

Vandercook Margaret

The Camp Fire Girls in Glorious France



Margaret Vandercook

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CHAPTER I A March Day

One afternoon in March, the windows of an old French farmhouse stood open, the curtains blowing in the breeze like white flags of truce, while from indoors came the murmur of a number of voices, girls' voices, gay and animated and speaking in English, not French.

The next moment there was a brief silence; afterwards one of them began singing, with an odd foreign accent, a song strange to hear in this French countryside, the song of an American camp fire:

“The fire of our camp is burning,
Sing sweet, sing low, sing far,
From the long, long trail returning
Led by the evening star.

“Bright is our fireside's glowing,
Sing sweet, sing low, sing high,
Fragrant the wind now blowing
Over the fields nearby.

“Pleasant shall be our resting,
Sing sweet, sing low, sing clear,
Others life's storms are breasting,
Ours is the home fire dear.

“Yet what is the night wind sighing?
Sing sweet, sing low, sing true,
The ill, the hungry and dying,
Are they not calling you?

“Back over the long trail moving,
Sing sweet, sing low, sing wide,
Following the law of loving,
France, we come to thy side!”

A murmur of applause, and then a group of girls in Camp Fire costumes stepped out of the house and into the front yard. The March afternoon was unusually warm with a flood of pale sunshine covering the landscape, the sky was a delicate blue, the clouds changing into fantastic shapes. Beyond, the open country was showing little patches of green in the upturned fields; on the branches of a few newly planted fruit trees were tiny buds.

“I want to congratulate you, Bettina, on your original Camp Fire song,” one of the girls declared. She had dark hair with red lights in it, a slightly tanned skin, a little slender figure, as forceful and erect as a young boy's. Indeed both in her appearance and manner Mary Gilchrist gave one the impression at

this time in her life that she possessed certain qualities of mind and character which are not supposed to be essentially feminine.

Bettina Graham, who was a tall, fair girl, older than her companion, smiled.

“It is good of you, Gill, to congratulate me, when I realize that you were longing to be outdoors and at work during all our Camp Fire ceremony. If there was any value in my song it was due to Yvonne’s singing.”

Standing close beside the two American girls was a young French girl who apparently had not heard their conversation. Her expression was troubled, there was a frown between her brows. It was as if she were listening, straining her ears for the sounds of battle which had been resounding through France for almost four years.

It was now the memorable spring of the year before the last desperate German drive and the final victory of the Allies.

Slipping her arm through Yvonne Fleury’s, Bettina Graham made an effort to distract her attention.

“Try not to be unhappy, Yvonne. Even if the Germans are winning an unexpected success in Flanders, surely you cannot think they will ever reach the valleys of the Marne and Aisne a second time! I don’t believe our work of reconstruction will go for nothing. Of course it is hard for you to be compelled to give up your brother after so brief a time together when for so long you had supposed him killed. Yet he has scarcely had opportunity to have rejoined his regiment at the front, since he was first to report at Soissons. We must do our best to continue our efforts here at our farmhouse on the Aisne until his return. Surely the war cannot last much longer!”

At this instant Bettina’s conversation was interrupted.

“Behold a sight to banish all gloom!” exclaimed Mary Gilchrist, pointing over toward a field which adjoined the farmhouse yard.

There in truth was an amazing spectacle to be seen in a quiet French countryside!

Mounted upon an American tractor, which was ploughing vigorously through the earth, was an elderly American woman. She was wearing the usual blue blouse of the French peasant made slightly longer and showing underneath an unmistakable pair of full trousers of the same material. Upon her head was a large straw hat, tied under her chin with a bright red ribbon.

Forgetting their anxieties the three girls laughed in chorus.

“Count upon Miss Patricia Lord’s doing and saying exactly what she pleases at any time or place,” Mary Gilchrist continued. “As it happens I promised Miss Patricia to run our tractor over that particular field some time this afternoon, as soon as our Camp Fire ceremony closed. But you see she has preferred not to wait for me. In regard to her present costume, I heard Mrs. Burton say to Miss Patricia the other day that such a costume was not to be endured, France having already suffered enough without being compelled to behold Miss Patricia looking as she does at present. She even suggested that the influence of our Camp Fire organization in this neighborhood might be affected if Miss Patricia persisted in wearing so ridiculous an outfit. Yet observe Miss Patricia! Recently she has been acting as if she intended to plow and sow every acre in the devastated regions of France within the next few weeks, as if actually she were racing with fate. I don’t believe the German army itself will be able to stop her, certainly not for long. But I must go to fulfill my promise.”

Concluding her speech, Mary Gilchrist left her two companions, and at the same time the two girls turned to greet a newcomer.

She was a woman between thirty and forty years of age, slender, with brilliant blue eyes and dark hair; seated in a wheeled chair she was evidently recovering from a serious illness. About her there was a look of extreme delicacy, nevertheless her expression was gay, almost challenging.

“Do please let me get out of this absurd chair at once,” she demanded of the two girls who had charge of her. “After a little more of this I shall feel like a mummy! I am just as well as I ever was before that small piece of German shell chose me for its victim and turned Aunt Patricia into a

true prophet of evil. How persistently she did object to my journey into southern France! But what an exquisite afternoon! I think one never appreciates the true value of sunshine until one has been shut away from it. And how peaceful the French country about us seems! Surely the Germans will never again overrun this portion of France!”

To understand the present scene, one must know that a number of months before, Mrs. Richard Burton, the famous American actress, had arrived in one of the devastated districts of France near the river Aisne, bringing with her a group of American Camp Fire girls to help with the restoration work and also to originate the first Camp Fire organization among young French girls. Accompanying them was Miss Patricia Lord, an American spinster of great wealth.¹

At the end of her speech, the Camp Fire guardian, arising from her chair, stood up a little shakily, resting her arm upon that of her niece, Peggy Webster.

The young girl was like and at the same time unlike her, as she was the daughter of Mrs. Burton’s twin sister.

At the present time Peggy was about eighteen years old, with vivid dark coloring, a short, straight nose and a firmly modeled chin.

There was a suggestion of splendid physical vitality in contrast with the older woman’s frailty. Yet the woman and girl had the same look of a determined will hidden beneath natural sweetness and gaiety.

“Perhaps it may be as well for you not to recover too promptly, Tante. We may all be driven from this area of France as soon as you are strong enough to travel. I believe there is no reason for immediate anxiety, yet recently the news from the front is not encouraging. I believe the French authorities are beginning to feel it may be as well to send the women and children back from the Marne and Aisne a second time to some place of greater security. But I agree with you, the idea seems impossible. To think of the Germans again overrunning the dear little French villages which have so recently been restored is a nightmare. Personally I won’t even consider it. Suppose the Germans are enjoying another temporary success, they will be thrust back eventually.”

As if anxious fully to absorb the beauty and tranquility of the scene about them, until they were really convinced that there was no further danger threatening the Allied lines in France, the Camp Fire guardian and the group of girls surrounding her remained silent a moment, after Peggy’s speech.

Nevertheless, each one of them concealed a nervousness, impossible under the circumstances to confess.

Rumors, none of them especially reliable, but gaining strength through their number, had recently been reaching the Camp Fire farmhouse on the Aisne that the German attack against the British line further north was meeting with unexpected triumph. This did not mean that the victory would continue, or that the enemy would ever reach the neighborhood of the Aisne.

Yet each one of the present group of Camp Fire girls had lately faced this possibility.

Peggy’s words may have been intended to reassure them as well as herself.

Perhaps with an effort to interrupt an unhappy train of thought, suddenly, with a smothered exclamation compounded of amusement and horror, Mrs. Burton pointed toward Miss Patricia Lord.

At the instant Miss Patricia was descending from her tractor and was soon standing in the center of her freshly plowed field. In this situation her costume appeared more remarkable than ever. Yet one had to accept the fact that it represented a new order of American service in France.

“What impression do you think our French neighbors receive of Aunt Patricia?” Mrs. Burton demanded. “I know most of them are puzzled by her and a few of them are genuinely afraid of her and yet she has accomplished more for their happiness in the last few months than half a dozen other persons. Yet she will wear the clothes she likes and she will not attempt to speak French that any human being can understand.”

¹ See “The Camp Fire Girls on the Field of Honor.”

A little in the French fashion, since one is apt to be influenced by the mannerisms about one, Mrs. Burton now shrugged her shoulders.

“At least, girls, you know no one can move Aunt Patricia!”

Talking without any special significance, the Camp Fire guardian had observed that Miss Lord and Mary Gilchrist were no longer standing alone in the freshly plowed field not far from the farmhouse yard.

Running toward them across the heavy furrows was old Jean, the French peasant who had been assisting Miss Patricia with the work of the farm.

A little in advance of him was a French boy of about fourteen.

Ordinarily old Jean’s back was bent with age and long years of outdoor toil, yet at the present time he held himself nearly erect. He was panting and seemed nearly exhausted. The boy was running like a young race horse, and under the influence of an intense excitement.

Hearing their approach both Miss Patricia and Mary Gilchrist started toward them.

“Suppose we go and find out what news old Jean is bringing us,” Mrs. Burton suggested, her voice as controlled and quiet as usual. “He looks as if he had something important to say!”

As she was compelled to walk slowly and as the Camp Fire girls would not desert her, before they had gone any distance, Miss Patricia was seen to turn from old Jean and to come stalking toward them, followed by Mary Gilchrist.

She appeared like a general about to assume command of his troops.

“Polly Burton, within twenty-four hours you must be ready to leave our farmhouse and to take the Camp Fire girls with you. Jean has just arrived with the story that the Germans will soon begin an attack in this neighborhood. There is a possibility that they may push forward a certain distance. Personally I don’t believe a word of it, yet I can’t have you and a group of girls here on my hands. Besides, Jean says we are to have no choice. The French authorities insist that all women and girls, children and old men, move further back from the battle line.

“You will go first to Yvonne Fleury’s château, which is nearer the road to Paris. As Jean says there is no immediate danger, you will wait there for a few days until I can make arrangements to join you. If the Germans ever arrive at our farmhouse – and understand I don’t believe for a moment this will occur – why they will find very little for their refreshment.

“I shall probably keep Vera Lagerloff here with me, as she is the most sensible of the Camp Fire girls. But, Polly Burton, will you kindly not stand there staring at me as if you did not grasp what I have just told you. I assure you the Germans are again laying waste this beautiful French country. It really seems to me that I cannot endure it.”

And half leading, half carrying Mrs. Burton, Miss Patricia Lord entered the old French farmhouse.

CHAPTER II

The Château Yvonne

It was night in the Château Yvonne.

The old house was unlighted and extraordinarily still. Now and then from the recesses of a vine-covered wall, a screech owl sounded his lament, while from the banks of a small lake nearby a company of frogs croaked their approval.

Otherwise the château appeared deserted, and in the moonlight one could see that portions of it were in ruins and that only the oldest part, which originally had been built of stone, remained intact.

Nevertheless, at present the old château was not uninhabited. It was now after midnight and a figure, carrying a candle, moved through the wide hall of the second floor. So silently the figure moved that unless one were listening intently, one would have heard no footfall.

The apparition was a woman, with her hair bound in two long braids, her figure slender and agile as a girl's. Yet she had a look of courage, of hardly fought anxiety, which, together with her delicacy, held no suggestion of youth.

As she entered one of the bedrooms, one saw that she was not alone in the old house, two girls lay asleep in a large, old-fashioned French bedstead, a third girl in a cot nearby.

Their sleep must have been partly due to exhaustion, because as the light of the candle flickered across their faces, no one of them spoke or stirred.

A moment later, slipping as noiselessly into a second room, there was a faint movement from one of a pair of sleepers. A girl's lips framed a question, but before the words were spoken the intruder had moved away.

Now she walked to the front of the house and stood before a tall French window whose shutters were tightly closed; through the slats came faint streaks of light.

She seemed to be hesitating. Then blowing out her candle and with difficulty opening one of the heavy shutters, she climbed out upon a small balcony. The balcony, which was only a few feet in width, commanded an unusual view of the surrounding country.

As there were no large objects to obstruct the vision, one could see an extraordinary distance in the clear and brilliant moonlight. Not a single tree of any size guarded the old French château, although one might reasonably have expected to find it surrounded by a forest of a century's growth.

Only a few years before, the trees on this French estate had been famous throughout the countryside. An avenue of oaks bordering either side the road to the house had been half a mile in length and of great age and beauty. Strangers in the neighborhood were driven through the grounds of the château, chiefly that they might admire its extraordinary old trees.

Tonight, looking out from the little balcony down this selfsame avenue, one could see only a few gnarled trunks of the once famous trees, still standing like sentinels faithful at their posts till death.

When, soon after the outbreak of the European war the Germans swept across the Marne, the Château Yvonne and its grounds had been made an object of their special mania for destruction. Such trees as had not been destroyed by bursting shells and poisonous gases they had deliberately set afire.

Yet at present, Mrs. Burton, as she stood on the little balcony and looked out over the country, was grateful for their loss. She was thus able to observe so much more of the surrounding landscape. There was no human being in sight.

For the past four days she and five of the Camp Fire girls had been in hiding in the Château Yvonne, and within these four days the face of the world seemed to have changed.

Already it has grown difficult for some of us to recall the last week in March in the year 1918, when the Germans again appeared to have a chance of victory and the Allied lines were seen to waver and then recede from northern to southern France.

It was within this fateful week, with the channel ports and Paris again threatened, that the Camp Fire guardian and her group of American girls, had been vainly awaiting at the Château Yvonne the arrival of Miss Patricia Lord, Vera Lagerloff and Sally Ashton, in order that they might continue their retreat to Paris.

As Mrs. Burton now gazed out over the landscape, shining serenely in the clear beauty of the moonlight, she was interested in only two problems. What had become of Miss Patricia and her companions and how far away from the Château Yvonne at this hour was the German army?

In leaving the farmhouse on the Aisne and journeying to the château, instead of withdrawing from danger, they seemed to have approached nearer it. Yet no one possessed exact information concerning the results of the last few days of the great struggles. The persons admitted within the château had brought with them conflicting stories. One of them reported that the enemy was nearing Soissons, another that the French and American troops were holding the Germans at Château-Thierry. It was impossible to reach a definite decision. Yet always there was this conclusion. The French refugees were all hurrying on toward Paris; Mrs. Burton and her companions should join them at once.

Now as Mrs. Burton considered the situation for the hundredth time within the past twenty-four hours, she was as far from a conclusion as ever.

Against her will, but agreeing with Miss Patricia's wish, she had gone on ahead, Miss Patricia firmly declining to leave the farmhouse until her livestock and farming implements, acquired with such difficulty and of so great use to the French peasants, could be safely hidden from the approaching enemy.

At the time there had seemed no immediate danger to be feared. In proof of this Vera Lagerloff had not only remained behind, but by her own request, Sally Ashton, and Sally had always insisted that she was the least courageous of her group of Camp Fire girls.

Expecting to make the same journey later, now four days had passed without word of any kind from them.

There was the possibility that, upon learning there might be greater danger along the route which Mrs. Burton had traveled, Miss Patricia had decided to take some other road.

Yet considering this suggestion, again Mrs. Burton remained unconvinced. Miss Patricia Lord was a woman of her word; having told her to await her coming at the Château Yvonne, she would reach there finally if it were humanly possible. Otherwise Miss Patricia would fear that they might stay at the château indefinitely and so become involved in another tragedy of the Marne.

Finally, however, Mrs. Burton crouched down in the ledge of the window jutting out into the balcony. Having reached a halfway decision she at last could admit to herself her own fatigue.

In the morning the Camp Fire girls, who were her present companions, must start off alone toward Paris, leaving her at the château.

She could plead the excuse that she had become too exhausted to travel further until she had an opportunity to rest.

In the midst of her reflections, Mrs. Burton was even able to smile a little whimsically. Since the hour when Jean had brought the news of danger to the quiet farmhouse on the Aisne how completely she seemed to have ignored, if not to have forgotten, her own invalidism. And yet until that hour no one of her household had believed her equal to the least exertion!

Only a short time before, her husband, Captain Burton, had at last considered her to have grown sufficiently strong for him to leave, in order that he might continue his Red Cross work in France. And afterwards how strictly she had been guarded by Miss Patricia and the Camp Fire girls!

There is a familiar axiom that necessity knows no law. At present Mrs. Burton did not believe that she felt any the worse from her recent experiences save an increasing weariness.

The Camp Fire girls would undoubtedly oppose her wish to wait for Miss Patricia alone, she must therefore summon the strength to enforce her will.

The March winds were growing colder. At this moment, although wrapped in a heavy coat, Mrs. Burton shivered, partly with apprehension and partly from cold.

She knew that the five girls were not far off and yet, in the silence and loneliness of the night, with no human being in sight, she suddenly felt desperately solitary.

She was frightened. Notwithstanding her fear was not so much for herself, though she dreaded being left perhaps to face an oncoming German horde, her greater fear was that the Camp Fire girls might meet with disaster, traveling without their guardian and with a horde of French refugees, toward greater security in Paris.

How greatly she longed at this moment for a sight of Miss Patricia Lord's gaunt and homely figure, always a tower of strength in adversity.

Yet not only was there no sign of her approach, there was an ominous quiet over the entire countryside.

"Mrs. Burton!"

The older woman started, a cold hand had touched her own and a girl, climbing through the window, sat beside her.

"Yvonne!"

Mrs. Burton's hand closed round Yvonne Fleury's.

Nearly four years before the young French girl, who was now a member of Mrs. Burton's Camp Fire, had been forced to escape from her home during the first victory of the Germans along the Marne. In the flight her younger brother had been killed and her mother had afterwards died. Her older brother, Lieutenant Fleury, whom she afterwards believed to have been killed at the front, was at that time fighting with the French army.

Small wonder that tonight, Yvonne, perhaps facing another flight from her home, was unable to sleep.

"I must talk, Mrs. Burton, if you don't mind," she whispered. "I will disturb no one. Tell me you do not believe the Germans will cross the Marne a second time. If they do, nevertheless, I mean to stay on here at my home. I have just concluded to beg you and the Camp Fire girls to leave the château in the morning and go on with your journey to Paris. I will be here when Miss Patricia arrives to explain and later she can follow the route you will take. If my home is to be destroyed a second time I shall be here when the destruction takes place."

Understanding the young French girl's mood too well to argue with her at this moment, Mrs. Burton answered:

"Perhaps the situation is not so tragic as we fear, Yvonne. But in any case you must remember that your brother, Lieutenant Fleury, is again at the front fighting for the honor and glory of France. You cannot of your own choice add to his sorrows. Besides, you and I never doubt for a single moment that the Allies will ultimately win. Then you will have your home and your brother restored to you again!"

At present Mrs. Burton was able to say no more. At this moment toward the southeastern line of the horizon, suddenly the sky had become a flaring crimson. The next instant there followed the noise of an explosion and a sound of distant firing.

CHAPTER III

The Retreat

“As soon as we finish breakfast I think it wiser that you girls make your arrangements to start on toward Paris at once.”

In the old kitchen of the French château the Camp Fire girls were seated about an ancient oak table, eating as quietly as if nothing had occurred to disturb them in the night.

The noise of the firing, which had interrupted Mrs. Burton’s and Yvonne’s conversation, had not lasted long, and no one knew from what source it had come, whether the Germans were making a surprise attack nearby, or the allied troops repulsing one.

At dawn, hearing a knocking at the kitchen door, Mrs. Burton had admitted an old French peasant woman and her small grandson. At present they were having their breakfast of coffee and bread in a corner of the big kitchen, having preferred not to sit at the table. With them they had brought the news that the Germans had endeavored to cross the river about ten miles from the Château Yvonne, but had been driven back. Also they reported that the roads were becoming constantly more crowded with refugees, and as soon as they had a little food and rest they wished to journey on.

Following her demand, a little to the Camp Fire guardian’s surprise, no dissenting voice greeted her.

Instead Alice Ashton replied immediately:

“I entirely agree with you, Tante. The sooner all of you make the effort to reach Paris the better under the present conditions. I am afraid your strength will not hold out if you continue waiting much longer in this uncertainty. You understand that I cannot go with you. I must stay here until Sally arrives with Aunt Patricia, if they ever do arrive. Sally is younger than I am and not able to take care of herself in an emergency, so that if anything happened to her I should always feel responsible. I see now that to have allowed her to remain behind with Aunt Patricia and Vera was madness, and yet no one could have anticipated the turn events have recently taken. Still, in coming to France during war times each one of us understood the possibility of danger. During our work at our farmhouse on the Aisne we had a much quieter experience than any of us anticipated!”

Alice’s speech had made an impression upon her small audience, notwithstanding, Mrs. Burton shook her head.

“Sorry I can agree with only a part of what you have just said, Alice. You *must* go on to Paris with the other girls. I will stay on here to wait for Aunt Patricia, Sally and Vera. I shall be in no especial danger, unless the fighting actually reaches this château, which I doubt. But with you girls here with me the situation would be utterly different. Never so long as I live would I wish to face a member of your families. I know now that I should never have brought you with me to France until the war was actually ended! Personally I shall prefer staying on here for a few days to rest.”

Mrs. Burton now turned directly to Yvonne Fleury.

“Yvonne, I have not forgotten what you told me last night, nevertheless, you must go on to Paris. Remember the other girls need you to act as their guide, as you alone know the roads in this part of the country. It may be that after you have motored some of the way you may be able to board a train, so that you will reach Paris more quickly. I don’t know, I must leave details of the journey to your judgment. Some day, Mary Gilchrist, I intend writing your father what his gift of a motor to you has meant to us here in France.

“Also I think he need no longer regret having had no son to send to France; no one could have accomplished more useful work than you in these past few months, or handled a car more successfully.”

As she finished her suggestions, which she had made as casual and matter of fact as possible, Mrs. Burton half rose from the tall wooden stool, which was serving as her resting place, only to be drawn back again by Peggy Webster, who laid a firm hold on her.

“Don’t talk nonsense, Tante!” Peggy remarked coolly, although not with marked respect. “You know I would just as soon march out boldly and alone to meet the advancing German army as to leave you here in the château by yourself to await Miss Patricia’s coming. As a matter of fact all of us realize she may never reach here. There is no use avoiding the truth that there is every possibility the road may be cut off. Besides, you speak of the impossibility of your facing our families if misfortune should overtake one of us. Please think of the situation for me if I should some day have to confess to my mother that I had left you alone and ill, utterly deserted by all of us, to meet whatever may come. You are not well enough to be alone even under ordinary circumstances.”

Peggy Webster possessed certain obstinate characteristics of her father. Many years before when they were both young, Mrs. Burton and Mr. Webster had known each other intimately and been eternally at war.

Therefore, Mrs. Burton was secretly a little amused and a little annoyed at this moment by the firmness of Peggy’s crimson lips, the single frowning line that appeared between her dark level brows. Moreover, she knew that at present she had neither strength nor time for argument with her niece.

“We must either decide it is wisest for us all to leave here for Paris, or all to remain here,” Bettina Graham added at this instant. “Certainly, Tante, no one of us will consider going on without you, or even leaving just one of us here to face the situation with you. It is my opinion that the way to meet the present difficulty is to meet it together. Our chief trouble now is, not so much our own danger, as our uncertainty and worry over Aunt Patricia, Vera and Sally. It seems to me our original mistake was ever to have separated; either we should have waited with them at the farmhouse until we could have started off together, or insisted they come here to the château with us.”

Not alone was Bettina Graham’s opinion of influence among her group of Camp Fire associates, ordinarily Mrs. Burton was also equally responsive to it, Bettina possessing an unusual nature, a high sense of honor, unselfishness and above all else good breeding. And these characteristics were not due only to her parentage and training, but to something innate in the girl herself.

Yet this instant, and in spite of Peggy’s restraining hand, Mrs. Burton managed to rise from her place.

The next, she stood quietly facing the group of girls, who were gazing as intently upon her. And upon each face the Camp Fire guardian read the strongest spiritual opposition to her recent suggestion.

During the night Mrs. Burton had slept very little, she was now feeling more exhausted than she cared to confess. Nevertheless, she faced her present task with the courage and calmness characteristic of her in important moments.

Dressing had always been something of an art with Mrs. Burton, even in the days when as a girl, she, as Polly O’Neill, had little money to spend. Since that time Mrs. Burton had apologized for herself by declaring that clothes must do for her what natural beauty accomplished for other women. They must divert attention from her natural plainness.

But whether or not this were true, and most persons would not have agreed with her, Mrs. Burton always dressed with exquisite care.

This morning, even under the present trying conditions, her hair was as carefully arranged, her blue serge costume fitted with the same neatness and simplicity. Only her face revealed her fatigue and anxiety.

Nevertheless, as she stood gazing at her group of Camp Fire girls with a mixture of appeal and authority, some quality in her expression gave her a charm few persons ever possessed, a charm which had been partly responsible for her remarkable success as an actress. At present her eyes were very blue and determined, her mouth revealed both strength and tenderness.

“I am sorry,” she began, “perhaps you girls do not agree with me, perhaps it may be many years before you will understand what motive is back of my present decision. I cannot argue or explain to you now. Only by noon you must be prepared to leave here for Paris and for me to stay behind. I insist upon it. In the years I have been your Camp Fire guardian I don’t think I have often attempted to use my authority, or to follow any plan which has not met with your approval. But today I intend doing both those things. I will give you all the instructions I can and a letter to Senator Georges Duval. When you reach Paris he will see that you find a proper place to live. You will wait there until the rest of us either join you, or let you hear what to do next. Now we have already spent too much time in discussion, please get ready at once!”

As she concluded there was a finality in Mrs. Burton’s tones which few persons were ever able to disregard.

Moreover, she turned at once and left the room.

After she had gone the Camp Fire girls remained silent a moment and then Mary Gilchrist gave a despairing shrug to her shoulders.

“Well, at least I have no choice, if you girls are to go to Paris I must go with you to drive our motor. Yvonne, I think you are in the same situation that I am. We shall need you to tell us about the roads. Whatever the others think wisest I am willing to do. But assuredly I don’t believe we ought to leave Mrs. Burton here alone, and just as certainly I don’t see how we are to take her with us, unless we decide to do it by force.”

Peggy Webster, who, since the beginning of her aunt’s speech, had sat with her eyes downcast and her cheeks flushed, now leaned forward resting her elbows on the table.

“Girls, please listen and help me,” she pleaded. “It is my judgment that the rest of you must start for Paris, but that I must remain here. Tante will not go with us, or change her decision. I have known her all my life. At times she seems easily influenced, at others she is absolutely immovable. This is one of the times. So I must pretend that I mean to accompany you, I must make my preparations just as the rest of you will do, and at the last moment trust to some sudden inspiration which will allow me to stay behind. There is even the possibility that Aunt Patricia and Sally and Vera may appear before noon, though I confess I have not much faith in the idea. Recently, watching for their coming, I have felt a little like Sister Anne in the story of Bluebeard.”

At this moment Peggy attempted to laugh, although her merriment was not a conspicuous success.

Immediately after, without questioning Peggy Webster’s conclusion, the Camp Fire girls set about their preparations to join the groups of refugees, now retreating for the second time toward Paris.

There was not a great deal to be accomplished.

They had brought with them from their farmhouse on the Aisne only a few essential things, and no one had completely unpacked.

Fortunately, Yvonne Fleury had stored away at her home, not only sufficient food for their stay at the Château Yvonne, but enough to take with them whatever was required for the journey to Paris.

For two hours the girls worked industriously, Mrs. Burton assisting them in every possible way and never again referring to her own intention not to accompany them.

Only once for a few moments she had a short talk with her niece.

“I know, Peggy, that these are the days when everybody offers the most excellent advice to everybody else, so I suppose I am no exception. But please promise me not to worry about me, or to think of me, until we see each other in Paris. Then I shall be happy to receive any attention you wish to bestow upon me. In all probability the French and American troops will never allow the enemy to reach this neighborhood and I shall enjoy the rest here alone. But if anything occurs you are to tell my husband and your mother that it was my usual obstinacy which forced you girls to make this dangerous trip alone. By the way the old French peasant woman who came in this morning has promised to stay

here with me if you will take her little grandson with you and see that no harm comes to him. So you see I shall be perfectly well looked after.”

“Yes,” Peggy answered non-committally, and went her way.

A little before noon Mary Gilchrist drove her motor car into a courtyard behind the French château.

The courtyard was built of stone.

On the further side a narrow road led on to the main one, which further on connected with the road to Paris.

A few moments after, the five Camp Fire girls came out of the house dressed for the journey. They wore their Camp Fire traveling costumes especially designed for their new service in France.

Mrs. Burton accompanied them, but there was nothing in her appearance or manner to suggest that she had changed her decision and intended to go on with them to Paris.

When four of the girls climbed into the motor, she stood nearby talking to them. Peggy Webster was only a few feet away, making no effort to enter, and yet with her preparations for the trip as complete as any one else.

“This is not goodbye, girls, merely the French adieu! Really I suppose both the farewells mean ‘God be with you till we meet again.’ As for me I shall see you soon, along with Aunt Patricia, Sally and Vera. Afterwards we shall remain in Paris until the Allies win the war. This cannot be far off, this temporary German success is the last flare of a dying fire. Come, Peggy dear, let me help you climb in.”

Mrs. Burton’s manner was persistently, almost annoyingly cheerful, though no one of her companions responded to it in the least degree.

“I suppose you might as well know the truth now, Tante,” Bettina Graham announced. “No one of us has ever meant to allow you to be here alone at the château. We have merely decided that Peggy is your niece and so has a greater right to stay than the rest of us. Goodbye, Peggy. If we hear you and Tante are in special danger we may return to you!”

Like many another person Mrs. Burton had believed in her own triumph before her battle had been finally won.

Now she walked over and put her hand on Peggy Webster’s shoulder.

“Come, dear, I think you understand I mean to be obeyed.”

Silently two pairs of eyes gauged each other, while two wills fought for supremacy.

But who would have conquered in the end no one was ever to find out.

At this instant there was an unexpected noise in the narrow road behind the courtyard of the château.

Forgetting Peggy for the moment, Mrs. Burton ran toward the gate which led from the courtyard into the road. For the moment she seemed to have lost courage. Few persons in the neighborhood had known of their presence in the Château Yvonne for the past few days.

She felt a sudden premonition of evil. Who could be appearing at this hour to interrupt the effort of the Camp Fire girls to reach Paris in safety?

Mrs. Burton stepped out into the road with Peggy Webster following close behind her.

A cavalcade seemed to be approaching them. Yet there was nothing to suggest danger.

Nevertheless, the spectacle they now beheld was startling even in war times.

A pair of heavy cart horses were moving up the road, drawing a large farm wagon.

Two cows, laden like beasts of burden and hitched to the wagon, were coming on behind.

On the front seat of the wagon was a tall, gaunt spinster, an old man and a boy. Miss Patricia Lord was driving.

Inside the wagon, surrounded by bundles and boxes of varying sizes, were two girls, Sally Ashton and Vera Lagerloff.

As the wagon drew near, Miss Patricia Lord stood up and began waving a long stick.

“Polly Burton, why are you and the Camp Fire girls not already on the road toward Paris? Perhaps you have not heard the Germans are breaking through at different points all along the Allied line! I will give you just five minutes to be ready to go on with us!”

CHAPTER IV

The Road to Paris

With so extraordinary a combination of vehicles the journey of the Camp Fire girls and their guardians to Paris became necessarily a slow and frequently interrupted one.

In contrast with a recently built American motor car, Miss Patricia's present equipage suggested nothing more modern than Noah and his admirable Ark.

Yet the two groups of friends and refugees wished to keep within reasonable distance of each other. They both appreciated that if ever they were separated for any distance, they might never be able to make connections again.

The roads were becoming constantly more crowded with an increasing stream of vehicles and travelers afoot, yet among them all no equipage was so remarkable as Miss Patricia's, or excited more interest.

Upon leaving the Château Yvonne, a quarter of an hour after Miss Patricia's belated arrival, there had been opportunity for only a hastily arranged program.

At that time the plan had been for Mary Gilchrist, following Yvonne Fleury's instructions, to drive straight ahead. At any point in the road, where a change of direction should be made, or any special instruction given, Mary was to draw her car aside out of the way of the other vehicles, there to await Miss Patricia's slower approach.

The program possessed a good many obvious weaknesses and yet in the few moments at their disposal before their departure, no one of the Camp Fire party had a better plan to suggest.

Rather surprisingly well it succeeded in the beginning.

Even without the knowledge of Miss Patricia's clumsy caravan in the background, Mary Gilchrist would not have been able to drive rapidly.

When her car reached the main road, it was found to be not merely filled with refugees seeking safety further behind the line. Reinforcements were being rushed from the opposite direction to stem the German tide.

Advancing slowly the Camp Fire automobile took its place in the long line of other vehicles. Now and then this line was halted by an officer, when heavier trucks and wagons were to be allowed to pass.

Finally, at a convenient crossroad, where she did not interfere with the other traffic, Mary halted.

Within less than half an hour Miss Patricia reached them. There she insisted upon alighting, ostensibly to make certain inquiries and to offer her usual advice, but in reality to discover the state of Mrs. Burton's health. No one was in the least deceived.

However, as Mrs. Burton insisted she was bearing the journey remarkably well and was far more interested than frightened and that the Camp Fire girls were in the same state of mind, Miss Patricia returned to her wagon and the pilgrimage was resumed.

Toward late afternoon, the effort at a second reunion was less successful.

It was now between four and five o'clock. A great wave of weariness and depression appeared to be engulfing not only the Camp Fire travelers, but the entire band of French refugees.

When they spoke at all to one another, it was only to tell some depressing story. Surely the Germans would capture Paris with this latest victorious assault. Some one reported that the Germans had perfected a long-range gun which would bombard Paris at a distance of seventy miles.

The Camp Fire girls became subject to the same state of despondency. They talked very little; moreover, it was plain to all of them that Mrs. Burton was reaching the end of her reserve strength. Some time before, she had ceased to have anything to say.

Without discussing the question, each one of the girls now understood that they could not travel much further until morning. Some arrangement must shortly be made for the night.

At five o'clock Mary Gilchrist and Yvonne Fleury, who were on the front seat of the motor, discovered a small private road which led from the main road into the yard of a small cottage. Here they concluded to await the second coming of Miss Patricia.

Mrs. Burton they established on the tiny veranda in the front of the house, to rest and at the same time to watch for the approach of the others, while the girls went to make investigations. The house they had chosen seemed to be entirely deserted.

Too tired to care what was going on about her, for some time Mrs. Burton sat huddled in her heavy fur coat. She was too exhausted even to care what became of herself or of anyone else.

At first she scarcely noticed that the Camp Fire girls had left her a long time alone, or that Miss Patricia had failed to appear. But when more than half an hour went by she began to feel nervous.

One could readily imagine that Miss Patricia's collection of farm animals might have given out from their long march and be unable to continue the journey.

Mrs. Burton also began to worry over Sally Ashton and Vera. She had not been able to exchange a word with either of them on their arrival at the château, and knew nothing of their experiences in the last few days since they had said goodby at the farmhouse on the Aisne.

The March winds were growing piercingly cold now that the sun was dying down. Still the little groups of refugees kept moving on past the yard of the cottage where Mrs. Burton sat waiting.

Finally the travelers seemed to be growing fewer in number; they too must have become exhausted by their long pilgrimage and be taking shelter or else resting along the roadside.

Stiff from the cold and having remained seated so long, as no one of the Camp Fire girls came back to join her, Mrs. Burton at length rose and walked out of the yard of the cottage toward the main road. It might be possible that catching sight of Miss Patricia's approach she would be relieved of her anxiety.

After strolling on for a few yards, Mrs. Burton observed a crowd of refugees who must have halted to rest. They were seated in small groups along either side of the road. Drawing nearer, Mrs. Burton saw that their faces wore that look of patient endurance, which in the past few months she had witnessed so many times in the faces of the French peasants. They were not uncheerful, now that they were resting. Eating their evening meal life seemed to hold out fresh hope. After all, had they not been assured that the United States was each day landing thousands of fresh troops in France? Soon the enemy would be driven out of France forever!

Then, a little further on, Mrs. Burton beheld a familiar and well beloved figure.

Passing between the groups of refugees, most of them old men and women who had been traveling on foot, pushing perambulators or else drawing wagons laden with tiny children or their few household possessions, marched Miss Patricia Lord.

She appeared to be dispensing food to her fellow travelers, as on one arm she was carrying a large pail and on the other a basket.

Discovering Mrs. Burton she set both the pail and the basket down in the middle of the road and strode forward, and for once in her life Miss Patricia appeared apologetic.

"Polly, my dear, forgive me for keeping you waiting so long. I hope you are not utterly worn out; I am extremely worried about you and yet I could not resist what I am doing at present. I have had no opportunity to tell you that I brought away with me from our farmhouse nearly all the food supply we had in our possession. It was my intention then to feed as many refugees as possible along the road to Paris. I presume I should have thought of you first, but I believed you would feel obliged to wait for me somewhere and that you had journeyed far enough for today. Come with me."

Meekly following Miss Patricia, who had by this time picked up her now empty basket and pail, Mrs. Burton walked on a few yards more.

In a little patch of grass, springing up near the roadside under the few warm rays of the March sun, Mrs. Burton found old Jean, the French peasant, milking one of Miss Patricia's cows. Beside him and engaged in a similar occupation was a young French boy.

Drawn up out of the way of the other vehicles, that were still passing along the main road, Miss Patricia's horses and wagon were waiting. Standing beside the wagon, was Vera Lagerloff. She was bestowing a small package of food upon anyone who requested it, but at the same time keeping careful watch on the main supply.

Not until a second glance, did Mrs. Burton discover what had become of Sally Ashton. Then she saw Sally standing listlessly a few feet away, making no effort to help either Vera or Miss Patricia and scarcely appearing to notice the people about her.

As her Camp Fire guardian approached, Sally tried to express a proper degree of enthusiasm and affection, yet Sally's appearance frightened and puzzled Mrs. Burton.

She did not look at her directly, yet one could see that the expression of her eyes had changed. They had lost their childish look of dreaming and were wide open and startled. Her face had ceased to possess its former softly rounded curve and there were tiny hollows in her cheeks and lines about her mouth.

"Sally, I am tired, won't you come with me? I do not feel strong enough to walk alone. The other girls and I have found a little cottage not far away which we think deserted. I believe we had best spend the night there. We are all too weary to go on any further and besides, darkness will be upon us in another hour. I will explain to Aunt Patricia, and she and Vera will join us later when they have finished feeding the little multitude."

After a few words of explanation to Miss Patricia, Sally and Mrs. Burton went on toward the abandoned cottage, neither of them attempting any conversation.

Approaching them a few yards from the house were Alice Ashton and Bettina Graham. At once Alice took charge of her sister and Bettina of their Camp Fire guardian.

Both girls reported that the house they had discovered was entirely abandoned and that they had taken possession of it for the night. Supper was ready and waiting.

An hour after the entire party was asleep.

CHAPTER V

Armistice Day in Paris

It was shortly before eleven o'clock on the morning of November eleventh when the bells of Paris began pealing.

The following instant a group of young American girls who had been seated about a tiny fire in a large, bare room, jumped hurriedly to their feet.

"It has come at last, the Germans have signed the armistice! *Vive la paix!*" one of them exclaimed.

Her words were almost drowned in the noise of the firing of guns, the thunder of cannon, noises to which Paris had been listening for the past four years in bitterness, but which she now heard with rejoicing.

"Let us start out at once, Aunt Patricia, to take part in the celebration before the streets become too crowded," Peggy Webster suggested. "What luck to be in Paris today! I should rather be here than in any city in the world at the present time, for surely the city which has suffered most through the war must rejoice most!"

As she finished speaking, Peggy walked over to a window and flung it open. Already they could hear the sounds of cheering. Below Peggy could see people running into the street, windows of other houses being thrown open. Voices were calling, *vive, vive everything, except, "la guerre."*

"Isn't it a pity Tante is not with us? We shall miss her more than ever today," Bettina added. "Yet I am glad she is not too ill to feel the deepest thankfulness even if she cannot take part in the celebration and we may manage to see her later this afternoon. Aunt Patricia, do you feel equal to going with us? The crowds may make you overtired. Don't worry, we promise to be as careful as possible, but do let us hurry. I feel as if I could scarcely bear the four walls of a house ten minutes longer. I want to shout, weep, laugh over victory. Glorious France, how much she has suffered and how much she has won!"

"Nevertheless, Bettina Graham, there is no reason to talk in such a high-flown fashion," Miss Patricia Lord returned, "as if you were making a speech on one of the boulevards. I think we had better be saying our prayers. Just the same please be quiet a moment while I try to think; the noise outside is sufficient without your increasing it. I am afraid it will not be safe for you Camp Fire girls to go out into the streets for at least another twenty-four hours. But most certainly I shall go, however, I will return as promptly as possible to let you know what I have seen."

At this instant Miss Patricia removed the large horned spectacles, through which she had been reading the morning paper, and wiped the moisture from them carefully. She then wiped her eyes, but entirely unconscious of what she was doing.

Nevertheless, she may have remained unaware of the expressions upon the faces of the half dozen girls who were her present companions.

At this moment an arm encircled her waist.

"Really, truly, Aunt Patricia, you don't think we can stay indoors when all the rest of Paris is rejoicing? You wouldn't be so cruel as to ask it of us, you who have preached courage in the time of war, would not have us turn cowards with the approach of peace?"

And Mary Gilchrist looked imploringly into Miss Patricia's fine eyes, wise enough not to appear to notice their unusual moisture.

"You come with us, Aunt Patricia, and I think we shall manage to keep together and not to lose either our heads or our way. Remember we made a safe retreat to Paris when the Huns believed they were soon to follow after us and take possession of the city."

As Mary Gilchrist had just announced, it was true that a number of months before, after an arduous retreat, first from their farmhouse on the Aisne and later from the Château Yvonne, the Camp Fire girls and their guardians had arrived safely in Paris. During the following summer months they had lived in a French pension not far from the Place de la Concorde, while the long range German guns vainly endeavored to frighten the city with a sense of her impending doom.

At present neither Mrs. Burton nor Sally Ashton was with their Camp Fire group in the pension. Soon after their arrival, not having recovered sufficiently from her wound to endure the long strain and fatigue of the retreat, Mrs. Burton had again been seriously ill. By her surgeon's advice she had been removed to a hospital nearby, where she had been for the past few months, and although by this time a great deal better, she had not yet rejoined her friends.

Sally Ashton, without appearing to be actually ill and indeed always denying every suggestion of illness, had never from the day of the retreat from the farmhouse been like her former self. Six weeks before, influenced more by Miss Patricia's wish than the doctor's orders, she had departed for rest and quiet to a little house in the country a few hours journey from town.

At this moment, following Mary Gilchrist's words, the Camp Fire girls formed an imploring circle about their chaperon, Miss Patricia Lord, who, in Mrs. Burton's absence, had no one to dispute her authority.

Never to appear actually to oppose Miss Patricia, the girls had learned to be the better part of wisdom, therefore the present moment was fraught with danger. To disobey Miss Patricia's wish, which might at any moment be translated into a command, would be disagreeable and perchance succeeded by uncomfortable consequences. However, not to see Paris in her carnival of joy and to share in the celebration was not to be considered.

And in all probability Miss Patricia had always appreciated this fact.

"Oh, very well," she conceded with unexpected suddenness, "and do get ready as soon as possible. I have only to put on my bonnet. In truth I have been prepared for this moment ever since our arrival in France. Have I not always insisted that victory was always a mere question of time!"

A few moments later the throngs in the streets of Paris were increased by the presence of the half dozen American Camp Fire girls and Miss Lord.

Perhaps not much more than a half an hour had passed since the announcement of the signing of the armistice and yet already a multitude had appeared out of doors. Paris was happy and expressing her happiness as only Paris can.

The air was filled with cheers, with snatches of songs, not so frequent the "Marseillaise," as "Madelon," the song of the poilus, since it was the French soldier who had brought victory to glorious France.

Through the crowds Miss Patricia engineered the way, Yvonne Fleury clinging to one arm, Mary Gilchrist to the other, while behind them followed Vera Lagerloff and Alice Ashton and next came Bettina Graham and Peggy Webster.

As the crowd in their neighborhood was moving toward the Place de la Concorde there was no choice but to move with it.

In the Place de la Concorde, filled with statues commemorative of French history, the girls observed a vast mass of waving flags. Here all the trophies of war had been placed. Soldiers and young girls were climbing on the big guns, shouting, laughing, kissing one another.

Save for Miss Patricia's leadership the Camp Fire girls would never have moved on with so little difficulty. Like a happy grenadier she marched with her head up and her old eyes flashing. France had no greater admirer than the elderly American spinster.

A French soldier, leaning over to kiss Mary Gilchrist, who was gazing upward and unconscious of him, found Miss Patricia's hand suddenly interposed between his lips and Mary's face. Being a Frenchman, he had the grace gallantly to kiss Miss Patricia's hand and then to march off laughing at the joke on himself.

Finally the little group of Americans found themselves in a temporary shelter near the statue of Alsace-Lorraine in the Place de la Concorde. From the close of the Franco-Prussian war this statue of an heroic figure of a woman, representing the lost provinces, had been draped in mourning. Today the mourning had been torn away and the statue smothered in flowers.

It chanced that Bettina Graham and Peggy Webster were crowded close against the railing surrounding the statue.

“Peggy,” Bettina whispered, “I want to add my little tribute to France’s victory after forty years of waiting for the return of her provinces. I have nothing to offer but this little bunch of violets I have been wearing all morning. And certainly they are a faded tribute! Still there is no chance of getting any other flowers today.”

“Oh, never mind, it is the sentiment after all, isn’t it, Bettina? The tribute is no tinier than the effort we Camp Fire girls have been making in the last year to help France. It is simply that we have given all we had to give,” Peggy returned.

While she was speaking, Bettina had unfastened a large bunch of Roman violets, which she was wearing at her waist, and was leaning over the railing trying to find a place for her small bouquet. At the same instant a hand, holding an enormous bunch of red and white roses encircled with deep blue forget-me-nots, was thrust above her head.

Flushing at the contrast, Bettina hurriedly dropped her violets and glanced upward.

Behind her was a young man, evidently an American, although not a soldier, as he was not wearing a uniform.

“I beg your pardon, I hope I have not interfered with you,” an American voice apologized.

But before Bettina was able to do more than shake her head, there was an unexpected movement in the crowd and she and Peggy were again pushed onward.

A few feet ahead Miss Patricia was looking back and signaling. They could see that a girl had been lifted on the shoulders of two soldiers. The crowd was now following them.

When the girl began singing, the crowd became quieter. Her voice was clear and beautiful; she was singing the “Marseillaise,” then snatches of Allied songs.

Evidently the girl, whom the soldiers were bearing along in triumph, was some celebrated artist, who was giving the best she had to give to the people as her tribute to France. And the crowd now and then sang with her, whatever words of whatever national song they knew.

Finally toward dusk, the Camp Fire girls and Miss Patricia found themselves returning to the neighborhood of their pension. Lights were beginning to shine along the boulevards, when Paris until tonight had been in darkness for nearly four long years.

At a street corner where the crowd had thinned, Miss Patricia waited with Yvonne and Myra until the other four girls had caught up with them.

“You girls, can make your way home from here alone, can’t you?” she inquired. “I really must see Polly Burton before this day is past. I must say a few words to her else I shall never feel the day’s celebration has satisfied me.”

“Of course, Aunt Patricia, but since we all feel exactly as you do, why not let us go with you?” Peggy answered.

Soon after the Camp Fire girls and Miss Lord found Mrs. Burton seated by a window in her hospital bedroom, holding a little book in her hand and, except that she was pale from the excitement of the day, looking extraordinarily well.

“Oh, I never, never, never have been so glad to see people before!” she cried, jumping up and embracing Miss Patricia. “If you only knew what it has meant to stay here in a hospital with my nose glued against the window pane, when all the world is going mad with joy, you would be truly sorry for me. I think I should have tried to make my escape, if my doctor had not telephoned me I was not to think of going out for a moment. I suppose, Aunt Patricia, you managed to telephone

him this instruction last night because you imagined the armistice would be signed today. But please everybody tell me at once just what you have seen and done.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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