

Vandercook Margaret

The Camp Fire Girls Behind the Lines



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	13
CHAPTER IV	16
CHAPTER V	19
CHAPTER VI	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

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CHAPTER I

"El Camino Real"

A small cavalcade was slowly winding down a steep, white road.

The bare, brown hills rose up on one side like the earth's friars of St. Francis, while on the other, at some distance away, the Pacific Ocean showed green and still. Near the shore the waves broke into white sprites of foam against the deep, incurving cliffs.

A girl riding at the head of the column reined in her horse, afterwards making a mysterious sign in the air with one upraised hand.

In answer to her signal the other riders, a group of Camp Fire girls, also stopped their horses. Across many miles sounded faintly the deep-toned voices of old mission bells.

"I believe the mission is ringing a farewell to us," one of the girls remarked to the companion whose western pony had stopped nearest her own. "To me, of all the Spanish missions we have seen so far, Carmel was the loveliest. '*Carmelo*' – why, the very name has an enchanting sound!"

"Bells of the Past, whose long-forgotten music
Still fills the wide expanse,
Tingeing the sober twilight of the Present
With colors of romance!"

"I hear you call, and see the sun descending
On rock and wave and sand,
As down the coast the mission voices, blending,
Girdle the heathen land!"

"Borne on the swell 'of your long waves receding,
I touch the farther Past —
I see the dying glow of Spanish glory,
The sunset dream and last!"

The girl who had been reciting possessed an odd, charming voice with a slightly hoarse note. She was small and had bright, almost copper-colored hair. Her slender nose, which had a queer little twist at the end, destroyed any claim she might otherwise have had to conventional beauty and yet curiously enough added to the fascination of her expression.

The other girl shook her head.

"I don't agree with you, Marta. You seem to me in as great a state of enthusiasm over everything we have seen in California as if you were a native. I confess to you I am a little weary of visiting old Spanish missions. Personally I shall be glad when we are in our summer camp. The missions are so empty and so sleepy these days with their queer, dreamy old gardens and no one to be seen except an occasional tourist and a few old monks. Nevertheless I liked your recitation. Sometimes I wonder, Marta, if you intend imitating our Camp Fire guardian's career?"

Gerry Williams spoke in a voice of amused superiority she often employed in talking with other girls.

Marta Clark's eyes, which had the strange characteristic of appearing to change in color according to her moods, now darkened slightly as she turned to gaze steadily at her companion.

"Do you know, Gerry, I have an idea the old missions would never have bored you, if you had any thought that a prince might come and discover you in one of them!"

"Certainly not," Gerry laughed.

Gerry was alluring. Her hat was hanging over the pommel of her saddle so that her fair hair was blowing about her face. Now that the sun and wind had tanned her delicate skin, her blue eyes looked bluer than ever.

Instead of replying, Marta Clark, at this instant, turned her horse with the intention of riding beside one of the other girls.

Marta Clark was the latest addition to the new group of Sunrise Hill Camp Fire girls. The summer before she had met them in Arizona where they were camping at the "End of the Trail." At that time she was living nearby in a tent with her brother who had been seriously ill. Her brother's health had improved and he had written a successful play. Afterwards his marriage to Ellen Deal, one of the older Camp Fire girls, had made it possible for Marta Clark to accept Mrs. Burton's invitation to join her Camp Fire group. As her guests they were now traveling along the Pacific coast, visiting the old Spanish missions.

The King's Highway, called in the old Spanish tongue, *El Camino Real*, stretches from northern California to the southernmost end.

One of the other Camp Fire girls turned her head as Marta came near her. All the horses were moving on again.

"I wonder why the automobile has not caught up with us?" Peggy Webster remarked. "I supposed the car would have passed us long ago. As it is time for tea, and I am already tired, I think it would have been more sensible if we had remained together."

The little riding party of six girls was accompanied by a large wagon filled with a camping outfit. The wagon was drawn by a small pair of gray mules and driven by a tall, raw-boned man, a typical western plainsman. Beside him sat a young fellow about seventeen years old. The wagon was following a few yards behind the riders.

"Then suppose we stop and have tea while we wait and watch for the others," Bettina Graham proposed, having overheard Peggy's lament.

"I don't believe they could have lost their way, since one has only to follow the guide posts of the old mission bells. Nevertheless Tante has a most eccentric fashion of suddenly deciding to explore along small byways. But they must surely come along here finally."

Peggy Webster shook her head.

"We had best ride on for a little while longer in order to make the distance we planned to make today. Perhaps by that time the car will have joined us. In any case we can find a better place to watch and to prepare tea."

At the present time on each side the road the mustard plants were blooming, making a broad field of the cloth of gold broken only by the long trail.

Further along down the slope of a hillside a miniature orange grove had been planted with trees no larger than would have comfortably shaded dolls' houses.

Then, as they rode on, the Camp Fire girls drew nearer to the fine of the coast. A fog was blowing in from the sea.

Finally, standing up in her stirrups for an instant, Peggy Webster pointed ahead.

"See those three rocks down there that look like 'the Big Bear, the Middle-Sized Bear and the Little Bear,' in the fairy story! Don't you think they would form a comfortable background for our tea party? At least they will be a protection from the wind. If we go on and the fog grows much thicker we shall not be able even to see each other."

Soon after the horses and the wagon halted and Dan Webster climbed down, bearing the tea basket. Mr. Simpson, who was continuing to act as guide, took charge of the horses.

The coast looked bare and wind-swept. There were no trees nearby and no driftwood along the shore.

However, nearly two hundred years before, when Father Juniper Serra founded and built the Spanish missions of California, he and his brother monks left behind them a golden harvest. In all their pilgrimages from land's end to land's end they flung the seed of the mustard plant along their route.

Leaving the other girls to unpack the tea basket, Marta Clark and Bettina walked quickly back along the road until not a quarter of a mile away they discovered another field of the omnipresent mustard.

Then the two girls began searching for the dried stems of the mustard plant in order to start their camp fire.

Bettina was standing with her arms filled with the long stems when Marta Clark came close up beside her. Both of the girls were knee deep among the golden flowers.

"You look like Ruth among the corn, Bettina," Marta remarked, surveying the other girl with generous admiration.

"Do you remember the story of Ruth in the Bible? 'So she gleaned in the field until even, and beat out that she had gleaned. And she took it up and went into the city.'"

Bettina shook her head. "No, I do not remember. It is wonderful to me, your ability to quote so correctly. If ever you are able to do the thing you desire, your memory will be a wonderful help. But I am not going to talk about it. I know you feel as embarrassed over your ambition as I do over mine."

In the past few weeks Marta Clark and Bettina were beginning to feel a deep interest in each other. This was but natural, for although they were unlike in character they had many tastes in common. Marta was quick and passionate, while Bettina was apt to appear almost too serene and self-controlled. Yet they both cared for books, for human beauty and the beauty of the great outdoors.

During the few moments the girls were talking the fog had been closing in more thickly about them until it was only possible to see the road a few yards away through a cloak of mist.

At this instant they distinctly heard the noise of an approaching motor car.

Mrs. Richard Burton, better known to the world as the famous actress, Polly O'Neill Burton, and guardian to the group of Sunrise Hill Camp Fire girls, had chosen to make the journey down the California coast in her automobile.

This afternoon her sister, Mrs. Webster, her nephew, Billy Webster, Vera Lagerloff and the maid, Marie, were traveling with her.

The plan had been that the Camp Fire girls should start on their riding trip several hours ahead and that they meet later and camp for the night at some agreeable place along their journey.

Marta and Bettina ran forward, intending to stop the approaching car. Both girls were thinking that the car was moving much more swiftly than usual.

Almost immediately they saw that the automobile coming toward them was not Mrs. Burton's, but a small khaki-colored roadster driven by a United States officer with another soldier on the seat beside him.

They were going along at full speed as if they were carrying information of great importance.

Then suddenly, without Marta or Bettina recognizing the cause, the car swerved, made a wide detour and quickly overturned. A few seconds later when the two girls, hoping to be of service, had reached the car, the young United States officer was crawling slowly out from beneath the wreck.

He tried to stand up and to smile reassuringly at Bettina, who chanced to be ahead, but the next moment if she had not put out her arm to steady him he would have fallen.

A little while after he was sitting unheroically amid the dust of the roadside, smiling somewhat quizzically up at his rescuer.

"I don't believe I am seriously hurt," he remarked cheerfully, "but as I know you are patriotic and would like to try your first-aid remedies upon me, please go ahead. I am Lieutenant Carson and at present I appear to be a somewhat unsuccessful Paul Revere. But would you mind explaining, while you are washing the dirt out of this plagued cut on my forehead, why you are wearing a costume that seems to suggest a combination of an Indian princess' outfit and a soldier's uniform?"

Marta Clark was devoting her attention to the other soldier, who did not appear to be hurt but only slightly dazed from his mishap.

Bettina for an instant regretted that she was unable to change places with Marta. She had studied first aid, of course, along with her Camp Fire work, but was not accustomed to masculine patients.

Moreover, Bettina considered that the young officer was showing an unwarranted personal interest in his first war nurse. As a matter of fact, she entirely refused to pay any attention to his questioning.

CHAPTER II

The Land of Romance

Two weeks later two women were walking up and down a garden path in the moonlight.

Across from them stood a long, low adobe house of a single story. The veranda, extending from one end to the other, was so thickly covered with a flowering vine that even in the moonlight one could get the reflection of its brilliant color. The air was scented with the fragrant perfume of roses and the blossoms of orange and lemon trees. From behind the soft shading of the vine across the road came the brilliant twanging of a guitar and a mandolin. Two voices were singing a Spanish love song.

Farther away under the deeper shadow of the moon a white cross arose above a mass of fallen stone.

"I declare, Mollie, this is the old world, not the new, isn't it? I feel as if we had traveled away from our own country today into a foreign land; but what land I cannot say, because this place tonight must be more beautiful and more romantic than even Spain itself. Yet one is not sorry to forget for a little while the present world and its tragedies!"

The other woman shook her head. The two sisters were the same height, had nearly the same character of features and the same coloring; nevertheless were curiously unlike.

One conspicuous difference was in their voices.

"Do you know, Polly, I think perhaps you have made a mistake in bringing the Camp Fire girls to spend the summer in so picturesque a place. We probably shall have a romance on our hands before the season is over," Mrs. Webster answered. "It is natural of course that *you* should be affected by such surroundings. But when a night like this has an influence upon a woman of my age with an almost grown-up family, it makes me feel extremely nervous when I consider the girls."

Mrs. Burton laughed.

"Nevertheless, my beloved Mollie, even if you *have* a grown-up family and I have no children, I don't see what difference the fact makes in our ages, as we happen to be twins. Besides, I never could see why age should destroy one's susceptibility to beauty! My only feeling is that perhaps we have no right to ease and enjoyment of any kind this summer, now that the United States has entered the war. I don't think I should have invited the girls on this long trip had I known beforehand. I feel I ought to be devoting all my energies to war work; however, we must do whatever we can out here. Richard seemed to think it impossible to have me near the southern camp where he is located."

Mrs. Webster sighed gently in response. She was unhappy over the war, too, but not so inclined as her sister to take deeply to heart the sorrows of the world when they did not touch her personally.

"Well, I am glad we can be together for a few months longer, Polly. I realize it is selfish of me, and yet I do rejoice that neither Dan nor Billy is old enough to be drafted. Dan's desire to volunteer is of course ridiculous! At least, I shall safe-guard my boys. I am also glad my husband is doing war work by increasing the amount of food raised upon our place, instead of entering the service as an ordnance officer as your husband has. Dear me, I really think it is very fine of Richard at his age!"

Shrugging her shoulders, Mrs. Burton smiled a little ruefully.

"You are determined to dwell upon our great age tonight, aren't you, Mollie mine? Please remember that your daughter Peggy bestowed her affections upon Ralph Marshall last summer when we were at the Grand Canyon and not in southern California. Yet I do feel that with the possibility of young soldiers and officers turning up at any moment in our midst, you and I will have to be unusually vigilant chaperons.

"But do let us go now and find what has become of the girls. We have had a long journey and should soon be in bed."

Mrs. Burton slipped her arm inside her sister's and drew her away from the old hotel garden across the gleaming road.

To the right of them, bathed in the half-tropic moonlight, was the old Spanish mission of San Juan Capistrano, named in honor of a warrior-saint of the Crusades. It was the loveliest place in all California.

As they walked slowly on Mrs. Burton recited in an undertone, and with the emotional sweetness which had captivated countless audiences and which never failed to thrill her sister:

"Up from the south slow filed a train,
Priests and soldiers of old Spain,
Who through the sunlit country wound
With cross and lance, intent to found
A mission in that wild to John,
Soldier saint of Capistran."

They stopped a moment as if to let the beauty sink deep, and then the two women entered the gate of the old mission grounds.

Early in the afternoon the Sunrise Camp Fire party had arrived at the little half-foreign town of Capistrano, set midway, like a link with the past, between the two modern cities of San Diego and Los Angeles. For hours they had been exploring the old mission. Then, after dinner, the Camp Fire girls, with Dan and Billy Webster to act as escorts had asked the privilege of returning to remain in the old mission garden until bedtime.

Tonight, to Mrs. Burton's eyes at least, the mission looked like a half-ruined palace of dreams. Once the mission of San Juan Capistrano held a great stone church, a pillared court, a portico, a rectangle; here the Franciscan fathers had their cells, and many rooms for distinguished guests. It was the richest and most splendid mission in old California.

But at present only the ruins of its past remained.

Above, in one of the crumbling arches of the colonnade, an owl hooted so hoarsely that Mrs. Webster clutched her sister's arm in a tighter clasp. The greeting had sounded, not like a welcome, but a warning.

There was no one to be seen and the place was wrapped in a kind of ghostly silence.

"It is most extraordinary how the girls and Dan and Billy have disappeared," Mrs. Burton whispered plaintively, scarcely daring to speak in a natural tone.

She and Mrs. Burton had passed through one of the colonnades and were now in the old court in the rear. Along one side ran a line of forsaken cloisters.

"Wait a moment, Mollie, please," Mrs. Burton murmured.

Adding to the enchantment of the present scene she could hear again the sound of music. The two musicians who had been singing on the veranda across from their hotel also must have wandered into the mission grounds.

Then, almost at the same instant, Mrs. Burton and Mrs. Webster discovered the Camp Fire girls.

Beyond the enclosed space of the old mission lay a broad piece of open ground. Over it tonight poured the unbroken radiance of the moon. In time long past this ground had been devoted to the use of the Indians who were being taught Christianity and the habits of civilization by the Spanish fathers. In those days this ground was encircled by a row of Indian huts. One part was set apart for the Indian women and girls, and here the Indian maiden remained in seclusion until her wedding day.

But tonight, in some mysterious fashion, the past seemed to have come back, for a group of Indian maidens had returned to their former dwelling place.

"The picture is too lovely to disturb," Mrs. Burton whispered irresolutely.

In the moonlight one could not discern the differences in the costumes of the Camp Fire girls, nor their fairer coloring.

Bettina, Marta, Peggy and Alice Ashton were seated upon the ground, forming a square, with Dan standing apparently hovering like a guardian angel above them.

As usual, Billy Webster was lying gazing up at the sky and Vera Lagerloff was sitting beside him.

A little apart from the others Gerry Williams and Sally Ashton were strolling up and down with their arms intertwined.

"Do you think we should speak of our plan immediately?" Bettina Graham was inquiring of the other three girls. "Unless we can carry it out I don't feel that we have the right to our Camp Fire summer together."

In the moonlight her yellow brown hair had turned a bright gold.

Peggy, who was ever a direct and sensible person, shook her head.

"We must wait until we have found the location for our camp and are fairly well settled," she replied. "At present our own ideas as to what we can do to help with the war work are much too vague. But I suppose we shall be near the great National Guard war training camp, and that in itself ought to be an inspiration. Have you ever heard from your wounded lieutenant, Bettina? It was amusing to have him and his friend to tea in so unexpected a fashion. I shall never forget how amazed the family was on discovering us with soldier guests. I am sorry we have never seen either of them again."

"I have had one note from Lieutenant Carson, saying that he was all right," Bettina answered. "He will probably be stationed at the cantonment near here. I wish for your sake Ralph Marshall was to be there instead."

There was no engagement existing between Peggy Webster and Ralph Marshall. But Peggy was too transparent a person to conceal her interest in Ralph after their past summer of misunderstanding and final reconciliation. As Ralph had volunteered and joined the aviation corps soon after the entry of the United States into the war, she had not seen him in many months. But it was understood that they wrote to each other and Peggy openly expressed her pride in Ralph's courage and ability. Ralph had been offered an opportunity to remain in his own country and act as an aviation instructor, but instead had chosen to go to France. At the present time he was in a camp on Long Island waiting his hour for sailing.

Before Peggy could make a reply to Bettina's final speech, the four girls saw their Camp Fire guardians approaching and rose to greet them.

"You girls look too picturesque to disturb, and yet we must not remain outdoors all night, no matter how the beauty of the night tempts us. I trust we may have many other nights as radiant as this before our summer is over," said Mrs. Burton, half apologizing for her own and her sister's intrusion.

A few moments later the Sunrise Camp Fire girls were walking slowly away from the mission grounds to their own rose-covered hotel.

Not by accident, but because of a common purpose, Sally and Gerry managed to linger a few yards behind the others.

The singing which had so fascinated Mrs. Burton and added to the witchery of the night had also attracted the attention of the two girls. But it was not the music alone which had charmed them. In their careless strolling up and down apart from their companions, Sally and Gerry had dimly seen the figures of the two musicians.

The mysterious singers had kept always in the background, only approaching sufficiently near for their songs to be heard; and yet, notwithstanding this, Sally and Gerry had managed to find out that they were two young men dressed in Mexican costumes. But whether they were Mexicans or Americans they could not guess, since it was impossible to see their faces and they seemed able to sing Spanish or English songs with equal ease.

The fact was that Gerry and Sally had arranged a scheme between them by which they hoped to make a desired discovery. Their scheme would have appalled the other Camp Fire girls, but they

chanced to have unlike views in regard to the agreeable adventures and experiences of life. Moreover, they often preferred bestowing their confidences only upon each other.

As the rest of the Camp Fire party moved on, both Sally and Gerry became aware that the musicians were growing bolder and were drawing nearer.

Both girls would have liked to turn round and deliberately look back. Yet they had scarcely the courage for this breach of taste, in spite of the fact that it was night and the redeeming grace of the moonlight rested over them.

Sally was carrying a little beaded Indian bag which she managed to drop without any one, aside from Gerry, noticing.

After going on a little further, unexpectedly they turned back to pick up the lost possession.

The two young men were thus within only a few feet of them.

There was but little satisfaction in the adventure, nevertheless, for although one of the musicians stepped forward and gravely presented Sally with the Indian bag he had observed on the ground between them; yet neither he nor his companion spoke and it was impossible, with their broad Mexican hats, to obtain a satisfactory view of their faces without revealing too great curiosity.

As a matter of fact, the entire Camp Fire party was unaware of the interest their appearance in the little town of Capistrano during the afternoon had excited. There were always tourists visiting the old mission, especially at this season of the year. But the number and appearance of the girls, their picturesque, half Indian costumes, which always puzzled people unacquainted with the Camp Fire uniform, and the big wagon carrying their large camping outfit, gave them a unique distinction.

CHAPTER III

The Call to Service

On a ledge of rock with the Pacific Ocean as a background a girl was standing, holding a bugle to her lips and with it sounding a clear, musical call.

Not far off a number of persons were seated about a smouldering camp fire. All day the sun had been hot, almost as a tropic sun, but now with the coming of the late afternoon a cool breeze was blowing in from the sea.

The feminine members of the little circle were knitting and sewing.

One of the two young men was holding a hank of wool, which a brown-haired, brown-eyed girl was winding slowly and carefully into a great ball. The other was lying full length on the ground looking toward the water.

"Why is my Sister Peggy sounding taps or a reveille, since at present it is neither morning nor night?" he questioned. "It seems impossible these days to get away from the sights and sounds which suggest war. I had hoped that when we were in camp out here in this far-away country we might at least have a *little* rest."

Billy Webster's manner was that of a spoiled and fretful boy; nevertheless an uncomfortable silence followed his speech.

Ever it appears impossible in this world, even among a small group of persons, to preserve entire harmony! In spite of his youth and his fragility, in spite of his quiet voice and oftentimes gentle manner, Billy Webster, from the time he ceased wearing dresses, had been able to sow discord. The trouble was that Billy always refused to think like the people surrounding him.

At present, when the entire Camp Fire party was interested heart and soul in the successful carrying on of the war, Billy had announced himself a pacifist. If he had contented himself with the mere announcement, his friends and family would have accepted his point of view with comparative equanimity. But with Billy the frequent exposition of his opinions was as the breath of life.

At this moment Vera Lagerloff leaned over to say in a whisper:

"For goodness' sake, Billy, please don't start an argument now on the subject of the war. You know how intensely Mrs. Burton disapproves of your ideas and how angry you make Dan."

Peggy descended from her rocky platform at this instant and joined the group. She was wearing her workaday Camp Fire costume and had her dark hair braided in two braids with a red band about her forehead.

"What is it, Peggy? You look as if you had something important to confide to us?" Mrs. Burton asked quickly, hoping to stem the flood of eloquence with which her nephew ordinarily met opposition. "I confess I am as curious as Billy to know why you sounded a bugle call at this hour of the afternoon."

Peggy sat down in camp-fire fashion on the ground, frowning and looking extremely serious. A bunch of pale lavender sea verbena she had gathered nearer the shore, she dropped in her mother's lap.

She did not know what Billy had been saying, but she was conscious that the atmosphere about her was uncomfortable.

Dan had not moved from his patient attitude, in order that Sally Ashton might continue to unwind her wool, yet his expression was not like his usual sweet-tempered one. Peggy at once surmised that Billy was in some way responsible for the unrest.

"Perhaps my bugle call was a little theatrical," she began; "nevertheless it was the call to service of our new order of 'Camp Fire Minute Girls.'"

Mrs. Burton nodded. "Yes, I remember. The 'Camp Fire Minute Girls' are to pledge themselves to help in winning the war by food conservation, by praying for the triumph of the right, and by

economizing in every possible way. I received a little booklet containing our new pledge and meant to speak of it to you."

In spite of the fact that Mrs. Burton was talking, she was not actually interested in what she was saying at the moment. Somewhere in the last row of her knitting she had dropped a stitch and while she spoke she was endeavoring to find it. As head of their small Red Cross society, Mrs. Webster was determined that their work should come up to the required standard. Knitting was not a natural art with Mrs. Burton and she particularly disliked unraveling her work after she supposed it finished.

Peggy reached over and quietly removed the gray sweater from her aunt's hands.

"You cannot pay attention to what anyone is saying and knit at the same time, Tante; I have seen you make the attempt before," Peggy remarked persuasively, "so please cease your efforts for a moment, as we have something of the utmost importance to talk about. Bettina, now that I have prepared the way, suppose you make things clearer. I have not your gift of words."

"It is only that we have been talking of the 'Camp Fire Minute Girls' and consider that we should follow the pledge very earnestly this summer," Bettina began. "We feel that really we ought to organize our camp fire on a new war basis. You have always been so generous to us, but this summer we wish to use only the new war recipes and to save and serve in every possible way. The advantage will be not only for the present time, but perhaps later with our own families. Peggy and I thought that we might even start a little garden near our camp, as vegetables grow so quickly in California. I suppose our ideas of helpfulness are rather vague and foolish, but that is why we wished to talk the situation over with you and Mrs. Webster and arrange some definite plan."

Mrs. Burton nodded. "An excellent idea, Bettina, and the sooner we Americans learn some method of less extravagant living the nearer we are to victory and the ending of the war. I wish I were a more apt pupil myself. Of course I am willing to agree with whatever you girls think best."

"Then we may help the soldiers in any way we like?" Sally Ashton inquired with such unexpected enthusiasm that everybody laughed.

"I do not care for any too strikingly original ideas of first-aid service, Sally," Mrs. Burton remonstrated.

Billy roused himself from his recumbent position and leaned forward. A single flame which had shot up from the smouldering fire cast a glow over his colorless face.

"I have been traveling with the Camp Fire party now for a good many weeks," he remarked in the suspiciously gentle manner with which he often began his verbal attacks, "and I am yet to hear one single word about an immediate peace. I cannot see what difference it will make in the end which country is victor. What the whole world must attain to is justice for every human being. I thought women were supposed to be the natural peace makers." Billy smiled – a malicious little smile which was vaguely irritating. "Women never have been peace makers or peace lovers. If they had do you suppose men would have continued fighting one another forever?"

"But, Billy – " Mrs. Burton began and suddenly ceased. A glance at her sister's face had been sufficient.

Besides, Dan Webster, released from his attention to Sally, had walked over and stood facing his mother and brother.

The two brothers, though, twins, were utterly unlike in appearance. For one thing, Dan was nearly six feet tall and splendidly built, with a vivid color and a suggestion of unusual physical health and power.

"I am sorry, Mother," he said in the voice he kept especially for his mother, "but I can't stay here and listen to Billy's nonsense and disloyalty. He is simply in love with the sound of his own voice and always has been. He has not the faintest understanding of the big things he talks about. I have stood a good deal from Billy first and last from the time we were children, because he was little and delicate and I was not supposed to treat him as I would have treated other fellows. I tell you candidly what Billy needs right now and what he always has needed is to have his head punched. He always

has taken refuge in his delicacy and hidden behind women. He is doing the same thing now with all this peace talk and half-baked socialism. I wonder how far socialism would have traveled if men had never fought for their rights and the rights of other people? I wish the socialists in this country would think of that little fact now and then. I suppose if no one had ever *fought* for liberty, most of us would be slaves. But I seem to be talking as much as Billy! It is only this, Mother, don't you see that Billy and I cannot both remain with the Camp Fire party this summer? I don't wish it to happen, but I am afraid if he goes on as he has been doing – and you know nothing ever stops him – why, there will be trouble between us, that is all. If you will only give your consent I am sure I can persuade father to allow me to volunteer."

Mrs. Webster's eyes filled with tears. Dan was too interested in watching his mother to pay any attention to Billy's good-natured drawl.

"Good old Dan, there is some truth in what you say, I suppose. There is a little truth in most people's opinions. But what a story-book hero you will make some day! It is all right, your rubbing it in about my not being as strong as other fellows; I suppose you don't know that hurts a little."

"My dear Dan, I did not dream you could be so unreasonable!" Mrs. Webster returned, having finally gained sufficient control of her voice to speak. "You know perfectly well I shall never give my consent to your volunteering for any branch of the army until you have reached the draft age. Moreover, if you have a difficulty with Billy you know how much sorrow that means for me. Besides, your aunt and the girls and I need you here with us at our camp fire this summer. If I could, I would send Billy back to the farm instead of you, but he still needs the benefit of this southern climate."

Poor Mrs. Webster, like many other mothers, often found her children too great a problem for her solving.

By this time Billy was again prostrate on the earth with his eyes fixed upon the sky and apparently perfectly serene. Even his mother's statement in regard to sending him home had not disturbed him, although he and his father chronically misunderstood each other.

Dan was repentant. "Sorry, Mother," he said; "this was not the time or place for me to open this discussion with you. I am sure I beg everybody's pardon."

Then he turned and walked away.

CHAPTER IV

The Camp and Temperamental Excursions

This summer in California for the first time the Sunrise camp was located near the sea.

After several days of investigating the countryside, in the meanwhile using the little mission town of Capistrano as their headquarters, the travelers discovered what they considered the ideal situation further south along the coast.

Near the border of one of the immense ranches for which southern California is famous they came upon a little stream of water flowing inside a channel. The channel had been deepened in order that the supply might last through the dry season. Not far away stood a small frame house. In harvest times the laborers on the ranch occupied this small house as a lodging for the night when the distance made it impossible for them to return to their own homes.

By a piece of rare good fortune Mrs. Burton was able for almost a nominal sum to rent this little place for her sister and herself.

The shack was lightly built, the roof formed of dried palm branches laid the one upon the other until the effect was like a thatched roof, although neither so warm nor so secure. Since it never rains during the summer in southern California, one requires only protection from the sun and wind. Near the house the camp-fire tents were set up in the form of a crescent.

Behind them the ranch stretched on for miles, a thousand-acre carpet of small green plants. For, as Marta Clark remarked when they were traveling down the state, it appeared as if California were preparing to provide the world with one gigantic bean feast.

Several hundreds of yards away the beach was silver and purple and rose with the sea verbena and ice plants which spread like a colorful embroidery over the sands. Here and there were tiny coves and clumps of rocks.

Near the camping site there was no main traveled road, but a small branch one which would improve with use. The closest place of human habitation was a seaside colony of artists, perhaps a mile or more beyond.

Here Mrs. Burton was able to find a garage for her automobile.

Partly because she was actually in need of his services and more to impress him with the idea, Mrs. Burton had persuaded Dan Webster to take charge of her car during the summer. As a matter of fact, aside from Billy, who did not always count, Dan was the only masculine person at the Sunrise camp, Mr. Jefferson Simpson having departed as casually as he originally had arrived, soon after the tents were set up.

Mrs. Burton preferred being shut away from strangers during their holidays and presumed the girls shared her desire.

Soon after their conversation about the camp fire a new régime of war economy was established at Sunrise camp. There were uncomfortable moments when strange dishes of none too appetizing a character were produced. But always the cooks declared it the fault of the too particular persons who refused to partake of them and not of the food itself. They did acquire new methods of bread making, substituting bran and corn-meal for wheat flour which were really improvements on the old. Moreover, the summer before the Indian girl, Dawapa, had taught the Sunrise Camp Fire members a number of the old Indian uses of corn. With perishable fruits and vegetables so abundant, it was unnecessary, during the summer at least, to suffer any real discomfort from war economies.

Now and then one of the girls would develop a too rigorous idea of self-denial to meet with the approval of her Camp Fire guardian. But after a time Mrs. Burton ceased to worry over original departures, permitting the girls to adjust matters for themselves.

However, it is not the adjustment of mere material things which is the difficult problem with human beings in living together, but the adjustment of one unlike nature with another.

As much as possible after his open disagreement with Billy, Dan Webster endeavored to avoid his brother's society. They never had been congenial or spent much time together since the days when they were children. But at present Dan and Billy were sleeping in the same tent at night and in the daytime Billy was always mooning about camp insisting upon one of the girls listening to him. He preferred Vera, but if she were too busy, any one of the other girls could substitute.

This would have made no difference to Dan except that Billy blandly and serenely continued to expound his views upon peace in spite of the fact that every member of Sunrise camp disagreed with him.

Hard as it was to endure, Dan's hands were tied, for he had solemnly promised his mother not to use physical violence with Billy, and nothing else would stop the flow of his misplaced eloquence.

So, as Dan was an ardent fisherman, he used to spend days away from camp fishing and swimming. He was fond of the Camp Fire girls, especially of Marta Clark and of Sally Ashton, but he could not endure too large a diet of exclusively feminine society. Moreover, Dan was too accomplished an athlete and too fine a fellow all round not to make friends wherever he went among men.

One afternoon it chanced that Dan was alone and preparing to go in swimming at a rather dangerous point about three miles below Sunrise camp.

The spot was deserted and Dan was beginning to undress when he became conscious of the uncomfortable sensation that some one at no great distance off was watching him.

Glancing about, Dan discovered the calm figure of his brother standing only a few yards away when he had sincerely hoped that at least several miles separated them.

In reply to Billy's friendly "hello," his brother returned no answer. Nevertheless Billy strolled quietly across the space between them, taking a seat on the rocky cliff, apparently as cheerful and undisturbed as if he considered himself a welcome interruption.

"Better not go in swimming from this cliff, Dan; this place looks pretty unsafe. The waves are so violent you might be thrown against the rocks," he began, offering his entirely unsolicited advice in the most affable manner.

As a matter of fact, upon most occasions, Dan Webster was rather unusually sweet tempered. But at present, because of his own disappointment over not being allowed to volunteer for some branch of war service, and because of what he considered his brother's disloyal opinions, the very sight of Billy enraged him.

"Billy Webster, I wonder if you are a coward about every mortal thing? I suppose you understand that cowardice is what I believe lies at the back of your pacifism. I suppose it is natural to wish to call an ugly fact by a pretty name. Besides, it is a lot pleasanter and easier to talk about the beauty and sacredness of peace and the rights of men than to fight and die for them. But please don't trouble about me and run along back to camp. I don't want to go into this subject with you again as I came away largely to get rid of your society." Dan made an effort to speak quietly.

"All right, I'll be off in a moment; don't wish to worry you," Billy agreed, and, except for a slight flush which Dan did not observe, he appeared unmoved. "Do you know I am glad you reopened this subject. Ever since you spoke of the same thing the other day I have been wondering if what you said was true and I am a pacifist because I am a physical coward. Of course I know I am afraid of a lot of things that don't frighten you, but I believe you are mistaken about this business, Dan. If I were up against a stiff proposition I might still be afraid and yet go through with it. My feeling about peace really has nothing to do with the part I may some day be called upon to play in this war, a pretty poor part at best I expect. I wish you would believe this if you can. But good-by; I am off."

Then, before Dan could make any response, Billy moved away. Once out of sight, he lay down upon the beach with his head propped on his slender hands, keeping a watchful outlook upon Dan,

who was swimming nearly a mile out from the shore. When Dan had finished and climbed back up the cliff, then only did Billy set out for Sunrise camp.

There were also temperamental difficulties, needing adjustment among the Camp Fire girls.

Frankly, both Sally Ashton and Gerry Williams had been bored by their long journey down the California coast and their many pilgrimages to the old Spanish missions along their route. With their natures it was impossible for either of them to understand how any human being could obtain a great deal of pleasure from mere scenery and what persons were pleased to call romantic atmosphere. To Sally and Gerry romance took shape in a very different guise.

During the trip they were at least sustained by the hope that, once settled in their summer camp, they would begin making agreeable acquaintances, notwithstanding, up to the present time, Sunrise camp had developed about as many social opportunities as a desert island.

Therefore, one morning, with the perfectly definite plan of going forth in search of adventure, Sally and Gerry set out upon a little temperamental excursion.

CHAPTER V

Abalone Shells

After their summer holiday together at the Grand Canyon the Sunrise Camp Fire girls had been separated during the previous winter, returning to their own homes. Nevertheless, they kept in touch with one another and, as a matter of fact, among the seven girls only Gerry Williams' history had remained a mystery to the others.

From the moment of her appearance upon the west-bound train with Mrs. Burton, who had introduced her as the new member of their Camp Fire group, not a word had been spoken concerning Gerry's past. Mrs. Burton must have regarded her friendship as a sufficient guarantee, since ever afterwards she and Gerry had continued equally reticent, not even confiding under what circumstances they originally had learned to know each other.

Naturally such secrecy aroused a certain degree of curiosity, and now and then one of the Camp Fire girls would ask Gerry a question, thinking her answer must betray some small fact in her past. But either she would evade the question or else politely decline to answer.

She was poor – no one could continue blind to this actuality – but whether her parents were living or dead, whether she had any other relatives, no one could find out from Gerry herself or from her Camp Fire guardian.

In truth, Gerry made no effort to conceal how intensely disagreeable she considered a lack of money, freely announcing that poverty always had been the bane of her past existence and that she asked nothing more from the future than to be safely delivered from it.

Occasionally some one would whisperingly question whether Mrs. Burton would continue her bounty to Gerry when the Camp Fire holidays were over; yet no one had sufficiently bad taste to make this inquiry. Mrs. Webster knew no more than the others. She made no effort to keep up with her Sister Polly's many generosities, which were frequently as erratic as the lady herself. Only to her husband would Mrs. Burton confide the extent of her efforts to help other people. She preferred doing things in her own way.

One circumstance was freely discussed between Mrs. Burton and her protégé. During the past winter Gerry had developed a desire to study art and Mrs. Burton had arranged for her lessons. Yet Gerry made no pretense of having any especial talent or of being very deeply interested in her work. She was also frank in stating that she did not care a great deal for the outdoor camping life, aside from the fact that Mrs. Burton considered the influence of living with the other Camp Fire girls of value to her. The great attraction in the experience for Gerry, as she freely stated, was the opportunity it offered to be near her famous friend.

Nevertheless, after a winter's study at the Art Institute in Chicago, Gerry had learned to make pretty outdoor studies of flowers and other small objects. She had a good deal of feeling for color and design, which she declared due to her interest in clothes. Her Camp Fire guardian encouraged her attention to art as much as possible, often excusing Gerry from everyday tasks, that she might give more time to her sketching.

Just why she should be thus favored the other Camp Fire girls did not understand, yet Gerry appreciated the reason.

Also less was always expected of her, and her weaknesses were more readily forgiven. The one foolish act of revenge upon Bettina had caused the only serious difficulty with her Camp Fire guardian, and apparently even this had been forgotten.

On the morning of their excursion Gerry had announced that she wished to spend the day sketching along the coast and that Sally had been kind enough to agree to accompany her.

The greater part of the time the two girls were extremely intimate and if now and then a slight coolness arose between them it never continued long, as they had too many common bonds of interest.

Both girls were charmingly pretty and an entire contrast. Sally Ashton's eyes and hair were brown, her lips full with an up-ward curve and her skin, which the sun and wind never seemed to tan, as soft and white as a baby's. She was small and plump and her figure had no angles.

One might have been deluded by Sally's yielding and feminine appearance into the impression that she could be easily influenced by stronger natures than her own. The fact is that Sally was never really influenced except when she chose to be.

Realizing this, Mrs. Burton made no effort to interrupt her friendship with Gerry Williams, which was just as well since nothing is more difficult than to interfere with a friendship between two girls who feel a mutual attraction and see each other frequently.

Gerry Williams' prettiness was of a more unusual character. She had the delicate fairness which one so rarely sees in its perfection. Her hair was a pale gold, yet the gold was undeniably there. Her eyes were light blue and held the clearness, the indelible, transparent blueness of certain pieces of rare old china. Her small head was set upon a rather long fair throat and as she walked with a peculiar lightness and grace it was almost as if she might at any moment break into dancing steps. About Gerry's nature there were elements which were frankly commonplace, nevertheless her appearance suggested one of the dancing figures upon an ancient Greek frieze.

This morning she and Sally wore their everyday Camp Fire costumes, and because it was cool their Navajo sweater coats, Gerry's a bright scarlet and Sally's an Oxford blue. They intended being away all day, and besides Gerry's sketching outfit they carried their luncheon.

The girls had chosen to go in the direction of the artists' colony only a few miles away. Over both the water and land there was the haze of the early hours at the seaside, and yet the mist was only a light one and more agreeable than the hot sun which would come later in the day.

The land was gay with flowers. On the hillside there were tall bunches of cacti, one variety bearing a bright yellow flower like a silken poppy. The ordinary jimson weed grew so large that each blossom looked like a great white lily.

On the side toward the beach the tiny beads of water glistening amid the rose color of the ice plants shone like tiny fairy jewels.

Past the groups of houses which presumably sheltered famous artists as well as amateurs, perhaps with no more ability than Gerry, the two girls wandered on, absorbed in their own conversation.

They were not especially disappointed at finding no one in the neighborhood of the colony who seemed to be of interest. There were three or four girls idling in one of the yards who stared curiously as the Camp Fire girls passed, but Sally and Gerry paid but slight attention to them in return, having previously confessed to each other that they were a little tired of so much feminine society.

A tall old gentleman with a white, closely trimmed beard strode by, carrying a large canvas under his arm. He frowned portentously, as if he would have the girls appreciate that he was a genius in the grasp of a creative impulse and so must not be disturbed. Neither Sally nor Gerry had the faintest impulse toward disturbing him, yet his appearance suggested a train of thought to Sally.

"I wonder, Gerry, why you decided so suddenly that you wished to study art?" she said. "Until this summer I have never even heard you mention the subject. Do you intend making a business of it some day? You won't mind my speaking of this, but you have always said you had to do something or other to make your own living."

Instead of replying at once Gerry hummed the first line of a song, also moving on so quickly that Sally, who was averse to violent exercise, had difficulty in keeping up with her.

"Certainly not, Sally," she answered finally. "Besides, if I ever should develop such a foolish idea, who do you think would buy my silly little pictures, except perhaps Mrs. Burton? I do wish she were my real aunt; I am oftentimes jealous of Peggy. But really I began studying art last winter

chiefly on her account. She insisted that I should not idle away all my time, so I concluded that I would prefer being an art student to attending a regular school.

"Mrs. Burton was delighted, because she thinks it would be a good plan for me to become a dressmaker or a designer. I am so fond of clothes and she believes the art lessons will be of value to my future work. However, my dear Sally, nothing is further from my own expectations. You and I for different reasons must make marriage our career. You were created for domesticity and I, well, I simply must marry some one with money. I used to hope that Mrs. Burton might do a great deal for me some day, before I knew about her own family and her Camp Fire group. Now I realize that she only intends helping me to help myself, as the highly moral phrase goes."

"But haven't you any people of your own, or any close friends?" Sally demanded with the persistency which belonged to her disposition. Half a dozen times before she had asked this same question without receiving a satisfactory reply.

Gerry only laughed good naturedly. Sally's curiosity amused her.

"*No* people and *no* friends I care to talk about, my dear. You know I have told you this several times before."

In spite of the fact that by this time the girls had walked for three or four miles, up until now Gerry had not suggested sitting down to begin her sketching. At this moment she moved over to the edge of a cliff, glancing down at the beach below.

"Come, Sally, see what a fascinating place I have discovered. Suppose we climb down to the beach; you must be tired and I may be able to work for a little while. I do want to have something to show Mrs. Burton as a result of our day."

On the beach the girls saw a little wooden hut with a huge kettle filled with boiling water standing before the door. Half a mile or more out in the ocean two Japanese fishermen were diving for the famous abalone shells, while on the sands a dozen of the shells, having been thoroughly cleansed, now lay drying in the sun; their inner surfaces of mother-of-pearl held all the colors of the dawn.

CHAPTER VI

"My Own Will Come to Me"

Whether consciously or unconsciously, the thing we most desire in this world will come to us in the end.

Rather precipitately Sally and Gerry climbed down the side of the cliff to the beach. The way was steep and now and then Sally had to be encouraged and assisted until both girls finally arrived on the sands a little out of breath.

The beach stretched on further than one could see, a pale golden carpet now that the mists were clearing. It was divided at this point by a narrow gully. On one side of the gully were uneven platforms of rocks and between these rocks ran little streams of salt water from the ocean, creating tiny tidal lakes and rivulets.

Up and down these rocks, sometimes disappearing inside the water, at others clinging perilously above its edge, or hiding behind sprays of sea lichen or fern, were innumerable small sea monsters. At times the sides of the rocks were alive with hundreds, even thousands, of tiny crabs; then one single unexpected noise and off they scuttled like an army, not in dignified retreat but in utter rout.

The girls having descended the cliff, rested for a few moments and then wandered along these ledges. They were not of a dangerous character, for most of the stones were flat and not too far apart to be safely crossed.

Yet they walked slowly. Occasionally they stopped to watch two fishermen at work. The men were Japanese divers, and it was fascinating to see them swim with quiet, even strokes out into the deep water and then dive down heads first to remain under a terrifying length of time. Yet as each man rose again usually he had secured one or more of the large abalone shells.

In spite of their interest, Sally Ashton pleaded that they remain at a safe distance from the two men. As a matter of fact, Sally frequently suffered from the small timidities which belonged to her particular type of intensely feminine character. Although not in the least timid herself, Gerry agreed, it being a wise custom of hers to give way to her companion in unimportant matters. Moreover, she really intended working seriously for a few hours. Now that she and Sally were both weary, this sheltered place along the beach would be as suitable as any other to begin her painting.

Finding a comfortable surface of clean sand on a broad ledge of rock, with other rocks in the background, Gerry sat down. Here there was less wind than in other places and sufficient room for Sally to lie close beside her.

At about the correct distance away, a small boat moored to some hidden anchor moved back and forth with the movement of the waves.

This boat appeared a suitable subject to Gerry for her sketch. She had no idea of making a success of so ambitious a subject, but since all that Mrs. Burton asked of her was industry and not high artistry, Gerry was willing to work now and then. She really did wish to please her Camp Fire guardian, and if her motives were a little mixed and not all of them of the noblest character, well, there are others of us in this world who have mixed motives beside Gerry Williams!

After the first few moments of settling down to her task, Gerry began to feel mildly interested in her effort.

Her surroundings were in themselves an inspiration.

Nearby, and using her friend's crimson sweater as a pillow, Sally Ashton had curled herself up in the sunshine. She was wearing her own blue one for warmth. There was but little breeze stirring and the sun had grown suddenly hot, but Sally had a passionate affection for warmth. She had also an endless capacity for sleeping when there was nothing of interest in life to make wakefulness worth while.

For a few moments she watched Gerry at work, thinking she had never seen her look so pretty or labor so industriously. Then Sally viewed the small boat whose continuous movement impressed her like the sleepy swaying of a cradle. Afterwards she fell into a state of semi-conscious dreaming.

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