

Vandercook Margaret

The Camp Fire Girls at the End of the Trail



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Margaret Vandercook

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CHAPTER I

A Strange Background

The castle had been built before the first known palace in Europe. It was fashioned centuries ago inside the walls of a stone cliff with two taller cliffs rising on either side. Beyond was a break between, allowing a narrow entrance to the cliff dwelling from the outside. In front there was a small plateau of rock ending in a precipice, which descended with a drop of a hundred feet to a new ledge, and then came another still deeper fall.

That afternoon a group of four persons were inside the ancient cliff dwelling. One of them – a young girl in an odd costume which was partly modern and yet suggesting an older race – had climbed to the crest of the ruins and stood, with her hand above her eyes, gazing about her.

Another girl, in a chamber below, was sitting upon a comfortable camp stool which she had undoubtedly brought with her, she was hammering industriously with a small steel hammer,

and now and then stopped to work with her chisel at a solid stone wall. Evidently she believed some extraordinary treasure was embedded inside, since she never glanced away from her labors.

On the bottom floor historic influences had not kept the two remaining girls from the cheering occupation of preparing tea. The wood must have been brought from the country behind the cliffs, for a camp fire was burning in the old stone chamber, with a large kettle of water simmering above it.

One of the two girls – tall and foreign in appearance, with large dark eyes and thick dark hair parted in the middle over a low brow – left her task now and then. She would then walk twenty yards or more toward a figure lying quietly in the sunshine. In spite of the warmth this figure was wrapped in a great blanket which allowed only a fair head and thin face to show forth.

If no attention was vouchsafed her, she would quietly return to her occupation. But, by and by, without speaking, she came and spread a small cloth on a flat surface of rock. Then she unpacked an Indian basket stored with things for making tea. Immediately afterwards, putting her fingers to her lips, she summoned the other girls to join her.

In response Alice Ashton rose up at once and carefully stored away her precious bits of stone and her hammer and chisel into the bag she carried for the purpose. Then she climbed down the jagged but secure steps cut into the face of the rock so many years ago.

But Peggy Webster, at the summit of the cliff dwelling, refused to descend in any such sensible fashion.

Instead, she began to slide over the face of the rock, losing and then regaining her foothold. Below the others watched her half fascinated and half annoyed.

“Peggy!” one of the girls called warningly.

For Vera Lageloff had seen her safely reach a flat surface about ten feet from the plateau below. She had walked out to the edge of it and there stood poised for a moment with her back to the sun. Her pose was as virile and graceful as that of a young boy.

Then, before the watchers exactly realized her purpose, she had crouched and sprung from the ledge. For the instant she was in the air she was a figure of bronze and crimson. The moment had struck the earth, she was merely Peggy Webster, in a khaki Camp Fire costume with a red band about her black hair and a little out of breath from her plunge.

“There I have been wondering if I could accomplish that feat ever since I arrived in this stone age country,” she announced penitently, appearing more ashamed of her performance than proud.

“Well, as long as you are gratified and still alive, Peggy, I only request that you never make the same attempt again,” Betty Graham returned, her color returning swiftly, now that her momentary nervousness had passed. For she had come away from her task of guarding the fire just in time to behold the other

girl's act.

“Really, since we came West, Peggy dear, I am becoming more and more convinced that the Fates never intended you for a feminine person,” she went on. “There is never any guessing what reckless thing you may do next. I am afraid an accident may happen to you.”

While she was speaking, Bettina Graham had taken her seat on the ground and had begun pouring the hot water into a tea-kettle of generous size.

Peggy now dropped down beside her.

“Don't say I am masculine, please, Bettina; I do so hate a masculine woman. Your last remark was only a more polite way of expressing the same unpleasant idea. Why don't you say instead that I am ‘Seraphita?’ She is Balzac's charming character – half girl, half boy, neither and both. When I am in favor with Tante she has a way of declaring me another Seraphita.”

“Besides your sudden plunge might have frightened Billy,” Vera Lageloff interrupted, not realizing how her speech betrayed the interest usually uppermost in her mind.

The figure, still wrapped in the blanket, was at present sitting up, looking from one girl to the other in a quietly disinterested fashion.

“Oh, no, I am never worried over Peggy when she is attempting athletic feats,” he announced. “She will never do herself serious harm in that way. What I fear for her, what I know will hurt her some day, are the experiences about which she is so

scornful at present. You see she is perfectly convinced that she will never care for any human being outside her family and a few friends. So nothing and no one can ever harm her.”

Billy Webster accepted the cup of tea and a comfortable number of sandwiches which Vera now offered him.

“Don’t be absurd, Billy,” Peggy challenged, her face reddening in spite of her efforts to appear undisturbed. “As far as you are concerned you will look ever so much better as soon as you cease behaving like an invalid. I do believe you are in better health than you wish us to think you are.”

“Perhaps I am; really I don’t exactly know,” Billy returned dispassionately, as if he were speaking of some one else. He was holding his cup and gazing over its rim. “I do enjoy having so little asked of me. It has never happened before, as I have always been expected to do the things I dislike. Now, I would far rather be half ill than to have to shoot and fish and do the kind of things Dan and the other fellows out here like to do. Besides, I really tried to make myself ill, so that father would have to consent to my coming West.”

Billy made this announcement without embarrassment, but not as if he cared whether or not it were believed.

It was his sister, Peggy, who flushed uncomfortably as she always did over her brother’s oddities. To her truthful mind and straightforward nature his peculiarities were impossible to understand.

But Billy did not look as if his words had been altogether true.

In spite of his sister's speech, he was far more fragile than he had been when she had said farewell to him at their farm in New Hampshire a few months before. She had then started west to join her aunt, Mrs. Burton, and become a member of the Sunrise Hill Camp Fire club in Arizona.

At this instant and without being observed, Vera shook her head at Peggy.

If no one else understood Billy Webster's vagaries, the Russian girl with whom he had so deep a friendship apparently did, or if not she usually had an excuse for him.

But Peggy suddenly remembered that her brother was not supposed to know how ill he had been.

Then, almost at the same time, an interruption followed in the form of an extraordinary sound, or combination of sounds. First there was the long-drawn-out wail of annoyance and protest made by a small western burro; then an intermingling of faint shrieks of fear with gay laughter.

Peggy and Bettina both ran forward to the narrow opening between the two cliff walls. Then they beheld an extremely pretty, rather plump woman, with rose-colored cheeks and grey in her brown hair, riding astride a burro. The burro was being lead by another woman of the same age, extraordinarily like and yet unlike the other one. The woman on foot was more slender and paler, her hair was darker and not grey, and her eyes a deeper blue.

"Peggy, darling, for goodness sake help me get your mother

off this beast,” she called out as soon as the two girls were inside the defile, “I have had to drag both the animal and Mollie Webster every inch of the way. See, Mollie, I told you that our camp was not far from this old cliff dwelling which the girls and I discovered and adopted the other day. You might easily have walked here.”

“So I might and would have, Polly O’Neill Burton, had I dreamed that you were going to make this wretched animal actually trot with me across a stone wilderness.”

During her protest, with some difficulty, Mrs. Webster was being persuaded to dismount from her burro by Peggy and Bettina. But she seemed not to have acquired the art of making the proper beginning, for her too long and too full skirt kept getting twisted around her.

“Better wear a proper Camp Fire costume, especially adapted for a Camp Fire guardian at the Grand Canyon of Arizona, Mollie,” Mrs. Burton suggested, going forward and leaving the girls to find some place to fasten the burro, when finally her beloved twin sister had made the descent to earth in safety.

Mrs. Burton’s costume was in fact charming and so simple that one would not easily have known how expensive it was. She wore tan-colored, high kid boots, wrinkling above the foot like mousquetaire gloves, a khaki-colored broadcloth coat and a short skirt with trousers of the same material beneath. Her hat was of French felt, a little deeper shade of brown, and trimmed with a soft red scarf.

“Billy, you look like an Indian chief with that blanket wrapped about you, provided one does not look too carefully on the inside,” she announced. “Hope the tea isn’t all gone; your mother needs some refreshment, although I don’t care for any.”

Then walking over to the edge of the cliff Mrs. Burton stood looking down, with a curious sensation of fascination and fear.

A moment later Mrs. Webster sat down beside her son, giving a suppressed sigh of relief. Billy seemed so much better, although he had been at the new Sunrise Camp but little over a week.

A short time before the Sunrise Hill Camp Fire party, who had been for several months living in a group of tents on the borders of the Painted Desert, had moved on to the neighborhood of the Grand Canyon. They were now in camp not far from the famous Angel Trail.

But before they were fairly settled a letter had arrived from Mrs. Webster saying that she would like to join the Camp Fire party and wished to bring along her two sons, Dan and Billy Webster.

There was no possibility of declining to welcome the newcomers, for it was Billy’s serious illness which had made a western trip necessary and forced his father’s consent to their joining his aunt’s camping party.

However, the campers were extraordinarily well pleased and particularly Polly Burton. For if her beloved Mollie were with her, surely her difficulties as Camp Fire guardian were over. She and Mollie were so unlike they were complements to each other.

“Fact is when we are together, Mollie mine, we have all the virtues and leave none to be desired,” Polly O’Neill, who was now Mrs. Richard Burton, had more than once announced to her twin sister.

And Mollie had laughed as she always did, accepting the speech as only one of her gifted sister’s absurdities. For, in spite of her Polly’s genius, her opinions never made much impression upon Mrs. Webster.

Nevertheless, perhaps on this point she was not altogether wrong. Already, since Mrs. Webster’s coming, the group of Camp Fire girls unconsciously were under the spell of its truth. There were some to whom Mollie Webster represented the influences which they needed and desired. She was far more motherly than her sister and loved to fuss and worry over each girl’s health and appetite. Yet, in her gentler fashion, she was really more exacting than Mrs. Burton, as such apparently yielding natures often are.

Already Alice Ashton and Vera Lageloff felt more closely drawn to Mrs. Webster – Vera, because she was Billy’s mother and had been her friend before she met Mrs. Burton.

With Alice Ashton the circumstances were different. For one thing, Alice felt that her Aunt Mollie took her more seriously and had a real respect for her intellectual interests and abilities. She could not always be perfectly certain that the other Camp Fire guardian was not sometimes a little amused by her ambitions.

Vera and Alice were both engaged in serving Mrs. Webster

with tea. A moment later Bettina and Peggy walked over and stood on either side of Mrs. Burton.

“To what on earth, Tante, did you expect us to hitch that wretched beast?” Bettina demanded. “Peggy did finally manage to tie him to a cliff but it required an extraordinary amount of talent.”

Laughing, Mrs. Burton slipped one hand inside Peggy’s and the other in Bettina’s.

“Sorry, children, but I could not persuade Mollie to come with me in any other way and I did want her to see this wonderful view. You know how she hates walking, but perhaps we may get her into better habits while she is in the West with us. Look down there. The distance is tremendous, isn’t it? and yet this is only one of the smaller canyons – not the Grand Canyon. The roaring of the water sounds as far beneath as if it were the River Styx. But don’t get so close to the edge, Bettina. I thought looking down great heights made you feel uncomfortable.”

“Some one jumped or fell over this cliff the other day,” Peggy announced. “Ralph Marshall told me that the man had been a guest at the hotel where he is staying.”

Mrs. Burton shivered, drawing back in her usual impressionable fashion.

“Don’t tell us any gruesome details, please, Peggy dear. Remember it is the wonder and beauty of nature we must think of, and not its terribleness.”

Afterwards the woman and two girls were silent for a little

while, each pursuing her own train of thought and each admiring in her fashion the marvelous spectacle before them.

It was as if a sunset had been inverted and its colors dropped down inside the cliffs, using the stones for clouds to hold the lights. Farther down, the walls of earth grew dark and finally a black stream ran between them.

A little later Mrs. Webster called to her sister and the two girls to join her. They then returned at once to the rest of the group and for half an hour sat there laughing and talking. For their background they had one of the most ancient dwellings of the human race ever found upon the earth, and their foreground was a portion of one of the great wonders of the world.

Nevertheless the Camp Fire party talked chiefly of their own affairs. After all, human beings are seldom vitally interested for long in anything save themselves and their own kind.

But, by and by, Mrs. Burton arose.

“Please hurry, everybody, we must get back to camp as soon as possible,” she suggested. “We forget that now September is here the days are getting shorter. I for one have not the courage to be lost in this part of the world. Moreover I have something to tell you when we reach camp which may surprise you.”

CHAPTER II

White Roses

The new camping site was by far the most beautiful the Sunrise Camp Fire club had ever occupied, even bearing in mind all its former history.

With wagons and their burros the girls, Mrs. Burton, and their guide had followed a trail leading from the old site near the Painted Desert to the new. They had preferred the long trek, although the nearby railroad would have covered the distance in a few hours.

Yet in this part of the country how easy it is to forget modern civilization if one will, since half a century ago the Grand Canyon itself was still unexplored.

Here their tents were pitched in a portion of the world's garden, while only a short distance away was the most gigantic wonder in stone.

In less than three-quarters of an hour the little party of seven, who had been drinking tea, arrived at their present home, involuntarily stopping a few yards from the tents for the purpose of enjoying the picture before them. They had come through half a mile of pine forest after leaving the neighborhood of the cliffs and now found themselves encircled by pines on all sides. In only a few places was there a clearing through which one could get

a vista of the far horizon, but in one of these clearings the new Sunrise camp had pitched their white tents.

In front of the tents the grass was soft and thick and of a deep bluish green. To the left a miniature hill was broken by a narrow fissure down which a tiny, clear stream trickled into a small lake below that was only a little larger than a big circular mirror. As a matter of course the pool had been christened the "Wishing Well." The name is indeed time honored, but then wishing is perhaps the oldest and at the same time the youngest occupation in the world.

A few scrub trees and bushes grew along the ground between the pines, yet the air was altogether filled with the pine tang and fragrance. In many nearby places there were the brilliant early autumn flowers of the western plateaus.

As a beacon light to the home-comers, as well as for domestic reasons, a large fire was burning at a safe distance from the tents. Through the trees the sunset colors turned the scene to rose and gold.

For the moment there chanced to be no one in sight save Marie Papin, Mrs. Burton's maid, and Mr. Jefferson Simpson, the Camp Fire guide.

So near the fire were they standing and so absorbed in their conversation that, although they must have noticed the return of the little party, neither turned to speak to any one of them.

In the reflection of the firelight the two figures made an interesting and not an ordinary picture. The contrast

between them was striking. For once Marie had discarded her conventional maid's costume of black and was wearing a white muslin dress as only a French woman can wear white, changing it from simplicity to coquetry.

Moreover, the rough-and-ready outdoor costume, ordinarily adhered to by Mr. Simpson, had been set aside for a conventional attire, or possibly this was his impression. Yet Mr. Simpson did not appear conventional.

As they reached their own tents Polly Burton nodded significantly to Peggy and Bettina. Then she waited outside when they disappeared inside.

"I wonder if Tante's surprise, which we were to hear on our return, had anything to do with Marie and Mr. Simpson?" Peggy demanded, as she began changing her costume for the more ceremonial one worn at dinner. She was looking reflective and at the same time a little annoyed – an expression characteristic of Peggy Webster under some conditions. She did not enjoy romantic problems.

Bettina laughed. She knew that Peggy had an instinctive prejudice against the romantic in any and all its forms. Not only Bettina, but Peggy's family and many of her friends often wondered why Peggy should be so different in this from other girls. Moreover, how would she ever meet her own romance when her hour came, if she had so intense a shyness at its very suggestion among other people?

A number of times Bettina had been aware that their Camp

Fire guide felt more than an ordinary interest in Marie. Yet the thought of an affair between the young French woman with her ideas of life and the big uncultured miner had seemed impossible. They were farther apart than the two poles, since, in the end, the poles being reached bear many resemblances. If Mr. Simpson had been rich, there might have been another story. However, some theory had to be worked out to explain Mr. Simpson's wish to continue as the Sunrise Camp Fire guide.

True, he was a soldier of fortune who, according to his own story, had played many parts. However, each member of the Camp Fire club appreciated his superiority to the task he had undertaken of being their courier, guide, man of all work, doing a hundred and one tasks for a group of something less than a dozen women. Even if he had fallen upon evil days and accepted the work as a temporary occupation or amusement – for he appeared to consider his tasks more amusing than laborious – there were many other more dignified and lucrative occupations in which he could have engaged.

So Bettina reflected, as she followed Peggy's example in getting dressed.

They had not finished when a slim figure slipped in to their tent uninvited.

Her expression was slightly apologetic as she seated herself upon the edge of a cot, drawing one foot up under her and flinging her hat aside, as a girl frequently does when beginning a confidence.

However, the newcomer was not a girl. Instead she was the Camp Fire guardian and hostess of the Sunrise club in Arizona at the present time, and also in their recent camping experience upon the edge of the Painted Desert, Mrs. Richard Burton, the famous actress, known to the public as Polly O'Neill Burton.

“Sorry my surprise for this evening has not developed, or rather that it has developed in an unexpected fashion,” she began, speaking enigmatically and shrugging her shoulders, half chagrined and half pleased.

“Perhaps you girls know from experience that I am more nervous over playing chaperon than any other Camp Fire guardian duty. But I must confess I never expected to be troubled by Marie! She and I have traveled together for years without Marie’s having a single love affair so far as I have been told. And then appears Mr. Simpson, the last person to be suspected in the light of a lover.”

Mrs. Burton’s lips twitched and her eyes shone with an amused light.

“I like Mr. Simpson very much. Really I am afraid Marie is not good enough for him as she is behaving so absurdly,” she ended inconclusively.

“Tante, what are you talking about? Certainly you never betray your point at the beginning of a story as so many people do,” Peggy demanded, still frowning, but approaching nearer the lady on the cot.

Mrs. Burton laughed.

“Sorry, Peg, but, perhaps, remembering your prejudice against love affairs, I forbore to tell you several days ago that Marie and Mr. Simpson became engaged on the last night of our journey to camp. You may recall that Mr. Simpson took a number of you girls out for a walk after we had pitched tents for the night and after Marie had me safely stored away in bed. I was surprised at the time at her wishing to go with you, as Marie and outdoor exercise are not enamored of each other. Then Marie came in late, after you girls had gone to bed, and told me her news. We were planning to have a party tonight and announce the engagement. I sent hundreds of miles for a cake and white roses,” Mrs. Burton concluded mournfully.

Bettina Graham was twisting her yellow-brown hair into a single braid about her small head – a difficult performance before a six-inch hand mirror which she held in one hand while twisting with the other.

Nevertheless she stopped.

“Well,” she inquired, “didn’t the roses arrive?”

Mrs. Burton nodded. “Oh yes, but Marie has broken her engagement. Mr. Simpson confided to me that he thinks it is on account of his new clothes. He insists that Marie thought he would look like one of her Broadway heroes as soon as he discarded his western outfit. Assuredly he does not. Funny that he gave me this information quite good-naturedly, with an amused twinkle in his eyes! Of course Marie declared this untrue. She now announces that she could not make up her

mind to leave me; besides life in the West could never satisfy her. She believes she must have been unduly influenced by the September moon at the time of her acceptance of Mr. Simpson.” Mrs. Burton shook her head in reflection. “The laws of attraction between human beings are perhaps the strangest of all laws. Remember my oracular speech, children; you may find it useful.”

At this moment she got up stiffly, as persons do after sitting in an awkward position for any length of time.

Peggy had continued frowning.

“How silly Marie is! I do think she has behaved abominably. I simply can’t understand how people can be so ‘changy’ about serious matters,” Peggy concluded, her cheeks again coloring with annoyance.

Remembering her own uncertainties on this same subject and concerning the acceptance of the husband whom she now adored, Mrs. Burton suddenly felt less vexed with Marie than she had a few moments before.

“All people are not alike, Peggy dear, for which we should be thankful. Anyhow there are at least two widely different varieties, the ‘Sentimental Tommies’ and the ‘Grizels’ of this world. One had a good many minds inside of one mind and they all have to be pleased. Then there are fortunate people like you and Grizel dear, who have only one beautiful clear mind to make up without doubts and backslidings.

“Now I must depart to get ready for dinner. At least we have the consolation of the cake and the roses. Mr. Simpson insists

that he will appear at his engagement party, even if there is no engagement and no bride. But Marie, of course, has retired in tears.”

CHAPTER III

A New Dawn

Very rarely did Polly Burton arise early in the morning. This excellent habit she had never liked as a girl and, of course, later on her stage life had made the custom well nigh impossible. Now, however, within the past few months of outdoor camping, she had changed and become that very doubtful early bird, or early worm, for one never can be sure which one may be – the winner of the morning prize or the victim.

However, the coming of daylight in this extraordinary land of hills and deserts, of giant cliffs and fairy gardens, was worth a serious effort.

At any rate this was Mrs. Burton's impression. Frequently she used to slip out of her tent before any one else had awakened and watch the dawn above the blue San Francisco peaks spread itself slowly over the entire horizon. Afterwards she sometimes returned to bed and to sleep, or else read until the Camp Fire girls were in evidence.

This morning it was a little before six o'clock when, getting into her clothes, she slipped out of doors. Quiet had to be preserved for, now that Mrs. Webster had arrived, she was sleeping in her sister's tent, while another smaller tent had been put up not far off which Dan and Billy Webster were occupying

together. Now, that Billy was so much better, his brother was able to look after him at night. Moreover their mother, after her siege of nursing, required the rest.

For two reasons, therefore, Mrs. Burton departed without making the least disturbance. First, she wished her sister to continue sleeping, second, she did not wish her own plan interfered with. One never could be sure when Mollie would not take a stand against what she might consider an unnecessary eccentricity.

Mrs. Burton's desire was to see the sun rise above one of the canyons and to see it alone. Not the Grand Canyon itself; one still had a day's journey down a precipitous trail from the Sunrise Hill camp for the best view of this amazing spectacle. She intended visiting one of the lesser canyons which was within reasonable walking distance.

The pine forest was as gloomy and quiet as a dim old cathedral when Polly Burton started swiftly through it toward the neighborhood of the cliffs of the day before.

There was a mist at the top of the trees hiding the first shafts of daylight. No other living human being was about. Only in one of the trees a screech owl, still under the impression that it was night, continued his curious wailing.

Mrs. Burton was not frightened, but naturally she was a little nervous and keenly alive to every sight and sound. Always enjoying new emotions and new impressions; now the early morning walk alone in so strange a place was unlike any past

experience she could recall.

Not many miles away stood a fashionable hotel filled with tourists, who had come to Arizona to see the Grand Canyon. Yet here in the forest one appeared to be in a primeval world. Not so different could these forests have been in the prehistoric days of the cliff dwellers, whose ancient homes were in the nearby cliffs.

Following the trail Polly Burton kept glancing from one side of the path to the other. Ridiculous, of course, but all through dinner the evening before Dan Webster had been regaling the girls with stories of the deer and bear supposed to live in the adjacent woods.

Yet, in spite of her unfaith, there was always enough of the spirit of the adventurer in Mrs. Burton, left over from the one-time Polly O'Neill, to hope for the unexpected.

Once in a place where the trees grew thicker than elsewhere, she half believed she saw a big, brown figure go lumbering off on all fours in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, without being interrupted in any way, she finally arrived at the ledge of cliffs where she had spent the afternoon before.

Now, instead of stopping at the same place, she walked slowly along, carefully guarding each step. The morning light was a dull grey – the color of deep shadows. Slowly the sky was growing warmer and breaking into light, coloring the thick mist in the ravine below until it resembled a mammoth, iridescent soap bubble.

Then the mist began to separate and to float upward like an

army of ghostly figures.

The effect was fascinating – even thrilling – and yet it was eerie. To an imaginative person many fantastic ideas would have presented themselves. It was as if the spirits of evil persons having been enchained to do penance for their sins in the world below, and now, having expiated their misdeeds, were allowed to float upward. Sometimes they moved in pairs, gradually drifting apart as they reached the higher air. Now and then a more lonely ghost, appearing as if wrapped about in a cloak of silver mist, would pursue his upward flight alone.

Mrs. Burton felt more than repaid for her trip, yet regretted that she had not brought one of the girls with her. Bettina would perhaps have enjoyed the spectacle most. The Camp Fire guardian was beginning to understand Bettina Graham better than she had in their past Camp Fire experience. But her desire was not purely unselfish, for she was nervous.

The scene was almost too beautiful and mysterious to be witnessed by oneself. Besides, in the past few months she had grown so accustomed to being in the society of the Sunrise Hill Camp Fire girls that she was almost uncomfortable any great length of time without them.

Now it would have been pleasant to have heard Bettina's pretty fancies, or to have had Peggy dispel the mists by a practical suggestion, or to have listened to Alice's or Ellen's scientific explanation of clouds, or to have beheld Sally and Gerry giggling irresponsibly over something which had nothing to do with mists

or ghosts or canyons.

Yet Mrs. Burton lingered until the dawn had fully come and all the sky was rose crimson. Then, glancing at her watch, she started toward camp.

In another half hour the girls would be up and preparing breakfast. As no one knew where she had disappeared it was possible that her Sister Mollie might become uneasy.

Once in the woods again she walked more hurriedly, not only because she feared being late, but for another more absurd reason. Unexpectedly Mrs. Burton had the sensation of being followed.

She did not see any one or anything, and was not even sure that she heard distinctly. Nevertheless her impression was vivid.

Twice she stopped and waited; once she called aloud; the second time, very like the one-time Polly O'Neill, she stamped her foot, crying out:

“If any one is playing a prank on me, please understand that I am weary of it.”

There was no answer. However, afterwards she had no longer the sensation of being pursued.

At camp Sally Ashton and Gerry Williams were busy preparing breakfast. Camp life was at least eventful when these two girls were at work.

Really, once stirred out of her slothfulness, Sally Ashton, who was essentially feminine, was an extraordinarily good cook. However, she required several persons to wait upon her while she

was at work.

This morning, in honor of Mrs. Webster, she was making a new cornmeal bread from a recipe which the Indian girl, Dawapa, had taught her.

She had Dan Webster engaged in assisting her. Dan not only brought fresh wood for her fire every few moments, but in between his pilgrimages watched with anxiety the cakes slowly browning in the hot ashes. Sally was never content unless she had at least one man or boy engaged in her active service. As a matter of fact if one were about she did not find this difficult to accomplish.

She waved a plump little hand toward their guardian when Mrs. Burton strolled into camp. Over the great pan of bacon she was frying Gerry Williams threw her a kiss.

There was no one else about. A little tired from her walk, Mrs. Burton sat down a short distance from the fire, for the warmth was pleasant, and, embracing her knees, began rocking slowly back and forward just as Polly O'Neill had always done when she wished to work out a problem.

Mrs. Burton was again considering her group of Camp Fire girls. How pretty Sally looked! Her hair lay in soft brown curls over her white forehead. She did not tan as the other girls. At the moment her big brown eyes were shining with an animation she did not always show. She was wearing a big apron over her Camp Fire dress.

Deliciously domestic Sally appeared to be working out-of-

doors! For, although Sally did belong to the type of women whom we choose to call especially feminine, she had gone far beyond the history of the primitive woman. Sally's idea was to enslave, certainly not to be enslaved.

In appearance she and Gerry Williams were a complete contrast, although having many tastes in common.

Since the trouble between Gerry Williams and Bettina Graham, Gerry and the Camp Fire guardian had not continued such devoted friends. Until then, except for her niece, Peggy Webster, Gerry had undoubtedly been Mrs. Burton's favorite among her group of girls.

But Gerry's effort to force Bettina to remain behind in the Indian's house, in order to place her in a false position during their last camping experience, had appeared not only mischievous but malicious. Mrs. Burton wondered if she had been right in bringing a girl of Gerry's training and tastes to live with girls who had been brought up so differently. She still said nothing to any one of them concerning Gerry's history, but she had one talk with the girl herself. Afterwards Gerry apologised, both to Bettina and to her and appeared to repent her behavior.

Now, in spite of the fact that Mrs. Burton could not trust her as she had at the beginning of their friendship, nevertheless Gerry's prettiness and affectionate manners never failed to appeal to her. She returned the kiss light-heartedly.

A few moments later the other Camp Fire girls appeared.

Peggy took away her aunt's coat and hat, since Marie had not

been seen since the night before. She was no longer sleeping in Mrs. Burton's tent, but in a tent with several of the girls.

Alice Ashton reported to Mrs. Burton that Marie had not yet lifted her head from the pillow, so overcome did she appear to be, either from relief or regret at the loss of Mr. Simpson.

Breakfast was about ready to serve before Mrs. Webster and Billy finally came out to join the others. They were an odd contrast – the mother and son – suggesting the homely but immortal comparison of the hen with the ugly duckling.

Mrs. Webster – who had once been Molly O'Neill – had cheeks round and soft and rosy as a girl's. Her blue eyes were filled with the sweetness of a loving and unquestioning nature. She was well past her youth and yet, in spite of her comfortable plumpness and the few grey hairs among the black ones, to the persons who loved her she seemed to grow prettier and sweeter as she grew older. Certainly her own family adored her.

But Billy Webster, her son, was a delicate boy with fair hair and large blue eyes. His expression was difficult to understand until one came to know that Billy questioned everything, but, having decided for himself acted, whenever it was possible, solely upon his own judgment.

When Dan Webster started forward to join his mother and offer his morning greeting, one felt better satisfied. For, except that he was big and strong and virile, he was exactly like her, both in appearance and apparently in character.

The Sunrise Hill Camp Fire girls were in the habit of

beginning each day with some little ceremony appropriate to their outdoor life and the spirit of their Camp Fire. Each member had her appointed time, for a morning ceremony. Today chanced to be Mrs. Burton's.

When everybody had assembled she walked toward a clearing and stood with her face to the east and her back against a group of pine trees with a growth of underbrush between.

"I am sorry all of you were not with me this morning at daylight. To have recited my verse then would have been more appropriate," she began.

However, what she recited was not so important, since always Mrs. Burton's audiences heard her with thrilling interest. For one reason, the voice of the great actress was so beautiful and appealing. Like the great Sara Bernhardt she would have been able to stir her hearers both to laughter and tears by a mere recital of the alphabet, could she have spoken as Bernhardt did in a language unfamiliar to her listeners.

"This verse is a part of the Indian New Fire ceremony and seemed to me appropriate to our morning camp fire," she explained.

Some vivid, charming quality appeared to be born anew in Polly O'Neill Burton each time she faced an audience, no matter how small and unimportant. This love of her work was perhaps the surest expression of her genius.

She now lifted her head, the color coming swiftly to her face, and pointing to the sun and then toward their own fire she spoke

in a beautiful resonant voice:

“All people awake, open your eyes, arise,
Become children of light, vigorous, active, sprightly;
Hasten clouds from the four world quarters,
Come snow in plenty, that water may abound when
summer appears,
Come ice and cover the fields, that after planting they
may yield abundantly,
Let all hearts be glad.”

The last words sounded like an invocation to happiness. However, it was Mrs. Burton who started forward, saying unexpectedly:

“Dan, there is some one watching us. I was under the impression I was being followed in my walk this morning. Why, I cannot understand! Will you find out who it is?”

Then, without replying, Dan went quickly forward into the nearby woods.

CHAPTER IV

A New Girl

There was an instant of waiting, then a little cry quickly suppressed. Soon after Dan could be heard returning.

But when he appeared he was half leading, half carrying, a girl of about fifteen or sixteen who did not look like a formidable intruder. She was small and her face was pale; at the moment her lips were pressed tightly together. Yet, in spite of her effort at self-control, her eyes were full of tears, either of anger, embarrassment or pain.

Yet, although Dan was resolutely holding her to the duty of facing the Camp Fire party, he was perfectly gentle. It would have been impossible for him to be otherwise.

Immediately Mrs. Burton walked forward. There was something about the girl that attracted her. She was not pretty; her features were too irregular; she had a long nose a little crooked, a wide mouth, and her chin was too sharply pointed for the breadth of her brow. But her eyes were a fascinating grey-green with extremely dark brows and lashes, and her hair was reddish brown.

“I am sorry,” the Camp Fire guardian began quickly. “Dan and I must both have been mistaken in thinking you the person we were seeking. But you must forgive my nephew, the fault

was mine. I was under the impression that some one was spying upon us, and who, for some absurd reason, was not willing to be discovered.”

The girl shook her head. “You were not mistaken. I have been watching you – or trying to – since early this morning. And I hate your having discovered me.”

She spoke quietly in a soft but at the same time throaty voice, as if she were a little hoarse.

Polly Burton was puzzled and yet it was stupid of her to have been. It was true that here in the West in the past few months, living outdoors with her group of Camp Fire girls, she had honestly forgotten a number of facts about herself.

“I don’t understand.”

But at this instant, murmuring something or other in apology, Dan Webster moved a few steps aside.

The girl turned her head.

“Don’t let go your hold on me,” she said almost angrily.

Again Dan held out his arm and this time the girl clutched it.

Dan’s face was crimson; he felt the whole situation to be extraordinarily awkward. He was not quick either in thought or action and undoubtedly he was confused by the words and the behavior of the girl who had been his prisoner a few moments before. Now she held on to him as if she dared not let go. He could feel her hand trembling on his arm and indeed her whole body was shaking.

Then Dan gave an inward sigh of relief, seeing that his mother

was approaching them.

“You have hurt yourself, haven’t you, child?” she began in a sensible comfortable fashion. “I presume you were merely curious about my sister and our Camp Fire proceedings. I know the information has gone out over the neighborhood that we wished to be left to ourselves. You understand my sister has to see so many people when she is playing that she has let it be known she wishes to meet nobody here. If you have been trying to see her without being observed, she must remember a time, which does not seem so long ago to me, when she was only a stage-struck girl herself. There, take my arm and let Dan help you to my tent.”

The girl had looked unhappy at the beginning of Mrs. Webster’s speech, but before the close she laughed a little uncertainly.

“I am afraid *that is* true,” she returned. “In any case I owe you an apology, Mrs. Burton.” She had dropped the lids over her eyes to hide her chagrin, but she went on honestly. “I suppose I am a stage-struck girl, although I do not like hearing myself called one. But I did come over here this morning at daylight for a look at your camp. Of course I never dreamed of seeing you. But when you started for your walk I did go along near you, as I did not suppose you would either see or hear me. But it was wonderful just to be so near you!”

In the meantime Peggy Webster had slipped forward and now stood alongside her aunt.

“Don’t be hateful, Tante,” she whispered warningly, knowing from experience that her aunt’s good nature was not always to be relied upon under trying circumstances. Moreover she had forgotten, as ninety-nine people out of a hundred do, when they arrive at distinction, how she had felt toward famous persons in her own youth.

But on this occasion Peggy need not have been uneasy.

The new girl was evidently of gentle breeding in spite of the shabbiness of her attire and the fact that she was rather more plain than good looking.

“Nonsense, child, it is oftentimes distinctly disagreeable to be near me, as my Camp Fire girls may tell you. But come and have breakfast with us, if you really have been prowling about since daylight as I have. I am dreadfully hungry.”

She started away with Peggy, expecting the others to follow. Either Mrs. Burton had not heard her sister’s speech, or else believed that her beloved Mollie was only fussing over the newcomer’s health as she did over everybody’s.

“Thank you, I would rather not be troublesome,” the new girl answered.

At this she let go Dan’s arm and took a step forward. But the pain of walking alone was too great for her self-control.

As people always did in disaster she turned to Mrs. Webster.

“I fear I have hurt myself and it is so stupid of me. Really I don’t know what to do. You see I did not want to be discovered and when I heard some one coming after me I started to run. I

must have tripped and fallen over a stump in the underbrush. As soon as I got up I was a prisoner.”

She flashed a peculiar glance at Dan Webster; but whether she was angry or amused over his discomfiture it was difficult to decide. Yet Dan looked wretched enough to satisfy the most teasing desire for revenge. He had the sweetest and most chivalrous temper in the world. No one ever remembered Dan’s deliberately hurting any one in his life. Now he undoubtedly felt as if he had caused a perfectly innocent girl to do herself a painful injury and had afterwards treated her with unpardonable rudeness. But it was not difficult to make Dan Webster feel himself in the wrong, both his sister Peggy, and his twin brother, frequently taking advantage of this trait of his character.

“You are not a prisoner in any sense,” Mrs. Webster replied, speaking more coldly, and appreciating Dan’s embarrassment. “But if you are hurt we shall be glad to do what we can for you and some one will drive you back to your home.”

More humbly the girl then took hold of Mrs. Webster’s proffered arm, and still holding on to Dan, started toward Mrs. Webster’s tent not many yards away.

In a curious fashion Dan felt that, in spite of her pretense of anger, the girl by his side felt a reliance upon him. And for some reason he could not explain he was interested in her. She was not half so pretty as many of the Camp Fire girls – Sally Ashton and Gerry Williams for instance. Yet there was something fascinating in her grey-green eyes, in her long nose with that funny twist at

the end of it, and in the uncertainty of her behavior.

Naturally Dan thought it ridiculous of the strange girl to have been hiding about in their neighborhood for the very ordinary pleasure of beholding his famous aunt.

Dan did not take Mrs. Burton or her fame as an actress seriously. Indeed, unconsciously he had inherited some of his father's old prejudice against women in any kind of public life. He was fond of his aunt, but not as Peggy was, or even his brother, Billy. For, although Billy did not bestow much affection upon any human being, except his mother and Vera Lageloff, he admired Mrs. Burton, was proud of her success, and was really more influenced by her opinion than any one's else.

The new girl walked with difficulty, but Dan could not help admiring her pluck. Ordinarily her skin was sallow but it was an odd greenish-white at present.

Outside his mother's tent Dan departed to find Ellen Deal.

Since the arrival of the Sunrise Camp Fire girls in Arizona, Ellen Deal had had but few opportunities for the display of her usefulness as a trained nurse. She had not graduated in nursing, since a breakdown in health had prevented her from finishing the last year of training. But she was older than the other Camp Fire girls and had come West with them because of Dr. Sylvia Wharton's request made to her half sister and always her beloved friend, Polly O'Neill, or Mrs. Richard Burton.

The call to the sick, however, with Ellen was like the call to arms with a soldier.

Fifteen minutes later, when Dan was finishing a belated breakfast, Ellen reappeared and sat down beside him. The next moment he saw the new girl come out of his mother's tent with her assistance and drop down on a cushion outside.

"Nothing serious the matter, as far as I can tell," Ellen announced in the business-like manner which seems to be considered professional. "Nevertheless I would like to have a doctor if one can be found over at the hotel or anywhere nearby. Our unexpected visitor has bruised and strained her knee and it may be worse than I think."

"Dan won't you take your victim, or our victim, her breakfast," Mrs. Burton suggested, smiling and yet looking sympathetic. Having finished her own breakfast she and Peggy had arranged a breakfast tray for their uninvited guest.

"Sit here, Dan," his mother announced a few moments later on his arrival before her tent. Then she hurried away to her own meal.

Dan sat silently watching the new girl.

She was evidently trying to show self-control. Yet it seemed impossible for her to choke the breakfast down, in spite of the fact that Sally had made new corn bread especially for her. Her lips kept twitching and finally the tears ran unchecked down her face.

"I am sorry you are in such pain," Dan said gently, and there was something very attractive in his gentleness, combined as it was with his beauty and strength. "I'll find a doctor for you in

a little while.”

To his surprise his companion again turned upon him angrily.

“I am not crying because I am in pain. I am not quite so ridiculous.” Then her nose twitched in a funny fashion and she added with the hoarse note in her voice which was so unusual, “I am crying because I am such a – such a fool.”

In spite of his wish to be sympathetic, Dan laughed.

“Oh, that is a common enough experience.”

But the girl shook her head.

“No,” she answered quietly, “there are a good many foolish people in the world, I know, but there are degrees. It seems to me I am the most hopeless kind.” She turned her eyes full upon Dan and curiously he was reminded of certain pools in his own New Hampshire woods on a soft grey day.

“My name is Marta Clark. I meant to tell you before. My brother and I are here living in a tent not far away from your camp – a few miles I believe. My brother broke down in health and we had to come out here because of him. He is still very ill and I have been taking care of him. If I can’t even hobble about for a few days I don’t know what is to become of us. Besides he has not the faintest idea where I am. I realized he would not allow me to prowl about trying to see Mrs. Burton if he knew, although he and I had talked of her being here. We had seen her act once and adored her.”

“Oh, you’ll find some one able to look after him for a few days well enough,” Dan replied, not viewing the matter as seriously as

his new acquaintance did.

Again the girl flashed what seemed to be an angry glance toward him.

“I don’t enjoy your forcing me to confess the fact,” she went on, “but my brother and I are desperately poor – far too poor to hire any one to take care of us, even for a few days. He was working and taking care of me, and when his illness came we had almost nothing. He was only a reporter on a paper and I was at school.”

“Nevertheless,” said Dan firmly, “I am sure we shall manage in some way to have you cared for until you are all right again.”

The girl’s face cleared, and Dan noticed that she had a rather care-worn look which her words had just explained.

“I don’t know why I should feel it when we are utter strangers, but you do look as if you could make things happen the way they should. I suppose it is because you are strong and patient. I am neither of those things.”

But they could not go on talking because, at this moment, the Camp Fire guardian was coming toward them.

CHAPTER V

The Patient

“But it is awfully kind of you, Ellen.”

Ellen Deal shook her head.

“No,” she answered. “I shall like it. Since I came out West with you and the Camp Fire girls, Mrs. Burton, I have been feeling that perhaps I was here under false pretenses. You see I am older than the other girls, and came partly because Dr. Sylvia told me I might be useful to you. Except for showing you a few first aid remedies I have not been useful at all. I don’t feel that I am a particularly agreeable companion, so I add nothing to the pleasure of the Camp Fire in that way.”

“Nonsense,” the Camp Fire guardian responded. Nevertheless a slight pang of self-reproach assailed her. Had she allowed Ellen Deal to feel that she was of less interest to the Camp Fire group than the other girls? It was true that Ellen was older, that she was midway between the age of a Camp Fire girl and a possible guardian. But, more than this, she seemed to have one of the hard and matter-of-fact natures it is always difficult to reach. Romance, the dreams and desires that are a part of nearly every life, hardly appeared to touch Ellen; or if they did at least she gave no sign. In their months together amid perhaps as beautiful and extraordinary scenery as there is anywhere in the world, Ellen

had showed no enthusiasm; in her life with the Camp Fire girls, no especial affection except, perhaps, in friendship with Alice Ashton.

“However, she was looking in a great deal better health,” Mrs. Burton reflected, and the present moment was scarcely the time for introspection by either of them.

“Just the same it is good of you, Ellen, besides not another one of us would be equal to the task. But if it is too much for you, you must let us know. Peggy is going with you now and I’ll drive over in the morning to see how you are getting on.”

“Thank you,” Ellen replied gratefully. Yet she would like to have said so much more – to have told Mrs. Burton how greatly she appreciated her kindness in allowing her, an entire stranger, to be one of her group of Camp Fire girls and also her guest for the past three months. However, words never came easily to her, for she was not one of the fortunate persons who can make themselves charming by the simple gift of expression, which may or may not be sincere.

Then she went away to pack her bag with a few necessary articles for the work ahead of her.

It was to Ellen Deal that Dan Webster had first confided the difficult position of their unexpected guest. Immediately Ellen had suggested that she go with the new girl to her camp and there see what should be done. Besides the fact of her brother’s illness, the girl herself would require looking after for a few days, if not for a longer time.

Later Mrs. Webster and Mrs. Burton had given a more or less enforced consents since, under the circumstances, there seemed nothing else to be done.

“Ellen certainly looks competent,” Polly decided at this moment, watching her move away. Her figure was small and neat, suggesting a great deal of reserve strength; her sandy hair had grown a shade brighter in tone from her months in the sunshine and her always bright color, brighter. It was a pity that she appeared so severe and critical.

This, also, was Marta Clark’s impression, riding beside Ellen, Dan and Peggy occupying the front seat of the wagon which the Camp Fire party ordinarily used for carrying provisions.

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