

Vandercook Margaret

The Camp Fire Girls Across the Seas



Margaret Vandercook

The Camp Fire Girls Across the Seas

«Public Domain»

Vandercook M.

The Camp Fire Girls Across the Seas / M. Vandercook — «Public Domain»,

© Vandercook M.

© Public Domain

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	13
CHAPTER IV	17
CHAPTER V	19
CHAPTER VI	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	23

Vandercook Margaret

The Camp Fire Girls Across the Seas

CHAPTER I

Two Years Later

A young man strode along through one of the principal streets of the town of Woodford, New Hampshire, with his blue eyes clouded and an expression of mingled displeasure and purpose about the firm lines of his mouth.

It was an April afternoon and the warm sunshine uncurling the tiny buds on the old elm trees lit to a brighter hue the yellow Forsythia bushes already in bloom in the gardens along the way.

Standing in front of an inconspicuous brown cottage was a large touring car, empty of occupants. Within a few yards of this car the young man paused, frowning, and then gazed anxiously up toward the closed door of the house. A short time afterwards this door opened when a girl, wearing a scarlet coat and a felt hat of the same shade pinned carelessly on her dark hair, hurried forth and with her eyes cast down and an air of suppressed excitement moved off in the opposite direction, without becoming aware of the onlooker. And although the bystander's lips moved once as if forming her name with the intention of calling after her, his impulse must have immediately died, for he continued motionless in the same spot until the girl had finally turned a corner and was lost to his view. Then the young man walked on again, but not so rapidly or resolutely as at first.

Indeed, he was so intensely absorbed in his own line of thought as to be unconscious of the other passers-by, until some one stopped directly in front of him and a familiar voice pronounced his name.

"Why, Billy Webster, where are you going?" Meg Everett demanded. "You look as if you were giving Atlas a holiday this afternoon and had transferred the weight of the world to your own shoulders."

Two years had changed the greater number of the old Sunrise Hill Camp Fire members from girls to young women, but they had not made a conspicuous difference in Margaret Everett. Her sunny yellow hair was tucked up, but today the April winds had loosened it, and though she was dressed with greater care than before the Camp Fire influence, she would never altogether approach her brother John's ideal of quiet elegance, as the Princess always had. Yet her eyes were so gay and friendly and her face so full of quick color and sympathy, that there were few other young men besides her older brother who found much to criticize in her. And certainly not the small boy at her side, who had once been "Hai-yi," the Indian name for "Little Brother," to the twelve girls at Sunrise Hill.

Returning Meg's interested gaze, Billy Webster, who was never given to subterfuges, had a sudden impulse to seek information and possible aid from her.

"Is it true, Meg," he asked, "that Miss Adams, the actress, is here in Woodford visiting her cousin and that Polly O'Neill has been going to see her every day and riding over the country in her motor car? I thought Mrs. Wharton had insisted that Polly was to have nothing to do with anything or anybody connected with the stage until three years had passed. It has been only two since Polly's escapade, and it seems to me that nothing could so awaken a girl's interest as being made the companion and friend of a famous woman. I thought Mrs. Wharton had better judgment. Polly had almost forgotten the whole business!"

As she shook her head Meg Everett's face wore a slightly puzzled look. For she was wondering at the instant if it could be possible that Billy had any special right to his concern in Polly O'Neill's proceedings. Mollie O'Neill was her dearest friend and for several years she knew Mollie and Billy had been apparently devoted to each other. Yet she would have been almost sure to have guessed had

their old affection developed into something deeper. Moreover, Mollie was only nineteen and Mrs. Wharton would have insisted upon their waiting before agreeing to an engagement between them.

"Oh, I don't think it worth while for you and Mollie to worry over Polly," Meg returned, even in the midst of her meditations, which is a fortunate faculty one has sometimes of being able to think of one thing and speak of another at the same instant. "Miss Adams is going away in a few days, I believe, and though she has invited Polly to be her guest and travel with her in Europe this summer, Mrs. Wharton has positively refused to agree to it. I can't help being sorry for Polly, somehow, for think what it would mean to see Esther and Betty again! Two years has seemed a dreadfully long time to me without the Princess; I only wish that there was a chance for me to go abroad this summer."

And in the midst of her own wave of the spring "Wanderlust," which is aroused each year in the hearts of the young and the old alike, the girl had a moment of unconsciousness of her companion's nearness and of the manner in which he had received her news. The next instant he had lifted his hat and with a few muttered words of apology for his haste, had walked off with his shoulders squarer than ever and his head more splendidly erect.

Meg's eyes followed him with admiration. "I hope you may look like Billy Webster some day, Horace," she said to the small boy at her side, who was now all long legs and arms and tousled hair. "But I don't know that I want you to be too much like him. Billy is the old-fashioned type of man, I think – honest and brave and kind. But he does not understand in the least that the world has changed for women and that some of us may not wish just to stay at home and get married and then keep on staying at home forever afterwards." And Meg laughed, feeling that her little brother was hardly old enough to understand her criticism or her protest. She herself hardly realized why she had made it, except that the spring restlessness must still be lingering within her. Meg was not usually a psychologist and there was no reason to doubt that Mollie would always continue a home-loving soul.

On the broad stone steps of the Wharton home, which was the largest and finest in Woodford, except the old Ashton place, Billy Webster was compelled to wait for several moments before the front door bell was answered. And then the maid insisted that the entire family had gone out. Mr. and Mrs. Wharton were both driving, Mollie was taking a walk with friends, and Polly paying a visit. Sylvia was not living in Woodford at present, but true to her Camp Fire purpose was in Philadelphia studying to become a trained nurse.

"Do you mean that Miss Polly gave you instructions to say she was not in?" the young man inquired, trying his best to betray no shadow of offended pride in his question. "Because if she did not, I am sure that you must be mistaken. I saw her leave the place where she was calling some little time ago and –"

But the maid was crimsoning uncomfortably, for at this moment there arose the sound of some one playing the piano in the music room near by.

"No, sir," the girl stammered, "no one asked to be excused. Miss Polly must have come in without my knowing." And in her confusion the girl ushered the visitor into an almost dark room, without announcing his name or even suggesting his approach.

However, the recent visitor was so much in the habit of going frequently to the Wharton home that he did not feel in any sense a stranger there. Besides, had he not spied the familiar scarlet coat and hat on a chair outside the music room, where no one but Polly would have placed them? And was it not like her to be sitting in the semi-darkness with the shutters of four big windows tightly closed, playing pensively and none too well on the piano, when the rest of the world was out of doors?

Billy felt a sudden and almost overmastering desire to take the musician's slender shoulders in his hands and give them a slight shake, as she continued sitting on the stool with her back deliberately turned toward him.

"I hope I am not disturbing you," he began with a little laugh, which even to his own ears did not sound altogether natural.

And then, when the girl had swung slowly around, he walked up toward her and leaning one elbow on the piano, with his eyes down, continued speaking, without giving his companion the opportunity even for greeting him.

"Polly," he said, "I have just heard that Miss Adams has invited you to go abroad with her this summer and that your mother has refused to let you accept. But I cannot entirely believe this last part of my news. I don't dare unless you tell me."

There was a slight sound from his listener, an effort at interruption, but the young man went on without regarding it.

"I did not mean to speak to you so soon. I know you are too young and I expected to wait another year. And certainly you have not given me much encouragement. Sometimes I have not felt that you liked me any better than when first we knew each other. But you can't have completely forgotten what I said to you that day in the woods two years ago. And you know I never change my mind. Now I can't bear to have you go so far away from Woodford without saying again that I care for you, Polly, in spite of our sometimes disagreeing about things and that I will do my level best to make you happy if you, if you – "

But the girl at the piano had risen and Billy now lifted his eager blue eyes to her face. Immediately his expression changed, the hot blood poured into his cheeks, and he moved forward a few steps. Then he stood still with his hands hanging limply at his sides.

For the girl, whose pallor showed even in the semi-darkness of the room and whose lips trembled so that it was difficult for her to command her voice, was not Polly O'Neill! Although her hair was almost equally dark, her chin was less pointed, her lips less scarlet and her whole appearance gentler and more appealing.

"I am sorry," Mollie O'Neill faltered, "I did not understand when you began, Billy, or I should not have listened. But I didn't dream that you and Polly – oh, I didn't suppose that people could quarrel as you do and yet be fond of each other. And you were my friend, Billy, and Polly is my twin sister. I cannot understand why one of you did not tell me how you felt without waiting to have me find out like this." And in spite of her struggle for self-control, there was a break in Mollie O'Neill's soft voice that Billy would have given a great deal never to have heard, and a look on her face which, though he did not entirely understand, he was not soon to forget. She had put out one arm and stood steadying herself against the piano stool like a child who had been unexpectedly hurt and frightened and who wished to run away, yet felt that if she lingered a little longer she might better understand the puzzle.

Nevertheless Billy said nothing for a moment. He was too angry with himself, too worried over the surprise and sorrow in Mollie's eyes, to speak. For they were deeply attached to each other and nothing had come between their friendship since the morning, now almost five years ago, when she had cleverly bandaged up the wound in his head. They had been foolish children then, but so long an intimacy should surely have taught him by this time the difference between the twin sisters. If only the room had not been so dark when he came in, if only he had not been deceived by the crimson coat and cap and by his own excitement!

"There was nothing to tell you before, Mollie, at least nothing that counts," Billy began humbly. "Sometimes I have wanted to explain to you my feeling for Polly. We do quarrel and she makes me angrier than anyone I know in the world, and yet somehow I can't forget her. And I like being with her always, even when she is in a bad temper. Then I don't wish her to go on the stage. I think it a horrid profession, and Polly is not strong enough. I would do anything that I could to prevent it. But you see, Mollie, I have no reason to believe that Polly cares for me; though now and then she has seemed to like me better than she once did. Still I am determined to try whatever means I can to keep her away from this Miss Adams' influence. For if once Polly leaves Woodford with her, the old Polly whom we both know and love will never come back to us again." And Billy appeared so disconsolate and so unlike his usual confident, masterful self, that Mollie smiled at him, a little wistfully it is true, but in a perfectly friendly and forgiving fashion.

"I'll go and find whether Polly has come home," she answered. "I ran in for a moment to call on Miss Adams and found that Polly had left there half an hour before. I wore her old coat and cap, so I think she must be dressed in her best clothes and paying visits somewhere." And Mollie laid a hand lightly on her friend's arm.

"Don't be discouraged at whatever Polly says to you," she begged. "You know that she may be angry at the idea of your opposing her having this European trip with Miss Adams. But she is not going. Mother is positive and Polly will not do more than ask for permission since there is a whole year more before her promise ends."

And Mollie slipped quietly away, grateful for the darkness and her old friend's absorption.

In the hall, a few feet from the music room door, she encountered Polly herself, with her eyes shining and her face aglow with the beauty and fragrance of the April afternoon. And before she could slip past her Polly's arms were about her, holding her fast, while she demanded, "Whatever has happened to make you so white and miserable, Mollie Mavourneen? Are you ill? If anyone has been unkind to you – "

But Mollie could only shake her head. "Don't be absurd; there is nothing the matter. Billy Webster is here waiting to see you."

Nevertheless, a moment afterwards, when Polly had marched into the music room and opened wide a shutter, her first words as she turned toward her visitor were, "Billy Webster, what in the world have you said or done to make Mollie so unhappy?"

CHAPTER II

The Wheel Revolves

It was midnight, yet Polly O'Neill had not gotten into bed.

Instead she sat before a tiny, dying fire in her own bedroom with her hands clasped about her knees and her black hair hanging gypsy-fashion over her crimson dressing gown. Mollie had gone to her own room several hours before. In a moment there was a light knock at the door and Polly had scarcely turned her head when her mother stood beside her.

Mrs. Wharton looked younger than she had several years before, absurdly young to be the mother of two almost grown-up daughters! Her face had lost the fatigue and strain of another spring evening, when Betty Ashton had first hurried across the street to confide the dream of her Camp Fire club to her dearest friends. Of course her hair was grayer and she was a good deal less thin. Notwithstanding her eyes held the same soft light of understanding that was so curiously combined with quiet firmness.

"Why aren't you in bed, Polly mine?" she asked. "I saw that the gas was shining or I should never have disturbed you."

In answer Polly without rising pushed a low rocking chair toward her mother. "I wasn't sleepy. Is that the same reason that keeps you awake, Mrs. Wharton?" she queried.

In all their lives together Polly O'Neill and her mother had always held a different relation toward each other than ordinarily exists between most mothers and daughters. In the first place Mrs. Wharton was so very little older than her children that in the days in the cottage when they had lived and worked for one another, they had seemed more like three devoted and intimate friends. Of course the two girls had always understood that when a serious question was to be decided their mother remained the court of the last decision. However, in those years few serious questions had ever arisen beyond the finding of sufficient money for their food and clothes and occasional good times. So that there had been nothing to disturb the perfection of their attitude toward one another until Mrs. O'Neill's marriage to her former employer, Mr. Wharton. And then there is no doubt that Polly for a time had been difficult. Naturally she was glad for her mother's sake that she had the new love and wealth and position; nevertheless she was homesick for their old life and its intimacy and in her heart half sorry that her own dream of some day bringing fortune and ease to her mother and Mollie was now of so little account. And then all too soon, before matters had really become adjusted between the two families, had followed her own act of insubordination and deception and her mother's mandate.

Of course Polly had bowed before it and had even understood that it was both right and just. She had been happy enough in these last two years, in spite of missing Betty Ashton almost every hour, and had come to like and admire her stepfather immensely. Nevertheless there had remained a slight shadow between herself and her mother, a misapprehension so intangible that Polly herself did not realize it, although Mrs. Wharton did.

"I suppose you are not sleepy, dear, because you are sitting here thinking that never in the whole world was there ever a mother so narrow and so dictatorial as I am," Mrs. Wharton began. "Oh, I have been in bed, but I have been lying awake for the past hour looking at myself with Polly's eyes."

Polly frowned, shaking her head, yet her mother went on without appearing to notice her.

"I wonder if you think that I have no realization of the wonderful opportunity I have just made you refuse. Do you think, Polly, that I don't appreciate what it must mean to a girl like you to have made a friend of a great woman like Margaret Adams? And to have her so desire your companionship that she has asked you to be her guest during her summer abroad? Why such a chance does not come to one girl in a hundred thousand and yet I have made you give it up!"

With a little protesting gesture Polly stretched out her hand. "Then let us not discuss it any further, mother of mine," she demanded. "I promised you not to speak of it again after our talk the other day and I am going to exact the same promise of you."

The girl shut her lips together in a tight line of scarlet and all unconsciously began rocking herself slowly backward and forward with her expression turned inside instead of out, as her sister Mollie used sometimes to say. But Mrs. Wharton leaned over, and putting her finger under Polly's chin tilted it back until her eyes were upturned toward hers.

"But was I fair to you, dear? Have I decided what was best for you, as well as for Mollie and me? We have not spoken of it; we have both felt that silence was the wisest course; but tonight I should like to know whether, when the three years of your promise to me have passed, do you still intend going upon the stage?" Mrs. Wharton asked.

"Would you mind so very, very much?" Polly inquired quietly. And then with a sudden rush of confidence, which she had never before shown in any of their talks together on this subject, Polly faced their old difference of opinion squarely. "It has always been hard for me to understand, mother, why you are so opposed to my trying to become an actress. You are broad-minded enough on other subjects. You have worked for your own living and ours; and you were willing enough to have Sylvia, who is younger than I am and who will be very rich some day, go away and study to become a trained nurse, just because she believed it her calling. Yet because I want to learn to act, why the whole stage and everything connected with it is anathema. You do not even like Miss Margaret Adams as much as you would if she were in some other kind of work. Oh, of course I appreciate that people used to feel that no woman could be good and be on the stage, but no sensible person thinks that nowadays." Polly stopped abruptly. "I don't mean to be rude, mother," she concluded.

But Mrs. Wharton nodded. "Please go on. I came in tonight to find out just what you were thinking. I don't believe you realize how little you have explained your real feeling to me on this subject since that unfortunate time in New York."

"I didn't want to trouble you," again Polly hesitated. "It is hardly worth while doing it now. Because honestly I have not made up my mind just how to answer the question that you asked me a few minutes ago. Whether at the end of another year, when you have agreed to let me do as I like, I shall still insist upon going upon the stage, knowing that you and Mollie are at heart unwilling to have me, I can't tell. Perhaps I shall give up and stay on here at Woodford and maybe marry some one I don't care about and then be sorry ever afterwards."

Instead of replying Mrs. Wharton got up and walked several times backwards and forwards across the length of the room, not glancing toward the girl who still sat before the fire with her hands clasped tightly over her knees. But Polly had small doubt where her mother's thoughts were. And a few moments afterwards she too rose and the next instant pulled her mother down on a cushion before the fire, and resting close beside her put her head on her shoulder.

"Dear, you were mistaken when you came in and found me awake," Polly explained, "in supposing that I was thinking of my own disappointment in not being allowed to make the journey with Miss Adams or feeling hurt or angry with you because you decided against it. Really, I never dreamed in the first place that you would be willing. Still, I was thinking of asking you to let me break my word to you after all! You said that I was to stay here in Woodford for three years, and yet I want you to let me go away somewhere very soon. I don't care where, any place will do."

Now for the first time since the beginning of their conversation Mrs. Wharton appeared mystified and deeply hurt.

"Is your own home so disagreeable to you, Polly, that you would rather go anywhere than stay with us?" she queried. And then to her further surprise, turning she discovered that tears were standing unshed in Polly's eyes and that her lips were trembling.

"I don't know how to tell you, mother. It is all so mixed up and so uncertain in my own mind and so foolish. But I wonder if you have ever thought that Mollie liked Billy Webster better than our other friends?"

"Mollie?" Mrs. Wharton could hardly summon her thoughts back from the subject which had lately absorbed them, to follow what she believed a quickly changing idea of Polly's. "Why, yes, I think I have," she answered slowly. "But I have never let the supposition trouble me. Mollie is so young and her deepest affections are for you and me. Besides, Billy is a fine fellow and perhaps when the time comes I shall not be quite so selfish with her."

But Polly's cheeks were so crimson that she had to put up her cold hands to try and cool them.

"And you have always believed that Billy almost hated me, haven't you?"

Mrs. Wharton laughed. "Well, I have never thought a great deal about it, except that you argued a great deal about nothing and that each one of you was determined to influence the other without producing the smallest result."

"Yes, mother, and that is what makes what I want to tell you so horrid and silly," Polly went on, intentionally making a screen for her face with her dark hair. "Because Billy Webster has a perfectly absurd idea that he cares for me, simply because he wishes to manage me. And – and he was tiresome enough to tell me so this afternoon."

Surprise and consternation for the moment kept Mrs. Wharton silent. "But you, Polly?" she managed to inquire finally. "How do you feel? What did you answer him?"

Then for an instant the girl's former expression changed and the old Irish contrariness of spirit hovered in a half smile about her lips.

"Oh, I told him that I did not like him any better than I had in the beginning of our acquaintance and that I had only been nicer to him now and then lately because he was your friend and Mollie's. And no matter what happened to me, if I never, never stirred a foot out of Woodford, I should never dream of marrying him even when I am a hundred years old."

A sigh of some kind escaped Mrs. Wharton, partly of relief and partly of annoyance.

"Then why should you wish to go away, dear?" she queried. "If you said all that, surely Billy will never trouble you again!"

A characteristic shrug was Polly's first answer. "Oh, Billy only cares about me because he can't have me," she replied the next minute. "But he insists that he will go on trying to win me until doomsday. Still it isn't either about Billy or about me that I am thinking at present. Can't you understand, mother, without my having to explain? It is so hard to say. It's Mollie! Not for anything in the world would I have her feelings hurt or have her think that I had come between her and her friendship for Billy."

But Mrs. Wharton's manner was immediately quiet and reassuring. "Mollie would never think anything unfair of you, Polly. And perhaps it will be better for you to speak of this to her. If Mollie has had any false impression, if her feeling for Billy has been anything but simple friendliness, now it will not be difficult for her to adjust herself. When later – " However, Mrs. Wharton was not able to finish her sentence, for Polly had murmured, "She does know. Of course she has not said anything to me and I never want to have to refer to it to her. But you need not trouble. Billy was so stupid." Here Polly gave an irrepressible giggle. "He proposed to both of us this afternoon. And I think he was much more worried over Mollie's telling him that she should have been taken into his confidence sooner, than he was over my refusal."

The clock on Polly's mantel shelf was striking one long stroke. Hearing it Mrs. Wharton rose to leave the room, first pulling Polly up beside her. The girl was several inches taller than her mother.

"Polly dear," she said, "so far as Mollie is concerned I don't agree with the wisdom of your going away from home. But I want you to understand something else, something that I have never properly explained to you. It is not just narrowness or prejudice, this opposition of mine to your going upon the stage. You remember, dear, why your father left Ireland and came here to live in these New

Hampshire hills. And you know you are not so strong as Mollie, and I used to be afraid that you had less judgment. Recently, however, you have seemed stronger and more poised. And I had almost decided before I came in to you tonight, that if in another year you are still sure that you wish to make the stage your profession, I shall not stand in the way of your giving it a fair trial. You don't know, but in your father's family not so many years ago there was a great actress. She ran away from home and her people never forgave her. I don't even know what became of her. Nothing like that must ever happen between you and me." Mrs. Wharton kissed Polly good night. "Have faith in me, dear, for I have understood the ambition and the heart-burning you have suffered better than you dreamed. I shall go to see Miss Adams again tomorrow. If you must try your wings some day, perhaps there could be no better beginning than that you should learn to know intimately one woman who has fought through most of the difficulties of one of the hardest professions in the world and has earned for herself the right kind of fame and fortune."

CHAPTER III

Farewells

Polly O'Neill was entertaining at a farewell reception. April had passed away and May and it was now the first week in June. In a few days more she would be sailing for Southampton with Miss Margaret Adams to be gone all summer. The party was not a large one, for Polly had preferred having only her most intimate friends together this afternoon.

So of course the old members of the Sunrise Hill Camp Fire Club were there and a few outside people, besides the group of young men who had always shared their good times.

Moreover, the past two years had given the old Camp Fire Club an entirely new distinction, since one of its girl members had recently married.

At this moment she was approaching Polly O'Neill, and Polly held out both hands in welcome, as she had not seen the newcomer since the return from her wedding journey. Edith Norton it was, who was dressed, as she had always hoped to be, in a costume that neither Betty nor Rose Dyer could have improved upon, a soft blue crêpe with a hat of the same color and a long feather curling about its brim. For Edith had confessed her fault to her employer soon after her difficulty in the last story and had been forgiven. And, as a good-by present to Betty Ashton, she had promised never to have anything more to do with the young man of whom her Camp Fire friends had disapproved. The result was that she had married one of the leading dry goods merchants in Woodford, and hard times and Edith were through with each other forever.

Now her cheeks were flushed with happiness instead of the color that she had used in the days before her membership in the Camp Fire Club, and her pretty light hair made a kind of halo about her face.

"Apoi-a-kimi," Polly smiled at her guest, "you have not forgotten our Indian name for you, have you, Mrs. Keating, now that you are the first of us to acquire an altogether new name?"

Edith shook her head with perhaps more feeling than she might have been expected to show and at the same time touching an enameled pin which she wore fastened on her dress she said: "I am a Camp Fire girl once and forever, no matter how old I may become! And I never needed or understood the value of our experiences together so much as I do now. Tell Betty for me, please, that I sometimes think it is to our Camp Fire Club that I owe even my husband. He could not possibly have liked me had he known me before those good old times. So since Betty brought me into the club and has stood by me always – "

With a smile Polly now made a pretense of putting her fingers to her ears; nevertheless she glanced around with a kind of challenging amusement at the half a dozen or more friends who were standing near, as she interrupted her visitor.

"Betty! Betty!" she exclaimed. "I have been wondering the greater part of this afternoon whether this is a farewell party to me or an opportunity to send messages to Betty Ashton." Purposely Polly waited until she was able to catch John Everett's eye, for he stood talking to Eleanor Meade only a few feet away. John pretended not to have heard her. He had only returned to Woodford for the week in order to see his father and sister, for he had graduated at Dartmouth some time before and was now in a broker's office in New York City. And already he was under the impression that he had attained the distinction of a New York millionaire and that his presence in Woodford was a unique experience for his former village acquaintances. So he was now being extremely kind to his sister Meg's old friends, although it was, of course, absurd for any one to presume that he had more than a passing, pleasant recollection of any girl whom he had ever known in Woodford.

All this that he was thinking Polly appreciated when she had watched the young man's face for less than half a moment. And as she had a reprehensible fondness for getting even with persons, she then registered a private vow to let Betty hear just how much John Everett had changed.

However, she had but scant time to devote to this resolution, for almost at the same instant another young man, excusing himself from his sister, walked toward her with an expression which was rarely anything except grave and reserved.

Polly spoke to him with especial pleasure. For the past two years had changed not only her attitude toward Anthony Graham, but that of a good many other persons in Woodford.

Two years can be made to count for a great deal at certain times in one's life and Anthony had made the past two do for him the work of four. He was no longer an office boy and student in Judge Maynard's office, for he had graduated at law and was now helping the old man with the simpler part of his practice. And because Judge Maynard was seventy and childless he had taken a liking to Anthony and had asked him to live in his home, for the sake of both his protection and his society. And this perhaps was a forward step for the young fellow which the people in the village appreciated even more than the boy's own efforts at self-improvement; for Judge Maynard was eccentric and wealthy and no one could foretell what might happen in the future.

Edith had moved away to make room for the newcomer, so that Polly and her guest stood apart from the others.

Anthony was as lean as ever, although it was the leanness of muscular strength, not weakness; his skin was dark and clear and his hazel eyes gazed at one frankly, almost too directly. One had the sensation that it might be difficult to conceal from him anything that he really wished to know.

"Miss Polly," he began rather humbly, "I wonder if you would be willing to do a favor for me?" He smiled, so that the lines about his mouth became less grave. "Oh, I have not forgotten that you did not altogether approve of Miss Betty's friendship for me when I came back to Woodford, and I do not blame you."

"It was not Betty's friendliness for you that I minded," Polly returned with a directness that was very often disconcerting.

The young man reddened and then laughed outright. "I thought it better to put it that way, but if you must have the truth, of course I know it was my liking for her to which you objected. But look here, Miss Polly, no one knew of my admiration except you. So I suppose you know also that every once in a while in these past two years Miss Betty has written me a letter – perhaps half a dozen in all. So now I want you to take her something from me. It does not amount to much, it is only a tiny package that won't require a great deal of room in your trunk. Still I have not the courage to send it her directly and yet I want her to know that I have never forgotten that what she did for me gave me my first start. I have improved a little in these past two years, don't you think? Am I quite so impossible as I used to be?"

Polly frowned in reply; but she reached forward for the small parcel that Anthony was extending toward her.

"Look here, Anthony," she protested, "for goodness sake don't make a mountain out of a molehill, as the old saying goes. Betty Ashton did not do anything more for you than she has done for dozens of other persons when she could afford it, not half as much. So please cease feeling any kind of obligation to her; she would hate it. And don't have any other feeling either. Goodness only knows how these past two years in foreign lands may have altered the Princess! Very probably she will even refuse to have anything to do with me, if ever Miss Adams and I do manage to arrive in Germany."

Polly ended her speech in this fashion with the intention of making it seem a trifle less impertinent. However, Anthony appeared not to have understood her. Nevertheless, having been trained in a difficult school in life perhaps he had the ability for not revealing his emotions on all occasions.

For Herr Crippen and Mrs. Crippen, Betty's father and stepmother, were at this moment trying to shake hands with him. Herr Crippen looked much more prosperous and happy since his marriage to the girls' first Camp Fire Guardian. He had now almost as many music pupils in Woodford as he had time to teach, while Miss McMurtry had lost every single angular curve that had once been supposed by the girls to proclaim her an old maid for life and as Mrs. Crippen was growing almost as stout and housewifely as a real German Frau.

In the interval after Anthony's desertion, as Mrs. and the Herr Professor had already spent some time in talking with her, Polly found herself alone.

She was a little tired and so glanced about her for a chair. Her mother and Mollie were both in the dining room as well as Sylvia, who had come home for a week to say farewell to her beloved step-sister. But before Polly could locate a chair for herself, she observed that two were being pushed toward her from opposite sides of the room. Therefore she waited, smiling, to find out which should arrive first. Then she sank down into the one that John Everett presented her, thanking Billy Webster for his, which had arrived a second too late.

Excitement always added to Polly O'Neill's beauty, and so this afternoon she was looking unusually pretty. As it was the month of June she wore a white organdie dress with a bunch of red roses pinned at her belt and one caught in the coiled braids of her dark hair.

She had been perfectly friendly with Billy, even more so than usual, since their April talk. For having her own way made Polly delightfully amiable to the whole world. Billy, however, had not responded to her friendliness. He was still deeply opposed to her going away with Miss Adams. And though he was doggedly determined to have his own will in the end, he seemed to have lost all his former interest and pleasure in being often at the Wharton home. For not only was Polly in what he considered a seventh heaven of selfish happiness at her mother's change of mind, but Mollie no longer treated him with her former intimacy. She was friendly and sweet-tempered, of course, but she never asked his advice about things as she once had, nor seemed to care to give him a great amount of her time. Instead she appeared to be as fond of Frank Wharton and as dependent upon him as though he had been in reality her own brother. And Frank having recently returned to Woodford to live, had gone into business with his father. Truly Billy felt that he had not deserved the situation in which he now found himself. Of course one might have expected anything from so uncertain a quantity as Polly, but to Mollie he had been truly attached and she had been to him like a little sister. So it was difficult to comprehend what had now come between them.

Billy had no special fancy for playing third person and remaining to talk to Polly and John Everett, so considering that both his chair and his presence were unnecessary, he moved off in the direction of the dining room.

Polly smiled up at her latest companion with two points of rather dangerous light at the back of her Irish blue eyes. Then she let her glance travel slowly from the tips of John Everett's patent leather shoes, along the immaculate expanse of his frock coat and fluted shirt, until finally it reached the crown of his well-brushed golden brown hair.

"It must be a wonderful feeling, John, to be so kind of – glorious!" Polly exclaimed, in a perfectly serious manner.

"Glorious," John frowned; "what do you mean?" He was an intelligent, capable fellow, but not especially quick.

"Oh, don't you feel that you are giving poor little Woodford a treat every now and then by allowing it the chance of beholding so perfect an imitation of a gentleman. I don't mean imitation, John, that does not sound polite of me. Of course I mean so perfect a picture. I have been feasting my eyes on you whenever I have had the opportunity all afternoon. For I want to tell Betty Ashton when I see her who is the most distinguished-looking person among us. And of course – "

John flushed, though he laughed good-naturedly. "What a horrid disposition you still have, Polly O'Neill. One would think that you were now old enough to make yourself agreeable to your

superiors." He stooped, for whether by accident or design, the girl had dropped a small paste-board box on the floor.

"This is something or other that Anthony Graham is sending over to Betty Ashton," Polly explained with pretended carelessness. "I suppose you can remember Betty?"

But John Everett was at the present moment engaged in extracting a small pin from the lapel of his coat. "Don't be ridiculous, Polly, and don't impart your impressions of me to Betty, if you please. Just ask her if she will be good enough to accept this fraternity pin of mine in remembrance of old times."

CHAPTER IV

Unter den Linden

A tall girl with red hair and a fair skin, carrying a roll of music, was walking alone down the principal street in Berlin. She did not look like a foreigner and yet she must have been familiar with the sights of the city. For although the famous thoroughfare was crowded with people, some of them on foot, the greater number in carriages and automobiles, she paid them only a casual attention and finally found herself a seat on a bench under a tall linden tree near the monument of Frederick the Great. Here she sighed, allowing the discouragement which she had been trying to overcome for some little time to show in every line of her face and figure.

She was not handsome enough to attract attention for that reason, and she had too much personal dignity to suffer it under any circumstances. So now she seemed as much alone as if she had been in her own sitting room.

Only once was she startled out of the absorption of her own thoughts. And then there was a sudden noise near the palace of the Emperor; carriages and motor cars paused, crowding closer to the sidewalks; soldiers stood at attention, civilians lifted their hats. And a moment afterwards an automobile dashed past with a man on the back seat in a close fitting, military suit, with a light cape thrown back over one shoulder, his head slightly bowed and his arms folded across his chest. He had an iron-gray mustache, waxed until the ends stood out fiercely, dark, haughty eyes, and an intensely nervous manner. And on the doors of his swiftly moving car were the Imperial Arms of Germany.

The girl felt a curious little thrill of admiration and antagonism. For although she had seen him more than a dozen times before, the Kaiser Wilhelm could hardly pass so near to one without making an impression. And although the American girl was not in sympathy with many of his views, she could not escape the interest which his personality has excited throughout the civilized world.

But a moment after the street grew quiet once more and she returned to her own reflections.

In spite of her pallor she did not seem in the least unhealthy, only tired and down-hearted. For her eyes, though light in color, were clear and bright, and the lips of her large, firmly modeled mouth bright red. She wore a handsome and becoming gray cloth dress and a soft white blouse, her gray hat having a white feather stuck through a band of folded silk. The coolness and simplicity of her toilet was refreshing in the warmth of the late June day and a pleasant contrast to the brighter colors affected by the German Frauen and Fräulein.

Finally the girl opened her roll of music and taking out a sheet began slowly reading it over to herself. Then her dejection appeared to deepen, for eventually the tears rolled down her cheeks. She continued holding up her music in order to shield herself from observation. Even when she was disturbed by hearing some one sit down beside her on the bench, she did not dare turn her head.

But the figure deliberately moved closer and before she could protest had actually taken the sheet of paper out of her hands.

"Esther, my dear, what is the matter with you? Have you no home and no friends, that you have to shed your tears in the public streets?" a slightly amused though sympathetic voice demanded.

Naturally Esther started. But the next instant she was shaking her head reproachfully. "Dr. Ashton, however in the world did you manage to discover me?" she demanded. "I am resting here for the special pleasure of being miserable all by myself. For I knew if I went back to the pension Betty and your mother would find me out. And the worst of it is that neither one of them understands in the least why I am unhappy. Betty is really angry and I am afraid that Mrs. Ashton thinks I am stupid and ungrateful."

Instead of replying, Richard Ashton picked up Esther's hand and slipped it through his own arm. He looked a good deal older than his companion. For he was now a graduated physician with

three years of added foreign experience, and besides his natural seriousness he wore the reserved, thoughtful air peculiar to his profession. So his present attitude toward Esther Crippen seemed that of an older friend.

"I don't know what you are talking about or what dark secret you seem to be trying to conceal," he returned. "All that I do know is that I have been sent out to find you and that you are please to come home with me. Betty and mother have been expecting you to return from your music lesson for an hour. And Betty is so in the habit of getting herself lost or of mixing up in some adventure where she does not belong, that she is convinced a like fate has overtaken you. Then I believe that something or other has happened which she has not confided to me, but which she is dying to tell you. There are times, Esther, when I wish that our sister, Betty, was not quite so pretty. I am always afraid that some day or other these German students, whom she seems to have for her friends, will be involved in a duel over her. And if that happens I shall very promptly send her home."

Dick and Esther had now left the broad, park-like square and had turned into a narrower side street adjoining it. Ordinarily any such suggestion concerning Betty would have aroused Esther's immediate interest and protest. However, whatever was now on her mind was troubling her too much for her to pay any real attention to what Dick had just said. So they walked on for another block in silence, until finally Esther spoke in her old timid, hesitating manner, quite unconsciously locking her hands together, as she had on that day, long ago, of her first meeting with Richard Ashton.

"I am sorry to be so stupid and unentertaining. It was good of you to come and look for me," she began apologetically. "I wish I could stop thinking of what troubles me, but somehow I can't. For Betty will insist on my doing a thing that I simply know I shall not be able to do. And I do hate having to argue."

They were still some distance from the German pension where Dick, his mother and sister and Esther were boarding, so the young man did not make haste to continue their conversation, as he and Esther knew each other too intimately to consider silences.

"Look here, Esther," Richard Ashton finally began, "you know that Betty considers me the worst old gray-beard and lecturer on earth. So I am going to be true to my reputation and lecture you. Why do you allow yourself to be so much influenced by Betty? Don't you realize every now and then that you are the older and that the Princess ought to come around to your way of thinking? Why don't you tell her this time that *you* are right and she is wrong and that you won't hear anything more on the subject that is worrying you."

Esther laughed, swerving suddenly to get a swift view of the earnest face of her companion. How often he had befriended her, ever since those first days of shy misery and rapture when she had made her original appearance in the Ashton home, little realizing then that the Betty whom she already adored was her own sister.

"I am not really afraid of the Princess, you know, Mr. Dick," she replied, laughing and using an odd, old-fashioned title that she had once given him. "The truth is that if you were able to guess what I have on my mind you might also disagree with me. Because in this particular instance there is a possibility that Betty may be right in her judgment and I in the wrong."

They had walked by this time a little distance beyond the crowded portion of the big city. Now the houses were private residences and boarding places. Finally they stopped before a tall yellow building, five stories in height, with red and yellow flowers growing in a narrow strip along its front. Before an open window on the third floor a girl could be seen sitting with a book in her lap. But she must have become at once aware of the presence of the young man and his companion, because the instant that Dr. Ashton's hand touched the door knob, she disappeared.

CHAPTER V

Changes

Dick Ashton's laughing wish that his sister Betty were a little less pretty was not so unreasonable as you might suppose, had you seen her on this particular late June afternoon as she ran down the narrow, ugly hall of the German pension to greet her brother and sister.

She had on a pale blue muslin dress open at the throat with a tiny frill of lace. Her red bronze hair had coppery tones in it as well as pure gold and was parted a little on one side and coiled up in the simplest fashion at the back of her head. The darkness of her lashes and the delicate lines of her brows gave the gray of her eyes a peculiar luster like the shine on old silk. And this afternoon her cheeks were the deep rose color that often accompanies this especial coloring.

She put one arm around Esther, drawing her into their sitting room, while Dick followed them. It was an odd room, a curious mixture of German and American taste and yet not unattractive. The ceiling was high, the furniture heavy and dark, and the walls covered with a flowered yellow paper. But the two girls had removed the paintings of unnatural flowers and fruits that once decorated them, and instead had hung up framed photographs of the famous pictures that had most pleased them in their visits to different art galleries. There was Franz Hals' "Smiling Cavalier" gazing down at them with irresistible camaraderie in his eyes which followed you with their smile no matter in what portion of the room you chanced to be. On an opposite wall hung a Rembrandt painting of an old woman, and further along the magical "Mona Lisa." In all the history of art there is no more fascinating story than that relating to this great picture by Leonardo da Vinci. For the woman who was the original of the picture was a great Italian princess whom many people adored because of her strange beauty. She had scores of lovers of noble blood and lowly, but no one is supposed to have understood the secret of her inscrutable smile, not even the artist who painted it. This picture was first the property of Italy and then carried away to hang for many years in the most celebrated room in the great gallery of the Louvre in Paris. From there it was stolen by an Italian workman, taken back into Italy and later restored to the French Government. But before Mona Lisa's return to her niche in the Louvre she made a kind of triumphal progress through the great cities of her former home, Rome, Florence and Venice. And in each place men, women and little children came flocking in thousands to pay their tribute to beauty. And so for those of us who think of beauty as a passing, an ephemeral thing, there is this lesson of its universal, its eternal quality. For the smile of one woman, dead these hundreds of years, yet fixed by genius on a square of canvas, can still stir the pulses of the world.

Betty happened to be standing under this picture as she helped Esther remove her coat and hat. And though there was nothing mysterious in her youthful, American prettiness, there is always a poignant and appealing quality in all beauty. Esther suddenly leaned over and placing her hands on both her sister's cheeks, kissed her.

"What have you been doing alone all day?" she asked. "Was your mother well enough to go out with you?"

Betty shook her head without replying and, though Esther saw nothing, Dick Ashton had an idea that his sister was merely waiting for a more propitious time for the account of her own day. For she asked immediately after: "What difference in the world does it make, Esther Crippen, what I have been doing? The thing I wish to know this instant is whether Professor Hecksher has asked you to sing at his big concert with his really star singers? And if he has asked you what did you answer?"

"So that was what was worrying you, Esther?" Dick said and walked over to the high window, pretending to look out.

For Esther was beginning to grow as pale and wretched as she had been an hour before and was once more twisting her hands together like an awkward child.

Betty caught her sister's hands, holding them close. "Tell me the truth," she insisted.

First the older girl nodded, as though not trusting herself to speak and then said: "Yes, Professor Hecksher *has* asked me. He wants me to make my musical *début* even though I go on studying afterwards. But I can't do it, Betty dear. I wish you and the Professor would both understand. I appreciate his thinking I can sing well enough, but it is not true. I should break down; my voice would fail utterly. Oh, I am sorry I ever came abroad to study. I have been realizing for months and months that my voice is not worth the trouble and expense father and the rest of you have taken. I am simply going to be a disappointment to all of you."

"Esther, you are a great big goose!" Betty exclaimed indignantly. "I thought we ended this discussion last night and you decided to let Professor Hecksher judge whether or not you could sing. One would think he might know, as he is the biggest singing teacher in Berlin. And certainly if you don't sing I shall die of disappointment. And I *shall* believe that you are ungrateful to father and to – to all of us."

She was obliged to break off, for Esther had left the room.

Then Dick swung around, facing his sister. "Look here, Betty," he began more angrily than she had often heard him speak. "Has it ever occurred to you that you may all be forcing Esther into a life for which she is not fitted, which will never make her happy? Of course there is no denying her talent; her voice is wonderful and grows more so each day. But she is intensely shy. She hates notoriety and strange people – everything that a musical life must mean. I don't think that you ought to insist upon her singing at this special concert if she does not wish it. You do not understand her."

Utter amazement during her brother's long speech kept Betty silent. For it was too absurd that any one should seriously suggest Esther's turning her back on the big opportunity for which she had been working for the past two years. Why, for what other purpose had they come to Germany? And for Esther to be invited to sing at Professor Hecksher's annual autumn concert was to have the seal of his approval set upon her ability. For of course the great man selected from his pupils only those whose appearance in public would reflect credit upon him. And often an appearance at one of these much-talked-of recitals meant the beginning of a musical reputation in the outside world. So Betty stared at her brother curiously, at loss to appreciate his point of view. She felt offended, too, at the tone he had just taken with her.

"So you think you understand Esther better than I do, Dick?" she answered slowly. "I suppose you and Esther must have talked this matter over on your way home. Certainly it is Esther's own choice and I shall say nothing more about it. And I'll ask mother not to mention the subject either." Betty picked up a small piece of embroidery lying on a table near by and began sewing industriously, keeping her face bent over it so as to hide her flushed cheeks and the light in her eyes. For Betty had not forgotten her Camp Fire training in self-control. Besides, she did not like quarreling with her brother. Dick was ordinarily so reasonable, she felt even more mystified than hurt by his behavior. It was so unlike him to argue that one should turn back from a long-sought goal just because there were difficulties to be overcome. Had he not fought through every kind of obstacle for the sake of his profession?

The silence in the room was interrupted only by the ticking of a Swiss clock, until finally a deep gong sounded from below stairs. It might easily have given the impression that the house was on fire, but as neither Dick nor Betty appeared surprised, it was plainly a summons to the early dinner, which is so important a feature of German pension life.

Folding up her work Betty moved quietly toward the door. But she had only gone a few steps when she heard Dick coming after her. Then in spite of trying her best to hurry from the room, he caught up with her, putting his arms about her.

"Tell me you are sorry, Princess, or you shan't have any dinner," he demanded. For it had been a fashion of theirs years before when they were children to have the offender pretend to demand an

apology from the offended. But Betty did not feel in the mood for jesting at present and so shook her head.

Then Dick met her gaze with an expression so unusual that Betty instantly felt her resentment fading.

"Perhaps I was wrong in what I said just then, little sister, I don't feel sure," he apologized. "But at least I realize that you wish Esther to gain fame and fortune for her own sake and not for yours. I was only wondering which makes a woman happier in the end, a home or a career? Now please relate me your day's experience, which you have been keeping such a profound secret, so that I may know I am forgiven."

"It is too late now," Betty returned, slipping away from his grasp. "I must find out whether mother is coming down to dinner. Perhaps I may tell you afterwards."

CHAPTER VI

A Cosmopolitan Company

Sitting opposite Betty at the dinner table were the two German youths to whom Dick most objected. And yet they were totally unlike both in appearance and position. For one of them was apparently a humble person, with long light hair hanging in poetic fashion below his shirt collar, a big nose and small, hungry, light-blue eyes that seemed always to be swimming in a mist of embarrassment. He was a clerk in a bank and occupied the smallest room on the highest floor of the pension. So it would have been natural enough to suppose from his manner and behavior that he was of plebeian origin. But exactly the opposite was the case. For the landlady, Mrs. Hohler, who was herself an impoverished gentlewoman, had confided to Mrs. Ashton that the strange youth was in reality of noble birth. He had an uncle who was a count, and though this uncle had one son, the nephew Frederick stood second in the line of succession. To Richard Ashton, however, this added nothing to the young man's charms, nor did it make him the less provoked over Frederick von Reuter's attitude toward Betty. Nevertheless he rather preferred Frederick, who seemed utterly without brains, to her second admirer, Franz. For Franz was dark and aggressive and had an extremely rich father, a merchant in Hamburg. Also Franz hoped to be able to purchase a commission in the German army, so that already he was assuming the dictatorial, disagreeable manner for which many German officers are unpleasantly distinguished.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.