

Vandercook Margaret

The Camp Fire Girls on the Field of Honor



Margaret Vandercook

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CHAPTER I

AN OLD HOUSE

There are certain old houses in New York City built of rose-colored brick and white stone which face Washington Square.

On this morning in early winter a light snow covered the ground and clung to the bare branches of the shrubs and trees.

In a drawing-room of one of the old houses a young girl was moving quietly about at work. She was alone and the room was almost entirely dismantled, the pictures having been taken down from the walls, the decorations stored away and the furniture protected by linen covers.

The girl herself was wearing an odd costume, a long frock made like a peasant's smock with an insignia of two crossed logs and a flame embroidered upon one sleeve. With her dark eyes, her dark, rather coarse hair, which she wore parted in the middle over a low forehead, and her white, unusually colorless skin, she suggested a foreigner. Nevertheless, although her mother and father were born in Russia, Vera Lagerloff was not a foreigner. However, at this moment she was talking quietly to herself in a foreign tongue, yet the language she was making an attempt to practice was French and not Russian. Since the entry of the United States into the world war, New York City had been exchanging peoples as well as material supplies with her Allies to so large an extent that *one* language was no longer sufficient even for the requirements of one's own country.

Finally, still reciting her broken sentences almost as if she were rehearsing a part in a play, Vera walked over to a front window and stood gazing expectantly out into the Square as if she were looking for some one.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon and the neighborhood was almost deserted. In the paths beyond the Washington Arch a few children were playing. Now and then an occasional man or woman passed along the street, to vanish into a house or apartment building.

A few taxis and private cars rolled by, but not one made even a pretence of stopping before the rose-colored brick house.

After about five minutes of waiting, sighing and then, smiling at her own folly, the girl turned away and began slowly to climb up the old colonial stairs leading to the second floor.

"When will human beings cease demanding the impossible?" she asked of herself, yet speaking aloud. "I know that Mrs. Burton and Bettina cannot arrive for another half hour, nevertheless I am wasting both time and energy watching for their appearance."

During the past month Vera Lagerloff had been the guest of Mrs. Richard Burton in her New York home. Together they had been closing the house for an indefinite period and making their final arrangements for sailing for France. Within a few days the American Sunrise Camp Fire unit, with Mrs. Burton as their guardian, was to set sail to help with the work of reclamation in the devastated area of France and also to establish the first group of Camp Fire girls ever recognized upon French soil.

Since their summer "Behind the Lines" in southern California, Vera had been studying with these two purposes in mind.

In the front of the house on the second floor Mrs. Burton's private sitting-room was to be left undisturbed until the day of her departure, and it was toward this room Vera was making her way.

Except for the two servants, man and wife, engaged only a short time before, who were presumably busy downstairs, she supposed herself alone.

Now as she approached the sitting-room, through the open door she caught sight of the blue and silver of the walls, a pair of old blue curtains and a tea-table decorated with a tea-service and a blue bowl of yellow jonquils. Then an unlooked-for sensation made the girl pause within a few feet on the far side of the threshold, almost holding her breath, for she had the extraordinary impression that the room she had presumed empty was already occupied.

The next instant Vera discovered that a man was standing in front of a small mahogany desk endeavoring to break into a locked drawer. He had not heard her approach, for he did not turn toward her, nevertheless she immediately recognized the man and the situation. The day before, in order to meet the expenses of the journey to France, Mrs. Burton had drawn a large sum of money from bank, placing it in her desk for safe keeping. To the members of her own household she had made no secret of this, and now one of them was taking advantage of his knowledge.

Vera recognized that she must think and act quickly, or it might be possible that all their hopes and plans for service in France would vanish in one tragic instant.

In the bedroom in the rear of the hall she knew there was a telephone. Yet the moments occupied in having the telephone answered and in calling the police seemed interminable. In far less time surely the thief must have accomplished his design!

Yet naturally after her call had been answered Vera knew she must return to make sure and equally naturally she feared to face the man were he still upstairs.

In the right hand corner of Mrs. Burton's dressing table was a silver mounted pistol. This had been Captain Burton's parting gift to his wife before his own departure for Europe a few weeks before. Vera distinctly remembered her own and Mrs. Burton's nervousness over the gift and Captain Burton's annoyance. They were about to make their home in a devastated country recently occupied by the enemy and yet were afraid of so simple a method of self-protection! Vera had shared in Captain Burton's lecture and in his instructions.

Moreover, ordinarily she was not timid, but instead possessed a singular feminine courage. So an instant later, holding the small pistol partly concealed by her skirt, Vera slipped noiselessly back again into the hall, moving along in the shadow near the wall. Within a few feet of the sitting-room suddenly the thief appeared in the doorway. The next instant, startled by her appearance, he made a headlong rush down the stairs with his purpose too nearly accomplished to think of surrender.

As Vera followed she wondered if, when the thief reached the front door, where he must pause in opening it, would she then have the courage to fire? Much as she desired to secure the stolen money, she felt the instinctive feminine dislike of wounding another human being.

Yet now she discovered that, in spite of having failed to notice the fact on her way upstairs, the front door was not locked. It had been purposely left slightly ajar so that there need be no dangerous delay.

But before the thief actually reached the front door majestically it was flung open. From the outside a voice called "Halt."

Immediately after, instead of a policeman as she anticipated, Vera beheld one of the most singular figures she had ever seen. For the moment, in her excitement and confusion, she could not tell whether the figure was a woman's or a man's. A long arm was thrust forward, then, such was the thief's surprise, that he allowed the stolen pocketbook to be removed from his grasp without opposition.

As Vera regained sufficient equanimity to cover him with her pistol she heard a rich Irish voice unmistakably a woman's, saying:

"Sure, man alive and have you nothing better to do than steal when the world is so hard put for honest soldiers and workmen to carry on her affairs. Now get you away and pray the saints to forgive you, for the next time you'll not be let off so easily."

Glad to take the newcomer at her word, the man vanished. Then before Vera could either move or speak, the surprising visitor marched up to her.

“Put that pistol away, child, and never handle it again, or you will injure yourself! Now take me upstairs to Polly Burton’s sitting-room and make me some tea, for the plain truth is I am famished. I have just arrived in New York from Boston, and travel in war times certainly has its drawbacks. But if you will wait I’ll first bring my suitcase inside the hall until we feel more like carrying it upstairs.”

Before Vera could offer her assistance a shabby suitcase was brought indoors.

Immediately after she found herself, not leading the way, but following the unexpected intruder to the second floor. Evidently the elderly woman was familiar with the house, for she made her way directly to the sitting-room and, seating herself upon the divan, began untying her bonnet strings.

In spite of her own confusion and excitement and the visitor’s surprising appearance, Vera believed herself in the presence of an important personage. She understood this, notwithstanding the fact that the woman’s costume was conspicuously shabby and she herself extremely plain.

The bonnet which she removed without waiting to be asked followed a fashion of about a quarter of a century before. When her traveling coat had been laid aside the black dress underneath was almost equally old-fashioned in design.

“Here, child, please take this money and hide it in the same place, or find a safer one,” she announced. “Yet it may be just as well not to mention the robbery to Polly Burton. She is sure to need more strength than she possesses to be able to start on this perilous journey to France almost at the beginning of winter, with only you foolish children as her companions. Besides, I presume Polly left the money in the most conspicuous place in the house; she never has learned not to trust the entire world. I allowed the thief to escape so we need give no further time to him. But tell me the whole story—who are you, how did the man get into the house and why are you here alone?”

At last, in the first opportunity which had been vouchsafed her, Vera endeavored to explain what had occurred. As she spoke she could feel herself being observed with the keenest, most searching scrutiny. Yet for some reason, although never having heard the name or seen her companion before, she had no thought of disputing her visitor’s right to whatever information she desired. The dark eyes in the weather-beaten old face were wise and kind; the manner belonged to a woman accustomed to being obeyed.

Later Vera and her guest made a careful tour of the lower part of the house. Of course the cook had vanished soon after her husband. But they were downstairs in time to meet the police when they finally made their appearance.

Vera opened the door, yet she stood aside to hear her companion announce.

“You can go away again. No, we have no need of you, the telephone call was a mistake.”

Finally when the police had disappeared without requiring a great deal of persuasion, for the second time Vera followed her unknown companion upstairs.

“You understand, child, it would have been the greatest interruption to our present plans if I had not permitted the thief to escape. Some one would have had to appear in court and doubtless Polly Burton would have had newspaper reporters coming to the house at all hours. They would have liked a story in which a woman of her prominence played a part.”

Fifteen minutes later, having presented the unexpected guest with the tea she had requested, Vera was sitting beside the tea table waiting to satisfy her further needs, when she caught the sound of a key being turned in the lock of the front door downstairs and the next instant Mrs. Burton’s voice, followed by Bettina Graham’s, calling for her.

With a hurried apology and really fearful that her autocratic companion might attempt to detain her, Vera ran out of the room.

Over the banisters she could see Bettina Graham, who had just arrived from Washington, and Mrs. Burton, who had gone down to the Pennsylvania station to meet her.

Standing near Bettina was a girl whom Vera had never seen before.

As soon as she joined them Bettina introduced her explaining:

“Vera, this is Mary Gilchrist, who is going abroad to drive a motor in France. She had no friends with whom she could cross, and as we were intending to sail on the same steamer, I suggested when we met in Washington the other day that she might like to join our Camp Fire unit. At the depot I introduced her to Tante, who of course insisted that she come home with us rather than stay in a hotel alone.”

During this conversation, Mrs. Richard Burton, the Sunrise Camp Fire guardian of former days, having passed by the group of girls, was making her way upstairs alone. She had moved so quickly that, in her effort to be polite to Bettina’s new friend, Vera had no opportunity to mention the presence of another stranger in the house. When she did murmur something, Mrs. Burton did not hear.

Reaching her own sitting-room she gazed uncertainly for half an instant at the tall figure on the divan, who, having poured herself another cup of tea, was now engaged in drinking it. The next she clasped her hands together and with a manner suggesting both nervousness and apology, began.

“Aunt Patricia, please don’t say you have come to argue with me about taking my group of Sunrise Camp Fire girls to work with me in the devastated area of France. It is really too late now to interfere. I was finally able to secure my husband’s permission.”

Miss Patricia Lord carefully set down her tea-cup.

“Come and kiss me, Polly Burton, and tell me you are glad to see me. I don’t like your fashion of greeting an unexpected guest. But there—you look tired out from too much responsibility before it is time to set sail! As a matter of fact, I have not come to try to *prevent* your going to France. Has anybody ever made you give up anything you had firmly set your heart upon? But, mavourneen, I have come to go with you. Do you suppose for a moment, after receiving yours and Richard’s letters telling me of your plans, that I dreamed of allowing you to undertake such a project as you have in mind alone? Why, you won’t be able to look after yourself properly, to say nothing of more than half a dozen young girls! I am told there are eight hundred and forty thousand homeless people in the devastated districts of France at the present time and I cannot understand why you wish to add to the number. But as you will go, well, I am determined to go with you.”

A moment later, seated close beside the older woman, Mrs. Burton had slipped an arm inside hers and was holding it close.

“Oh, Aunt Patricia, I am so relieved,” she murmured. “I have not confided this fact to any one before, but sometimes I have been so nervous over the prospect of looking after my group of Camp Fire girls in France that I have wanted to run away and hide where no one could ever discover me. Of course I am not afraid of disaster for myself, Richard is in France and then nothing ever happens to me! Besides, no one has a right to think of oneself at present. But to be responsible to so many mothers for the safety of their beloved daughters! I rise up each morning feeling that my hair must have turned white in the night from the very thought. But if you are with me, why, I will not worry! Still I don’t see just how you can arrange to sail with us; perhaps you can manage to cross later, but our passage has been engaged for weeks and – ”

Miss Patricia Lord arose and walked over to the tea table, where she devoted her energy to pouring her hostess a cup of tea.

“You need not trouble about *my* arrangements, Polly. I secured my ticket on the steamer upon which you are to sail some time ago and also my passport. I sent my trunk directly to the boat. Of course I am taking but few clothes with me, as a matter of fact, I have all I shall require in my suitcase downstairs. But later there will be many things necessary for our housekeeping in France of which you may not have thought.”

CHAPTER II

EXPLANATIONS

“Bettina, who on earth is Miss Patricia Lord? A more formidable lady I never imagined!”

Sitting before a fire in their bedroom, which they had chosen to share so as to be able to talk for as long a time as they wished before retiring, were the two Sunrise Camp Fire girls, Bettina Graham and Vera Lagerloff. Both girls had changed conspicuously in manner and appearance since the summer before when they had been in camp together “Behind the Lines” in southern California. However, there comes a day in every girl’s life when with entire suddenness she seems to understand and accept the revelation of her womanhood.

To Bettina Graham had been given an added social experience. During the past few months, without being formally introduced into society, nevertheless she had been assisting her mother in receiving in their home in Washington. In spite of the fact that there had been but little entertaining on a large scale because of the war, Bettina had gone to occasional dinners and small dances, and on account of her father’s prominence and her mother’s popularity, had shared in the best opportunities. Moreover, Washington had never been so crowded with interesting men and women, and yet scarcely a day passed when Bettina did not whisper to herself that nothing could make her enjoy a conventional society existence. It was only because of the universal absorption in the war at the present time that society had become more endurable. But to continue the life indefinitely demanded an impossible sacrifice.

One afternoon in late fall Bettina and her father, Senator Graham, in an hour of mutual confidence, imparted the information to each other that they regarded themselves as social failures.

“You see, Bettina, my dear, I was not to the manner born in this social game and had no one to teach me until I married your mother,” Senator Graham announced with a certain embarrassment. “Indeed, I never had entered a drawing-room until I was a grown man and then had not the faintest idea how the confounded thing should be done. You don’t think you could have inherited a social awkwardness from me?”

Then, fearing to have wounded his daughter’s feelings Senator Graham added quickly: “I don’t mean that you have not charming manners, little Betty, as charming as any in the world aside from your mother’s. And personally I have not seen a prettier girl in Washington or elsewhere. But if you really are unhappy among strangers and would like to go to France with your old friends to help with the work over there, why, I will try to see how matters can be arranged. I don’t think I would speak of your idea to your mother, not just at present, as there is no point in worrying her.”

In answer Bettina had laughed and promised. Always she was touched by her father’s use of her old childhood name now that she had become nearly as tall as he himself was.

“But, father, don’t think I mind sharing a social disability with you. I am afraid my infirmity goes somewhat deeper,” Bettina answered. “As a matter of fact, I heard one of mother’s friends say the other day that there was no more brilliant or agreeable man in Washington society than Senator Graham, once he could be persuaded to throw aside his social hauteur and condescend to ordinary mortals,” she continued, imitating the visitor’s voice and manner, to the Senator’s deep amusement.

“But of course I won’t annoy mother until I am sure our Camp Fire unit has a real chance of being accepted for the work in France. It is hard upon mother to have had Tony inherit all the family beauty and charm. However, he will make up to her some day for my failures!”

Bettina was doing herself an injustice. In reality she was unusually handsome and as she grew older her tall stateliness increased her distinction. Tonight she looked especially attractive as she sat braiding her long yellow hair into two heavy plaits, with a blue corduroy dressing gown worn over her night-dress.

“Aunt Patricia? It is odd, Vera, you have never heard her name mentioned! Yet I confess my personal acquaintance with Aunt Patricia also began this afternoon, although I have known of her for a long time and my mother is one of her great friends.

“Years ago when Tante was first married Aunt Patricia arrived in this country from Ireland, and as she seemed to be frightfully poor she secured a position at the theatre as wardrobe woman. Right away she adopted Tante and Uncle Richard and they have been devoted to one another ever since. Later on Aunt Patricia’s brother died, leaving her an enormous fortune. Then it developed that she had come to this country from Ireland because he had sent for her and afterwards had refused to live with him or accept a cent of his money because he would not do what she wished, or because for some reason or other she disapproved of him.

“After Aunt Patricia inherited the money she has spent as little as possible for her own needs, but instead gives away large sums in eccentric fashions which appeal to her. Nevertheless I confess I am not happy over the prospect of her going to France to be with us, although Tante seems immensely relieved to have her companionship and our families will be glad to know she will not have to bear so much responsibility alone. It is a good deal of a task to look after seven or eight girls.”

Vera frowned somewhat ruefully.

“But I thought we were going to France to care for other people not to be looked after ourselves. However, if Miss Lord’s behavior this afternoon is a fair criterion I shall certainly become as a little child. For the entire time we were together I don’t think I dared do anything except what she commanded. But isn’t it wonderful that our entire Camp Fire unit is to go to France for the reclamation work? I thought when Mrs. Burton offered me the opportunity last summer that I should go alone.”

Within the past months Vera Lagerloff had also changed, but the transformation was unlike Bettina Graham’s.

After Billy Webster’s death in California Vera had made astonishingly little open protest. But for that reason the effect upon her character had been the deeper.

Since her earliest childhood there had been but little in her life for which she cared intensely, save her friendship with the odd dreaming boy, whose ambitions for his own future had absorbed so much of her time and thought. Until Billy died Vera really had never considered her own future apart from his.

In many ways she was superior to the members of her own family, which in itself makes for a certain spiritual loneliness. Yet her parents were Russians, and Russia is at present offering more contradictions in human nature than any other race of people in the world. However, if her parents were peasants and had but little education, they had possessed sufficient courage to emigrate to the United States at a time when the Czar and autocracy ruled in their own land. Afterwards Vera’s father had become a small farmer on Mr. Webster’s large place, and here Vera and Billy had grown up together.

But at least Vera’s family made no effort to interfere with her. The other children appeared content to follow in the ways of their ancestors, living with and by the land. In a measure they were proud that Vera cared for books and people who could never be their friends. Yet perhaps Vera’s character had been largely influenced by her one singular friendship.

Now it remained to be seen what she could accomplish with her own life uninspired by a dominating affection.

She was an unusual looking girl, and not handsome according to Anglo-Saxon standards. She was tall and ruggedly built, with broad shoulders and hips, indicating strength more than grace. Her heavy dark hair, growing low over her forehead, had a unique quality of vitality. Her nose and mouth were both a little heavy, although her mouth gave promise of future beauty, and she had the fine Slavic eyes with the slight slant.

Vera and Bettina afforded a marked contrast. The one girl, whatever her brilliant father might say of his antecedents, showed only the evidences of high breeding, both its charm and limitations.

Yet, thinking more deeply, was not after all Vera's the older ancestry since the first men and women must have been those who lived nearest to nature?

At this moment, when the one girl finished speaking, leaning over Bettina rested her chin in her slender hand. She had not seen Vera for some time and was now trying to discover in her companion's face what she knew would never be confided to her, to what extent Vera had recovered from her sorrow over Billy Webster's death.

But instead of speaking of this, Bettina continued:

"Yes, it is extraordinary that our entire Camp Fire unit is so soon to cross over to France. I only wish the rest of us were as well prepared for the work as you are, Vera. You have been studying cooking and the care of children, besides the first aid and the farm work, which you must have known already? I was able to find time for only a short period of intensive study. Yet fortunately I know a good deal of French. Ever since I was a tiny child I have been speaking French and certainly I am familiar with our Camp Fire training and ideals. I only learned recently that, although there are organizations similar to our Camp Fire in England, China, Japan and Australia, there is none in France. Is it not a wonderful thing that we are to be the pioneers of the Camp Fire movement in France? Don't you feel that if we can arouse sufficient enthusiasm among the French girls to induce them to form a national organization it will bring American and French girls into closer touch with each other?

"Do you know, Vera, so many times in the past year I have heard prominent men in Washington declare that the French, British, Italians and Americans, having fought together on common ground for a common ideal, can never in the future be anything but brothers in spirit. Yet never once have I heard any one speak of the same need for intimate association among the women of the different nations. Why is this not equally important? The women of the future must also acquire something of the new international spirit, must also learn to work and play together. I think our Camp Fire embodies all these inspiring principles and ideas for girls, and so I hope our work in France may be the beginning of an international Camp Fire organization all over the world."

Vera Lagerloff, who had apparently been watching the flickering yellow and rose flames in their tiny fire while Bettina talked, now looked toward her and smiled.

"Be careful, Bettina, you are a dreamer. Remember, the world has room for but a few dreamers. I suppose that is why Billy went away. After all, you know it is the small, hard sacrifices that are required of women and girls in time of war."

Then getting up, Vera began walking up and down the room as if finding relief in action.

"By the way, Bettina, have you heard the latest news from Gerry Williams?—oh, I should have said Gerry Morris, I forgot her married name." Vera went on, apparently desiring to change the subject: "She hopes to see us after we reach our headquarters in France, if she and her father-in-law are not too far away. I have sometimes wondered if Mr. Morris did not give the money he had recently inherited to help with the restoration work in France as a thank offering because Felipe was required to serve only a short sentence for having tried to escape the draft? Soon after he was permitted to enlist. Mr. Morris and Gerry are living in one of the tiny ruined villages, assisting the old men and women and children to rebuild their little homes."

Bettina frowned, hardly aware that her expression had become slightly skeptical.

"Yes, I was told that Gerry had sailed with her father-in-law, although so far as I know Felipe is still in an American training camp," Bettina replied. "But, Vera, I am not yet an enthusiast over Gerry. However, as we have never liked each other, perhaps I am not fair. I do not believe that people's natures ever entirely change, even if circumstances do affect one for a time. So I shall have to behold the miracle of a transformed Gerry before I am convinced of the change I am told has taken place in her."

At this instant Bettina suddenly ceased speaking because a faint knock had just sounded on their bedroom door.

When Vera opened the door another girl stood outside. She was small and dark and had an upward tilt to her nose and indeed to her entire face.

“I know this is the hour for confidences and so I won’t interrupt you long,” she began. “Only I thought it might be just as well if I present you with a short outline of my history. Miss Graham was kind enough to allow me to travel to Washington with her after meeting me at the home of a mutual friend. She does not know much about me, so I think she is especially kind. But perhaps we girls are beginning to take one another more for granted! As a matter of fact, my name is Mary Gilchrist, although I am usually called ‘Gill’ by my friends, because my father insists I am so small I represent the smallest possible measure. I have no mother and have spent all my life with my father on our big Wheat ranch in Kansas. I suppose I should have been a boy, because I adore machinery and have been driving a car for years, even before the law would have permitted me to drive one. Of course I only motored over our ranch at first. Now I am hoping I can be useful in France. For the last few years I have been able to manage a tractor for the plowing and harvesting of our fields. My father has given me my own motor to take to France. He said he could do nothing less, since he had no son to devote to his country’s service and, as he was too old to fight himself, felt he could do his best work in increasing our output of wheat. But I did not intend saying so much about myself, only to thank you and Mrs. Burton for agreeing to allow me to make the crossing with you. I shall try not to be a nuisance. Good-night.”

Then actually before Vera or Bettina could reply the other girl vanished. Yet she left behind her an affect of energy and warmth, her glowing, piquant face, the red lights in her brown hair, even the freckles on her clear, lightly tanned skin gave one the impression that courage and action were essential traits of her character.

After she had gone Vera smiled.

“Well Bettina, I believe your new friend is original, whatever else she may be.”

And Bettina nodded in agreement.

CHAPTER III

“A LONG TIME GOING OVER THERE”

In a week Mrs. Burton and the Sunrise Camp Fire unit sailed from a port somewhere in the United States to a port somewhere in France. Not only were they accompanied by Miss Patricia Lord, but apparently they were led by her. Whenever any information had to be imparted it was always Miss Patricia who gave it and she also appeared to settle all questions and all disputes. Under ordinary circumstances the Camp Fire girls would have been annoyed, but at present they were too absorbed in a hundred interests and as many emotions to be more than vaguely aware of Miss Patricia's existence.

Mrs. Burton, in spite of finding her own position frequently usurped and her opinions regarded as of small value, nevertheless from the moment of leaving New York felt a sensation of gratitude each time she glanced at Aunt Patricia's homely and uncompromising countenance. In time past they had weathered many storms together; if there were storms ahead Miss Patricia could be counted upon to remain firm as the Rock of Gibraltar. Difficult and domineering, yet behind her brusqueness there was great good sense. Moreover, Mrs. Burton knew that Miss Patricia possessed the gift of kindness which is the rarest of human qualities. The Irish humor was there also, although now and then it might be hidden out of sight and only used by Miss Patricia as she used her Irish brogue in moments of special stress.

Conscious that her group of Camp Fire girls was not pleased by the addition of a new member to their party, Mrs. Burton hoped in time they might come to appreciate Miss Patricia's real value, although she made no effort to propitiate them at the start.

The leave-taking these days is perhaps the hardest portion of the journey to France. One must say farewell with apparent cheerfulness to one's family and friends, assuming that whatever dangers may lie in wait for other people, for you there can be only plain sailing, since this is the gallant spirit these tragic times demand. But for the Camp Fire girls there was also a certain fear that they might find themselves unfit for the service they wished to offer. However, there was no faltering and no regret, but only tremendous inspiration in the knowledge that they were to be the first American Camp Fire girls to enter France upon a special mission and with a special message to French girls.

Of the date or the port from which passenger vessels sail these days there is no published record. It is enough to state that the Camp Fire party sailed one morning in the early winter a little before noon from a small harbor south of New York City. The morning had been cold and rainy and the fog lay thick upon the water many miles from the land.

In spite of the fact that their vessel was to form one of a convoy of a dozen ships, each boat left port at a different hour, to meet further out at sea.

Soon after their own sailing, Mrs. Burton retired to her state-room. Aunt Patricia and the Camp Fire girls insisted upon remaining on deck for an indefinite length of time.

At what point the United States considers her ships have entered the danger zone on this side of the Atlantic only persons who have lately crossed to the other side can know.

When this hour arrived the Camp Fire girls were standing close together, although separated into small groups. Peggy Webster, Vera Lagerloff and Bettina Graham were talking to one another; Sally Ashton and Alice Ashton stood a short distance off with their arms about each other, drawn together only in moments of excitement. Within a few feet Marta Clark was beside Mary Gilchrist, with Aunt Patricia not far away, but apparently paying no attention to any of them.

In truth, it was Aunt Patricia who gave the first signal. The ships which until now had been at some distance apart were deliberately forming into the position necessary for their convoy. It was almost as if they were making ready for a naval attack; the boats slowed down, mysterious whistles were blown, signals were run up.

An hour or so later and the entire convoy, guarded by United States torpedo destroyers, were steaming rapidly ahead.

Bettina Graham was leaning over the ship's railing looking toward the western line of the horizon through a pair of long-distance glasses. In another moment she offered the glasses to Vera.

"I wonder if you can see the destroyers more distinctly than I can manage, Vera? The fog is so heavy and the boats are so nearly the same color. No wonder they are known as the 'gray watch-dogs of the sea!' I suppose one should feel safer because we are so surrounded, and yet in a way I am more nervous. Certainly the destroyers do not allow one to forget the reason for their presence, and I really had not thought a great deal of our danger from submarines until they appeared."

For a few seconds as she stared through the glasses Vera made no reply.

As she turned to present the glasses to Peggy, Vera shook her head.

"Then I am a better American than you are, Bettina, because I most assuredly do not feel as you do. Our guard of destroyers gives me an almost perfect sense of security. It may be absurd of course and a kind of jingoism, but I do not consider that we can possibly come to grief, protected by our own navy."

As they stood thus close together the Camp Fire girls were wearing the uniforms which had been especially designed for their trip abroad.

Their ordinary Camp Fire outfit was of course not suitable; nevertheless the new costumes had been made to follow as closely as possible the idea and the model of the old. For military reasons they had chosen a darker shade of brown than the ordinary khaki color. At present over their serviceable brown serge traveling dresses they wore long coats of a golden brown cloth made with adjustable capes to conform with the changes of climate. The only suggestion of the Camp Fire was the insignia of the crossed logs with the ascending flames embroidered upon one sleeve. Their hats were of soft brown felt.

In spite of the variety of striking and interesting uniforms on board ship, already the Camp Fire girls had excited a good deal of quiet attention. However, this may not have been due to their uniforms alone. As a matter of fact, they were younger than the other passengers and many persons were curious with regard to the work they were planning to undertake in France.

Sailing upon the same vessel there chanced to be a Red Cross unit of twenty other girls who were to do canteen work among the French and American soldiers. But except for one conspicuous exception, this unit of girls was noticeably older.

This made the one girl appear rather an outsider; moreover, the Camp Fire girls learned that she was not an American girl, but a French girl returning to her own country.

There were no passengers on the ship who were not sailing to France for urgent reasons and for reasons which the United States government considered of sufficient importance to permit of their crossing.

There were a number of business men whose affairs were not only of importance to themselves, but to the Allied interests as well. There was a medical unit with a staff of doctors, nurses and assistants, three or four newspaper and magazine men, one well-known woman writer. But the most distinguished among the travelers were several returning Frenchmen who had been in the United States upon a special mission.

CHAPTER IV

CHAPERONING THE CHAPERON

One afternoon about midway in the voyage across the Atlantic, Mrs. Burton was seated upon the upper deck in her steamer chair enveloped in a fur rug and a fur coat. A small sealskin turban completely covered her hair, so only her face was revealed, her brilliant blue eyes, long slender nose and chin, and her cheeks upon which two spots of color were glowing.

She was talking in French with a great deal of animation to a man who sat beside her. From his manner and appearance and also from his pronunciation it was self-evident that he was a Frenchman. Moreover, he revealed a certain intellectual distinction typically French. Monsieur Georges Duval was of middle age with clear-cut, aristocratic features, keen dark eyes and iron-gray hair. In comparison with him Mrs. Burton looked like a girl.

It was just before tea time and the deck was crowded with the ship's passengers. Since no lights were permitted after dark, it was necessary to enjoy all the daylight possible out of doors. This afternoon was clear and lovely, with a serene blue sky and sea.

A number of the Camp Fire girls were strolling about talking to new acquaintances. But if Mrs. Burton had any knowledge of their presence she gave no sign, being too deeply interested in her conversation with her present companion.

"You are extremely kind, Monsieur, and I am most happy to receive any advice you can give me. Later on I shall probably ask for your aid as well. Now and then I have wondered if in coming to France to offer our services to your country many American women may not prove more of a burden than a help. I hope this may not be true of me or of my companions. We intend to settle down somewhere in one of the devastated districts and do whatever we can to be useful. But chiefly the group of girls I have with me want to offer their services to French girls. I have so often thought, Monsieur, that perhaps the greatest problem of the future rests with the young girls of the present day. When the war is over it will be their task to care for the wounded men and for many others whom these long years of warfare will have made unfit for work. More than this, there will be so many of these girls who can never have husbands or children. Our Camp Fire organization in the United States has a special message for the women of the future. But I must not bore you with this when you have so many matters of more importance to hold your attention."

Monsieur Duval shook his head.

"You are not boring me, Madame. You could not do that, but in any case remember you are talking to a Frenchman about the women of his own country. Sometimes I think we Frenchmen confuse our women and our country; to us they are so much one and the same thing. When we fight for France, we are fighting for our women, when we fight to protect our women we are fighting to save France. I do not believe the world half realizes what great burdens the French women bore after the Franco-Prussian war, only forty years ago, not only in working shoulder to shoulder with their men, but by inspiring them after a bitter and cruel defeat. The courage, the steadfastness which France has revealed in the four long years of this present war is one way in which we have tried to pay our immense debt to them."

Unable to reply because of the tears which she made no effort to conceal, Mrs. Burton remained silent for a few moments. When she finally spoke it was with a kind of diffidence:

"Monsieur Duval, has it ever occurred to you how strange it is that, aside from our American Revolution, most of the great modern wars for democracy have been fought upon French soil? I have thought of this many times and sorrowed over what seems the injustice to your race. Forgive me if I appear too fanciful! Recently I have recognized why France always is represented by the symbolic figure of a woman. She has endured the birth of the world's freedom inside her body and her soul."

In Mrs. Burton's speech there was perhaps nothing original, but always there was the old thrilling beautiful quality to her voice which stirred her audience, whether large or small.

Monsieur Duval did not attempt to hide both his admiration and interest in his companion. The second day out at sea they had been introduced to each other by Mrs. Bishop, the woman novelist, with whom Mrs. Burton had a slight acquaintance in New York City. Indeed, they had met only upon one occasion, but on shipboard one is apt to renew acquaintances which one would have considered of no special interest at other times.

Since their original meeting Mrs. Burton and the French commissioner, whom she had discovered to be a member of the French senate as well, had spent several hours each day in talking together. There were many subjects in which they were both interested, although of course the war absorbed the greater part of their thought.

"I only hope France may prove worthy of the sympathy and aid your country pours out upon her so generously. But I think when you reach France you will have no reason to complain of her lack of gratitude," the Frenchman answered.

"Of course our cause at present is a common one and our soldiers are fighting as brothers. But long before your men fought with ours, you American women were rendering us every possible service. Please be sure if I can be of the least assistance to you in making your plans for work in France I shall be more than happy. In spite of all our conversations you never have told me definitely what it is you intend doing."

Mrs. Burton smiled. A cool breeze was blowing in from the sea so that she hid herself closer inside her rug.

"Just a moment then, Monsieur Duval, I will talk of our plans and then we must discuss something frivolous. Every morning as I waken I make up my mind not to speak of the war for at least a few hours, but somehow I never manage to keep my promise to myself. We intend undertaking a certain amount of reclamation work in one of the ruined French villages. Our present scheme is first to find an old farm house and establish ourselves there in order to make a home where our neighbors can come to us as they will. My Camp Fire girls thus hope to form friendships with the French girls and later to induce them to become interested in our Camp Fire ideas.

"You may be amused, Monsieur Duval, but another thing we intend is to teach the French women and girls to make corn bread, so as to help in the wheat conservation. I was told by a woman in Washington, who had just come back from the devastated regions, that this would be a real service to France, if once we could persuade the French people to our use of corn. The Indians taught us. As our Camp Fire is more or less modeled upon their institutions, we hope to carry on the Indian message of the corn. But enough of this; you have been kind to listen to me so long."

Monsieur Duval shook his head courteously.

"What you say is interesting and worth while, Madame, but I have an idea that you need not personally give all of your own time to these efforts. These matters your companions and other women may be able to accomplish with equal success. But you, you probably will find more important work to do in France. Perhaps you will allow me to see you later. I do not wish our acquaintance to end with our voyage, and it may be I can persuade you to additional tasks. But in any case I hope you will talk personally with many of my country people, men and women; there is no one so well adapted to make our nations understand each other as a gifted and charming American woman. I have many friends in Paris and before you leave I trust I may be allowed the privilege of presenting at least a few of them to you."

Feeling agreeably flattered, as any woman is flattered by the homage of a clever man, Mrs. Burton was about to reply, when suddenly the tall figure of Miss Patricia Lord appeared, rising before her like a pillar of darkness.

She gave Monsieur Duval a curt nod; except for this she made no explanation of her presence, continuing standing until the courteous Frenchman felt constrained to offer her his chair.

However, not until he had walked away did she condescend to accept his place and then she managed to sit perfectly upright, which is a *difficult* feat in a reclining chair.

“What is the matter, Aunt Patricia?” Mrs. Burton at once demanded, feeling suddenly disturbed by Miss Patricia’s severe expression. “Surely nothing has happened to any one of the Camp Fire girls! I think I have noticed nearly all of them strolling about on deck in the past half hour.”

Gloomily Miss Patricia frowned. “I am not here to discuss with you the girls whom you are suppose to be chaperoning. I wish to speak of your conduct, Polly Burton. I have been considering the subject for the past twenty-four hours. Under the circumstances you might as well know *first as last* that I do not approve of your present intimacy with this unknown Frenchman, this *Mr. Duval*.” Miss Patricia scorned the use of the French title. “I have no idea of attempting to pronounce the foolish word the French employ for plain ‘Mister.’ However, you realize perfectly well that from the day following our sailing you have spent the greater part of your time in his society. Sorry as I am to speak of this, my respect for your husband compels me to warn you – ”

Here Aunt Patricia was interrupted by an explosion of laughter as fresh and ingenuous as a girl’s.

“My dear Aunt Patricia, really I beg your pardon, but I supposed you were coming with me to France to help me chaperon my Camp Fire girls! I never dreamed of your also feeling obliged to chaperon me. Remember, I am pretty old and never was particularly fascinating, even as a girl. I am afraid you will have a hard time to persuade my husband to jealousy. Richard is the fascinating member of our family! As a matter of fact, I have simply been boring Monsieur Duval for the past hour by discussing our plan of campaign after we reach France. You don’t consider the subject a dangerous one?”

But neither Miss Patricia’s face nor figure relaxed.

“I may not be original, Polly Burton; as a matter of fact, I have no idea that you *said* anything of the least importance to your Frenchman. With you it is the old story; it is not *what* you say, but the *way* you say it. I have been watching you and you may pretend to have noticed the Camp Fire girls. However, if you tell the truth, you have not been aware of anything or anybody except Mr. Duval during the entire afternoon.”

At this moment Miss Patricia appeared so annoyed and suspicious that it was difficult for Mrs. Burton to decide whether she were the more amused or irritated. However, it made no difference; either attitude would be entirely lost upon Miss Patricia Lord.

“I am sorry you don’t approve of me,” Mrs. Burton returned with a pretence of meekness, yet dropping her eyelids to conceal the expression of her eyes.

“It is not that I do not approve of you, Polly, for I so seldom do that,” Aunt Patricia replied. “It is that I also feel it *my duty* to recall you to *your* duty. You speak of having lately observed the Camp Fire girls wandering about near you. I feel it an effort to believe this because only a short time ago, while undoubtedly you were enjoying yourself with a foreigner concerning whom you know absolutely nothing, I discovered Sally Ashton seated upon a coil of rope in an obscure portion of this vessel, flirting outrageously with a young American physician. Your niece, Peggy Webster, is walking up and down the lower deck with a French officer; lower deck not the upper, mind you, where she might have been seen by you, although I doubt it. The other girls are – ”

By this time Mrs. Burton had become seriously annoyed. She was obliged to remember, of course, that Miss Patricia was a much older woman, yet, nevertheless her eyes darkened and her color deepened a little ominously.

“Please Aunt Patricia, you are making a mistake,” she began warmly. “I am not in the habit of spying upon my Camp Fire girls and I am sure you will never find such a proceeding necessary.”

Then, ashamed of the word she had employed, she continued more gently.

“So you have been making a tour of investigation because you considered that I was neglecting my duty? All I can say, Aunt Patricia, is that you will always discover Sally Ashton flirting if there is an agreeable man in sight. I cannot make up my mind whether or not Sally is unconscious, yet

flirting with her is either an instinct, an art, or both. However, every man who sees her immediately succumbs. But as for Peggy, Peggy is an absolutely trustworthy person! Did I not tell you that Peggy considers herself engaged to Ralph Marshall, who is in the aviation service in France at the present time? None of Peggy's family will acknowledge her engagement; we feel she is too young, yet Ralph's parents are old friends of my sister and brother-in-law. After a time I am sure you will understand the Camp Fire Girls better."

There was undeniably a tone of condescension in Mrs. Burton's voice, and Aunt Patricia sniffed.

"I understand the girls as well as I consider necessary, Polly Burton, and probably better than you do. I have always insisted that you have little knowledge of human nature. As for thinking that a girl of Peggy's age, with almost no experience of life, can have any idea of the character of man she could or should marry – "

But here, realizing that Miss Patricia was mounted upon one of her favorite hobbies and that nothing she could say or do would stop her, Mrs. Burton, pretending to offer a polite attention, in reality allowed her mind to wander.

Miss Patricia was usually antagonistic to all male persons safely past their babyhood. Among her friends it was an open question whether Aunt Patricia had been jilted at an early age, or whether she had never condescended to an admirer.

"All men are idiots," is what she had been known to remark when hard pressed.

Gradually Mrs. Burton allowed herself to slip back in her chair, resting her head more comfortably against a brown velvet cushion.

It was strange that she had felt so little fear of the submarine menace during the present voyage, when she had expected to be fearful the entire way across. There were odd moments at night when one could not sleep, thinking of the possible, even the probable danger that might manifest itself at any moment. But aside from obeying the ship's rules with regard to life belts and lights, the keeping of one's state-room door unlatched, what was there to do save trust in a higher power?

Actually at this moment Mrs. Burton, while presumably listening, was deciding that she was enjoying the very crossing to France she had so much dreaded.

It would never do to shock Aunt Patricia, yet in a number of years she had not met so agreeable a man as the French senator. Moreover, she was entertained by the opportunity to form a new and stimulating intimacy with a clever woman. Mrs. Bishop, known to her public as Georgianna Bishop, having written several successful novels, was at present traveling to Europe to write of the American soldiers life in the trenches.

In spite of the fact that Miss Patricia seemed also to regard Mrs. Bishop with disfavor, Mrs. Burton had invited her to spend a part of her time in France with them, if it could possibly be arranged.

At this moment, if Miss Patricia would only stop talking, Mrs. Burton believed that she would like to have Mrs. Bishop sit beside her during the hour of afternoon tea.

Tea would be served in a few moments. Perhaps, if Miss Patricia would decide to move, one of the Camp Fire girls would appear to act as messenger and find Mrs. Bishop.

With this thought in mind, glancing carelessly up and down the deck, Mrs. Burton discovered Vera Lagerloff and Bettina Graham coming hurriedly toward her. What was more surprising, they were accompanied by the new friend with whom she had been talking a few moments before.

Both girls looked so white and frightened that Mrs. Burton, making a hasty movement in attempting to jump up from her chair, found herself entangled in her steamer rug.

As Monsieur Duval endeavored to extricate her, he said quietly:

"I hope we have not alarmed you, but a most unfortunate accident has just occurred on board ship, which I hope may not develop into a tragedy. A young French girl, traveling with the American Red Cross unit, is supposed to have attempted to take her own life. I am by no means sure of this, she may be ill and have fainted from some cause. I was sent for, I presume because of my nationality, then some one suggested you."

But before Monsieur Duval had more than finished speaking, Mrs. Burton was hurrying away, accompanied by Bettina and Vera.

“I really do not know how to explain what has happened,” Bettina continued. “You remember the French girl we have noticed because she appeared so much younger than the other members of her Red Cross unit? It seems that at the beginning of the war all her people were killed and her home in France destroyed, so that she is now entirely alone. She was living with friends in the United States, but suddenly decided that she wished to return to France. Unexpectedly she must have lost her courage. However, all Vera and I really know is what one of the other Red Cross girls told us, asking us to tell no one else.”

By the end of Bettina’s speech, Mrs. Burton and the two girls had left the deck, and Vera was leading the way down one of the narrow corridors bordered on either side by small state-rooms.

At the door of one of the rooms a woman in the uniform of a Red Cross nurse, after making a little motion to command silence, stepped quietly out.

“There is nothing serious the matter, Mrs. Burton. It was hardly worth while to disturb you. At present the young French girl who was crossing with us to her former home is suffering from an attack of hysteria. As I have not been able to quiet her and as you are here, perhaps you will come and see what you can do.”

Then she turned to Vera and Bettina.

“If there is any other story of what has occurred being told on board ship, will you please do your best to contradict it? A ship is a hopeless place for gossip. However, I am afraid Yvonne will scarcely be fit for the work our Red Cross unit expects to undertake. I must find some one to befriend the child after we reach Paris.”

Bettina and Vera moved away, followed by the older woman.

At the same instant Mrs. Burton, entering the half open door of the state-room, discovered a young girl of about seventeen or eighteen, with large brown eyes and fair hair, lying huddled on the bed. She was not crying, yet instantly put up her hands before her face as if to escape observation.

Mrs. Burton sat down on the edge of the berth beside her.

CHAPTER V

THE CONFESSION

“Don’t talk if you prefer not; perhaps you may be able to sleep after a little if I sit here beside you,” Mrs. Burton said gently.

“But I would prefer to be alone,” the young French girl answered, speaking English with a pretty foreign accent.

Instantly Mrs. Burton rose, intending to leave the tiny state-room; however, having gone but a few steps she heard the same voice plead:

“No, please don’t leave me. I have been watching you and your friends ever since our ship sailed, and as I must talk to some one, I wish it to be you. If you only knew how sorry I am to have created a scene and to have given so much trouble, when everybody has been so kind.”

Then the girl began to cry again, but softly as if her desire for tears was nearly spent.

Without replying Mrs. Burton took her former position.

Occasionally she had a moment of thinking that perhaps after her years of experience as a Camp Fire guardian she was beginning to understand something of the utterly unlike temperaments of varying types of girls. Moreover, in spite of Aunt Patricia’s judgment, her work had afforded her unusual opportunities for the study of human nature.

Now, as she sat silently watching the young French girl in her effort to regain her self-control, Mrs. Burton realized that hers would be no ordinary story. Her friend had chosen to protect her by stating that she was suffering from an attack of nerves, yet this instant the girl was making an intense effort to gain a fresh hold upon herself both mentally and physically.

“I am sorry,” she repeated a moment later, “for I realize now I should never have made the attempt to return home to France, although I thought after nearly three years in the United States surely I had the courage! Still, for the past few days I have been becoming more and more convinced that I was going to fail, that I had not the strength for the work ahead of me. What you were told just now, that I had merely fainted, was not true. I had made up my mind that since I was not going to be able to be of service to my country I would not add to her burden. I could not do that; there had to be some way out, and I *had* to find the way.”

Sitting up, Yvonne now leaned forward, resting her small head with its heavy weight of fair hair upon her hands, clasped under her chin. She was not looking at her companion. Her eyes held an expression which betrays an inner vision.

“I did make an effort to do what you suspect. I wonder if I was wrong? Certainly I was unsuccessful, since I do not even feel ill in consequence. I suppose I ought to explain that I had written a note to apologize for the mistake I had made in urging the Red Cross unit to bring me with them to France and to say I regretted the distress and trouble I must give. Then as I was carrying the letter to the room of the friend whom you found here with me I think I must have fainted. She was shocked and angry when she learned what I had attempted to do and I have given my word I will not try again.” Yvonne was silent for a moment and then added with another catch in her voice: “Do you think it wicked of me, because I am still a little sorry I failed in what I attempted? But I don’t think you will when I have told you my history.”

Under ordinary circumstances Yvonne’s broken and incoherent story would have annoyed Mrs. Burton. She had scant sympathy and could make but slight excuse for the neurotic persons who have no fortitude with which to meet life’s inevitable disasters but expend all their energy in compassion for themselves. Especially did she resent this characteristic in a young girl, having grown accustomed to the sanity and the outdoor spirit engendered by the Camp Fire life. Moreover, one has at present no time or pity save for real tragedies.

Yet Yvonne's attitude had not so affected her. Instead she realized that the girl's suffering had been due to a vital cause and that the secret of her action still remained hidden.

"Had you not better rest and talk to me later?" Mrs. Burton inquired. "I think you are very tired, more so than you realize. After a time perhaps you will see things more clearly. You are young, Yvonne, to believe there is nothing more for you in life that is worth while."

"I know that would be true if these were not war times, Madame," the girl answered. "Will you please listen to my story now? There may be no opportunity at another time."

Slipping out of her berth, Yvonne proffered the one small chair the state-room afforded to her visitor.

"Won't you sit here? You may be more comfortable," she suggested.

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