying to get here for months,” one stout lady confided to the Market Street jeweler’s wife; “but it does seem to me I never have a minute to spare. But Lluella says that I *must* come now, for the term is ending. That’s Lluella over yonder jumping on that mat. Isn’t she quick on her feet?”

“Grace is such a reckless child,” complained the lady on Mrs. Belding’s other side. “She’s her father all over again – and he’s got the quickest temper of any man I ever saw. Gets over it right away, you know; but it’s a trial to have a man get mad because the coffee’s muddy of a morning.”

“Oh, I know all about *that*,” sighed the fleshy lady, windily.

“I don’t suppose there’s really any danger of the children getting hurt here, Mrs. Belding?” proceeded the thin mother.

“I believe not. Laura says there is no danger—”

“Oh, your Laura is a regular athlete!” interrupted the fat woman. “My Lluella says she is just *wonderful*.”

“So does my Grace,” declared the thin lady on the other side. “She says there’s nobody like ‘Mother Wit,’ as she calls Laura.”

“I think there is no danger,” murmured Mrs. Belding, not sure whether she was glad or sorry that her daughter was so popular.

“Oh, Mrs. Belding! are *you* here?” broke in rather a shrill voice from the rear. “I told Lily I would come to-day; but really, I hardly knew whether it was the thing to approve of this gymnasium business—”

Mrs. Pendleton’s voice trailed off as it usually did before she completed a sentence. She was a small, extremely vivacious, black-eyed woman, much overdressed, and carrying a lorgnette with which she eyed the crowd of girlish figures on the floor below.

“Of course,” she murmured to Mrs. Belding, “if *you* approve—”

“Where is Grace now?” cried the thin lady, suddenly. “Mercy! See where she has climbed to. Do you suppose they can get her without a ladder?”

Grace, a thin, wiry child of the wriggling type, had successfully clambered up the rope almost to the beam overhead and was now surveying the gallery with lofty compassion, which included a lively appreciation of her mother’s uneasiness.

“Oh, Grace!” shrilled the thin woman. “Get down this instant! Or do you want me to bring you a ladder?”

An appreciative giggle arose from some of the girls below. Grace turned rather red around her ears, and began to descend. It was one thing to make her mother marvel; she did not want her “act” to be turned to ridicule.

“They look real pretty – now don’t they?” admitted Mrs. Pendleton, loftily, after surveying the gymnasium for some time through her lorgnette. “Lily’s dress cost us a deal of trouble. But she looks well in it. She’s well developed for her age and – thank goodness! – she has a *chic* way with her.

“I thought we never would get the suit to fit her. And she changed her shoes three times,” added the society matron. “Finally I told her if she was going to have nervous prostration getting ready to take physical culture, she’d better wait and take it when she was convalescent.”

“I hope Lluella will be careful of her hands,” said the fleshy lady on Mrs. Belding’s right. “She’s always bruising or cutting her fingers. Just like her aunt. Her aunt always had to wear gloves doing her housework.”

“There! they are going to march,” cried the thin lady, as Mrs. Case blew her whistle and the girl on the rope slid the last few feet to the floor. “Grace is down, thank goodness!”

“Her music teacher says Grace’s ear is a regular gift – she keeps such good time.”

“I’m sure no sensible parent would ever have *bought* those ears,” whispered Mrs. Pendleton to Mrs. Belding. “They must have been a gift,” for those organs on the agile Grace were painfully prominent.

“But she had *such* a pretty smile when she looked up at her mother just now,” whispered the kind-hearted Mrs. Belding.

“That reminds me,” said the society matron – though why it should have reminded her nobody knows! “That reminds me, my Lily is crazy to go camping – positively crazy!”

“I know,” sighed Mrs. Belding. “Laura is determined, too. And her father approves and has overruled all *my* objections.”

“Oh, it’s not that with me at all,” said Mrs. Pendleton, briskly. “I’m glad enough to have the child go. She’s too much advanced for her age, anyway. If she spends this summer at Newport, and Bar Harbor, and one or two other places where I positively *must* appear, I’ll never be able to get her back into school this fall.

“It ages a mother so to have a growing daughter – and one that is so forward as Lily,” said this selfish lady, fretfully. “Lily thinks she is grown up now. No. I approve of her going with a lot of little girls into camp. And she wants to go with your Laura’s crowd, Mrs. Belding.”

“I’m sure – Laura would be pleased,” said Mrs. Belding, sweetly, without an idea that she was laying up trouble in store for Mother Wit.

“Oh, then, I can leave it with you, dear Mrs. Belding?” cried Mrs. Pendleton, with uncanny eagerness. “You will arrange it?”

“Why – er – I presume Laura and her friends would have no objection to another of their schoolmates joining them. I understand Mrs. Morse will chaperon them—”

“And quite a proper person for that office, too,” agreed Mrs. Pendleton. “I presume they will take along a maid.”

“Oh! I do not know,” said Mrs. Belding, beginning to feel somewhat worried now. “I imagine the girls expect to do for themselves—”

“Oh! I will send a maid with Lily. At least, I will pay the wages of one who will do for all the girls – in a way.”

She bustled away to find Lily after the march. Mrs. Belding waited for her daughter in more or less trepidation. It had suddenly crossed her mind that Lily Pendleton was seldom at her house with the friends that Mother Wit gathered about her.

CHAPTER IV

“LONESOME LIZ”

“Oh, galloping grasshoppers!” gasped Bobby Hargrew, clinging tight to Laura and Nellie Agnew in the dressing-room. “Do you hear what she says?”

“What language, Bob!” said Nellie, in horror. “How *can* you?”

“Of whom are you speaking?” asked Laura, with an admonishing look.

“That Lil Pendleton. The gall of her!”

“Stop, Bob!” commanded Laura. “You talk like a street urchin.”

“I don’t care if I talk like a sea urchin,” complained the smaller girl. “She says she’s going with us.”

“Where?” asked Nell.

“Camping.”

“Who?” exclaimed Laura, promptly.

“That Pendleton girl. Says her mother just told her. *Your* mother said so, Laura Belding. So there!”

“Why – why—”

“I don’t want to complain of your mother, Laura,” said the grocer’s daughter, “but it seems too bad we can’t pick and choose whom we’ll have go camping in our crowd.”

“Mother doesn’t understand! I am sure she never meant to *make* us take Lil if we didn’t want her.”

“And surely we *don’t*,” declared the doctor’s daughter, with more emphasis than she usually used in commenting upon any subject.

“Let’s put the rollers under her and let her zip,” exclaimed the slangy Bobby.

“If Gee Gee should hear you,” laughed Laura, referring to one of the very strict lady teachers of Central High, Miss Grace Gee Carrington.

“She’s too busy with Margit Salgo – Beg pardon!” exclaimed Bobby. “Margaret Carrington, as she will in future be known. Gee Gee has scarcely called me down this week.”

“Now, if it was Margit who wanted to go,” sighed Nell Agnew, speaking of the half-Gypsy girl who had just come under the care of Miss Carrington.

“Or Eve Sitz,” added Bobby. “But Eve says she gets out-of-door work enough on the farm in the summer. Camping out is no fun for her.”

“I don’t know what to say about Lily,” began Laura. “I cannot understand mother promising such a thing. If anybody should decide, it should be Jess’ mother. *She* is going with us.”

“Oh! there’s another thing,” interrupted the fly-away Bobby. “If Lil goes, she’s going to take along a lady’s maid.”

“*What?*” gasped the other girls.

“Mrs. Pendleton is going to pay the wages of a girl to go with us and do the camp work,” announced Bobby, and now she spoke with some enthusiasm.

“Goodness!” exclaimed Laura.

“Not so bad,” sighed Nellie, who really did *not* like hard work and had dreaded that division of labor which she knew must fall to her if they went camping without “help.”

“Having a girl along to cook and do up the beds and wash dishes and the like wouldn’t be so bad,” announced Bobby, growing braver as Nell seemed to encourage the idea.

“Well! Miss Hargrew!” accused Laura. “I believe you have gone over to the enemy. *You* really want Lil to go with us to Acorn Island.”

“No. But I’d be glad to have her mother pay the wages of somebody to do most of the hard work,” grinned Bobby.

There was a regular “buzz society,” as Bobby called it, after the girls were dressed. The original six who had planned to go camping on Acorn Island *did* hum like a colony of bees when they all learned that Lily Pendleton was likely to be foisted upon them.

“It’s a shame!” exclaimed Jess, angrily. “She knows well enough we don’t want her.”

“Well,” murmured one of the Lockwood twins. “She asked us and we said the invitation would have to come through Laura.”

“Cowards!” exclaimed Mother Wit, dramatically. “That’s why she got her mother to go to *mine*. And I am real angry with mother—”

“Oh, Laura! we wouldn’t offend your mother for anything,” said Nell, hastily.

“Or put her in an uncomfortable position,” Bobby added. “She’s been too nice to us all.”

“And, of course, we have to stand Lil in the school and gymnasium. She won’t kill us; she’s only silly,” went on Nell.

“I believe you’re all more or less willing to have Lil go,” declared Laura, in wonder.

“We-ell,” drawled Bobby. “There’s the chance of having somebody to do the camp work for us—”

“Not Lil!” shrieked Jess. “She never lifts her hand at home.”

“No,” said Nell. “But Mrs. Pendleton will pay a maid’s wages.”

“Ah – ha!” ejaculated Jess Morse. “I smell a mice, as the Dutchman says. We are to be bribed.”

And bribed they were. At least, none of them wished to put Laura’s mother to any trouble. So they agreed to let Lily Pendleton go camping with them. Mrs. Pendleton left it to the girls to find anyone they wanted to help about the camp, and promised to pay good wages.

“I know just whom we can get,” Bobby said, eagerly, that evening when the girls – and some of the boys – were assembled as usual on the Belding front porch.

“Who’s that?”

“That Bean girl,” said the groceryman’s daughter.

“Who’s she? Miss Boston Bean?” chuckled Chet.

“Lizzie Bean! I know who she is,” exclaimed Laura.

“She’s the girl who’s been helping the Longs since Alice came back to school. Now Alice will keep house for her father and the other children again, and Lizzie will be out of a job,” explained Bobby.

“Whew! ‘Lonesome Liz?’” ejaculated Lance Darby. “Short and Long calls her that. Says she’s about half cracked—”

“I guess she isn’t cracked enough to hurt,” said Dora Lockwood, quickly. “Is she, Dorothy?”

“Of course not,” agreed her twin. “And she keeps the house beautifully clean, and looks after Tommy fine.”

“Let me tell you Master Tommy Long is some kid to look after,” chuckled Chet.

“And that’s no dream,” agreed his chum, Lance.

Bobby began to laugh, too. “Did you hear his latest?” she demanded of the crowd.

“Who’s latest,” asked Jess.

“Tommy Long – the infant terrible?”

“Let’s hear it, Bobs,” said Jess. “If he can say anything worse than *you* can—”

“But this break on Master Tommy’s part was entirely unintentional. Alice was telling me about it. She sends him to Sunday School and he has to memorize the Golden Text and repeat it to her when he comes home.

“The other Sunday he had been skylarking in Sunday School, it was evident, for when she asked him to tell her the text, he shot this one at her: ‘Don’t worry. You’ll get the blanket.’”

“*What?*” gasped Laura.

“That’s a teaser,” said Lance. “What did the kid mean?”

“That’s what troubled Alice,” chuckled Bobby. “She couldn’t get it at all; but Tommy stuck to it that he had given her the text straight. So she looked it up herself and what do you suppose Tommy had twisted into ‘Don’t worry. You’ll get the blanket?’”

“Give it up,” said Jess. “Let’s have it.”

“Why, the text was,” said Bobby, more seriously, “Fear not; the Comforter shall come unto you.”

“That kid is a terror,” said Chet, when the laugh had subsided. “And so’s Short and Long. I believe he agreed to let Pretty Sweet go along with us to Lake Dunkirk just because he likes to play jokes on Purt.”

“Dear me!” sighed Bobby, with unction. “With Pretty in your camp and Lil in ours, the sun of no day should go down upon us without, seeing *some* fun.”

“And if you have ‘Lonesome Liz’ along,” chuckled Lance, “you girls certainly won’t forget how to laugh.”

It was agreed that Laura and Jess should see Lizzie Bean the next morning and engage her for the position – if she would accept. They started early, for although they were only juniors and would have another year to attend Central High before graduation, this last day of school would be a busy one for them as well as for the graduating class.

Billy and Alice Long, who were their schoolmates, lived in a much poorer quarter of the town; it was down toward the wharves, and not far from the Central High’s boathouses.

The street was a typical water-side street, with small, gaily painted cottages, or cottages without any paint at all save that put on lavishly by the ancient decorating firm of Wind & Weather. Each dwelling had its own tiny fenced yard, with a garden behind. The Longs’ was neatly kept both front and rear, and the house itself showed no neglect by the tenants.

Mr. Long was a hard working man, and although the children were motherless, Alice, the oldest, kept the home neat and cheerful for her brothers and sisters. All the children were old enough to go to school save Tommy; and he had been to kindergarten occasionally this last term and would go to school regularly in the fall.

Laura and Jess, hurrying on their errand, came in sight of the Long cottage abruptly, and of a wobegone little figure on the front step.

“Why, it’s Tommy!” exclaimed Laura Belding. “Whatever is the the matter, Tommy?” for the little fellow was crying softly.

He was a most cherubic looking child, with a pink and white face, yellow curls that swept the clean collar of his shirt-waist, and a plump, “hug-able” little body.

“Yes, what *is* the matter, dear?” begged Jess Morse.

“H-he’s gone an’ cut off th-the tails of the pu-puppies,” sobbed Master Tommy, his breast heaving.

“Who has?” demanded Laura.

“He. That man what co-camed here,” choked the little fellow.

“What a pity! I’m awfully sorry,” Laura pursued, soothingly. “The poor little puppies.”

“Ye-yes. Pa s-said *I* should chop ’em off myself!” concluded Master Tommy in a burst of anger.

“My goodness me!” gasped Jess, horror-stricken. “Will you hear that boy talk? He’s a perfect little savage.”

“No, he isn’t,” said Mother Wit, shaking her head. “He’s only a boy – that’s all. You never had a brother, Jess.”

“I know well enough Chet was never like *that*,” declared Josephine, confidently.

They went in by the front gate and walked around the house, leaving the disappointed youngster wiping his eyes. They expected to find Lizzie Bean at the back.

In that they were not mistaken. At the well-curb was a lank, bony girl, who might have been Laura's age, or perhaps a couple of years older. She was dreadfully thin. As she hauled on the chain which brought the brimming bucket to the top of the well, she betrayed more red elbow and more white stockinged ankle-bone than any *one* person should display.

“My goodness, she's thin!” whispered Jess.

“We are not looking for a Hebe to help us at the camp,” Laura returned in the same low tone.

Lizzie Bean turned to see who was approaching. Her face was as thin as the rest of her figure. Prominent cheek bones, a sharp, long nose, and a pointed chin do not make a beautiful countenance, to say the least.

Besides, the expression of her face was lachrymose in the extreme. It did seem, as Jess afterward said, that Lizzie must have lost all her relatives and friends very recently, and was mourning for them all!

“Goodness me!” she whispered to Laura. “No wonder they call her ‘Lonesome Liz.’ She's so sad looking she's positively funny.”

CHAPTER V

THE START

“What do you girls want?” drawled the lean girl, resting her red elbows on the well-shelf and looking down at Laura and Jess Morse.

She did not speak unpleasantly; but she was very abrupt. Laura saw that Lizzie Bean’s flat, shallow appearing eyes were of a greenish gray color – eyes in which a twinkle could not possibly lurk.

“We understand that you are not going to help Alice much longer,” Laura said, pleasantly. “So we have come to see if you would like another position for a few weeks?”

“What d’ye mean – a *job*?” proposed Liz-Bean, bluntly.

“Ye-yes,” said Laura, rather taken aback.

“What doin’?”

“Why, we girls are going camping. There are seven of us – and Mrs. Morse. Mrs. Morse is the mother of my friend, here, Josephine Morse–”

“Please ter meet yer,” interposed Liz, bobbing a little courtesy at the much amused Jess.

Laura went on steadily, and without smiling too broadly at Liz:

“There are seven of us girls and Mrs. Morse. We shall live very simply – in tents and in a cabin, on Acorn Island.”

“Eight in fam’bly, eh?” put in the thin girl. “Eight is a bigger contract than I got here.”

“Oh! in camping out we don’t expect anything fancy,” Laura hastened to say. “We want somebody to make beds, and wash dishes, and clean up generally. Of course, the cooking will not *all* fall on your shoulders–”

“I sh’d hope not,” said Liz, briskly. “Not if it was as solid as some folkses’ biscuits. One woman I worked for once made her soda-riz biscuits so solid that if a panful had fell on yer shoulders ’twould ha’ broke yer back.”

Jess *had* to explode at that, but the odd girl did not even smile. She only stared at the giggling Jess and asked:

“Ain’t ye well?”

“Oh, yes!” gasped Jess.

“Well, I didn’t know,” drawled Liz. “My a’nt what brought me up useter keep a bottle of giggle medicine for us gals. An’ it was nasty tastin’ stuff, too. She made us take a gre’t spoonful if we luffed at table, or after we gotter bed nights. There was jala inter it, I b’lieve. I guess I could make ye some.”

Jess stopped laughing in a hurry. Laura tried to ignore her chum’s indignant look; but it was quite plain that Lizzie Bean “had all her wits about her,” as the saying is.

“Then you can cook?” Laura observed.

“Well, I can boil water without burnin’ it,” declared the odd girl. “But I ain’t no Woodruff-Wisteria chef.” Afterward the chums figured it out that Liz meant “Waldorf-Astoria.”

“Do you think you would like to go with us?” Laura asked.

“I dunno yet. Where is it?”

Laura explained more fully about the camping site, how they were to get there, and other particulars of the project.

“It listens good,” Liz said, reflectively. “Though I ain’t never cooked nothin’ but soft-soap over a campfire.”

“Oh! there will be a portable stove,” Laura said.

“When ye goin’?” asked the girl.

“Day after to-morrow.”

“What’ll ye pay?” was the next bluntly put question.

Laura told her the weekly wage Mrs. Pendleton had guaranteed. Although Lizzie Bean's face was well nigh expressionless at all times, the girls saw at once that something was wrong.

"I dunno," said Liz, slowly. "I have worked mighty cheap in my life – and I ain't got no job when I leave here – an' I gotter eat. But that *does* seem a *naw*-ful little wages."

"Why! I think that is real liberal," declared Jess, with some warmth.

Liz eyed her again coldly. "You must ha' worked awful cheap in your life," she said.

"I know," Laura explained, quietly, laying an admonitory hand upon her chum's arm, "You know, that is what you will receive each week."

"What's *that*?" demanded Liz, with a jump, "Say that again, will ye?"

"We will pay you that sum weekly," repeated Laura.

"Say – say it by the month!" gasped the lean girl, her eyes showing more surprise than Laura had thought them capable of betraying.

Laura did as she was requested. A slow, faint grin dawned on Liz Bean's narrow countenance.

"I been useter gittin' paid by the month – and sometimes not *then*. Some ladies has paid me so little for helpin' them that I wisht they'd paid me only every *three* months, so's 'twould sound bigger!

"I gotter take ye up before somebody pinches me."

"Pinches you? What do you mean?" asked Jess, doubtfully.

"I don't want to wake up," declared Liz. "I never got so much money since I was turned adrift when my a'nt died. Don't *you* wake up, neither, and forgit to pay me!"

"I promise not to do that," laughed Laura. "Then you'll come with us?"

"If I don't break an arm," declared Lizzie Bean, with emphasis.

They told her how to meet them at the dock, and the hour they expected to start. "And bring your oldest clothes," warned Jess.

"What's that?" demanded Liz.

"We just about live in old clothes – or in a bathing suit – in camp," explained Laura.

"Bless your heart!" exclaimed Liz. "I ain't never had nothin' but old clo'es. Been wearin' hand-me-downs ever since I can remember."

"My goodness gracious!" said Jess, and she and Laura hurried off for school. "Did you ever see such an uncouth creature? I don't wonder Billy Long says she's cracked."

"I don't know about her being cracked, as you call it," laughed Laura. "Just because she's queer is no proof that she is an imbecile. You know the old parody on 'Lives of Great Men All Remind Us,' don't you?" and she went on to quote:

"Lives of imbeciles remind us
It may some day come to pass,
We shall see one staring at us
From our trusty looking-glass!"

"Shucks!" responded Jess. "You'll get to be as bad as Bobby Hargrew with those old wheezes. But, did you *ever* see such a girl before?"

"No," admitted Laura. "I honestly never did. But I am quite sure she is in the possession of all her senses—"

"She may be; but I bet her senses are not like other folks'," chuckled Jess.

"She surely won't *bite*, Jess," responded Laura, smiling.

"Hope not! 'Boil water without burning it!' What do you know about *that*?"

"I think it's funny," said Laura.

"Well! I only hope we get something to eat in camp," murmured Jess.

"We can't expect her to do all the cooking," Laura said. "And I shall tell the girls so."

“Goodness! I don’t know whether I want to go camping with this bunch, after all,” said Jess. “What some of them will do to the victuals they have to cook will be a shame!”

However, the prospect of indifferent cookery made none of the girls of Central High less enthusiastic in the matter of the preparations for camping out on Acorn Island, in the middle of Lake Dunkirk.

They were all as busy as bees the next day, packing their bags and flying about from house to house, asking each other: “What you going to take?”

“Goodness me!” cried Laura, at last; “it isn’t what do we *want*, but how little can we get along with! Discard everything possible, girls – do!”

Bobby Hargrew declared Lil Pendleton had started to pack a Saratoga trunk, and that she had been obliged to point out to Lil that neither of the motorboats was large enough to ship such a piece of baggage.

Their gymnasium suits would be just the thing in camp. And of course they all had bathing suits. Otherwise most of the girls got their apparel down to what Jess Morse called “an insignificant minority.”

“If the King of India, or the Duke and Duchess of Doosenberry, comes calling at our camp, we shall have to put up a scarlet fever sign and all go to bed,” said Bobby. “We’ll have nothing to receive them in.”

“But not Purt Sweet,” chuckled Billy Long. “Purt’s packed a dinner jacket and a pair of spats. How much other fancy raiment he proposes to spring on us the deponent knoweth not. He’ll be just a scream in the woods.”

“He asked me if there were many dangerous characters lurking in the woods around Lake Dunkirk,” chuckled Lance. “Somebody has been stringing him about outlaws.”

“Short and Long looks guilty,” said Chet, suspiciously. “What you been stuffin’ Purt with, Billy?”

Billy Long, who straddled the piazza rail, swinging his feet, showed his teeth in a broad smile. “You read about that Halliday fellow, didn’t you?” he asked.

“Oh! the chap they say stole the money from that Albany bank?” responded Lance.

“It was securities he stole – and forged people’s names to them so as to get money,” said Laura. “The Lockwood girls’ Aunt Dora lost some money by him.”

“That is – if he did it,” said Chet, doubtfully.

“Well, the newspapers say so,” Jess observed.

“What if they do?” demanded Billy, belligerently. “They all said *I* helped burglarize that department store last summer – didn’t they? And I never did it at all.”

“No. It was another monkey,” chuckled Lance.

The others laughed, for Billy Long had gotten them into serious trouble on the occasion mentioned, and it was long enough in the past now to seem amusing. But Chet added:

“It’s a wonder to me that Norman Halliday had a chance to get hold of all those securities and forge people’s names to them. And he knew just which papers to take. Looks fishy.”

“Well, he ran away, anyhow,” Lance said.

“So did Billy,” Bobby said. “And for the same reason, perhaps. He was scared.”

“My father says,” Chet pursued, “he has his doubts about Halliday’s guilt. He believes he is a catspaw for somebody else.”

“Anyhow,” said Billy, “the papers say he’s gone into the Big Woods south of Lake Dunkirk. And Purt wants to carry a gun to defend himself from outlaws.”

“If he does,” Chet said, seriously, “I’ll see that there are no cartridges in the gun. Huh! I wouldn’t trust Purt Sweet with a pop-gun.”

Bobby, meanwhile, was saying to Laura: “I wonder why Old Dimple was interested enough in that Albany bank robbery to carry around that clipping out of the paper?”

“Maybe he lost money, too,” Laura suggested.

“What’s that about the old Prof?” put in Chet. “Do you know he’s gone out of town already?”

“No!” was the chorus in reply.

“Fact. I saw him with his suitcase this forenoon. He took the boat to Lumberport.”

“Well, as we shall all start in that same direction to-morrow morning, bright and early—”

“Not all of us bright, but presumably early,” put in Bobby, sotto voce.

“Anyway, it’s time we were in bed,” finished Mother Wit. “Off with you all!”

Whether Laura’s advice had a good effect, or not, nobody was really late at the rendezvous the next morning. Prettyman Sweet’s motorboat *Duchess*, a very nice craft, and the larger powerboat belonging to Chet Belding and Lance Darby, named *Bonnie Lass*, were manned by the boys before the girls appeared.

These two boats were large enough to transport both parties of campers, and would likewise tow the flotilla of canoes. The *Duchess* tailed behind it three double canoes belonging to the girls and the *Bonnie Lass* towed five belonging to their boy friends.

It was a fine day and the lake was as blue as the sky – and almost as smooth to look upon. A party of parents and friends came to see the campers start. The girls and Mrs. Morse went aboard the *Bonnie Lass*. Lizzie Bean, with a bulging old-fashioned carpet-bag, appeared in season and joined the girls.

In the bustle of departure not many noticed the odd looking maid. The girls and boys were too busy shouting goodbyes to those ashore, and the crowd ashore was too busy shouting good wishes, or last instructions, to the campers.

Mrs. Pendleton had been driven down to the wharf, early as the hour was, to see her daughter off.

“And be sure to wear your rubbers if it rains, Lily!” the lady shrieked after the departing *Bonnie Lass*.

“Gee!” whispered Bobby, to Jess. “I s’pose somebody’ll have to hold an umbrella over her, too, if it starts to shower.”

CHAPTER VI

PRETTYMAN SWEET MAKES A FRIEND

Lake Luna was a beautiful body of water, all of twenty miles long and half as broad, with Centerport on its southern shore and Lumberport and Keyport situated at either end.

The first named stood at the mouth of Rocky River which fed the great lake, while Keyport was at the head of Rolling River through which Lake Luna discharged its waters.

Centerport was a thriving and rich city of some 150,000 inhabitants, while the other two towns – although much smaller – were likewise thriving business communities. There was considerable traffic on Lake Luna, between the cities named, and up and down the rivers.

Cavern Island was a beautiful resort in the middle of Lake Luna; but man's hand was shown in its landscape gardening and in the pretty buildings and the park at one end.

Acorn Island, in Lake Dunkirk (thirty miles above Lumberport, and connected with Lake Luna by Rocky River) was a very different place. It was heavily timbered and had been held by a private estate for years. Therefore the trees and rubbish had been allowed to grow, and one end of the island, as the girls of Central High knew, was almost a jungle.

But at the eastern end – that nearest the head of Rocky River – was a pleasant grove on a high knoll, where the old cabin stood. There they proposed to camp.

Indeed, Mr. Tom Hargrew, Bobby's father, had been kind enough to send the girls' tents up to the island with the men he had directed to repair the cabin, and the party expected to find the camp pitched, and everything ready for them when they arrived at Acorn Island.

This would scarcely be before dark, for there was some current to Rocky River, although its channel was deep and there were no bridges or other barriers which the powerboats and their tows could not easily pass.

The boys expected to have to rough it at the site of *their* camp for the first night, and they had come prepared for all emergencies of wind and weather.

All, did we say? All but one!

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