

Speed Nell

The Carter Girls' Week-End Camp



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	7
CHAPTER III	12
CHAPTER IV	17
CHAPTER V	22
CHAPTER VI	25
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	26

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CHAPTER I

A LETTER

From Douglas Carter to her mother, Mrs. Robert Carter

Greendale, Va., August – , 19 – .

My darling Mother:

Words cannot express the joy and gratitude all of us feel that father is really getting well. I shall never forget the miserable time last spring when Dr. Wright came into the library where Helen and Nan and Lucy and I were sitting and told us of his very serious condition. I had felt he was in a very bad way but did not realize it was quite so dreadful. I am sure you did not, either. And when Dr. Wright said that you must take him on a long sea voyage and we understood that we were to be left behind, the bottom seemed to drop out of the universe.

And now, dear mother, I have a confession to make: You took for granted we were going to the springs when we wrote we were to spend the summer in the mountains, and we thought with all the worry you had about father, perhaps it was best to let you go on thinking it. Of course you did not dream of the necessity of our doing anything to make money as father had never told you much about his finances. Well, mother dear, there was about \$80 in the bank in father's private account. Fortunately for the business, which Mr. Lane and Dick have carried on to the best of their ability, there was some more in another account, but we have managed without touching that. I hope I am not going to shock you now, but you shall have to know it – we have rented our lovely home, furnished, for six months with privilege of a year, and we have sold the car, dismissed the servants – all but Susan and Oscar, who are up here at Greendale with us. This is what might shock you: We are running a week-end boarding camp here in the mountains and the really shocking part of it is – we are making money!

It was a scheme that popped into Helen's head and it seemed such an excellent one that we fell to it, and with dear Cousin Lizzie Somerville chaperoning us and Lewis Somerville protecting us, we have opened our camp and actually would have to turn away boarders except that the boys are always willing to sleep out-of-doors and that makes room for others not so inclined.

We see Dr. Wright quite often. He comes up for the Sunday in his car whenever he can spare the time. He has been kindness itself and has helped us over many rough places. There have been times when we have been downhearted and depressed over you and father, and then it has been his office to step in and reassure us that father was really getting better. He and Bobby are sworn friends and there is nothing Bobby will not do for him – even keep himself clean.

We are well. Indeed, the mountain air has done wonders for all of us. Helen is working harder than any of us, but is the picture of health in spite of it. Nan is more robust than she has ever been in her life. I think the tendency she has always had to bronchitis has entirely disappeared. Dr. Wright says it is sleeping out-of-doors that has fixed her. Lucy has grown two inches, I do believe. She has been very sweet and helpful and as happy as the day is long with her chum Lil Tate here for the whole summer. Mrs. Tate brought her up for a week-end and the child has been with us now for over two months. We have two boys of fifteen who are here for the summer, too, Frank Maury and

Skeeter Halsey. They are a great comfort to me as I feel sure Lucy and Lil will be taken care of by these nice boys.

Of course, the original idea of our camp was to have only week-end boarders, but we find it very nice to have some steadies besides as that means a certain fixed amount of money, but I am not going to let you worry your pretty head about money. We have a perennial guest, also – none other than pretty, silly Tillie Wingo. She came to the opening week-end and proved herself to be such a drawing card for the male sex that we decided it would be good business to ask her to visit us indefinitely. It was Nan's idea. You know Tillie well enough to understand that she is always thoroughly good-natured and kind without being helpful in any way. All she has to do is look pretty and chatter and giggle. Of course she must dance, and she does that divinely. She is a kind of social entertainer, and the number of youths who swarm to Week-End Camp because of her would astonish you. She is certainly worth her keep. Here I am touching on finances again when I did not mean to at all.

We are so happy at the thought of having you and father with us for the rest of the summer. Dr. Wright thinks the life here will be almost as good for father as that on shipboard, provided the week-enders do not make too much racket for him. If they do, we are to have a tent pitched for him out of ear-shot. Poor Cousin Lizzie Somerville is very happy over your coming because it will release her. Her duties as chaperone have not been very strenuous, but the life up here has been so different from anything she has ever had before that it has been hard on her, I know, harder than she has ever divulged, I am sure. Now she can go to her beloved springs and play as many games of cards as she chooses.

Dr. Wright says it would be better for you not to go to Richmond at all before coming here, as father might want to go to work again, and it is very important for him to be kept from it for many months yet. He is to meet you in New York and bring you straight to Greendale. I can go down to Richmond with you after we get father settled here, and we can get what clothes you want for the mountains. We have everything in the way of clothes stored at Cousin Lizzie Somerville's.

It is very lovely here at Greendale, and I do hope you and father will like it as much as we have. Dr. Wright will tell you more about it when he meets you in New York on Wednesday. I am sending this letter by him as it seems safer than to trust to Uncle Sam.

We only hope the life up here will not be too rough for you. We will do all we can to smooth it for you; but a camp is a camp, you know, dear mother. Our best love to father.

Your loving daughter,

Douglas.

CHAPTER II

THE RETURN

“Oh, Douglas, I’m all of a tremble!” declared Helen Carter, as she knotted her jaunty scarlet tie and settled her gray felt hat at exactly the proper angle. “To think that they are really coming back!”

“I can hardly believe it. The time has gone quickly and still it seems somehow as though we had been living in this camp for ages. I am afraid it will go hard with the poor little mother.”

“Cousin Lizzie stood it and she is years and years older than mother,” and Helen looked critically at her dainty nose and rubbed a little powder on it.

“Yes, I know, but Cousin Lizzie is made of sterner stuff than poor little mumsy. I think that mother is the kind of woman that men would fight to protect but when all is told that Cousin Lizzie is the kind who would go out and help fight if need be. I can fancy her loading rifles and handing them to the men – ”

“So can I,” laughed Helen, “and saying as she loaded: ‘To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven; a time to kill and a time to heal.’”

“I am ashamed of myself – but somehow I am glad Cousin Lizzie did not think it was her duty to defer her going until mother and father got here. She has been splendid and too good to us for anything, but it is a kind of relief for her to be out of the cabin and away before they come,” said Douglas as she completed her rapid dressing by pulling an old khaki hat down over her rather refractory, if very lovely Titian hair.

“I know just what you mean. I hoped all the time she would realize that the morning train was much the better one for her to get off on, and then she could reach the springs in time for an afternoon game. It was a feeling I had that she might be too critical of poor little mumsy. You see we don’t know just how camp life is going to appeal to mumsy,” said Helen.

“Exactly! It may take her a while to get used to it,” and Douglas let a little sigh escape her. “I wish they could have arrived on any other day than Friday. Our week-ends in August have been so full. I fancy many of the week-enders will want to stay on for holidays, too.”

“If it is only not too much for father. Dr. Wright thinks it won’t be. He says noise in the open air is so different from housed noises for nervous persons.”

A honk from the faithful old mountain goat, a name they had given the ancient Ford that Bill Tinsley had contributed to the camp’s use, warned them it was time to start for the station. One more dab of powder on Helen’s nose completed her toilet and calling to Nan and Lucy to pile in, they started their ever perilous descent of the mountain to Greendale.

Bobby, who had been captured by a determined Susan and washed and dressed in honor of his returning parents, was occupying the seat of state in Josh’s cart, clean but indignant at the outrage committed.

“Tain’t no sense in washin’. I mos’ wisht I’d been born a pig. If I had, I betcher I’d a been a pet pig an’ some fool woman would er wanted to curl my tail and tie a bow ’round my neck.”

Such pessimism was too much for Josh, who shook with laughter as the slab-sided mule, Josephus, limped cheerfully down the mountain road.

To think that mother and father were really coming! The Carter girls lined themselves along the little station awaiting the train bearing the beloved passengers. What a healthy-looking quartette they were after a whole summer in the open. Douglas’ fair skin was reddened from exposure and her hair showed the lack of care that her mother had always exacted. Douglas attached very little importance to her appearance, and was constantly being put to rights by the more correct Helen. Even now, as they waited for the train, Helen was regretting that she had permitted her older sister to wear the very disgraceful-looking khaki hat.

“Khaki color is certainly unbecoming to blondes,” she thought. “I do want Douglas to look her best for mother. Father will think all of us are beautiful, anyhow, no matter what we wear,” and Helen could not help a feeling of satisfaction over her own very becoming cold-gravy costume with the touch of scarlet at her throat. It had seen much service but still had that unmistakable air of style that was characteristic of all of Helen Carter’s belongings.

Nan was quite robust-looking for Nan. She had inherited from her mother that soft black hair and those dusky eyes and a complexion of wondrous fairness that is seen sometimes in a rare type of Creole beauty. Mrs. Carter’s almost angelic beauty (her few enemies called it doll-like) was repeated in her daughter in a somewhat more sturdy edition. Nan’s mouth was larger and her eyes not quite so enormous; her nose a bit broader at the base and her chin squarer. Her attractive countenance showed a mixture of poetic feeling and sturdy common sense with a plentiful seasoning of humor and gave promise of her development into a very enchanting woman. All Nan asked of life was plenty of books and time to read them and a cloak of invisibility so that she would not be noticed. She was gradually overcoming the shyness that had always made her think that next to a cloak of invisibility the greatest boon her fairy godmother could grant her would be seven-league boots, so that she could get away from all embarrassing persons even if she could not hide from them. The summer of camping had certainly taken from her the look of fragility that had always been a source of uneasiness to her father but which her beautiful mother had rather prided herself on as it was in her eyes a mark of race and breeding.

Lucy Carter, the youngest of the four, was developing rapidly into a very attractive girl. Her resemblance to Helen was growing more marked, much to her pretended disgust, but to her secret delight. Already her long legs had shot her saucy head up to within a level of Helen’s, which made the younger sister ecstatically confident of her equality with the elder, whom in her heart of hearts she considered a paragon of perfection but with whom she was usually on sparring terms.

Bobby, the idolized little brother, had changed more than any of the Carters during that summer. He had lost forever the baby curves and had taken on a lean, wiry spareness. His almost unearthly beauty was gone by reason of a great gap in his face caused by the loss of his first teeth. One permanent tooth had found its way through and, as is the way with the first permanent tooth, seemed very enormous in contrast to the tiny little pearls that had hitherto passed for teeth. His knees were scarred and scratched as were his lean brown legs. Two sore toes were tied up in dirty rags, having been ministered to by Aunt Mandy, the kind old mountain woman who bore the proud distinction in Bobby’s mind of being the mother of Josh the boy and the owner of Josephus the mule.

“I hear the whistle!” exclaimed Lucy, prancing with excitement.

“So do I, but it is the saw mill over in the hollow,” drawled Nan.

“Won’t it be terrible if the train is late and all the week-enders get here before mother and father?” wailed Helen.

“Awful!” exclaimed Douglas. “If we can only get them settled in the cabin before the hullabaloo begins, maybe it won’t seem so bad to them. I just can’t stand it if the camp is going to be too much for father.”

“I’m most sure he will like it, but it’s mother who will be the one to kick,” said Nan. Kicking was not a very elegant way to express what no doubt would be the state of Mrs. Carter’s mind over the rough camp life.

“She’s a-comin’ now!” shouted Bobby. “I kin hear her a-chuggin’ up grade! Listen! This is what she says: ‘Catch a nigger! Catch a nigger! I’m a-comin’! I’m a-comin’!’” and the scion of the Carter family whistled shrilly through his sparse teeth, an accomplishment that had but recently come to him by reason of his loss.

It was the train and on time, which would give the youthful proprietors of the week-end boarding camp time to get their invalid father and dainty mother safely stowed away in the cabin before the onrush of harum-scarum guests should begin.

“Thank heaven!” was the pious ejaculation of the older girls.

Douglas and Helen felt all the qualms and responsibilities that had been theirs on the opening of the camp at the beginning of the summer. It had proved such a success that confidence had come to them, but now that their parents were to join them, although they were very happy at the thought of seeing them, they had grave doubts about the way in which their mother would look upon their venture and about the ability of their father to endure the noise and confusion.

Dr. Wright, who had gone to New York to meet the steamer, got off first, laden with parcels. Then came Mrs. Carter, looking so young and pretty that her daughters felt suddenly very mature. Mr. Carter followed his wife. He also was laden with bandboxes and bundles, while the grinning porter emerged with some difficulty from under a mass of suitcases, steamer rugs and dress boxes. Lewis Somerville extricated him in time for him to jump on the departing train as it made its laborious way up the steep grade, still singing the song that Bobby had declared it sang: “Catch a nigger! Catch a nigger! I’m a-comin’! I’m a-comin’!”

“My girls! My girls!” Mrs. Carter flew from one to the other like a butterfly who cannot tell which flower to light on, but Robert Carter dropped his parcels and enfolded all of them in a mighty embrace. How lean and brown he was! On sight he seemed like his old self to Helen, who was the first to find her way to his eager arms and the last to leave their encircling shelter. A closer scrutiny of his face, however, told her there was still something wrong. His snap and vim were gone. Intelligence shone from his kind blue eyes and his countenance bespoke contentment and happiness, but his old sparkle and alertness were missing. The overworked nerves had lost their elasticity and a certain power that had been a part of Robert Carter was gone forever. It was the power of leading and directing, taking the initiative. There was something very pathetic about it all, just as though a great general had been reduced to the ranks and must ever after serve as a private. What made it sadder was that he seemed content to follow. Someone else must work out the problem of how to keep his expensive family in all the luxuries they had demanded. It was no longer up to him! That was the way his expression impressed Helen. She escaped from the others and ran behind the little station.

“Father! Father!” she sobbed in an agony of love and misery. “He is not well yet! He never will be!”

“Oh yes, he will,” said a quiet, deep voice. It belonged to George Wright, who had come around the other side of the waiting room after helping Lewis Somerville deposit the luggage in Josh’s cart. “He is much better, better than I dared dream he would be. You see, he has had only four months and I said all the time it would take a year of rest and maybe more. What makes you think he is still so badly off?”

Dr. Wright had a ridiculous notion that he could explain to Helen much better her father’s condition if she would only put her head on his shoulder and do her sobbing there, but he buried his hands firmly in his pockets and made no intimation of his idea. He had constantly to take himself to task for forgetting that Helen was little more than a child. “You must wait, you fool!” he would reason with himself.

“But suppose someone else doesn’t wait and she gets snapped up before your eyes – what then?” But wait he felt he must, and in the meantime Helen often felt that his sternness meant disapproval and wondered what she had done to merit it – that is, what new thing. Of course she always knew she had merited his disapproval by her behavior when he had given the verdict that her father must go off on the voyage for health. And now when he said: “What makes you think he is still so badly off?” he sounded very stern and superior.

“He seems so – so – meek,” she faltered.

“Well, who would not be meek with all those parcels?” he laughed. “Your mother had only part of a day in New York, but she bought out the town. I’m meek myself.”

The conversation was interrupted by Lucy, who was always eager to find out what Helen was doing so she could do it too. When she saw her sister's tear-stained countenance she bitterly regretted her dry eyes but cry she could not, especially as she did not see anything to cry about.

Mrs. Carter, meanwhile, after flitting from daughter to daughter, had cried out: "But Bobby! Where is my precious Bobby?"

"Here me!" said that youngster. "We uns ain't fur."

"Bobby! Bobby! I didn't know you! Where are your teeth? Why did you have your hair cut so short? My baby, my baby!" and the poor little lady enfolded a rather abashed boy in her arms.

"Baby your grandmother! I ain't nobody's baby. We uns is Dr. Wright's shover cept'n when we uns is in the mountings and thin we uns is the 'spressman's sisterant."

"We uns? What do you mean, Bobby?" wailed the mother.

"I say we uns whenever we uns thinks to do it. That's the way mountingyears talks."

"Robert! Robert, look at Bobby and listen to him!"

Mr. Carter did look at Bobby and the remembrance of his own boyhood came back to him and he laughed as he seldom did now-a-days.

"Well, bless my soul, what a great big son I have got!" and he slapped Bobby on the back. "I fancy you are too big to kiss, you rascal!"

"I ain't too big to kiss if you uns comes behind the station where Josh'n Josephus can't see us," and Bobby led his willing parent behind the station where Helen had gone to shed a bitter tear and where Dr. Wright had discovered her and where Lucy had discovered them.

"Oh, shucks! They's too many folks here," he declared.

"Will all of you please step out of the way?" begged Mr. Carter. "Bobby has an important thing to discuss with me and we should like the back of the station to ourselves for a moment."

Left alone, the big man held his little son tight in his arms and in spite of Bobby's boasted manhood he was very happy to be once more hugged and kissed by his father.

Dr. Wright smiled into Helen's reddened eyes and said: "Bobby will do more for your father than anyone else now. If he can be a boy again he will get entirely well."

The many parcels were at last stowed away in the cart and Josh clucked sadly to Josephus.

"I reckon Bobby's done left us all, now that his paw is come," he said sadly to the sympathetic mule. But Bobby came running after him.

"Hi there! Wait, Josh! Father says he would sooner trust his bones to us than that old Tin Lizzie. You'n him'n me can squzzle in on the front seat."

"Sho' we kin!" declared the delighted Josh. He hadn't lost an old friend after all, but gained a new one.

Mr. Carter proved even more agreeable to the little mountain boy than his idol, Lewis Somerville. He had such wonderful things to tell of ships and things and seemed to understand a boy so well. Mr. Somerville was right strict with a fellow, expecting him to be clean all the time and never forget, but somehow, Mr. Carter was a little easier.

"You are frightfully burned, Douglas," complained Mrs. Carter as they finally got themselves stowed away in the faithful mountain goat. "I can't see why you do not protect your skin. Your neck will take months to recover from such a tanning."

"Well, I don't think that will make much difference," laughed Douglas. "I fancy it will be many a day before I go décolleté."

"I don't see that. If you are not going to college, I see no reason why you should not make your debut next winter."

Douglas looked at her mother in amazement. Could it be that even now she did not understand? She said nothing, feeling that it would be wiser to wait until she and her mother were alone. Never having economized in her life, Mrs. Carter did not know the meaning of the word. The many parcels

that were borne from the train gave Douglas a faint feeling. Had her mother been buying things in New York?

“I brought you a perfect love of a hat, darling,” Mrs. Carter chattered on, “but of course you shall have to bleach up a bit for it to be becoming to you. I did not dream you were so burned or I should not have selected such pale trimmings. I have a delightful plan! Since you are to come out next winter, I think a fortnight at the White in late August would be charming – give you that poise that debutantes so often lack. We can leave the children with your father and go together – ”

“But, mother – ”

“Oh, we shan’t go quite yet! I know you want to see your father for a few days before you leave him even for a fortnight.”

Douglas was speechless; Nan, who was crowded in by her, gave her a sympathetic squeeze.

“It is lovely to be with my girls again,” the little lady bubbled on. “Of course your letter was a great surprise to me, Douglas. The idea of my children making money!” and she gave a silvery laugh. “I am delighted that you have, because now no doubt your coming out will be even more delightful than I had anticipated. Of course those persons who are in our house in Richmond will simply have to get out.”

“But, mother – ”

“Simply have to – how can a girl come out suitably unless she is in her own home?”

CHAPTER III

THE PROBLEM

The cabin was looking very sweet and fresh after a thorough cleaning from the willing hands of Susan, who was in a state of bliss because her beloved mistress was returning. Gwen had found some belated Cherokee roses and with a few sprays of honeysuckle added had glorified the plain room.

“You think Miss Lizzie Somerville is el’gant! Well, you jes’ oughter see my missis. She is the mos’ el’gantes’ lady in the whole er Richmond. I bet Mis’ Carter ain’t never in all her life done a han’s turn. Gawd knows what she gonter say ’bout these here young ladies er hern workin’ like they was in service,” Susan remarked to the little English Gwen, who had done many a hand’s turn herself and still had an elegance all her own, so evident that the colored servants recognized her as a “lady bawn.”

“I think it is very wonderful that the Carter girls should be able to work so well when they have never been brought up to it,” said Gwen as she hung the last freshly laundered sash curtain.

“That’s they paw in ’em,” declared Susan. “He is the wuckinest gemman I ever seed. ’Tain’t nothin’ he won’t turn his han’ ter. He don’t never set back and holler fer help when he wants the fire fixed er sech like. No’m, he jes’ jumps up an’ waits on hisself. Sometimes he used ter git Mis’ Carter kinder put out ’cause he’d even do his own reaching at the table. Miss Douglas is the spittin’ image of him. None of the gals favors her much ’cep Miss Nan. She looks like her but she ain’t so langrous like when they’s work on hand. Miss Helen is the same kind er spender as her maw. I believe my soul them two would ruther buy than eat. Cook used ter say that Mis’ Carter an’ Miss Helen spent like we done come to the millionennium. Great Gawd! Here they is an’ I ain’t got on my clean apron. That’s one thing that Mis’ Carter’ll certainly git cross over – aprons.”

She did not, however. Too pleased to see the faithful Susan, Mrs. Carter overlooked the doubtful apron.

“What a charming room! Is this where I am to be? And you girls in the tents beyond? And Bobby – where does Bobby sleep?”

“He is with Lewis Somerville and his friend, Bill Tinsley. I believe he wrote you about Bill,” said Helen, “ – the young man who was shipped from West Point when Lewis was.”

“Oh yes, I remember! I am glad to see you have not let yourself run down like Douglas, my dear. Your hair looks well kept and your complexion is perfect.”

Douglas, much perturbed over her mother’s plans, had rushed off to be alone for a moment to compose herself.

“But, mother, I don’t burn like Douglas, and then Douglas’ hair is so lovely it doesn’t make any difference what she does to it. Mine must be well kept to pass muster. I hope you are not going to find it too rough here for you, mumsy,” and Helen put a protecting arm around the little mother, who was more like a sister, and a younger one at that, than a mother to these great girls.

“Oh, I think it is delightful for a while. Of course I have been on shipboard so long that I really am longing for some society. Did you hear me tell Douglas what my plan is for her and me? I should like to include you, too, but perhaps it would be best for you to wait a year.”

“No, I did not hear; you see the car is such a noisy one that one never can hear. What is your plan?”

“I want to take Douglas to the White for several weeks preparatory to her making her debut this winter.”

“Debut!” gasped Helen. “White Sulphur!”

“Certainly, why not?”

“But, mother, we haven’t money for clothes and things.”

“Nonsense! Our credit is perfectly good. I fancy there is not a man in Richmond who has paid his bills so regularly as Robert Carter, and now that he is not able to work for a few months I feel sure there is not a single tradesman with whom we have always dealt who would not be more than pleased to have us on his books for any amount.”

“I wanted to charge a lot of things I thought we needed, but Douglas just wouldn’t have it. She never does realize the importance of clothes. I don’t mean to criticize Douglas, she is wonderful, but she is careless about clothes.”

“Well, I shall put a stop to that, now that I am back with my children. Your father is so much better I can give my time to other things now. How exciting it will be to have a daughter in society! I never did want Douglas to go to college. What made her give it up? She never did say what her reason was. Letters are very unsatisfactory things when one is on shipboard.”

“It was money, of course,” said Helen. “There was no money for college.”

“Oh, to be sure! I forgot that college takes cash. Well, I am heartily glad she has given it up. I think college girls get too independent. I am dying to show you my purchases in New York.”

“I am dying to see them, too, but, mumsy, I shall have to leave you now and run and do a million things. We have a great crowd of week-enders coming up on the late train.”

“Can’t Susan attend to the things?”

“Oh, Susan does a lot, but I am the chief cook and Douglas is the brains of the concern and looks after all the money and does the buying. Nan attends to all the letter writing, and you would be astonished to see how much she has to do because we have showers of mail about board. Lucy sees to the setting of the tables, and all of us do everything that turns up to be done. Even Bobby helps.”

“How ridiculous! Well, take care of your hands, darling. I hate to see a girl with roughened hands. There is simply no excuse for it.”

Helen was dazed by her mother’s attitude.

“She is just presenting a duck-back to trouble,” thought the girl, looking rather ruefully at her shapely hands which were showing the inevitable signs of work.

She found Douglas sitting in a forlorn heap in their tent. Her countenance was the picture of woe.

“Helen! Helen! What are we to do?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be so bad to take a trip to the White, and you certainly deserve a change. Poor mumsy, too, is bored to death with such a long sea trip and she needs some society.”

“But, honey, the money!”

“Oh, I don’t see that we need worry so about that. Mother says that there is not a tradesman in Richmond who would not be pleased to have us on his books for any amount. I, for one, am longing for some new clothes. I don’t mind a bit working and cooking, but I do think I need some new things – and as for you – why, Douglas, you are a perfect rag bag.”

Douglas looked at her sister in amazement. The lesson, then, was not learned yet! She had thought that Helen understood about the necessity of making no bills as the bills were what had helped to reduce their father to this state of invalidism, but here she was falling into the mother’s way of thinking – willing to plunge into debt to any amount.

“But Dr. Wright – ”

“Oh, always Dr. Wright!”

“But, Helen, you know you like Dr. Wright now and you must trust him.”

“So I do. I like him better and trust him entirely and he himself told me at the station that father was getting well fast. He said it would take a little more time but that he would be perfectly well again – at least that is what I gathered. I know father would be the last man in the world to want his girls to go around looking like ash cats and you know it would make him ill indeed to think that mother wanted to go to White Sulphur for a while and could not go because of lack of money.”

“Of course it would, but surely neither you nor mother would tell him that she wanted to go if you know there is no money to pay for such a trip.”

“But there is money!” exclaimed Helen with some asperity. “You told me yourself that the camp was paying well enough for us to begin to have quite a bank account.”

“Yes – but – ”

“Well now, if we have some money you must think that I have helped to earn it!”

“Why, Helen dear, you have done more than any of us. You are so capable – ”

“I don’t say I have done more, no one could have worked harder than you have – in fact, everybody has worked, but if I have done my share of the work, then I am certainly entitled to my share of the money and I intend to take my share and send mother to White Sulphur for a change. Of course you will simply have to go with her as she has set her heart on it.”

“I will not,” announced Douglas, her girlish face taking on stern determination.

A shout from Bobby heralded the arrival of Josephus with the luggage. The discussion ended for the time being as Douglas and Helen were both needed to prepare for the inroad of week-enders that were to arrive in a few minutes. Mr. Carter alighted from the cart, already looking better. He was most enthusiastic over the camp and all of its arrangements.

“I am going to be your handy man,” he said, putting his arm around Douglas. “Are you well, honey? You look bothered.”

“Oh yes, I am as well as can be,” said Douglas, trying to smooth her wrinkled brow. How she did want to talk all the troubles over with her father, but he of all persons must not be bothered. The old habit of going to him with every worry was so strong that it was difficult to keep from doing it now, but she bit her lips and held it in.

“I’ll tell Lewis,” she thought. “He will at least sympathize.”

What was she to do about her mother and Helen? They seemed to have no more gumption about money than the birds. Even then parcels were being carried into the cabin from the cart that must have meant much money spent in New York. Where did mother get it? The rent from the house in town had been sent to Mrs. Carter for running expenses on shipboard and hotels at the many places where they had stopped, but that must have gone for the trip. Could she have charged the purchases in New York? Poor Douglas! She had felt that the problem of making her sisters see the necessity of economizing had been a great one, but she realized that it was nothing to what she must face now. She felt that all her former arguments had been in vain since Helen was dropping into her mother’s habit of thought and upholding that charming butterfly-like person in all her schemes of extravagance. Lucy was sure to follow Helen’s lead and begin to demand clothes, treats, trips and what-not. Nan, dear sensible, unselfish Nan, would be the only one who would sympathize with her older sister in regard to the necessity of continuing the strict economy they had practiced since early in May, when Dr. Wright had declared that the only thing that would save their father’s reason was an immediate change, a long rest and complete cessation of all business worries.

Nan’s tastes were simple, but she had a passion for color and beautiful textiles and sometimes indulged that taste in adorning her dainty little person. As a rule, however, she was quite satisfied to behold the color in a Persian rug or the wings of a butterfly. Beauty was to the girl the most important thing in life whether it was of line, color, sound or idea. She was perfectly happy with a good book and a comfortable place in which to curl up. Her fault was laziness, a certain physical inertia which her indulgent mother always attributed to her delicate constitution; but the summer in the mountains with the enforced activity had proven that the delicate constitution was due to the inertia and not the inertia to the delicate constitution. Up to that time in her life there had been no especial reason for exerting herself, but Nan was very unselfish and when she realized that her sisters were one and all busying themselves, she threw off her lazy habits as she would an ugly robe, and many tasks at Week-End Camp fell to her share.

Douglas, in this trouble that had arisen, felt that she could go to Nan for comfort and advice. Nan's mind was as normally active as her graceful little body was inactive and she had a faculty of seeing her way through difficulties that the conscientious but more slowly thinking Douglas much envied her.

"Nan, it's fifteen minutes before train time when the week-enders will come piling in – I'm dying to have a talk with you."

"Well, don't die – just talk," drawled Nan, looking up from her book but never stopping turning the crank of the mayonnaise mixer. This was a job Nan loved, making mayonnaise. She had gotten it down to a fine art since she could mix and read at the same time. She declared it was a plain waste of time to use your hands without using your head and since turning a mayonnaise mixer crank required no intelligence beyond that of seeing that the funnel was filled with olive oil, she was able to indulge in her passion for poetry while she was making the quarts of mayonnaise that the young housekeepers dealt out so generously to their week-enders.

"Listen to this!" and Nan turned the crank slowly while she read:

"Alas for all high hopes and all desires!
Like leaves in yellow autumn-time they fall —
Alas for prayers and psalms and love's pure fires —
One silence and one darkness ends them all!"

The crank stopped and all of the oil flowed through the funnel while Nan softly turned the leaves of Marston's "Last Harvest."

"Yes, honey, it is beautiful, but you had better read a livelier form of verse or your salad dressing will go back on you."

"Heavens, you are right! I've got 'Barrack Room Ballads' here ready in case I get to dawdling," laughed Nan.

"I want to talk about something very important, Nan. Can you turn your crank and listen?"

"Yes, indeed, but you'll have to talk fast or else I'll get to poking again. You see, I have to keep time."

So Douglas rapidly repeated the conversations she had had with her mother and later with Helen.

"What are we to do? Must I tell Dr. Wright? I am afraid to get them started for fear father will be mixed up in it. He must not know mother wants to go to White Sulphur – he would be sure to say let her go and then he would try to work again before he is fit for it, and he would certainly get back into the same state he was in last spring."

"Poor little mumsy! I was sure she would not understand," and once more the mixer played a sad measure.

"I was afraid she wouldn't," sighed Douglas, "but I did think Helen had been taught a lesson and realized the importance of our keeping within our earnings and saving something, too, for winter."

"Helen – why, she is too young for the lesson she learned to stick. She is nothing but a child."

"Is that so, grandmother?" laughed Douglas, amused in spite of her trouble at Nan's ancient wisdom (Nan being some two years younger than Helen).

"Why, Douglas, Helen has just been play-acting at being poor. She has no idea of its being a permanency," and Nan filled the funnel again with oil and began to turn her crank with vigor.

"But what are we to do? I am not going to White Sulphur and I am not going to make my debut – that's sure. I have never disobeyed mother that I can remember, but this time I shall have to. I don't know what I am to say about the trip to the White. Helen is saying she has helped to earn the money and she means to spend her share giving poor mumsy a little fun after her tiresome long journey on the water. I wish we had never told her we were able to put something in the bank last month. It was

precious little and Helen's share would not keep them at White Sulphur more than two or three days. Helen thinks I am stingy and mother thinks I am stubborn and ugly and sunburned – and there's the train with all the week-enders – ” and poor Douglas gave a little sob.

“And I have turned my wheel until this old mayonnaise is done – just look how beautiful it is! And you, poor old Doug, must just leave it to me, and I'll think up something to keep them here if I have to break out with smallpox and get them quarantined on the mountain.”

“Oh, Nan! Is there some way out of it without letting father know that mother wants something and cannot have it for lack of money?”

“Sure there is! You go powder your nose and put on a blue linen blouse and give a few licks to your pretty hair while I hand over the mayonnaise to Gwen and see that Lucy has counted noses for the supper tables. I've almost got a good reason already for mumsy's staying here aside from the lack of tin, but I must get it off to her with great finesse.”

“I knew you would help!” and Douglas gave her little sister and the mayonnaise bowl an impartial hug, and then hastened to make herself more presentable, hoping to find favor in the eyes of her fastidious mother.

CHAPTER IV

ROBERT CARTER'S ASTONISHING GIRLS

August, the month for holidays, was bringing much business to the proprietresses of Week-End Camp. Such a crowd came swarming up the mountain now that Lucy, who had set the tables with the assistance of her chum, Lil Tate, and the two sworn knights, Skeeter Halsey and Frank Maury, and had carefully counted noses according to the calculations Nan had made from the applications she had received, had to do it all over to make room for the unexpected guests.

“Just kilt-plait the places,” suggested Lil.

“If they keep on coming we’ll have to accordeon-plait ’em,” laughed Lucy.

“Gee, I’m glad your eats don’t land in your elbows!” from Skeeter.

“Me, too!” exclaimed Frank. “Miss Helen tipped me a wink that there’s Brunswick stew made out of the squirrels we got yesterday. And there is sho’ no elbow room at these tables.”

“Look at ’em swarming up the mountain. Where do you reckon they’ll sleep?” asked Lil.

“Have to roost in the trees.”

“I bet more than half of them didn’t bring their blankets,” hazarded Lucy.

“Yes, that’s the way they do, these town fellows,” said Skeeter, forgetting that he too had been a town fellow only a few weeks before that time.

The summer in the mountains was doing wonders for these youngsters. Sleeping in the open had broadened their chests. They were wiry and tanned and every day brought some new delightful duty that was never called a duty and so was looked upon by all of them as a great game. Theirs was the task of foraging for the camp, and no small job was it to find chickens and vegetables and fruit for the hungry hordes that sought the Week-End Camp for holiday and recreation.

They had found their way to many a remote mountain cabin and engaged all chickens hatched and unhatched. They had spread the good news among the natives that blackberries, huckleberries, peaches, apples, pears and plums were in demand at their camp. Eggs were always needed. Little wild-eyed, tangled-haired children would come creeping from the bushes, like so many timid rabbits, bringing their wares; sometimes a bucket of dewberries or some wild plums; sometimes honey from the wild bees, dark and strong and very sweet, “bumblebee honey,” Skeeter called it. All was grist that came to the mill of the week-enders. No matter how much was provided, there was never anything to speak of left over.

“These hyar white folks is same as chickens,” grumbled old Oscar. “They’s got no notion of quittin’ s’long as they’s any corn lef’ on the groun’.”

“They sho’ kin eat,” agreed Susan, “but Miss Douglas an’ Miss Helen done said we mus’ fill ’em up and that’s what we is hyar fur.”

The above is a conversation that, with variations, occurred during almost every meal at the camp. Oscar and Susan, the faithful servants the Carters had brought from Richmond, were proving more and more efficient now that the first sting of the country was removed and camp life had become a habit with them. They were creatures of habit and imbued with the notion that what was good enough for white folks was good enough for them. Their young mistresses were contented with the life in the camp, so they were, too. Their young mistresses were not above doing any work that came to hand, so they, too, must be willing to do what fell to their lot. Susan forgot the vows she had so solemnly sworn when she became a member of the housemaids’ league, to do housework and nothing else. She argued that a camp wasn’t a house and she could do what she chose. Oscar had, while in town, held himself above any form of labor not conducive to the dignity of a butler serving for many years in the best families. But if Mr. Lewis Somerville and Mr. Bill Tinsley, both of them belonging to fust famblies, could skin squirrels, why then, he, Oscar, must be a sport and skin them, too.

These week-ends in August were hard work for all concerned and now there was talk of some of the guests staying over for much longer and spending two weeks with them. That meant no cessation of fillin' 'em up. Previous to this time, Monday had been a blessed day for all the camp, boarders gone and time to take stock and rest, but now there was to be no let up in the filling process.

Susan, for the time completely demoralized by the return of her beloved mistress, had left her work to whomsoever it might concern and had constituted herself lady's maid for Mrs. Carter. She unpacked boxes and parcels, hovering over the pretty things purchased in New York; she fetched and carried for that dainty lady, ignoring completely the steady stream of week-enders climbing up the mountain or being carried up by the faithful and sturdy mountain goat, with the silent Bill as chauffeur.

Helen had reluctantly torn herself from the delectable boxes and parcels and was busily engaged in concocting a wonderful potato salad, something she always attended to herself. Gwen was making batter bread after having put to rise pan after pan of rolls. Oscar had begun to fry the apples, a dish ever in demand at camp. The Brunswick stew had been safely deposited in the fireless cooker early in the day and all was going well.

"There!" exclaimed Helen, putting the finishing touch to the last huge bowl of salad and stepping back to admire her handiwork. "That substantial salad unites beauty and utility."

"It sho' do, Miss Helen, it sho' do!" declared Oscar, adroitly turning his apples just as they reached the proper stage of almost and not quite being candied. "They's nothin' like tater salad fer contitutioning a foudnation stone on which to build fillin' victuals. It's mo' satisfying to my min' than the staff of life itself. All I is a-hopin' is that they won't lick the platter befo' I gits to it."

"You are safe there, Oscar, as I made this extra dishful to be kept back so you and Susan will be sure to get some."

"Susan, indeed!" sniffed her fellow-servant. "She ain't called on to expect no favors at yo' han'. To be foun' by the wayside, a fallin' down wantin' jes' at this crucible moment!"

"I think she is helping mother."

"Then I's got nothin' to say – but I 'low she helpin' yo' maw with one han' an' Susan Jourdan with yudder."

Mr. Carter and Dr. Wright looked into the kitchen a moment. Dr. Wright had been showing his patient over the camp, as all of the daughters were occupied. Mr. Carter was delighted with the arrangements and amazed at the scope of the undertaking. Could this be his Helen, the queen of the kitchen, attending to the preparation of this great quantity of food? He never remembered before seeing Helen do any more strenuous work than play a corking good game of tennis, and here she was handling a frying pan with the same skill with which she had formerly handled a racquet, looking after the apples while Oscar cracked ice and carried up into the pavilion the great pitchers of cold tea destined to quench the thirst of the week-enders.

Helen was looking wholly lovely in her becoming bungalow apron, with her flushed cheeks and hair a bit dishevelled from the hurry of getting things done without the assistance of the capable Susan. Robert Carter looked in amazement at the great bowls of potato salad and the pans of rolls, being taken from the oven to make room for other pans.

"In heaven's name, what is all this food for?" he asked, laughing.

"Have you seen the week-enders swarming up the mountain?"

"Why yes, but they couldn't eat all this."

"Don't you fool yourself!" and Helen gave her dear father a fried apple hug. She was very happy. The beloved parents were back with them. Dr. Wright assured her that her father was improving. The camp had been her very own idea and it was successful. They were making money and she was going to take her share of the profits and give her mother a trip. She, Helen Carter, only eighteen, could do all of this! She had no idea what the profits amounted to, but Nan and Douglas had only the week before congratulated themselves that they were putting more money in the bank than they were drawing out. She cared nothing for money in the bank except as a means of gratifying the ones she

loved. The poor little mumsy had been shut up on shipboard for months and surely she deserved some recreation. She was astonished at Douglas for being so stingy. It was plain stinginess that would make her think more of having some paltry savings than of wanting to give to their charming, beautiful little mother her heart's desire, so Helen thought.

Dr. Wright was smiling on her, too. He seemed to think she was a very remarkable girl, at least that was what one might gather from his expression as he stood by the kitchen and gazed in through the screening at the bright-eyed, eager young cook.

“Where are the other girls?” asked Mr. Carter.

“Oh, they have a million things to do! We always divide up and spread ourselves over the whole camp when the train gets in. Lucy has just finished setting the tables, and that is some job, I can tell you, but Lil Tate and Frank Skeeter always help. Nan has been making mayonnaise enough to run us over Sunday, and now she has gone with Douglas to receive the week-enders and show them their tents and cots. Douglas is the great chief – she does all the buying and supervising, looks after the comfort of the week-enders and sees that everything is kept clean and sanitary. Nan writes all the letters, and believe me, that is no little task. She also makes the mayonnaise and helps me here in the kitchen when I need her, but Gwen is my right hand man. But what am I thinking of? You haven't even met Gwen!”

The young English girl was looking shyly at the big man and thinking what she would give to have her own father back again. Dr. Wright had told Mr. Carter of Gwen and her romantic history, how Helen had found the wallet in the scrub oak tree containing all of the dead Englishman's papers, of old Abner Dean's perfidy in taking the land from Gwen when the receipt had not been found, although the child was sure her father had paid for the side of the mountain before he had built his cabin there. Mr. Carter had been greatly interested in the recital and now his kind friendliness brought a mist to the eyes of the girl.

“I am very glad to know you, my dear. Dr. Wright has told me of you and now I hope to be numbered among your friends.”

Gwen looked so happy and grateful that Helen had to give her father one more fried apple hug before she pushed him out of the kitchen to make room for the important ceremony of dishing up supper.

“Where did I ever get them, Doctor, these girls? Why, they are perfect bricks! To think of my little Helen forgetting the polish on her fingernails and actually cooking! I don't see where they came from.”

It was rather wonderful and George Wright was somewhat at a loss himself to account for them as he watched the dainty mother of the flock trip lightly across the rough mountain path connecting the cabin with the pavilion. Robert Carter himself had character enough to go around, but when one considered that his character had been alloyed with hers to make this family it was a wonder that they had that within them that could throw off tradition and environment as they had done and undertake this camp that was proving quite a stupendous thing for mere girls.

“Well, Dr. Wright,” trilled Mrs. Carter, “isn't this a delightful adventure for my girls to have amused themselves with? The girl of the day is certainly an enterprising person. Of course a thing like this must not be carried too far, as there is danger of their forgetting their mission in life.”

“And that mission is – ?”

“Being ornaments of society, of course,” laughed the little lady.

Mrs. Carter had long ago overcome the fear she had entertained for the young physician. He had been so unfailingly kind to her and his diagnosis of her husband's case had been so sure and his treatment so exactly right that she could have nothing but liking and respect for him. She even forgave him the long exile he had subjected her to on that stupid ship. It had cured her Robert and she was willing to have cut herself off from society for those months if by doing so she had contributed to the well-being of her husband. She had been all devotion and unselfishness in the first agony of

his illness. The habits of her lifetime had been seemingly torn up by the roots and from being the spoiled and petted darling she had turned into the efficient nurse. As his health returned, however, it had been quite easy to slip back into her former place of being served instead of serving. It was as much Robert Carter's nature to serve as it was hers to be served. The habits had not been torn up by the roots, after all, but only been trimmed back, and now they were sprouting out with added vigor from their pruning.

Very lovely the little lady looked in her filmy lace dress. Her charming face, framed by its cloud of blue-black hair, showed no trace of having gone through the anxiety of a severe illness of one whom she loved devotedly. Nothing worried her very long and she had the philosophy of a young child, taking no thought of the yesterdays or of the morrows. Dr. Wright looked on her in amazement. Her speaking of the camp as an adventure chosen by the girls as something with which to amuse themselves would have been laughable had it not been irritating to the young man. And now, forsooth, their business in life was to become ornaments of society!

"Humph!" was all he said, although he had to turn on his heel and walk off to keep from asserting that their mission in life should be to become useful members of society. He had a dread of appearing priggish, however, and then this was Helen's mother and he wanted to do nothing to mar in any way the friendship that had sprung up between that elusive young person and himself.

"Where are all the children, Robert?" asked Mrs. Carter, wondering in her well-bred mind why Dr. Wright should be so brusque.

"There aren't any children, Annette," sighed Mr. Carter, "but I shouldn't sigh but be glad and happy. Why, they are perfect wonders! Helen is in the kitchen, not eating bread and honey, but cooking and bossing, and all the other girls are flying around taking care of the boarders."

"Boarders! Oh, Robert, what a name to call them! I can't contemplate it. Who are all those people I saw coming up the road?"

"They are the boarders."

"Not all that crowd! I thought they had only a select few."

"No, indeed, they take all that come and I can tell you they have made the place very popular. I did not know they had it in them. I believe it was a good thing I went off my hooks for a while, as it has brought out character in my girls that I did not dream they had."

"It seems hardly ladylike for them to be so – so – successful at running a boarding place. I wonder what people will say."

"Why they will say: 'Hurrah for the Carter Girls!' At least, that is what the worth-while people will say."

"Well, if you think it all right, I know it must be," sighed the poor little lady, "but somehow I think it would be much better for them to have visited Cousin Elizabeth Somerville until we got back or had her visit them in Richmond. I don't at all approve of their renting my house. Douglas is so coarsened by this living out-of-doors. She has the complexion that must be guarded very carefully or she will lose her beauty very early. I think the summer before a girl makes her debut should be spent taking care of her complexion."

Robert Carter laughed. He was always intensely amused by his wife's outlook on life and society and looked upon it as one of her girlish charms. Common sense had not been what made him fall in love with her twenty years before, so the lack of it did not detract in any way from his admiration of her in these latter years. She was what she had always been: beautiful, graceful, sweet, charming; made to be loved, served and spoiled.

"Where is Bobby? He, at least, cannot be busy with these awful boarders."

"Bobby? Why, he is now engaged in helping Josh, the little mountain boy who is serving as expressman for the girls, to curry Josephus, the mule. These boarders are not awful, my dear. You will find many acquaintances among them. Jeffry Tucker came with his two girls, the twins, and a friend of theirs from Milton, Page Allison is her name. There are several others whom you will be

glad to see, I know. I think it would be well for us to go up in the pavilion where they dine and then dance, and you can receive them there as they arrive.”

Mrs. Carter patted her creamy lace dress with a satisfied feeling that she was looking her best. It was a new creation from a most exclusive shop in New York – quite expensive, but then she had had absolutely no new clothes for perfect ages and since the proprietor of the shop had been most pleased to have her open an account with him, the price of the gown was no concern of hers. It set off her pearly skin and dusky hair to perfection. She was glad Jeffry Tucker was at the camp. He was a general favorite in Richmond society and his being there meant at least that her girls had not lessened themselves in the eyes of the elite. Surely he would not bring his daughters to this ridiculous camp unless he felt that it would do nothing toward lowering their position.

The pretty, puzzled lady took her place at one end of the great long dining pavilion as the week-enders swarmed up the steps, attracted hither by the odor of fried apples and hot rolls that was wafted o’er the mountainside.

CHAPTER V

THE TUCKERS

There had been general rejoicing at Week-End Camp when Nan had announced that Jeffry Tucker and his daughters were to come up for a short stay. The Tuckers were great favorites and were always received with open arms at any place where fun was on foot. Mr. Tucker had written for accommodations for himself and daughters and their friend, Miss Allison.

No one would have been more astonished than Jeffry Tucker, the father of the Heavenly Twins, at the kind of reputation he had with a society woman of Mrs. Carter's standing. For her to think that his bringing his daughters to the camp meant that he considered it to their social advantage – at least not to their social detriment – would have convulsed that gentleman. He thought no more of the social standing of his daughters Virginia and Caroline (Dum and Dee) than he did of the fourth dimension. He came to the camp and brought his daughters and Page Allison just because he heard it was great fun. He had known Robert Carter all his life and admired and liked him. His daughters had gone to the kindergarten and dancing school with Douglas and Helen and when rumor had it that these girls were actually making a living with week-end boarders at a camp in Albemarle, why it was the most natural thing in the world for the warm-hearted Jeffry Tucker immediately to write for tent room for his little crowd.

I hope my readers are glad to see the Tuckers and Page Allison. The fact of the business is that they are a lively lot and it is difficult to keep them in the pages of their own books. They might have stayed safely there had not the Carter girls started this venture in the mountains. That was too much for them. Zebedee had promised Tweedles again and again to take them camping, and since what they did Page must do too, of course she was included in the promise. This is not their own camp and not their own book but here they are in it!

"Douglas Carter, we think you are the smartest person that ever was!" enthused Dum Tucker as Douglas showed them to their tent where three other girls were to sleep, too. "Isn't this just too lovely?"

"I'm not smart, it's Helen who thought up this plan," insisted Douglas. "We are so glad you have come and we do hope you will like it."

"Like it! We are wild about it," cried Dee, and Page Allison was equally enthusiastic.

"Where is Helen?" demanded Dum.

"She is chief cook and can't make her appearance until she has put the finishing touches to supper."

"Does she really cook, herself?" cried Dee. "How grand!"

"Sometimes she cooks herself," drawled Nan, coming into the tent to see the Tuckers, who were great favorites with her, too, "sometimes when we get out of provisions, which we are liable to do now as six persons have come who had not written me for accommodations."

"Mother and father got here from a long trip this afternoon," explained Douglas, "and we are so upset over seeing them that we are rather late. Helen usually does all she has to do before the week-enders come."

"Let us help!" begged Dee. "Dum and I can do lots of stunts, and Page here is a wonderful pie slinger."

"Well, we would hardly press Miss Allison into service when she has just arrived," smiled Douglas.

"Please, please don't Miss Allison me! I'm just Page and my idea of camping is cooking, so if I can help, let me," and Page, who had said little up to that time, spoke with such genuine frankness that Douglas and Nan felt somehow that a new friend had come into their circle.

“We’ll call on all three of you if we need you,” promised Douglas, hastening off with Nan to see that other guests had found their tents and had what they wanted in the way of water and towels.

“Isn’t this great?” said Dee. “I’m so glad Zebedee thought of coming. I think Douglas Carter looks healthy but awful bothered, somehow.”

“I thought so, too. I’m afraid her father is not so well or something. Think of Helen Carter’s cooking!” wondered Dum.

“Why shouldn’t she?” asked Page. “Is she so superior?”

“No, not that,” tweedled the twins.

“Helen’s fine but so – so – stylish. Mrs. Carter is charming but she is one butterfly and we always rather expected Helen to be just like her – more sense than her mother, but dressy,” continued Dee.

“You will know what Mrs. Carter is, just as soon as you look at her hands,” declared Dum. “If the lilies of the field were blessed with hands they would look exactly like Mrs. Carter’s.”

“Well, come let’s find Zebedee. I smelt apples frying,” and the three friends made their way to the pavilion where Mrs. Carter was receiving the week-enders with all the charm and ceremony she might have employed at a daughter’s debut party.

Her reception of the Tuckers was warm and friendly. It had been months since she had seen anyone who moved in her own circle and now there were many questions to ask of Richmond society. Jeffry Tucker, who could make himself perfectly at home with any type, now laid himself out to be pleasant to his hostess. He told her all the latest news of Franklin street and recounted the gossip that had filtered back from White Sulphur and Warm Springs. He turned himself into a society column and announced engagements and rumors of engagements; who was at the beach and who was at the mountains. He even made a stagger at the list of debutantes for the ensuing winter.

“I mean that Douglas shall come out next winter, too,” said the little lady during the supper that followed. Nan, seeing that her mother was having such a pleasant time with the genial Jeffry Tucker, arranged to have the Tuckers placed at the table that had been set aside for their mother and father. The Carter girls made it a rule to scatter themselves through the crowd the better to look after the hungry and see that no one’s wants were unsatisfied.

“Ah, is that so? I had an idea she was destined for college. It seems to me that Tweedles told me she had passed her Bryn Mawr exams.”

“So she did, but I am glad to say she has given up all idea of that foolishness. I am very anxious for her to make her debut.”

Nan, who was making the rounds of the various tables to see that everyone was served properly, overheard her mother’s remark and glanced shyly at Mr. Tucker. She caught his eye unwittingly but there was something in the look that he gave her that made her know he understood the whole situation and was in sympathy with Douglas, who was very busy at the next table helping hungry week-enders to the rapidly disappearing potato salad.

There was a rather pathetic droop to Douglas’ young shoulders as though the weight of the universe were getting a little too much for her. Mr. Tucker looked from her to Robert Carter who seemed to be accepting things as he found them with an astonishing calmness. He was certainly a changed man. Remembering him as a person of great force and energy, who always took the initiative when any work was to be done or question decided, his old friend wondered at his almost flabby state. Here he was calmly letting his silly wife, because silly she seemed to Jeffry Tucker, although charming and even lovable, put aside his daughter’s desires for an education and force her into society. He could see it all with half an eye and what he could not see for himself the speaking countenance of the third Carter, Nan, was telling him as plainly as a countenance could. He determined to talk with the girl as soon as supper was over and see if he could help her in some way, how, he did not know, but he felt that he might be of some use.

The supper was a very merry one in spite of the depression that had seized poor Douglas. She tried not to let her gloom permeate those around her. Helen was in a perfect gale and the Tucker

Twins took their cue from her and the ball of good-humored repartee was tossed back and forth. Tillie Wingo was resplendent in a perfectly new dancing frock. The beaux buzzed around her like bees around a honey pot. The silent Bill Tinsley kept on saying nothing but his calf eyes were more eloquent than any words. He had fallen head over heels in love with the frivolous Tillie from the moment she offered to tip him on the memorable occasion of her first visit to the camp. Lewis Somerville, usually with plenty to say for himself, was almost as silent as his chum, Bill. It seemed as though Douglas' low spirits had affected her cousin.

“What is it, Douglas?” he whispered, as he took the last plate of salad from her weary hand. “You look all done up. Are you sick?”

“No, indeed! Nothing!”

“When the animals have finished feeding, I want to talk to you. Can you give me a few minutes?”

“Why, of course, Lewis, as many as you want.”

Douglas and Lewis had been friends from the moment they had met. That had been some eighteen years before when Douglas had been crawling on the floor, not yet trusting to her untried legs, and Lewis, just promoted from skirts to breeches, had proudly paraded up and down in front of his baby cousin. There never had been a problem in Douglas' life that she had not discussed with her friend, but she felt a delicacy in talking about this trouble that had arisen on her horizon because it would mean a certain criticism of both her mother and sister.

“Walk after supper?” Bill whispered to Tillie. “Something to say.” Tillie nodded an assent.

Supper over, the tables and chairs were piled up in a twinkling and the latest dance record put on the Victrola.

“Why, this is delightful!” exclaimed Mrs. Carter, looking around for Mr. Tucker to come claim her for the first dance, but she saw that gentleman disappearing over the mountainside with Nan.

“Nan is entirely too young for such nonsense!” she exclaimed with some asperity, but partners were forthcoming a-plenty so she was soon dancing like any girl of eighteen, while her indulgent husband smoked his pipe and looked contentedly on.

Susan and Oscar washed the dishes with more rattling than usual as Oscar had much grumbling in store for the delinquent Susan.

“Wherefo' you done lef' yo' wuck to Miss Helen?”

“I's a-helpin' Mis' Carter. She kep' me a-openin' boxes an' hangin' up things. I knowed Miss Helen wouldn't min'. She thinks her maw oughter have what she wants. I done heard her tell Miss Douglas that she means to see her maw has her desires fulfilled. Sounded mos' lak qua'llin' the way the young missises was a-talkin'.”

“Well, all I got to say is that Mis' Carter ain't called on to git any mo' waitin' on than the young ladies. They's as blue-blooded as what she is an' even mo' so as they is got all the blood she's got an' they paw's beside. I bet she ain't goin' to tun a han' to fill any of these folks up. There she is now a-dancin' 'round like a teetotaller a-helpin' the boarders to shake down they victuals. I'll be boun' some of these here Hungarians will be empty befo' bed time.”

CHAPTER VI

POSTPRANDIAL CONVERSATIONS

It was a wonderful night. The sun had set in a glory of clouds while Oscar was still endeavoring to fill 'em up. The moon was full and “round as the shield of my fathers.” It was very warm with not a breeze stirring. Jeffry Tucker drew Nan down on the first fallen log they came to out of reach of the noise from the pavilion.

“It is fine to be able to leave the city for a while,” he said, drawing in deep breaths of mountain air. “And now, Miss Nan Carter, I want you to tell me what was the reason for the S. O. S. that you sent out to me as plain as one pair of eyes can speak to another. I am a very old friend of your father, have known him ever since I was a little boy at school where I looked up to him and admired him as only a little boy can a big one. I see he is in poor health, at least in a nervous state, and I am wondering if there isn't something I can do. I don't want to butt in – you understand that, don't you? But if I can help, I want to.”

And then Nan Carter did just exactly what everybody always did: she took Jeffry Tucker into her confidence and told him all of the troubles of the family. He listened attentively.

“I see! The rent from the house in Richmond is the only income you can depend upon just now, and your mother wants to live at home again and have Miss Douglas make her debut in state. She has given up college for lack of funds, but she is to make her debut instead – a much more expensive pastime, I fancy. What does your father say?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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