

Vandercook Margaret

The Camp Fire Girls Amid the Snows



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CHAPTER I

The Winter Manitou

The snow was falling in heavy slashing sheets, and a December snowstorm in the New Hampshire hills means something more serious than a storm in city streets or even an equal downfall upon more level meadows and plains.

Yet on this winter afternoon, about an hour before twilight and along the base of a hill where a rough road wandered between tall cedar and pine trees and low bushes and shrubs, there sounded continually above the snow's silencing two voices, sometimes laughing, occasionally singing a brief line or so, but more often talking. Accompanying them always was a steady jingling of bells.

"We simply can't get there to-night, Princess," one of the voices protested, still with a questioning note as though hardly believing in its own assertion.

"We simply can't do anything else, my child" the other answered teasingly. "Have you ever thought how much harder it is to travel backward in this world than forward, otherwise I suppose we should have had eyes placed in the back of our heads and our feet would have turned around the other way? Don't be frightened, there really isn't the least danger."

Then there was a sudden swish of a whip cutting the cold air and with a fresh tinkling of bells the shaggy pony plunged ahead. Five minutes afterwards with an instinctive stiffening of his forelegs he started sliding slowly down a steep embankment, where the road apparently ended, dragging his load behind him and only stopping on finally reaching the low ground and finding his sleigh had overturned.

For a while the unusual stillness was oppressive. But a little later there followed a movement and then an unsteady voice calling, "Steady, Fire Star," as a tall girl in a gray hood and coat covered all over with snow came crawling forth from the uppermost side of the sleigh and immediately began pulling at it with trembling hands.

"Princess, Princess, please speak or move! Oh, it is all my fault. I should never have let you attempt it; I am the older and even –"

A little smothered sound and a slight disturbance under an immense fur rug interrupted her: "I can't speak, Esther, until I get some of this snow out of my mouth and I can't move until this grocery store is lifted off me. I'm – I'm the under side of things; there are ten pounds of sugar and a sack of flour and all the week's camping supplies between me and the gay world." A break in the cheerful tones ended these words and there was no further stirring, but Esther Clark failed to notice this, as she first lifted the rug which had almost covered up Betty Ashton and then helped her to sit upright, looking more of a Snow Princess than even the weather justified. For all about her there were small mounds of sugar and flour white as the snow itself and dissolving like dew. While Betty's seal cap and coat were encrusted in ice and the snow hung from her brows and lashes, indeed her face, usually so brilliantly colored, was now almost as pale.

Esther was again tugging at the overturned sleigh trying to set it upright, the pony waiting motionless except for turning his head as if with the suggestion that matters be hurried along.

"I could manage a great deal better, Betty, if you would help me," Esther protested a little indignantly. "I know the girls at Sunrise cabin are getting dreadfully worried over our being so late in arriving at home."

Betty shivered. "I am getting a bit worried myself," she agreed, "and I might as well confess to you, Esther, that I haven't the faintest idea where we are, nor how far from the village or our camp. This snow has completely mixed me up; and I haven't sprained my ankle, of course, or broken it or done anything *quite* so silly, but my foot does hurt most awfully and I know I never can stand up on it again and – and – if I wasn't a Camp Fire girl about to be made a Torch Bearer I'd like to weep and weep until I melted away into a beautiful iceberg." And then in spite of her brave fooling Betty did blink and choke, but only for an instant, for the sight of her companion's face made her smile again.

"The runner of our sleigh has snapped in two," Esther next announced in accents of despair after having partially dragged the sleigh upright, although one runner still remained imbedded several inches deeper than the other in the drift of snow which had caused their disaster.

Betty held up both hands. "I believe it never rains but it pours," she said a little mockingly; "but what about the snow? I am sorry I was so obstinate, dear. It is nice to be sorry when the deed is done, isn't it? I suppose I should never have attempted driving back to Sunrise Hill on such an evening, but then we did need our groceries so terribly in camp and I was afraid nobody would bring them tomorrow. And, well, as I have gotten you into this scrape I must get you out of it."

So by clinging with both hands to Esther, Betty Ashton, by sheer force of will, did manage to rise on the one sound foot and then putting the injured one on the ground she stood wavering for a second. "I'm thinking, Esther, so please don't interrupt me for a moment," she gasped as soon as she found breath. "I can't but feel that this is our first real emergency since we started our camp fire in the woods this winter. If we only are able to get out of it successfully, why – why, won't Polly be envious?"

Betty Ashton was so plainly talking at the present instant to gain time that the older girl did not pay the slightest attention to her; instead, she was thinking herself. Of course she or Betty could mount their pony and ride off somewhere to look for help, but then Esther had no fancy for being left alone in a snow-storm in a part of the country which she did not know in its present aspect and certainly under the circumstances she had no intention of leaving Betty to the same fate.

Imagination, however, was never one of Esther Clark's strong points, although fortunately for them both now and in later years it was always a gift of the other girl's.

"Better let me sit down again," Betty suggested, letting go of her clasp on her friend; "and will you unhitch Fire Star and lead her here to me. Somehow I think it best for us to manage to get back on the road and find some sort of shelter up there under the trees until the worst of this storm is past."

With Betty to think and Esther to accomplish, things usually moved swiftly. So five minutes later, half leading and half being led by the pony, Esther climbed the embankment on foot with Betty riding and clinging with both arms about Fire Star's neck. Under a pine tree partly protected from the wind and snow by scrub pines growing only a few feet away, the girls found a temporary refuge. There they remained sheltered by the fur rug which Esther brought back on her second trip. The pony safely covered over with his own blanket stood hitched under another tree a short distance away.

Nevertheless, half an hour of waiting found the two girls shivering uncomfortably under their rug and losing courage with every passing moment, for the storm had not abated in the least and Betty was really suffering agonies with her foot, although she had removed her shoe, bathed her ankle in snow and bound it up in her own and Esther's pocket handkerchiefs.

"Esther," she said rather irritably, after a fresh paroxysm of pain had left her almost exhausted, "don't you think that, as we have been Camp Fire girls living in the woods for the past six months, even though conditions do seem trying, we ought to *do* something and not just sit here in this limp fashion and be snowed under?"

Esther nodded, but made no sort of suggestion. She was so cold and worried about Betty that she hadn't an idea in her mind save the haunting fear that if they continued long in their present situation they might actually be turned into icebergs.

However, Betty promptly gave her a pinch that was realistic enough to be felt in spite of all her frozenness. "Wake up, Esther, dear, and if you are really so cold, child, just warm yourself by your

nose, it certainly is red enough. Now as you girls have always said I dearly loved to boss, please, won't you let me be general of this expedition and you do what I say since I am too lame to help?"

Again Esther nodded. She generally had done whatever Betty Ashton had asked of her since the day of her coming to the great Ashton homestead in Woodford a little more than half a year before. But as Betty outlined her plan Esther grew interested and in half a moment jumping up began stamping her feet and swinging her arms to get the warmth and vigor back into her body.

"Why, Betty Ashton, of course we can manage even to stay here in the woods all night and not have such a horrid time! It won't be so difficult, I'll have things fixed in the least little while."

A short time afterwards and Esther had brought up from their broken sleigh a portion of the precious grocery supplies which she and Betty had driven into Woodford early that afternoon to obtain – a can of coffee, crackers, a side of bacon and, most welcome of all, a bundle of kindling tied as neatly together as toothpicks. For several weeks of having to gather wood out of doors, oftentimes in the snow and rain, and then drying it under cover, had made an occasional supply of kindling from the shops in town extremely grateful to the camp fire makers. Fortunately, Betty had filled the last remaining space in their sleigh with kindling wood before starting back to camp.

And in Esther's several absences she had been diligently preparing a place for a fire, first by scooping away the snow with her hands and then by scraping it with a three-pronged stick which she had found nearby.

However, a fire in the snow was not easy to start even by a Camp Fire girl, so that fifteen minutes must have passed and an entire box of matches been consumed before the paper collected from about their packages had persuaded even the kindling to light. And then by infinite patience and coaxing, wet pine twigs and cones were added to the fire until finally the larger logs, discovered under the surrounding trees, also blazed into heat and light.

And while Betty was cherishing the fire, Esther managed to make a partial canopy over their heads with brushwood.

There are but few things in this world though that do not take a longer time to accomplish than we at first expect and require a longer patience. So that when the two girls had finally arranged their temporary winter shelter, the twilight had come down and both of them were extremely weary. Nevertheless, the most wonderful coffee was made with melted snow in the tin can, bacon sliced and fried with the knife no Camp Fire girl fails to carry and the crackers toasted into a smoky but delicious brown. And then when supper was over Betty crept close to Esther under their rug resting her head on her shoulder.

"No one knows where we are to-night, Esther, so no one will worry. The girls will think we stayed in town on account of the storm and our friends in the village that we are now safe back in Sunrise cabin. So do let us make the best of things," she whispered. "To-night, at least, we are real Camp Fire girls from necessity and not choice, and I believe I can better understand why our ancestors once used to worship the fire as the symbol of home. Then, too, I am glad we chose the pine trees for our refuge. I wonder if you know this legend? When Mary was in flight to Egypt to save our Lord from Herod, she stopped beneath a pine tree and rested there safe from her enemies in a green chamber filled with its balsamy fragrance, the tree proving its love for the Christ Child by lowering its limbs when Herod's soldiers passed by. And then when the Baby raised its hand to bless the tree, it so marked it that when the pine cone is cut lengthwise it shows the form of a hand – the hand of Christ."

With the telling of her story Betty's voice was sinking lower and lower, and as her cheeks were now so flushed with her nearness to the fire and with fever from the pain in her foot, Esther hoped she might soon fall asleep. So she made no reply, but instead began singing the "Good-Night Song" of the Camp Fire girls which has been set to the beautiful old melody "Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes." And though she began very softly, meaning her song to reach only Betty's ears, by and by forgetting herself in the pleasure her music always brought her, she let her voice increase in power, until the final notes could have been heard some distance through the woods and even a little way up

the hill which stood like a solid white wall before them. The snow had stopped falling and the wind had died down, but the coldness and the stillness were therefore the more profound.

“The sun is sinking in the west,
The evening shadows fall;
Across the silence of the lake
We hear the loon’s low call.
So let us, too, the silence keep,
And softly steal away,
To rest and sleep until the morn
Brings forth another day.”

“Betty, Betty!” Instead of allowing her friend to sleep Esther began shaking her nervously only a few moments after the closing of her song.

And Betty started suddenly, giving a little cry of pain and surprise, for evidently she had been dreaming and found it hard to come back to so strange a reality. Here she and Esther were alone in the winter woods not many miles from shelter and yet unable to find it, while she had been dreaming of herself as a poor half-frozen waif somewhere out in a city street listening to strains of music, which were not of Esther’s song but of some instrument. The girl rubbed her eyes and laughed.

“Dear me, Esther, it’s too cold to sleep, isn’t it? Let us put some more wood on our fire and stay awake and talk. I think the Winter Manitou, Peboan, must have been visiting me with the wind playing the strings of his harp, for I have just dreamed I was listening to music.”

“You didn’t dream it; I wasn’t asleep and I heard it also. There, listen!”

The two girls caught hold of one another’s hands and silently they stared ahead of them through the opening in their curious, Esquimaux-like tent. Could anything be more improbable and yet without doubt the notes of a violin could be heard approaching nearer and nearer.

Transfixed with surprise and pleasure Esther kept still but Betty, who in spite of her whims was a really practical person, shook her head in a somewhat annoyed fashion. “It is perfectly absurd you know, Esther, for any human being to be strolling through the New Hampshire woods on a winter’s night playing the violin. We are not in Germany or the Alps or in a story book. But if it really is a person and not the Spirit of Winter, as I still believe, why he might as well help us out of our difficulty. I don’t feel so romantic as I did an hour or so ago.”

At this instant a dim figure did appear around a turn in the road where the girls had previously met disaster and putting her cold fingers to her lips Betty cried “Halloo, Halloo,” in as loud a voice as possible and at the same time seizing one of their burning logs she waved it as a signal of distress.

CHAPTER II

“Sunrise Cabin”

“Ach, gnädige Fräuleins, it ist not possible.”

“No, I know it isn’t,” Betty returned with her most demure expression, although there were little sparks of light at the back of her gray-blue eyes. She rose stiffly from the ground with Esther’s assistance and stood leaning on her arm, while both girls without trying to hide their astonishment surveyed a middle aged, shabbily dressed German with his violin case under one arm and his violin under the other.

“I haf been visiting the Orphan Asylum in this neighborhood where I haf friends,” he explained. “I am in Woodford only a few days now and after supper when the storm is over I start back to town. Then I thought I heard some one singing, calling, perhaps it is you?” He looked only at Betty, since in the semi-darkness with the fire as a background it was difficult to distinguish but one object at a time and that only by concentrated attention. But as she shook her head he turned toward Esther.

“When I hear the singing I play my violin, thinking if some one was lost in these hills I may find them.”

But Esther was not thinking of her discoverer, only of what he had said. “Do you mean we are really not far from the Country Orphan Asylum?” she asked incredulously. “And actually I have gotten lost in a neighborhood where I have spent most of my life! It is the snow that has made things seem so strange and different!” Turning to Betty she forgot for a moment the presence of the stranger. “I’ll find my way to the asylum right off and bring some one here to mend our sleigh and give poor little Fire Star something to eat. I don’t believe we are more than two miles from Sunrise Camp.”

However, Betty was by this time attempting to make their situation clearer to the newcomer. She pointed toward their sleigh at the bottom of the gully and their pony under the tree and told him of camp fires and grocery supplies to be carried to Sunrise cabin, until out of the chaos these facts at least became clear to his mind – the girls had lost their way in the storm and because of Betty’s injured ankle and the broken vehicle, had been unable to make their way home.

At about the same hour of this same evening, two other young women were walking slowly up and down in front of a log house in a clearing near the base of a hill, with their arms intertwined about each other’s shoulder. Outside the closed front door of the house a lighted lantern swung. From the inside other lights shone through the windows, while every now and then a face appeared and a finger beckoned toward the sentinels outside. Nevertheless, they continued their unbroken marching, only stopping now and then to stare out across the snow-covered landscape.

“They simply have not tried to attempt it, Polly; it is foolish for you to be so worried,” one of the voices said.

But her companion, whose long black hair was hanging loose to her waist and who wore a long red cape and a red woolen cap giving her a curiously fantastic appearance, only shook her head decisively.

“You can’t know the Princess as well as I do, Rose, or you would never believe she would give up having her own way. She went into town when the rest of us thought it unwise and she will come back, frozen, starved, goodness only knows what, still come back she will. Poor Esther is but wax in her hands. I wonder if anything happens to break the Princess’ will whatever will become of her?”

The other girl sighed and her friend gazed at her sympathetically but a little curiously.

“Betty will bear disappointment just as the rest of the world does,” she answered, “filling her life with what she can have. But I do wish she and Esther would come back to camp now, or at least send us some word. The storm has been over for several hours and none of us will be able to sleep to-night on account of the uncertainty.”

With one of her characteristic movements Polly O'Neill now moved swiftly away from the speaker. "I am going to ring our emergency bell if you are willing, Rose," she announced. "Oh, I know we Camp Fire girls hate to appeal to outsiders for aid, but it's got to be done for once, for I simply can't stand this suspense about Betty and Esther any longer." Then without waiting for an answer, she ran toward the back yard of the cabin and an instant later the loud clanging of a bell startled the peace and quiet of the country night, but only for a moment, because before the second pull at the bell rope Polly felt her arm being held fast.

"Don't ring again, Polly, or at least not yet," her companion insisted, "for I am almost sure I can see a dark object coming this way along our road and there's a chance of its being Betty and Esther."

Ten minutes later the front door of the Sunrise cabin was suddenly burst open and out into the snow piled half a dozen other girls in as many varieties of heavy blanket wrappers. The music of Fire Star's sleigh bells had reached their ears several moments before the arrival of the wayfarers.

However, very soon afterwards, following a suggestion of Sylvia Wharton's, Betty Ashton was borne into the cabin, four of the girls carrying her on a light canvas cot. This they set down before their big fire glowing in the center of the living room of the Sunrise cabin – Sunrise cabin which had not existed even in the dreams of the Sunrise Camp Fire girls until one afternoon in September not four months ago. Esther, with Mollie O'Neill's arm about her, walked into the cabin on foot, since she was only stiff with fatigue and cold. However, on throwing herself back in a big arm chair and allowing her shoes to be changed by Mollie for slippers, she seemed more affected, by their adventure than Betty.

For Betty, in Princess fashion, with Polly, Sylvia and Nan, and the girl whom Polly had called Rose, all kneeling devotedly at her feet, was talking cheerfully.

"He was just the most impossible, ridiculous looking person you ever could imagine, with red hair and glasses and dreadfully shabby clothes, the kind of a man in a German band to whom you would throw pennies out the window, but he declared that he had once lived here in Woodford for a short time years ago and had come back on some business or other. Oh, Esther, don't look at me so disapprovingly; I am saying nothing against him really. I am sure it was I who invited him to come out to our cabin and play for us girls. He looked so poor I thought I might be able to pay him then and I couldn't quite offer him anything for helping Esther mend the sleigh and then seeing us part of the way home. Home! Oh, isn't our beloved Sunrise cabin the most delightful and original home a group of Camp Fire girls ever possessed!"

And Betty's eyes clouded with tears, partly from pain and weariness but more from joy at her return, as she looked from the faces gathered about hers in the neighborhood of the great fireplace and then saw all their glances follow hers with equal ardor throughout the length of their great living room.

For if ever Betty Ashton had proved her right to her friend Polly's definition of her as a "Fairy Princess," it was when through her desire and largely through her money, Sunrise cabin rose on the very ground covered by the white tents of the Sunrise Camp Fire girls only the summer before.

The cabin was built of pine logs from the woods at the foot of Sunrise Hill and the entire front of forty-five feet formed a single great room. The end nearer the kitchen the girls used as their dining room, while the rest of the room was music room, study, reception and every other kind of a room. And, except for the piano which Betty had brought from her own blue room at home and a few chairs, every other article of furniture and almost every ornament had been made by the Sunrise Camp Fire girls themselves.

On either side the high mantel there were low book shelves and a music rack stood by the piano filled with the songs of the Camp Fire. Polly, Nan and Sylvia had manufactured a dining room table which was considered an extraordinary achievement although the design was really very simple. Four wide pine boards about ten feet in length formed the top and the legs were of heavy beams crossed under it at the center and at either end. The furniture of the living room was stained a Flemish brown to match the walls and floor done in the same color. On the floor were rag rugs of almost oriental beauty made by the girls and dyed into seven craft colors. On the walls hung pieces of homemade

tapestry, leather skins embossed with Camp Fire emblems, and flowers so pressed and mounted as to give the effect of nature. Then on the mantelpiece were two hammered brass candlesticks and a great brass bowl filled with holly and cedar from the surrounding wood. On odd tables and shelves were Indian baskets woven by the girls and used for every convenient purpose from holding stockings waiting to be darned to treasuring the Sunrise Camp Record Book which now had twenty-five written and illustrated pages setting forth the history of Sunrise Camp since its infancy.

But Eleanor Meade had given the living room its really unique distinction. Having once read a description of a famous Indian snow tipi, she had painted on the ceiling toward the northern end of the room seven stars which were to represent the north from whence the winter blizzards blew and on the southern side a red disc for the sun. The artist had pleaded long to be permitted to make the rest of the ceiling a bright blue with outlines of rolling prairie on the walls beneath, but this was greater realism in Indian ideals of art than the other girls were able to endure.

Yet notwithstanding so much artistic decoration, Science also had her place in the Sunrise cabin living room. For Sylvia Wharton had established a cupboard in an inconspicuous corner where she kept a collection of first aid supplies: gauze for bandaging, medicated cotton, peroxide, lime water and sweet oil, arnica, and half a dozen or more simple remedies useful in emergencies. True to her surprising announcement at the close of their summer camp Sylvia, without wasting time, and in her own quiet and apparently dull fashion, had already set about preparing herself for her future work as a trained nurse by persuading her father to let her have first aid lessons from a young doctor in Woodford. So now it was stupid little Sylvia (although the Camp Fire girls were no longer so convinced of her stupidity) who took real charge of caring for Betty's foot, going back and forth to her cupboard and doing whatever she thought necessary without asking or heeding any one else's advice.

Nevertheless, her work must have been successful, because in less than an hour after their return Betty, Esther and all the other girls were in dreamland in the two bedrooms which, besides the kitchen, completed Sunrise cabin. So soundly were they sleeping that it was only Polly O'Neill who was suddenly aroused by an unexpected knocking at their front door. It was nearly midnight and Polly shivered, not so much with fear as with apprehension. What could have happened to bring a human being to their cabin at such an hour? Instantly she thought of her mother still in Ireland, of Mr. and Mrs. Ashton traveling in Europe for Mr. Ashton's health. Slipping on her dressing gown Polly touched the figure in the bed near hers.

"Rose," she whispered, so quietly as not to disturb any one else. "There is some one knocking. I am going to the door, so be awake if anything happens." Then without delaying she slipped into the next room.

Crossing the floor in her slippers Polly made no noise and picking up the lantern which was always kept burning at night in the cabin, without any warning of her approach she suddenly pulled open the door. The figure waiting outside started.

"I – you," he began breathlessly and then stopped because Polly O'Neill's cheeks had turned as crimson as her dressing gown and her Irish blue eyes were sending forth electric sparks of anger.

"Billy Webster," she gasped, "I didn't dream that anything in the world could have made you do so ungentlemanly a thing as to disturb us in this fashion at such an hour of the night. Of course I have never liked you very much or thought you had really good manners, but I didn't believe –"

"Stop, will you, and let me explain," the young man returned, now fully as angry as Polly and in a voice to justify her final accusation. Then he turned courteously toward the young woman who had entered the room soon after Polly. "I'm terribly sorry, Miss Dyer," he continued, "I must have made some stupid mistake, but some little time ago I thought I heard the sound of your alarm bell. It rang only once, so I waited for a little while expecting to hear it again and then I was rather a long time in getting to you through the woods on account of the heavy snow. It is awfully rough on you to have been awakened at such an hour because of my stupidity."

But Rose Dyer, who was a good deal older than Polly, put out both hands and drew the young man, rather against his will, inside the living room.

“Please come in and get warm and dry, you know our Camp Fire is never allowed to go out, and please do not apologize for your kindness in coming to our aid.” She lighted the candles, giving Polly a chance to make her own confession. Though looking only a girl herself she was in reality the new guardian of the Sunrise Camp Fire girls.

Polly, however, did not seem to be enthusiastic over her opportunity to announce that she had been responsible for the alarm bell which had brought their visitor forth on such an arduous tramp. Billy Webster was of course their nearest neighbor, as his father owned most of the land in their vicinity, still the farm house itself was a considerable distance away. And to make matters worse the young man was too deeply offended by Polly’s reception of him to give even a glance in her direction.

Polly coughed several times and then opened her mouth to speak, but Billy was staring into the fire poking at the logs with his wet boot. Rose had disappeared toward the kitchen to get their visitor something to eat as a small expression of their gratitude.

Unexpectedly the young man felt some one pulling at the back of his coat and turning found himself again facing Polly, whose cheeks were quite as red as they had been at the time of his arrival, but whose eyes were shining until their color seemed to change as frequently as a wind swept sky.

“Mr. William Daniel Webster,” she began in a small crushed voice, “there are certain persons in this world who seem preordained to put me always in the wrong. You are one of them! I rang that bell because I thought my beloved Betty and Esther were lost in the storm, but they weren’t, and then I forgot all about having rung it. So now I am overcome with embarrassment and shame and regret and any other humiliating emotion you would like to have me feel. But really, Billy,” and here Polly extended her thin hand, which always had a curious warmth and intensity in keeping with her temperament, “can’t you see how hard it is to like a person who is always making one eat humble pie?”

Billy took the proffered hand and shook it with a forgiving strength that made the girl wince though nothing in her manner betrayed it.

“Oh, cut that out, Miss Polly O’Neill,” he commanded in the confused manner that Polly’s teasing usually induced in him. “It’s a whole lot rottener to be apologized to than it is to have to apologize, and it is utterly unnecessary this evening because, though, of course, I didn’t know you had rung the alarm bell, I did know if there was trouble at Sunrise cabin you were sure to be in it.”

And, as Polly accepted this assertion with entire amiability, ten minutes afterward she and their chaperon were both offering their visitor hot chocolate and biscuits to fortify him for the journey home. In order to make him feel entirely comfortable Polly also devoured an equal amount of the refreshments, not because she was given to self-sacrifice but because uneasiness about her friends had made her forget to eat her supper.

CHAPTER III

“A Rose of the World”

However much of a fairy Princess Betty Ashton’s friends may have considered her, Sunrise cabin had not arisen like “Aladdin’s Wonderful Palace” in a single night, although six months would seem a short enough time in which to see one’s dream come true. Particularly a dream which in the beginning had appeared to have no chance of ever becoming a reality.

For in the first place “The Lady of the Hills,” Miss McMurtry, on that very afternoon when coming across the fields to the Camp Fire she had there been told of the plan for keeping the Sunrise Camp Fire club together for the winter, had not approved the idea. The country would certainly be too cold and too lonely for the girls and the getting back and forth from the cabin to school too difficult. Fathers and mothers could never be persuaded to approve and, moreover, there would be no guardian, since Miss McMurtry could not attend to her work at the High School and also look after a permanent winter camp fire.

In a measure of course even the greatest enthusiasts for the new idea had known that there might be just these same difficulties to be overcome. Yet in conference they had decided to meet the obstacles one by one and in turn by following the old axiom of not climbing fences before coming to them. So as the money for building the cabin was a first necessity Betty Ashton had written at once to her brother Dick. Sylvia Wharton had seen her father, who had in September returned to Woodford, and Polly and Mollie had sent off appealing letters to Ireland asking for their mother’s approval and whatever small sum of money they might be allowed to contribute. Indeed each Sunrise Camp girl had met the demands of the situation in the best way she knew how. But really, although help and interest developed in various directions, once the business of building the cabin had been fairly started, it was from Richard Ashton that the first real aid and encouragement came. For Dick was a student in the modern school of medical science which believes in fresh air, exercise and congenial work as a cure for most ills instead of the old-time methods of pills and poultices, and having seen the benefit of a summer camp upon twelve girls he had faith enough for the winter experiment. Besides this plan had appeared to him as a solution for certain personal problems which had been worrying him for a number of weeks. His father and mother were not returning to America this fall as they had expected, since Mr. Ashton’s health required a milder climate than New Hampshire. It had seemed almost impossible for Dick to give up the graduating year of his study of medicine in Dartmouth in order to come home to Woodford to look after his sister and her friend, Esther Clark, who rather, through force of circumstances, appeared now to be Betty’s permanent companion.

So an offering from Dick Ashton with Betty’s fifty dollars, which had been returned to her by Polly O’Neill, had actually laid the foundation of Sunrise Cabin, although every single member of the club gave something big or little so that the house might belong alike to them all. As Esther and Nan Graham had no money of their own and Edith Norton very little and no parents able to help, the three girls added their portions by doing work for their friends in the village which they had learned in their summer camp fire. At last they were able to stock the new kitchen with almost a complete set of new kitchen utensils, the summer ones having suffered from continuous outdoor use.

Of course all the summer club members could not share the winter housekeeping scheme, but that did not affect their interest nor desire to help. Meg and “Little Brother” to everybody’s despair had to return home, since with John leaving for college, that same fall, their professor father could not live or keep house without them. But then they were to be allowed to come out to the cabin each Friday for week ends, and Edith Norton, whose work in the millinery store made living in town imperative, was to take her Sunday rests in camp. Of the summer Sunrise Camp Fire girls, only Juliet and Beatrice Field had really to say serious farewells when returning to their school in Philadelphia,

but they departed with at least the consoling thought that they were to come back to the cabin for their Christmas holidays. So that there remained only seven of the original girls pledged to give this experiment of winter housekeeping as a Camp Fire club a real test. And as they worked, pleaded and waited, one by one each difficulty had been overcome until now there remained but one – the necessity for finding a new guardian able to give all of her time to living at Sunrise cabin and to working with the girls.

One evening toward the early part of November after the cabin had been completed, Betty Ashton had called a meeting at her home for the final discussion of this serious problem. As there were no outsiders present, before mentioning the subject the girls had arranged themselves in their accustomed Camp Fire attitudes, in a kind of semi-circle about the great drawing room fire, in order to talk more freely. For the past week each girl had been asked to search diligently for a suitable guardian. Yet when Betty looked hopefully about at the faces of her friends without speaking she sighed, shading her gray eyes with her hand. Only by an effort of will could she keep her tears from falling – not a line of success showed in a single countenance.

Mollie O'Neill, understanding equally well, made no such effort at self-control. Placing her head on her sister's shoulder she frankly gave way to tears, while Polly stared moodily into the fire with Sylvia Wharton's square hand clutching hers despairingly. Esther and Eleanor frowned. Nan Graham, who had more at stake than the other girls, not trusting herself, jumped up and running across to a far corner of the big room flung herself face downward on a sofa. So there was a most unusual silence in the Sunrise Camp Fire circle and yet when a light knock sounded on the door no one said "Come in." An instant later, however, the knock was repeated, but this time, not waiting for an answer, the door opened and a figure walked slowly toward the center of the floor. It was a lovely figure, nevertheless, there was scarcely a person in Woodford whom the girls at this moment desired less to see. Certainly there was no one who had been more bitterly opposed to the whole Camp Fire idea and particularly to Betty Ashton's having a part in it.

"I don't know whether you allow an outsider to come into one of your meetings," the intruder began, dropping into a near-by chair.

From her place on the sofa Nan Graham lifted her head. She alone of the little company did not know their visitor's name. She saw a young woman of about twenty-six or seven with light golden brown hair and eyes with the same yellow lights in them, dressed in a lovely crepe evening gown with a bunch of roses at her belt and a scarf thrown over her shoulders. Nan's eyes glowed with a momentary forgetfulness, having long cherished just such an ideal and never before seen it realized.

But Betty only shook her head, answering with little enthusiasm:

"Oh, it doesn't matter this evening, Rose, you may stay if you like, though we don't generally have strangers at our meetings." And then, though she usually had good manners, Betty fell to studying the dancing lights in the fire without making any further effort at conversation. She had no desire to be rude, but it was trying to have Rose Dyer, her mother's intimate friend, the one older girl, held up as a model for her to follow, who had done her best to prejudice Mrs. Ashton against the Camp Fire plan the summer before, come into their midst at an hour when their very existence as a club seemed to be in peril.

For a few moments Miss Dyer waited without trying to speak again. Although Polly and Esther were both endeavoring to make themselves agreeable, the atmosphere of the drawing room continued distinctly unfriendly.

"I – I am afraid I am in the way although you were kind enough not to say so," Rose suggested, finding it difficult to explain what had inspired her visit with so many faces turned away from hers. "I think I had best go; I only came to ask you a great favor and now –" She was getting up quietly, when Betty with a sudden realization of her duties as a hostess made a little rush toward her and taking both the older girl's hands drew her into the center of their circle.

“Please forgive our bad manners and do stay, Rose,” she pleaded. “We really have no business to attend to to-night and perhaps company may cheer us up.”

But although Rose, without the least regard for her lovely gown, had immediately dropped down on the floor in regular Camp Fire fashion, apparently she had not heard what Betty had suggested, for straightway her expression became quite as serious as any one else’s.

“You may not care for what I am going to say and you must promise to be truthful if you don’t,” Rose began, as timidly as though she were not ten years older than any other girl in the room, “but I have been hearing for the past two months that you were looking for a Camp Fire guardian to spend the winter with you and I have been wondering – ” Here pulling the flowers from her belt she let her gaze rest upon them. “I have been wondering if you would care to have me?”

The silence was then more conspicuous than before and Rose flushed hotly.

“I am sure you are very kind,” Polly began in a perfectly unfamiliar tone of voice and manner since she too had known Rose all her life.

“We appreciate your kindness very much,” Eleanor added, fearing that Polly was about to break down.

But Betty Ashton dropped her chin into her hands in her familiar fashion and stared directly at their visitor. “My dear Rose, whatever has happened to you?” she demanded. “Why it’s too absurd! You know you don’t care for anything but parties and dancing and having a good time. You simply haven’t any idea of what it means to be a Camp Fire guardian; why it is difficult enough when you have only to preside at weekly Camp Fire meetings and to watch over the girls in between, but when it comes to living with us and teaching us as Miss McMurtry did last summer – ” Betty bit her lips. She did not wish to be discourteous and yet the vision of the fashionably dressed girl before her fulfilling the requirements of their life together in the woods was too much for her sense of humor.

Then suddenly, to Betty’s embarrassment and the surprise of everyone else, Miss Dyer’s eyes filled with tears.

“Please don’t, Betty,” she said a little huskily. “You know, dear, one can get rather tired of hearing one’s self described as an absolute good-for-nothing. Oh, I know I was opposed to your Camp Fire club last summer, but I have watched you more carefully than you dream and have entirely changed my mind. I am not asking you to let me come into your club to help you. I am afraid I am selfish, I can’t explain it to you now, but I want to help myself. Of course I am not wise enough to be your guardian, but I have been talking to Miss McMurtry and she has promised to help me and it is only because you don’t seem able to find anyone else that I dare offer myself.”

At this moment Nan Graham, whom Rose had not seen before, tumbled unexpectedly off her sofa. It was because of her eagerness to reach the other girls. They, at a quick signal from one to the other, had arisen, and now, forming a circle, danced slowly about their new guardian chanting the sacred law of the Camp Fire.

CHAPTER IV

“The Reason o’ It”

“Rose,” Betty Ashton called at about ten o’clock the next morning. Betty was sitting alone before the living room fire, the other girls having gone into town to school several hours before. Books and papers and writing materials were piled on a table before her and evidently she had been working on some abstruse problem in mathematics, for several sheets of legal cap paper were covered with figures.

“Rose,” she called again, and so plaintively this second time that the new guardian of the Sunrise Camp Fire girls hurried in from the kitchen. A gingham apron covered her from head to foot, a large mixing spoon was in one hand and a becoming splash of flour on one cheek.

“What is it, dear?” she inquired anxiously. “Does your foot hurt worse than it did? I ought to have come in to you right away, but Mammy and I have been making enough loaves of bread to feed a regiment and I have been turning some odds and ends of the dough into Camp Fire emblems to have for tea – rings and bracelets and crossed logs. I am afraid I am still dreadfully frivolous!” And Rose flushed, for in spite of Betty’s own problem she was smiling at her. This the Rose who had come to her first Camp Fire Council only a month before in a Paris frock, probably never having cooked a meal for any one in her life!

However, Betty answered loyally. “You are quite wonderful, Rose, and only the other day Donna said you were giving to our Camp Fire life what with all her knowledge she had somehow failed to give it – the real intimate family feeling. I suppose I oughtn’t to have interrupted you. No, it isn’t my foot, it is only that I have gotten myself into a new difficulty and I want to ask you what you think I had best do?”

And with a worried frown Betty again studied the closely written figures which must have represented some still unsolved problem, for she continued staring at them, turning the sheets over and over. Finally, before speaking, she drew an open letter from her pocket, carefully re-reading several lines.

“I suppose it isn’t worth while my mentioning, Rose, that none of us do anything at present but think, dream and plan for our Camp Fire Christmas entertainment,” she said with a half sigh and smile, “and you know packages have been coming to me until the attic is most full of them. I have just been charging things as I bought them and until to-day I haven’t paid much attention to what they cost. But yesterday I received such a strange letter from mother. She writes that father is a little better and I am not to worry and she hopes we may have a happy Christmas. However, she can’t send me any more money for the holidays beyond my usual allowance. Father has had some business losses lately, and not being able to look after things himself, they are not going quite right. Isn’t it odd, for you see I have already explained to her that we were going to have unusually heavy expenses this Christmas and please to let me have money instead of a present? Yet she says she can’t send me *anything*. Poor mother, she apologizes humbly instead of telling me that I am an extravagant wretch, but just the same it is the first time in my life I haven’t had all the money I needed to spend at Christmas and now I don’t see how I am ever going to pay for all the things I have bought. I don’t think I have any right to be a Camp Fire girl if I am in debt, and I am – miles!”

Instead of answering immediately Rose turned away her face to conceal a look of concern at Betty’s news which she did not wish the young girl to see. Other persons in Woodford were beginning to speculate upon a possible change in the Ashton fortune. Certain enterprises in which Mr. Ashton had been concerned had been known to fail, but then no one understood to what extent he had been interested.

“Can’t you give up some of the things, dear,” Rose suggested gently, knowing that Betty had never been called upon to do any such thing before in her life, but to her surprise she now saw that her companion’s expression had entirely changed.

“What a goose I am!” Betty laughed cheerfully. “Of course I can write to old Dick for the money. I don’t usually like to ask him, for he is such a conscientious person, so unlike reckless me, and will probably scold, but then he will give me the money just the same. I wonder if anything ever happened to make Dick more serious than other young men? He isn’t a bit like Frank Wharton or other wealthy fellows who do nothing but spend money and have a good time. He seems just devoted to studying medicine, and sometimes he has said such strange things to mother as though there might be some special reason why he wanted so much to help people.” And feeling that her own dilemma was now comfortably settled, Betty fell to puzzling over the older problem which she had always kept more or less at the back of her mind.

But, curiously enough, Rose Dyer shook her head discouragingly. “I wouldn’t try that method of getting the money, Betty, if I were you,” she replied thoughtfully. “I suppose it hasn’t occurred to you that if your mother and father are not able to give you extra money, and you know Dick always makes them put you first, why he is probably not having any extra money either. And since his whole heart is set on going to Germany next year to continue his work why he is probably saving all that he can now so as not to be an additional expense.”

Rose was several years older than Dick, but they had known one another ever since she came as a young girl to New Hampshire from her home in Georgia, bringing her colored mammy with her. For Rose’s parents had died and she had lived with an old uncle until a few years before when he had gone, leaving her his heiress. Now Rose’s pretty home in Woodford was closed for the winter and her chaperon living in Florida while she spent her time trying to learn to be a worthy guardian for the Camp Fire girls. Perhaps she really had heard more of Dick Ashton’s early life than his sister Betty and had a special reason for her interest in him, however she said nothing of it.

“I wonder if I couldn’t lend you the money. I am not rich as you are, but perhaps I have – ”

And here Betty shook her head decisively. “I couldn’t borrow the money of anybody, one way of owing it would be as bad as another. I simply have got to find a way.” She stopped suddenly because the sound of some one driving up to the cabin surprised her, and then, to her greater surprise, her guardian, after a hurried glance out of the window, dropped her mixing-spoon with a clatter and positively ran out of the room.

Betty stared. She could only see rather a shabby, old-fashioned buggy standing near the Totem pole in front of their cabin, and a young man hitching his horse to it.

Almost forgetting her bandaged ankle, the girl hobbled over to the door, but when she had opened it gave an involuntary cry of pain and the next instant found herself being lifted and carried back to her chair.

“You must not try to walk until you are sure things are all right with you,” a strange voice said severely. Then, in answer to Betty’s look of amazement, he took off his hat and bowed gravely. She found herself staring at a tall, slender man of about thirty, in carefully brushed clothes, which nevertheless had an old-fashioned, country appearance, and with a face at once so handsome and so stern that he looked as if he might have stepped out of an old frame which had held the portrait of one of the early Puritan fathers.

“I am the doctor Sylvia Wharton is studying with, Miss Ashton,” he explained. “You don’t know me but I know very well who you are. I have only been living in this part of the country for the past two years, trying to build up a practice among the farming people, so that when Sylvia stopped by and asked me to come and see you I telephoned at once to your physician in town, but finding him out I thought it might be best – ”

The young man hesitated and flushed. He was morbidly sensitive and conscientious, and knowing Mr. Ashton's prominence would not for the world have made an effort to gain Betty as a patient. However, Betty was by this time suffering so much that she gave a little cry of relief.

"Sylvia has much more sense than any of us," she returned gratefully. "I assured everybody I wasn't suffering in the least this morning and now – well, I suppose I shouldn't have walked over to the door."

The young doctor had knelt on the floor and was gently removing the bandage from the swollen ankle. "Sylvia has done very well," he declared. "The first aid idea is one of the best things I know about you Camp Fire girls, and Sylvia is trying to make me a convert, but surely you are not here alone. Miss Dyer is your chaperon or guardian, I am not entirely sure what you call her."

"Why, yes, Rose is here. I can't understand why she does not come in," Betty returned, feeling rather aggrieved and surprised at Rose's neglect of her. But at this instant, hearing the bedroom door open, both the girl and the young man turned and Betty just managed to control a quick exclamation.

For, to her amazement, for the first time since coming to the cabin, Rose had discarded her Camp Fire costume and was again fashionably dressed in a soft brown silk entirely inappropriate to her work and to the cabin.

If Betty had thought young Dr. Barton's face stern on first seeing him it was as nothing to his expression now. He bowed formally, but as his manner showed he had known Rose before, Betty closed her eyes. The pain in her foot was increasing each instant now that Sylvia's dressing had been removed. When she opened them again she found Rose kneeling on the floor by Dr. Barton, entirely forgetful of her gown and listening quietly to his curt orders. Then during the next fifteen minutes Rose Dyer had her first experience as a trained nurse, wondering all the time she was at work how she could possibly be so stupid and so awkward. For she splashed hot water on her gown and hand, tripped over her long skirt, and was so nervous when Betty showed any signs of pain that the tears blinded her brown eyes and her hands trembled. She might have broken down except that Dr. Barton so plainly expected her to do what she was told, and because of a wrathful figure that stood immovable in the doorway. It was "Mammy," dressed in a stiff purple calico gown with a white handkerchief tied about her head. Mammy was past seventy and no longer able to do much work, but she had never left her "little Rose" in the twenty-seven year of her life and never would so long as she lived. Not able to help a great deal, she was still able to give the Sunrise Camp Fire club a great deal of advice, and then she was also a kind of additional guardian since Rose could not have been left alone at the cabin all morning with the girls in town at school.

"I ain't never had much use for Yankee gentlemen," she mumbled to herself, plainly expecting the little audience to hear. "Whar I cum from the gentlemen was always waitin' on the ladies, not askin' them to tote and fetch, same as if they was poo' white trash."

CHAPTER V

Mollie's Suggestion

The trouble with Betty Ashton's foot was only a sprained ankle but it kept her confined for several days and gave her plenty of time for reflection. She must of course pay her debts, for she could not make up her mind to send back the things she had ordered (self-denial and Betty had very slight acquaintance with one another), and besides the disappointment would not be hers alone but all of the Sunrise Camp Fire girls.

For the truth is that Betty and Polly together had written a Camp Fire play setting forth some of the ideals of their organization and they wished to give the entertainment during Christmas week in the most beautiful possible fashion. Of course in the beginning they had assured Miss McMurtry, who was still a kind of advisory guardian, and Miss Dyer, that everything would be very simple and inexpensive, but naturally their ambitions grew with each passing day, and with scenery and costumes to be bought, besides the gifts and decorations for the Camp Fire tree, Betty found herself very much involved. As usual she was bearing the greater share of the expenses and then, though no one outside the Camp Fire club except Dick Ashton knew of it, Betty had been giving a part of her allowance each week so that Esther Clark might have singing lessons with the best possible teacher in Woodford. Not that the relation between Betty and Esther had seriously changed. The older girl still felt toward Betty the same adoring and self-sacrificing devotion, still considered her the most beautiful and charming person in the world and that her careless generosity lifted her above every one else, while, though to do Betty Ashton credit, she was entirely unconscious of it, her attitude toward Esther was just the least little bit condescending. Esther was so plain and awkward and particularly she lacked the birth and breeding Betty considered so essential, but then she was fond of her and did want Esther to have her chance – this chance she felt must lie in the cultivation of her beautiful voice.

So that when Betty, unable to make up her mind what had best be done, determined to consult with the girls, it was to her old friends, Mollie and Polly O'Neill, that she turned rather than to Esther. She had been unusually quiet one evening, although insisting that her ankle was entirely well. Suddenly, however, she plead fatigue and with a little gesture, which both girls understood as a signal, asked that Mollie and Polly come and help her get ready for bed.

When Betty was finally undressed, she sat bolt upright in her cot with her cheeks flushed and her gray eyes shining. So unusually pretty did she appear that Polly, who never ceased to admire her, even when she happened to be angry, set a silver paper crown upon her head. The crown was a part of their Christmas stage property and not intended for Betty, but now Polly stood a few feet away and clasped her hands together from sheer admiration, while Mollie, who was usually undemonstrative, leaned over and kissed her friend's cheek before settling herself at the foot of the bed.

"You certainly are lovely, Princess, and so is Mollie for that matter," Polly exclaimed, generously seating herself opposite her sister. Betty happened to be wearing a heavy blue silk dressing jacket over her gown and her auburn hair hung in two heavy braids, one over each shoulder. Her forehead was low and she had delicate level brows. But just now Betty flushed scarlet and frowned, for whatever her other faults she was not vain.

"Please don't call me Princess, Polly, dear," she urged, taking off her paper crown and surveying it rather ruefully, "because I am in truth only a paper princess to-night. You have told me a hundred times, Polly, child, that you thought I ought to know the sensation of being poor like other people, that I needed it for my education. Well, I do at last, for I have bought a lot of things for Christmas that I can't pay for, as mother writes she can't let me have any extra money."

Betty's expression, however, was not half so serious as that of her two friends as she made this confession. For the girls had also heard the rumor which had troubled Rose Dyer in regard to Mr.

Ashton's possible change of fortune, and knew that Betty did not in the least understand the gravity of her mother's refusal.

Polly positively shivered. Betty poor! It was impossible to imagine! Yet what, after all, did the supposed loss of a few thousand dollars mean to a man of Mr. Ashton's wealth.

Polly patted Betty's hand sympathetically. "Debt is the most horrible thing in the world, isn't it? I haven't forgotten how I felt when I was in your debt last summer, Betty, and took such a horrid way to get out of it."

"Maybe you had better send back what you have bought," suggested the more practical Mollie, making the same suggestion as their guardian.

But at this Betty and Polly glanced at one another despairingly. "Give up making their Camp Fire play a success?" For this is what it would mean should Betty have to send back her purchases!

"How much do you owe, dear?" Polly next inquired in a crushed voice.

And at this Betty drew the same sheets of complex figures out from under her pillow. "It is a hundred and fifty dollars, I can't make it any less," she confessed. "That sounds pretty dreadful doesn't it, when you have not a single cent to pay with, though I never thought one hundred and fifty dollars so very much before. Of course I could save something out of my allowance every month, but not very much, and father would not like me to ask people to wait."

"Can't you give up something besides the Christmas present from your mother which you were *not* going to have?" Mollie inquired so seriously and with such a horrified expression over the amount of her friend's indebtedness, and such an entire disregard for the Irishness of her speech, that both the other girls laughed in spite of their worry. Mollie's pretty face showed no answering smiles in return, nor did she take the least interest in the reason for their laughter. For it was not her way to be interrupted by their perfectly idle merriment.

"But haven't you, Betty?" she repeated.

And Betty leaned her chin on her hands. "I have my piano," she replied slowly, "but I can't sell that because then Esther would have no chance to practice, and we could never half enjoy our Camp Fire songs without."

Both the other girls shook their heads. Giving up the piano *was* out of the question.

For a moment longer there was silence and then Betty's cheeks flushed again. "I have got some things I suppose I can part with, though I rather hate to," she confessed. "I don't know whether mother and father would like it, but then they would not like my being in debt. In a safety box in the bank in town I have some jewelry I never wear because mother thinks it too handsome for a girl of my age. Father and Dick have given it to me at different times. I suppose somebody would tell me how to dispose of at least a part of it."

And although both Polly and Mollie at first strenuously objected to Betty's suggestion, it was finally decided that Betty and Polly should drive into Woodford on the following Saturday morning without saying anything to any one else and bring the safety box back with them. Then they could talk the matter over and find out what Betty could dispose of with the least regret. Her ankle was now well enough for her to make the trip in their sleigh without difficulty.

CHAPTER VI

A Black Sheep

The one month in the winter camp had made more change in Nan Graham than the entire preceding summer, and the influence exerted by Rose Dyer in so short a time greater than all Miss McMurtry's conscientious efforts, so does one character often affect another, so by a strange law of nature do extremes meet. Unconsciously Nan had always cherished just such an ideal as Rose represented. This uncouth young girl, untrained in even the simple things of life, with her curious mixed parentage of an Italian peasant mother and a ne'er-do-well father, who nevertheless was of good old New England stock, wished to be like the lovely southern girl who had nearly every grace and charm and had had every possible social advantage. Yet in spite of the contrast Nan did wish to be like her and though even to herself there seemed little chance of her succeeding, did try to mold herself after Rose's pattern. The other girls quickly noted her attempts to soften her coarse voice, to give up the use of the ugly expressions that had so annoyed them and even to wear her clothes and to fix her thick black hair in a soft coil at the back of her neck as their guardian did. But fortunately they were kind enough not to laugh nor even to let Nan know that they were watching her. The girl had a certain beauty of her own with her dark coloring and sometimes sullen, sometimes eager, face. Her figure, however, was short and square, indeed she showed no trace of her New England blood and bore no resemblance to graceful Rose.

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