

Wheeler Ruthe S.

Janet Hardy in Hollywood



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Chapter I

“THE CHINESE IMAGE”

Winter hung on grimly in the Middle West that year. Late March found the streets piled high with snow and on that particular morning there was a threat of additional snow in the air as Janet Hardy, a blond curl sticking belligerently out from under her scarlet beret, hurried toward school.

It was an important day for members of the senior class of the Clarion High School, for Miss Williams, the dramatics instructor, was going to hand out parts to read for the class play. For that reason, Janet walked more briskly than usual and she failed to hear footsteps behind her until another girl, running lightly, called.

“Slow up a minute, Janet. I’m nearly breathless. I’ve been chasing you for more than a block.”

Janet turned to greet Helen Thorne, who lived half a block beyond her own home and on the same broad, comfortable thoroughfare.

The girls fell into step, Janet slowing her pace until Helen could recover her breath.

“What chance do you think we’ll have of getting parts in the play?” asked Helen, her face reflecting her hopefulness.

“Just as good as any of the rest,” replied Janet. “I don’t think there are any Ethel Barrymores in school and I wouldn’t worry if there were. I won’t be heart-broken if I don’t get a part.”

“That’s easy to say, but I’m afraid I’ll be pretty much disappointed if I don’t get one. You have the *Weekly Clarion* to keep you busy.”

“It does that all right,” conceded Janet, who was editor of the page of high school news which appeared once a week in the local daily paper, the *Times*, under the title of “The Weekly Clarion.”

The girls turned into the street which led up the hill to the high school, a sprawling brick structure which covered nearly a block. The original building had been started in 1898 and as the city had grown additions had been made, seemingly at random, until hardly any one knew how many rooms there were and it was not unusual for a new student to get lost.

Janet was slightly taller than Helen. Her hair was a golden blond with just enough of a natural curl to make her the envy of most of the girls in school. Her blue eyes had a friendly, cheery look and her mouth had an upward twist that made it easy for her to smile.

Helen was a complement to Janet, with dark brown hair, brown eyes and a dusky skin. Because of her brunette coloring, she inclined to gayer colors than her blond companion.

It was half an hour before school when they reached the building, but a goodly number of seniors were already on hand and competition for rôles in the play would be intense. With 132 in the senior class, not many more than a score could hope to win parts.

“There’s so many it’s going to be a discouraging business,” said Helen as they went upstairs to the chemistry auditorium where the class was to meet.

“If a lot of the others think that, it will be easy for us,” smiled Janet. “Come on, tell yourself you’re going to win a part and you will.”

“I want to for Dad’s sake. He wrote that he would be home for my graduation and would attend all of the senior activities. So I’ve just got to make the play cast.”

“Keep up that kind of a spirit and you’re as good as in,” encouraged Janet, who secretly confessed that it was going to be quite a job to win a place in the play.

The chemistry auditorium was well filled when they arrived. Almost every senior girl was there and at least half of the boys.

Janet looked around the large room, gauging the mettle of the girls they would have to compete against. Well up toward the rostrum was Margie Blake, petite and blond and exceedingly vivacious. Margie was popular, confessed Janet, and probably stood a good chance of winning a part in the play for she had innate dramatic ability, while Janet, who had taken a leading rôle in the junior play, had been compelled to study each bit of action carefully.

Near Margie was Cora Dean, a pronounced brunette, who had already announced that she intended to have a leading rôle, and Cora had a reputation of getting whatever she went after, whether it was a place on the honor roll or a part in one of the drama club's one act plays.

"I'm afraid Cora will be after the part I try out for," whispered Helen. "She's good, too."

"She's not a bit better than you are, and not half as pretty," retorted Janet.

"But you don't always win play parts on your looks," said Helen.

Just then Miss Williams, the dramatics instructor, hurried in. In one hand she carried a large sheaf of mimeographed sheets while in the other was the complete book for the play. Several plays had been tentatively considered, but final approval had been up to Miss Williams and she was to announce the title that morning as well as give out reading parts.

The room quieted down as a few stragglers, coming in at the last minute, found seats at the rear.

Miss Williams sorted the mimeographed sheets into piles and at exactly 8:45 o'clock she rapped briskly on the desk with a ruler. The dramatics teacher was pleasant and almost universally liked. She smiled as she looked over the seniors who had gathered.

"It looks like we're going to have real competition for the play parts this year," she said. "I suppose, though, that first you'd like to know the name of the play."

She paused a moment, then went on.

"I've read all the plays the committee recommended carefully and my final choice is 'The Chinese Image.'"

There was a ripple of applause, for a number of seniors, including Janet and Helen, had read portions of "The Chinese Image."

Helen leaned toward her companion.

"That's the play I've been hoping would be selected. There's a part I think I can win."

"The leading rôle?" asked Janet.

"Well, hardly, but it isn't a bad part."

Miss Williams held up her hand and the buzz of conversation which had started after her announcement ceased.

"I have had parts for every character mimeographed and each sheet gives sufficient reading material for tryouts. There are 23 rôles in 'The Chinese Image.' I'm familiar with the ability of almost all of you and if you'll come up as I call your names, I'll give you tryout sheets. The first sheet contains a brief synopsis of the play with the complete cast of characters and the second sheet has the part I want you to try for. You will also find the hours on the second sheet when I want you to go down to the gym for the tryouts."

Janet had to confess that she was more than a little nervous as she waited for Miss Williams to call her name. Senior after senior was called up to the desk and handed his sheets. To some of them Miss Williams added another word or two, but she talked too low to be heard by the main body of pupils.

As the tryout sheets were handed out, the seniors left the room for it was nearly assembly time.

Helen looked anxiously at Janet.

"I wonder if we're going to be called? There are less than a dozen left."

"We'll know in a couple of minutes," replied Janet. "There goes Margie Blake. Wonder what part she'll get a chance at?"

“One of the leads, you can be sure of that. And there’s Cora Dean. I suppose Cora will get the part I try for. That happened in several of the one acts last year.”

“This isn’t last year and Cora’s a bit too temperamental. Well, we are going to be the last.”

All of the others had been called before Miss Williams spoke to Janet and Helen, and with a feeling of misgiving they advanced toward her desk.

Chapter II

LEADING RÔLES

Miss Williams smiled pleasantly as she looked up from the now slender pile of sheets with the tryout parts.

“Afraid I was going to forget you?” she asked.

“We were commencing to worry,” admitted Janet, “for after all there’s only one senior play.”

“Right. And I’m determined that ‘The Chinese Image’ be the best ever produced by Clarion High.”

The electric gong that heralded the opening of school banged its lusty tone through the hall.

“Never mind about opening assembly,” said Miss Williams. “I’ll explain to the principal that I detained you.”

The dramatics instructor looked quizzically at Janet and Helen.

“You make a good team, don’t you?”

“Well, we don’t exactly fight,” smiled Helen, “but there are times when we don’t agree.”

“Of course. That’s only human. What I mean is that when you get together with a goal in mind, you work hard to attain that goal. When Janet went out for editor of the *Weekly Clarion* last fall, you were working hard for her to win.”

“I did my best,” admitted Helen.

“And it had a lot to do with my winning out over Margie Blake,” said Janet whole-heartedly.

“Which is just the kind of spirit I’m looking for to put across the senior play. I’ll have to make a little confession or you’ll wonder why I’m so intensely interested in the success of this special play. A dramatic producing company has made me a tentative offer, but their final decision will be made after one of their representatives has seen the senior play.”

“But that would mean leaving Clarion,” protested Helen.

“I’m afraid it would, and while I wouldn’t like that, the opportunity offered by this company, if it finally develops, would be such that I just couldn’t afford to reject it.”

“I suppose there isn’t a whole lot of money in teaching dramatics in a high school,” said Janet.

“Not enough so I want to make it a life career,” replied Miss Williams. “But this isn’t getting along with my plan. Helen, I’m assigning you for a tryout for the leading rôle. Here’s your part. Read it over carefully and be ready tomorrow afternoon at 4:15 o’clock.”

Miss Williams handed the mimeographed sheets to the astounded Helen.

“They won’t bite,” she smiled.

“But the lead? I never dreamed you would want me to try out for that.”

“Why not? It calls for a brunette with ability and brains and I think you answer that description.”

Miss Williams turned to Janet.

“Here’s your rôle, Janet. It’s the second lead. You play a jittery little blond who hasn’t a brain in her head and probably never will have.”

“Does that rôle fit me?” asked Janet, her eyes twinkling.

“Well, hardly, but I think you’ll have a lot of fun working on such a part. Margie Blake is going to try for it, also.”

“Who will be trying for the part you’ve assigned me?” asked Helen.

“Cora Dean. I expect that with such competition both of you will be forced to do your best to win the part. Maybe it’s a little mean of me to match you against each other this way, but I’ve got to have a superlative cast for the play.”

“You’ll get it,” promised Janet, “for Helen and I are going to do our best to win these rôles. Why Helen’s father is planning on coming back for graduation week and Helen’s got to make the play.”

“Is he really coming?” asked Miss Williams, almost incredulously, for the name of Henry Thorne was a magic word in Clarion.

“He’s promised, and both mother and I are counting on it. We haven’t seen him since last fall.”

“Then I know one dramatics teacher who is going to be doubly nervous the night of the play. Just think of it – Henry Thorne, star director of the great Ace Motion Picture Company, watching a high school play. I’m afraid the cast may go all to pieces, they’ll be so nervous.”

“But Dad’s so entirely human,” said Helen. “That’s just the trouble. Because he’s made a success in films, people think he must be some kind of a queer individual who goes around with his head in the air thinking he is better than anyone else. He’s just like Janet’s father and when he gets home he likes nothing better than getting his old fishpole out, digging a can of worms, and going out along the creek to fish and doze.”

“I suppose you’re right, but his pictures have been so outstanding it seems that directing them must be some sort of a genius. I’ve never quite understood why you and your mother stayed on here, though.”

Miss Williams had often wanted to ask that question just to satisfy her own curiosity, but the opportunity had never opened before.

“Dad’s working under pressure on the coast, long hours and a terrific strain, and he says some of the things that are said about Hollywood are true. Most of the people are fine and hard working, but a small, wild crowd gives the rest a bad name and he doesn’t want to take any chance on my getting mixed up with that bunch.”

“But you wouldn’t,” said Miss Williams.

“I don’t think so, but Dad thinks it best for us to stay here in Clarion and mother and I are happy here with all of our friends. Of course we don’t see a whole lot of Dad, but when he does get home or we go out there, we have an awfully good time.”

Miss Williams glanced at her watch.

“It’s 9:10. You’d better go down to assembly. I’ll explain why you were late. Don’t forget, tryouts for both of you tomorrow afternoon and I’m counting on you to do your best.”

“We’ll try,” promised Janet, as they picked up the sheets with the tryout parts and left the chemistry auditorium.

In the hall Helen, her dark eyes aglow with excitement, turned to Janet.

“Just think; I’ve got a chance at the leading rôle. Of course Cora will probably get it, but at least Miss Williams is considering me.”

“Now let’s stop right here,” said Janet firmly, “and get one thing straight. You have a chance at the leading rôle.” Helen nodded.

“Cora has a chance at the lead.” Again Helen nodded.

“But,” went on Janet, “you are going to win the lead.”

“Oh, do you really think so?” There was a tinge of desperation in Helen’s voice.

“I know you are.” Janet spoke with a definiteness that she didn’t quite feel, for Cora was a splendid little actress. But Helen needed some real encouragement and Janet knew that if Helen felt confident from the start half of the battle was won.

The morning passed in a whirl of routine classes, but Janet found time to study her tryout sheets for several minutes.

“The Chinese Image” was ideally suited for a senior play, with an excellent mystery story to carry the action. A whole lot of dramatic ability was unnecessary for the rapid tempo of the story would carry along the interest of the audience.

The synopsis Miss Williams had prepared was brief and Janet read it twice.

“The Chinese Image” centered about a strange little figure which had been brought back from China in 1851 by Ebenezer Naughton, then captain of one of the clipper ships which had sailed out of Salem for far-away ports in the Orient. The strange, squat little figure had remained in the

Naughton family ever since for Captain Ebenezer, in his will, had stipulated that it must never be given away or sold.

“When grave troubles befall my family, turn to ‘The Chinese Image,’” he had written, “and therein you will find an answer.”

But the Naughtons had prospered and the will had been almost forgotten until the family came upon hard times and its fortune dwindled. Two grandsons of Captain Ebenezer, now heads of their own families, quarreled bitterly and in the ensuing family feud the image became involved. It finally fell to the lot of Abbie Naughton, the rôle played by Janet, to solve the mystery of the image, which she did in as thorough a manner as might have been expected of the light-headed Abbie.

Janet chuckled over the lines she was to read in the tryout. The part of Abbie should be great fun, for Abbie did about every nonsensical thing possible and the giddier the part could be made, the better, decided Janet.

Helen’s rôle was more serious, for she was supposed to be in love with one of the boys of the other branch of the family and many were the trials and tribulations of their love affair. It was a delicate rôle, with much sweetness and tenderness, and it should prove ideal for Helen. Janet couldn’t conceive of Cora Dean, who had a certain harshness about her, getting the part. But then, Cora was capable and she might be able to play the rôle to perfection.

Just before noon the sky, grey since morning, turned a more desolate shade and the clouds disgorged their burden of snow. It was dry and fine and tons of it seemed to be coming down.

Janet met Helen in the hall.

“What about lunch?”

“I’m going to stay at school and have mine in the cafeteria,” replied Helen. “How about you?”

“I don’t relish the long walk home, but I didn’t bring any money with me.”

Helen smiled. “You wouldn’t accept a loan, would you?”

“I might,” conceded Janet, “because I’m more than a little hungry.”

“I’ve got fifty cents. That ought to buy enough food to last until we get home tonight.”

“But we’re not going home,” Janet reminded her companion. “Have you forgotten about the roller skating party at Youde’s?”

Helen flushed. “To tell the truth, I had. I’ve been thinking so much about the play I completely forgot the party.”

“Better not. It will be lots of fun.”

“I don’t know whether I ought to go. If I do, I won’t have much time to study over my tryout part.”

“There’ll be an hour after school and you haven’t more than two paragraphs to memorize.”

“I know them now,” said Helen.

“Then come on and go to the party. The bus is leaving school at five o’clock. We’ll be at Youde’s in an hour and there’ll be a hot supper and the skating party afterward.”

“It’s snowing hard,” observed Helen, gazing out into the swirling grey.

“You think of everything,” expostulated Janet. “Of course, it’s snowing, but the road to Youde’s is paved part of the way. If it gets too thick we can turn around and come back.”

Both Janet and Helen had one open period in the afternoon which came at the same hour and they went into the library to study their tryout parts.

Janet read her lines, stopping several times to chuckle over the nonsensical words which Abbie Naughton was required to say in the play.

“This is going to be great fun,” she told Janet. “How is your part going?”

“It’s a grand rôle, and lots of fun. I know the lines, but I’m supposed to be in love.”

“That shouldn’t be a hard part then. You rather like Jim Barron, don’t you?”

“Yes, but what’s that got to do with my part?”

“I heard this noon that Jim was trying out opposite you.”

“Honestly?”

“Honest true. Of course he may not get it.”

“Jim’s a grand fellow.”

“Seems to me I’ve heard you say that before,” chuckled Janet. “I have a hunch you’ll get that part all right.”

Helen went through her rôle while Janet looked on with critical eyes, suggesting several minor changes which she thought would improve her companion’s chances.

The bell for the final class period sounded and they folded up their parts and hastened back to the assembly. Their last class for the day was honors English, a group of advanced English students who also served as the editors and reporters for the *Weekly Clarion*, writing and editing all of the high school news which appeared each Friday in the *Times*, the afternoon daily paper published in Clarion.

It was the honors English class which was sponsoring the roller skating party at Youde’s and Jim Barron, the sports editor, was in charge of the plans.

There were seventeen in the class, including Cora Dean and Margie Blake, who wrote the girls’ athletic news. Miss Bruder, the instructor, was small and dark, but somehow she managed to keep her high-tempered class under control.

This was a mid-week period and the entire time was devoted to writing stories, which were turned over to Janet for final editing. It was Janet’s task to write the headlines, a job at which she had become exceedingly proficient.

Promptly at 3:30 o’clock the final bell sounded and writing materials were shoved hastily aside.

Jim Barron stood up.

“I’m counting on everyone being at the party. The bus will be here at five o’clock. We’ll stop at Whet’s drug store on the way out of town to pick up any of you who aren’t here when we start. Remember, we’re taking the money for the party out of the profit we’ve made from the *Weekly Clarion* and it won’t cost you a cent. Wear old clothes and plenty of warm ones. See you here at five.”

The class scattered, some of them remaining at school to finish up odd tasks, others hurrying home to change clothes and prepare for the party.

“Going home?” asked Helen.

“Right now. I’m certainly not going to fall down in these clothes while I’m skating. I’ve got an old tweed suit and boots I’m going to wear. Why don’t you change to your corduroys?”

“I thought I’d stay on and work on my part.”

“You know that almost to perfection now. Better get into some older clothes.”

Helen acquiesced and they donned their winter school coats and started down the hill toward home. The snow was still coming down steadily, as fine and dry as ever.

“I’m glad there’s no wind. This would drift terribly if there was,” said Janet, kicking her way through the fine spume.

Chapter III

THE WIND ROARS

Janet was home in plenty of time to dress in leisure for the skating party. Her mother looked in once to make sure that she had plenty of warm clothes on.

“I’m glad you’re wearing that old tweed outfit. It’s warm and at the same time nice looking.”

“Even though it’s old, mother?”

“Even though it’s old. Tweed always looks nice and that’s an especially pretty shade of brown. It goes so well with your hair. Wear your scarlet beret and don’t forget the boots.”

“I won’t,” promised Janet as her mother started downstairs again.

The Hardy home was pleasant, even though decidedly old-fashioned. There was a broad porch completely across the front of the house. The house itself was L-shaped, the base of the L having been added after the original structure was built. The exterior was shingled and creeping vines softened the sharper angles.

Janet’s room had a south exposure with two dormer windows that added to the many angles of the low-ceilinged rambling room. The wall paper was pink and white with gay farm scenes interspersed. Crisp chintz curtains were at the windows and a gay curtain hid the large, old-fashioned wardrobe at one end of the room in which she kept her clothes.

Her dressing table was between the dormers with a rose-colored shade on the electric light.

The bed, a walnut four poster, was against the wall nearest the hall. A gay, pink-tufted spread covered it. At one side was a small walnut stand with a shaded reading lamp.

Hooked rugs, reflecting the cheery tone of the room in their varied colors, covered the dark, polished floor.

Over in the far corner, where the roof sloped sharply, Janet had built a book case and stained it brown. It was filled with books, arranged in none too perfect order, showing the interest she had in them.

But Janet had little time now to relax in the charm of her room. Parting the curtain of the wardrobe she found her tweed suit far to the back. Her boots were back there too, but they had been well oiled and were pliable.

From a walnut chest of drawers which stood beside the wardrobe Janet drew woolen socks for it was an 18-mile ride to Youde’s and they probably wouldn’t be home until late.

Janet dressed sensibly, woolen hose, heavy tweed skirt, a blue, shaggy wool sweater and her tweed coat. The crimson beret would be warm enough.

She glanced at the clock. She had spent more time than she had anticipated, it was after 4:30 and Whet’s drug store where they were to meet the bus was a good six blocks away.

Janet hurried downstairs.

“I’ve a cup of tea and some cookies all ready,” her mother called.

It would be after six o’clock before they ate and Janet drank the tea with relish. The cookies, crisp and filled with raisins, were delicious and she put several in the pockets of her coat.

“I put your old fur coat in the hall,” said Mrs. Hardy. “Your scarf’s there, too.”

“Thanks mother. I’m certainly going to be too warm.”

Her mother went to the window. It was nearly dark and the snow still swirled down in dry, feathery clouds.

“I almost wish you weren’t going,” she said, “but there doesn’t seem to be any wind.”

“Oh, we’ll be all right, mother. The bus is large and if the weather should get bad we could stay at Youde’s until it clears. Remember Miss Bruder is chaperon and she’s extremely sensible.”

“She needs to be with your crowd on her hands,” smiled her mother, following Janet into the hall.

Janet slipped into her old coat. It wasn’t much to look at but it was warm and serviceable, one of those bunglesome coonskins that were so popular with college students at one time. She twisted her scarf around her neck, gave her mother a quick hug and kiss, and strode out of the house.

Janet kicked along through the dry snow, walking rapidly until she reached Helen Thorne’s home. There were no lights in the southeast room and Janet knew that Helen must be dressed for that was Helen’s room.

She whistled sharply, a long and a short, that penetrated the quick of the twilight.

The porch light flashed on and Helen, sticking her head out, yelled, “I’m coming.”

Helen hurried down the walk, wriggling into a suede jacket.

“Think that will be warm enough?” asked Janet, who felt very much bundled up in her coonskin.

“I’ve got my corduroy jacket underneath and a sweater under that. I’m practically sealed up against the cold, but I’ll run back and get my old coonskin.”

They swung along rapidly toward Whet’s scuffing through the dry snow.

“I like this,” said Helen, breathing deeply. “The snow’s grand and it isn’t too cold. Wonder if they’ll have any heat at Youde’s?”

“Oh, the dining room will be warm, but there’s only a fireplace out in the room where we skate. Wraps will probably feel good there until we get well warmed up from skating.”

Out of the haze ahead emerged the blob of light that marked the neighborhood drug store. As they approached they could see two or three standing near the front door of the store.

Ed Rickey, captain of the football team, jerked open the door.

“Greetings, wanderers of the storm. Enter and be of good cheer.”

They stamped the snow off their boots and stepped inside. Cora Dean and Margie Blake were there. Boon companions, they were seldom apart.

“Hello,” said Margie, but there was no warmth in the greeting.

“Hello,” replied Janet.

“You must think you’re going to the north pole,” put in Cora, as she looked Janet and Helen over coolly.

“Well, not quite that far, but we believe in being sensible and warm,” replied Helen, and Cora’s face flamed, for both she and Margie, always trying to make an impression, were dressed in fashionable riding breeches of serge. They were pleasing to look at, but hardly the thing for comfort on a night when the temperature might drop almost to zero. Instead of coats they wore zipper sweaters of angora wool. Their boots were fashionable, but light, and would be of little use in withstanding any severe cold.

“Here comes the bus,” said Ed Rickey, who was bundled up in nondescript clothes.

“All out that’s going to Youde’s,” he bellowed, imitating a train caller.

The bus ground to a stop in front of the store and the girls followed Ed across the curb. Jim Barron opened the door. The windows of the bus were heavily frosted for a heater was going full blast but the driver, a middle aged man, had a windshield wiper cutting a swath through the frost that formed on the glass in front of him.

Miss Bruder spoke as they came in.

“Everyone’s here,” announced Jim. “Find your seats. Next stop at Youde’s.”

There was plenty of room in the bus for the vehicle had a capacity of thirty and there were only eighteen in addition to the driver. Most of them found seats well to the fore where they could feel the blast of warm air from the heater.

Clarion was a sprawling city of 19,000, but in less than ten minutes they had left the street lights behind and were rolling along a smoothly paved highway.

It was impossible to see out for the windows were frosted solid, but it was a merry crowd nevertheless. Ed Rickey, who had a fine bass voice, started in with a school song and the others soon joined him.

Six miles outside Clarion they turned off the main road and swung over toward the hills which flanked the Wapsie river for it was along the banks of the Wapsie that Youde's Inn was located.

Their progress was slowed here for the road had not been cleared by a snowplow. But the snow was less than five inches deep and the powerful bus forged ahead steadily.

Almost before they knew it they were over the last hill and dropping down into the river valley. As the bus turned into the inn, floodlights in the yard were snapped on. A dog, barking eagerly, leaped forward to greet them.

Ed and Jim were out of the bus first, assisting the others down. With Miss Bruder in the lead, they trooped toward the rambling, one story inn.

Eli Youde, a coonskin cap on his head, was at the door. Behind him stood his wife, a buxom, motherly soul of forty-five.

"Supper's on the table now," said Mrs. Youde as she greeted them. "The girls can take off their things in the room at the right; the boys go to the left."

There were nine boys and eight girls in the honors English class, but with Miss Bruder it made an even number and she was so young and full of fun that she always seemed like one of them.

Cora and Margie stopped before an old fashioned dresser to powder their noses and pat their hair into shape, but at a skating party these things were irrelevant to Janet and Helen and they hastened out to join the group in the dining room.

One long table had been set. There were no place cards and the first to arrive took the choice seats, which were near a glowing soft-coal burner.

Mrs. Youde, assisted by her husband, brought in steaming bowls of oyster stew. Three large bowls of crisp, white crackers were on the table, but huge inroads in them were soon made. Conversation died away as the stew was ladled down hungry throats.

Before the bowls of stew had vanished, Mrs. Youde brought in two heaping platters of thick sandwiches. Janet found at least three varieties and was afraid to ask Helen how many she discovered.

"This is ruining my weight, but I'm having a fine time," said Janet between bites and Helen nodded.

After the sandwiches came pumpkin pie, great thick wedges of it with a mound of whipped cream on top and a slab of yellow cheese at one side.

Ed Rickey yelled for help and when no one volunteered to jounce him up and down to make room for the pie, he managed to get to his feet and trot around the table several times.

"I'm never going to be able to bend down and put on a skate," groaned Jim Barron, who had begged a second piece of pie and was now looking ruefully at the last crisp crust. He wanted it, but he didn't quite dare and with a sheepish look he pushed the plate away from him.

"Perhaps we'd better sit around a few minutes before we start skating," suggested Miss Bruder. The suggestion was welcomed and while Mr. Youde carried armfuls of woods into the skating rink to fill the fireplace they told stories around the roaring fire in the heater.

"I feel better," announced Jim a few minutes later. "In fact, I'll be courteous enough to help any of you weak damsels get your skates on. Let's go."

With Jim in the lead, they trooped into the skating rink. The fireplace, along one wall and halfway down the rink, was roaring lustily as Mr. Youde piled it with fresh fuel.

The skates were in boxes, numbered for size, and ranged in rows along the walls. Jim, Ed and one of the other boys did the fitting while the girls sat on a long bench.

"Here's a pair that ought to be long enough for you," grinned Jim as he placed a skate under Janet's right foot.

“Oh, I don’t know that I’m such a clodhopper,” smiled Janet. “Anyway, I’ll bet I can beat you around the rink the first time.”

“It’s a go,” replied Jim, fastening the other skate. “Wait until I get the wheels under my hoofs.”

Janet stood up and tried the skates. Jim had found an excellent pair for her. They felt true and speedy. She tried a preliminary whirl. Her balance was good.

Jim shot out onto the floor, tried to make a sharp turn, lost his balance, and sat down with a thud that shook the room.

“First down,” yelled Ed Rickey, who hastened to Jim’s aid and entangled himself over Jim’s outstretched legs. Ed also went down and shouts of merriment echoed through the room.

“Ready Jim?” asked Janet when the husky senior was back on his feet.

“Just as ready now as later,” he replied and they shot away, Janet’s feet moving swiftly as she got up speed.

Jim had the longer legs, the more powerful strokes, but Janet was fast and light. That might overcome the advantage of her heavier rival.

“Go on, Janet, go on!” she heard Helen shouting as they took the first turn.

Jim was still ahead, but he was going too fast for a safe turn and he skidded sharply and lost speed at the next turn while Janet, her feet a twinkle of motion, shot ahead. Jim yelled in protest, but Janet only went the faster and flashed by the finish at least two yards ahead of the puffing Jim.

From then on the rink buzzed with the roll of the skates as in couples and singly they sped around the room.

Ed Rickey was a wizard on skates and after the first rush of skating, when some of them were content to sit on the benches near the fireplace, he gave a demonstration of fancy skating.

Janet had never imagined Ed had that grace and sense of rhythm but the big fellow was remarkably light on his feet.

Then they were back on the floor again, this time in a series of races Jim Barron had planned, some of them rolling peanuts the length of the rink and back and others skating around backwards in tandem races.

In spite of the roaring fire, the room was cold and Janet felt the chill creep through her bones. She stopped skating and edged over close to the fireplace just as the bus driver came in and spoke to Eli Youde. The innkeeper departed at once with the driver and Janet heard the bang of an outer door as though it had been caught by the wind and closed violently. But there had been no wind when they came down into the valley to the inn.

If the wind had come up, the snow might drift badly. She put that thought out of her mind, and rejoined the skaters.

It was less than five minutes later when the innkeeper and the bus driver returned, striding down the center of the rink. Mr. Youde held up one hand and the skaters gathered around him.

“Wind’s coming up and the snow’s starting to drift. May be bad in another hour or two. If you want to get home before midnight you’d better start now for it will be slow going up in the hills.”

“We’ll start at once,” decided Miss Bruder. “Get your wraps, everybody.”

Janet, some unknown fear tugging at her heart, hung back and spoke to Mr. Youde.

“Is it perfectly safe to start the trip back?” she asked.

“I guess so. That’s a powerful bus. But you’d better start now before the wind gets bad. This snow is going to drift like fury before morning. I expect we’ll be blockaded for a couple of days.”

Janet rejoined the girls in the room where they had left their coats. A horn sounded outside and they hastened to don their wraps. The floodlights in the yard flashed on and the group, bidding the Youdes cheery goodnights, hastened out to the bus.

Chapter IV

LITTLE DEER VALLEY

In spite of her warm clothing, Janet could feel the sting of the night air. It was much colder than when they had arrived. The snow seemed to be less, but the wind was shipping it in little eddies across the yard.

With the heater running full blast, the bus was comfortable and they found seats well up toward the front. Miss Bruder counted them to make sure that everyone was on hand. Reassured, she told the driver to start the return trip.

The windows were heavily frosted and it was like being in a sealed room, the only peephole being the small frame of glass which the windshield wiper kept clear.

“What time is it?” Janet asked Helen, who had a wrist watch.

“Nine forty-five. We’re starting home early.”

Janet nodded, but she was glad they had made the start. It wouldn’t have been pleasant staying at Youde’s if they had been snowed in for the lonely inn had few comforts.

The powerful engine of the bus labored as the big machine topped a grade out of the valley and they swung down into another. For five or six miles it would be one hill after another and Janet wondered if the snow was drifting down in the valleys.

The road was little used and if the wind increased, it might make travel exceedingly difficult. But she dismissed that thought from her mind for the bus had heavy chains on the double wheels at the rear.

The spontaneity which had marked their trip out was missing and conversation soon died away. Everyone was tired and willing to snuggle down into their coats.

Janet must have been dozing for the heavy roar of the bus motor awoke her with a start.

They were backing up. Then they stopped and the driver shifted gears. The bus leaped ahead, the throttle on full and the exhaust barking in the crisp air. Gradually their forward motion ceased and the wheels ground into the snow.

Without a word the bus driver shifted instantly into reverse and they lurched backward. The driver stopped the bus, set the emergency brake, and dodged out into the night.

“What’s the matter?” asked Helen, who was almost hidden in her fur coat and deliciously sleepy.

“I think we’ve hit a drift,” replied Janet.

“We ought to be almost home, though. It seems like we’ve been traveling for ages.”

“I expect we are,” but Janet didn’t feel the optimism that she meant her words to convey.

If the wind had increased they might find themselves in a serious situation.

The bus driver opened the door and stuck his head in.

“One of you fellows come out and give me a hand with the shovels.”

Jim Barron, nearest the door, responded with Ed Rickey at his heels.

After several minutes the bus driver came back inside and slowed the motor down to idling speed and the wave of heat from the heater diminished noticeably.

With the motor barely turning over, outside noises were audible and Janet could hear the rush of the wind. Particles of the fine, dry snow were being driven against the window beside her.

It was at least fifteen minutes later when Jim, Ed and the driver returned, red-faced and breathless from their exertions. The boys dropped into the front seats while the driver opened the throttle and sent the big machine lumbering ahead.

The bus plunged into the drift, the chains on the rear wheels biting deep into the snow. Once they swung sharply and Janet gasped, but they swung back and with the engine taxed to the limit finally pulled through the drift.

Janet saw Jim look around and she thought she detected grave concern in his eyes. Then he turned away and she was too far away to speak to him without alarming the others.

The bus labored up a long grade, breasted the top of the hill, and then started down. It would be in the valley that trouble would come, for the snow would be heavily drifted.

The big machine rocked down the slope, jolting its occupants around and bruising one or two of them. Janet heard Miss Bruder cry out sharply and turned around, but the teacher motioned that she was all right.

Then the speed of the bus slackened, the wheels spun futilely, and their forward motion ceased. Almost instantly they were in reverse, but the bus slipped to one side and in spite of the full power of the motor, the wheels churned through the dry snow.

The driver eased up on the throttle, looked significantly at Jim and Ed, and with them at his heels plunged into the storm again. Fortunately, he had tied several shovels to the bus before leaving Youde's and they were not without implements to dig themselves out.

Janet could hear them working, first at the front and then at the rear and Helen, now thoroughly wide awake, looked at her in alarm.

"It's getting colder in here," she said.

"The engine's barely turning over; there isn't much heat coming out."

"I know, but I mean the temperature outside must be dropping rapidly, and listen to the wind."

But Janet preferred not to listen to the wind; it was too mournful, too nerve-racking. What it whispered alarmed her for they were still some miles from the main road and there were few if any farms near.

The bus driver returned and motioned to the other boys.

"Give us a hand. We don't want to stay here a minute longer than necessary."

The rest of the boys piled out of the bus, leaving the girls and Miss Bruder alone.

"I'm nearly frozen," complained Margie Blake. "At least we might have obtained a good bus driver."

"I don't think it's the driver's fault," interposed Janet. "We stayed too long at Youde's."

"Then he should have told us the storm was getting worse. My folks will be worried half to death if we are hung up here all night."

Janet admitted to herself that they would all have cause to worry if they had to stay in the bus all night, for she doubted if the supply of fuel would be sufficient to keep the engine going to operate the heater for that length of time and she dreaded to think of how cold it might get if the heater was off.

Between the gusts of wind that swept around the bus they could hear the steady swing of the shovels biting into the snow. It was eleven o'clock when the driver came inside. His face was almost white from the cold and he beat his hands together as he took the wheel and eased in the clutch.

With the motor roaring heavily Janet felt the power being applied to the wheels ever so gradually to keep them from slipping. The bus seemed cemented into the snow, but motion finally became evident. The wheels churned and they moved backward.

Someone outside was shouting, but the words were unintelligible to all except the driver. He stopped while one of the boys scraped the frost off the window outside for the windshield wiper had frozen.

Then, barely creeping ahead and with the bus in low gear, they moved through the snow, shouted commands keeping the driver in the right path. At last they were through the drift and the boys piled back into the bus, pounding each other on the back and clapping their hands to bring back the circulation.

Miss Bruder called Jim Barron back.

"Just how serious is this, Jim?" she asked.

"Pretty bad. We're three miles from the main road and there isn't a farm within two miles. Only thing we can do is to keep going ahead and try to shovel through."

“How about Little Deer valley?”

“That’s what we’re worrying about. The wind gets a clean sweep there and I’m afraid we may not get through.”

“Can we turn back and stay at Youde’s?”

“Some of the road behind us would be as badly drifted as Little Deer valley,” replied Jim. “I guess the only thing is to grind ahead and trust that the gas holds out.”

For a time they made steady progress, the bus rumbling along smoothly and the heater throwing out a steady blast of warm, dank air. Then they rolled down a gentle slope and onto the flat of Little Deer valley, which was more than half a mile wide.

The driver stopped and went out to wade through the drifts. He came back to report that they might make it although in places the drifts were nearly up to the tops of the fence posts.

“It’s going to mean plenty of shoveling,” he warned them.

“We’ve got to go on,” said Miss Bruder. “If we get stuck at least we’re that much closer to the road. Perhaps we could walk to the main highway.”

Janet saw Jim glance sharply at Miss Bruder. Perhaps she didn’t realize the seriousness of their situation, or perhaps she was masking her thoughts with those words.

The gears ground again, the motor took up its burden, and they lurched ahead, churning through the deepening snow.

The air was colder now. There was no warmth from the heater. Something had gone wrong with the motor or a pipe had frozen. No matter then. Getting through the drifts was uppermost in their minds.

Gradually the straining progress of the bus slowed, finally stopped, the gears clashed, and they lurched backward several hundred feet. Then they plunged ahead again, burrowing deeper into the snow.

“Everybody out to shovel,” said the driver, snapping off the engine to save fuel.

The boys hurried out into the cold and the girls huddled closer to each other. Margie and Cora, thinly clad for such a night, beat their arms almost steadily and stamped their feet in rhythmic cadence.

Janet and Helen, heavily clothed, were still warm although the cold crept through their gloves to some extent.

“I wonder how cold it is?” asked Helen.

“I haven’t any idea, but it feels like it was almost zero. Let’s not think about it.”

“Try not to think about it,” retorted Helen, and Janet admitted that her companion was right. There was nothing to think about except the cold and the snow. Of course there was the class play, but marooned in the middle of Little Deer valley with a howling blizzard raging was no time to think of class plays.

The driver came back and stepped on the starter. The motor was slow in turning over. It must be bitterly cold, thought Janet. Finally the engine started and they plowed ahead a few feet, then finally churned to a stop.

Outside the shovels clanged against the steel sides of the bus as the boys dug into the snow again. It was chilling, numbing work out there and Jim Barron tumbled through the door to stand up in front and beat his arms steadily. When he went out, Ed Rickey came in and the boys alternated.

Margie whimpered in the cold and Janet felt sorry for her.

“My coat’s large. I’ll come up and sit with you and Cora can come back here with Helen,” said Janet.

The other girls, thoroughly chilled, welcomed the change and Janet unbuttoned the voluminous coonskin and shared it with Margie, Helen doing likewise for Cora. Janet could feel Margie trembling as she pressed close to her.

After a time the driver returned and started the motor again. They moved forward slowly, creeping along the trail the boys had opened with the shovels. Finally they rocked to a stop and the driver turned toward Miss Bruder.

“It’s no use. The drifts are three feet high and getting worse every minute.”

Chapter V

THE WHITE MENACE

Miss Bruder looked at the girls, huddled together on the seats, desperately trying to keep warm. Outside the boys were bravely attempting to clear a path, but it was hopeless.

“Perhaps we’d better get out and try to reach the main road on foot,” she said.

“I wouldn’t advise that,” replied the driver. “Some of the girls couldn’t make it through the drifts. It must be well below zero now and the snow’s still coming down bad.”

Just then Jim and Ed led the boys back into the bus, closing the door carefully after them. They were covered with fine snow and frost from their own breath.

“I’m going to try and break through to the road,” said Jim. “The rest of you stay here and try to keep warm. Whatever you do, don’t leave the bus.”

“If anyone is going to try to make it to the paved highway, I’m going,” spoke up the driver. “I’ve been over this road a number of times. I’ll follow the fence line and get to a farm somehow.”

In spite of the protests of the boys, the driver remained firm, insisting that he, and he alone, could make the trip.

“Keep the door shut and don’t run the motor. The heater’s out of order now and if you run the motor, carbon monoxide fumes may creep in. They’re deadly.”

But that was an unnecessary warning for all of the boys knew the danger of the motor fumes in a closed compartment.

Bundling himself up well, the driver plunged into the storm and Miss Bruder and her honors English class were left alone in the middle of Little Deer valley with the worst storm of the winter raging around their marooned bus.

Jim turned off the headlights, leaving only the red and green warning lights atop the bus on. He snapped the switches for the interior lights until only one was left aglow for there was no use to waste the precious supply of electricity in the storage battery.

If anything the whine of the wind was louder and it was exceedingly lonely out there despite the presence of the others. There was something about it that made Janet feel as though she were a hundred miles from civilization. She had not dreamed it would be possible to have such a sense of loneliness and yet be in a group of schoolmates.

Jim Barron and Ed Rickey kept on the move, talking with some of the boys or attempting to cheer up the girls.

“Better get up every few minutes and swing your arms and stamp your feet,” advised Ed. “That’ll keep the circulation going; otherwise you may suffer frostbite.”

Helen squinted her eyes and looked at her watch in the dim light shed by the single bulb. It was just after midnight.

“Wonder if we’ll be home by morning,” she asked, turning back to Janet.

“Let’s hope so, though I’m not in the least bit hungry after the big meal we had at Youde’s.”

“That seems ages away,” replied Helen. “I’d almost forgotten the skating party.”

Margie, who had taken shelter under Janet’s coat, spoke up.

“It’s all the bus driver’s fault. We never should have left Youde’s.”

“But none of us wanted to spend the night there,” said Janet. “Of course we didn’t dream the snow would have drifted this much.”

“The driver should have known,” insisted Margie, and Janet thought her more than a little unreasonable, but then Margie was probably thoroughly chilled and likely to disagree with everything and everyone.

The minutes passed slowly, dragging as Janet had never known they could. The cold increased in intensity and some of the other girls, not as warmly dressed as Janet and Helen, began to complain.

“My feet are getting numb,” said Bernice Grogan, a slip of a little black-haired Irish girl.

“Better keep them moving,” said Ed Rickey. “Here, I’ll move them for you until the circulation starts back.”

Ed knelt down on the floor and took Bernice’s boots in his hands, massaging her feet vigorously.

Soon Bernice began to cry.

“It’s the pain. They hurt terribly.”

“Just the circulation coming back,” said Ed, but Janet knew from the lines on his forehead that Ed was worried.

“If any of the rest of you feel numb, just call out. We’ve got to keep moving or some of us may suffer some frozen parts before morning,” he warned.

Bernice, in spite of her efforts, couldn’t keep the tears back, but they froze on her cheeks, so bitter was the cold.

Jim Barron opened the door, and a rush of cutting air swept in. Then he was gone into the night and Janet could hear him wielding the shovel outside.

It was five or six minutes before Jim returned and he looked utterly exhausted.

“I’ve never seen such a night,” he mumbled. “I’m afraid the bus driver didn’t get very far.”

“Then we’d better start out after him,” said Ed, getting to his feet.

But Jim’s broad shoulders barred the door.

“We’re going to stay right here. You can’t even find the fences now. It would be suicide to start in the dark. The only thing we can do is keep as warm as possible inside the bus. I started throwing snow up around the windows. Some of you fellows give me a hand. We’ll bank the bus in snow clear to the top and that will keep out some of this bitter wind.”

“But if you cover the bus with snow, they’ll never find us when they come hunting us,” protested Cora.

“Just never mind about that,” retorted Jim. “The only thing I’m worrying about now is keeping us from freezing to death.”

Jim’s words shocked the girls into silence.

Chapter VI

DESPERATE HOURS

Freezing to death! The phrase was terrible in its import, yet the danger was very near and very deadly, for there was slight chance that the bus driver had gotten through to give a warning of their predicament. Even if he had Janet wondered if any searching party could brave the rigors of the night.

Outside the boys worked steadily, coming inside in shifts, and then going back. They could hear the snow thud against the side of the bus as it was piled higher and higher and the sound of the wind gradually faded as the wall of snow protecting them from it thickened.

The light from the single bulb was ghostly now. The battery seemed to be weakening. Helen looked at her watch. It was just one o'clock when the boys came in, beating their hands and knocking the frost from their breath off their coats.

Jim was the last one in and he closed the door carefully after him.

Bernice was crying again and Ed, though half frozen himself, bent down and massaged her feet. Miss Bruder was white and shaken for it was more than she could cope with and she turned to Ed and Jim to pull them through the emergency.

While Ed worked with Bernice's feet, Jim spoke to the group.

"We might as well face this thing frankly," he said. "We're in an awful jam. It must be fifteen or twenty below right now. The snow has stopped, but the wind is increasing in strength and the snow is drifting badly. It may be hours, perhaps a day, before we're discovered."

He paused and watched the conflicting emotions on their faces, then plunged on.

"We've banked the bus with snow to keep out the worst of the wind, but it's going to be terribly cold just the same. We've got to keep moving, keep up our spirits. If we don't –"

But Jim didn't finish his sentence. There was no need for they all knew what would happen once they became groggy and sleepy.

"I'm going to start with a count and I want all of you to beat your feet in time with me. That'll jar your whole body and warm you up a little."

Jim started counting and soon the whole group was stamping their feet methodically.

Even Janet had not realized how cold she was. Her feet had felt a little numb, but under the steady pounding against the floor they started to tingle, then burn with an intensity that brought tears to her eyes where they froze on her lashes.

"I'm nearly frozen," chattered Margie, huddling closer to Janet. "If it wasn't for your coat I'd be like an icicle by this time."

They kept up the motion with their feet for at least five minutes, and Jim called a halt then.

"Everyone feel a little warmer?" he asked.

"My hands are still cold," said one of the girls, but Janet was too stiff to turn around and see who was speaking.

"Then here's an arm drill for everyone," said Jim, starting to swing his arms in cadence.

When that exercise was completed, most of them could feel their bodies aglow as the blood raced through their veins.

Ed started to tell funny stories and though he did his best, their own situation was so tragic that nothing appeared humorous. But he kept them interested, which was the main thing.

Helen was the first to break the now monotonous flow of Ed's words.

"Stop, Ed," she said, her voice low and tense. "Shake Miss Bruder, quick!"

Ed turned suddenly to the teacher, who had been sitting back of him. Her head had fallen forward on her chest and her arms hung limp.

The husky senior picked her up and brought her back under the light, the rest crowding around him.

Then Janet took charge. Miss Bruder's eyes were closed, but she was breathing slowly.

"I believe she's half frozen. She was sitting where a constant knife of air was coming in around the door," whispered Jim. "Get busy and massage her."

Janet, with Helen helping her, stripped off Miss Bruder's thin gloves. Her hands were pitifully white.

Ed scooped up a handful of snow where it had sifted in around the door and used it to rub Miss Bruder's hands while Janet and Helen massaged the upper part of her body and her face.

It was five minutes before the teacher responded to their frantic efforts. Then her eyes opened and she tried to smile.

"I must have dozed for a moment," she whispered.

"Don't talk," said Helen. "Rest now."

"Is everyone all right?" insisted the teacher.

"Everybody's here," replied Jim, who was keeping a close eye on Bernice, who seemed the most susceptible to the cold.

Ed pulled Janet to the rear of the bus.

"This thing is getting serious," he whispered. "Some of the girls won't be able to stand it until morning unless we're able to keep them warmer. Jim and I have sheepskins. We'll put them down on the floor and you girls get down and lie on them. Huddle together and cover up with your own coats. Your body heat should keep you warm and we'll be moving around and talking to you so none of you will get too drowsy from the cold."

"But you can't do that. You and Jim will freeze," protested Janet.

"Freeze? I guess not. We're too tough for that. Besides, I've got all kinds of clothes on under this sheepskin."

Janet finally agreed to the plan and Ed explained it briefly. Miss Bruder hesitated, but the others overruled her.

Jim and Ed placed their heavy canvas, sheep-lined coats on the floor and the girls laid down on them like ten pins, huddling together and putting their own coats over them.

"Get just as close as you can so you'll keep each other warm," counseled Jim, who, minus his heavy coat, was busy swinging his arms and legs.

In less than five minutes the girls were ready to admit that the plan was an excellent one, for they were quite comfortable under the mound of coats and Janet made them keep up a constant flow of conversation, calling to each girl every few minutes. Up in the front of the bus they could hear the boys moving steadily and stamping their feet.

How long they had been under the pile of coats Janet couldn't guess, but suddenly there was a wild pounding on the door of the bus. She managed to get her head out from under the coats in time to see Jim open the door.

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