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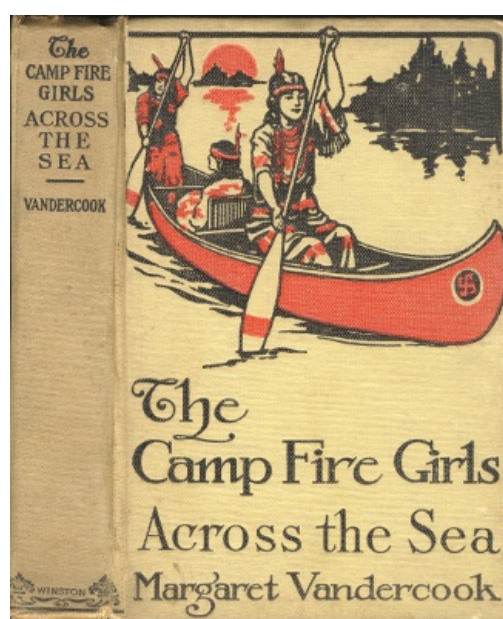
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## **THE CAMP FIRE GIRLS ACROSS THE SEAS**

**BY MARGARET VANDERCOOK**

**Author of "The Ranch Girls Series," etc.**

**ILLUSTRATED**

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**"LOOK HERE, ESTHER," HE BEGAN**

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## The Camp Fire Girls Across the Seas

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### CHAPTER I

#### TWO YEARS LATER

A young man strode along through one of the principal streets of the town of Woodford, New Hampshire, with his blue eyes clouded and an expression of mingled displeasure and purpose about the firm lines of his mouth.

It was an April afternoon and the warm sunshine uncurling the tiny buds on the old elm trees lit to a brighter hue the yellow Forsythia bushes already in bloom in the gardens along the way.

Standing in front of an inconspicuous brown cottage was a large touring car, empty of occupants. Within a few yards of this car the young man paused, frowning, and then gazed anxiously up toward the closed door of the house. A short time afterwards this door opened when a girl, wearing a scarlet coat and a felt hat of the same shade pinned carelessly on her dark hair, hurried forth and with her eyes cast down and an air of suppressed excitement moved off in the opposite direction, without becoming aware of the onlooker. And although the bystander's lips moved once as if forming her name with the intention of calling after her, his impulse must have immediately died, for he continued motionless in the same spot until the girl had finally turned a corner and was lost to his view. Then the young man walked on again, but not so rapidly or resolutely as at first.

Indeed, he was so intensely absorbed in his own line of thought as to be unconscious of the other passers-by, until some one stopped directly in front of him and a familiar voice pronounced his name.

"Why, Billy Webster, where are you going?" Meg Everett demanded. "You look as if you were giving Atlas a holiday this afternoon and had transferred the weight of the world to your own shoulders."

Two years had changed the greater number of the old Sunrise Hill Camp Fire members from girls to young women, but they had not made a conspicuous difference in Margaret Everett. Her sunny yellow hair was tucked up, but today the April winds had loosened it, and though she was dressed with greater care than before the Camp Fire influence, she would never altogether approach her brother John's ideal of quiet elegance, as the Princess always had. Yet her eyes were so gay and friendly and her face so full of quick color and sympathy, that there were few other young men besides her older brother who found much to criticize in her. And certainly not the small boy at her side, who had once been "Hai-yi," the Indian name for "Little Brother," to the twelve girls at Sunrise Hill.

Returning Meg's interested gaze, Billy Webster, who was never given to subterfuges, had a sudden impulse to seek information and possible aid from her.

"Is it true, Meg," he asked, "that Miss Adams, the actress, is here in Woodford visiting her cousin and that Polly O'Neill has been going to see her every day and riding over the country in her motor car? I thought Mrs. Wharton had insisted that Polly was to have nothing to do with anything or anybody connected with the stage until three years had passed. It has been only two since Polly's escapade, and it seems to me that nothing could so awaken a girl's interest as being made the companion and friend of a famous woman. I thought Mrs. Wharton had better judgment. Polly had almost forgotten the whole business!"

As she shook her head Meg Everett's face wore a slightly puzzled look. For she was wondering at the instant if it could be possible that Billy had any special right to his concern in Polly O'Neill's proceedings. Mollie O'Neill was her dearest friend and for several years she knew Mollie and Billy had been apparently devoted to each other. Yet she would have been almost sure to have guessed had their old affection developed into something deeper. Moreover, Mollie was only nineteen and Mrs. Wharton would have insisted upon their waiting before agreeing to an engagement between them.

"Oh, I don't think it worth while for you and Mollie to worry over Polly," Meg returned, even in the midst of her meditations, which is a fortunate faculty one has sometimes of being able to think of one thing and speak of another at the same instant. "Miss Adams is going away in a few days, I believe, and though she has invited Polly to be her guest and travel with her in Europe this summer, Mrs. Wharton has positively refused to agree to it. I can't help being sorry for Polly, somehow, for think what it would mean to see Esther and Betty again! Two years has seemed a dreadfully long time to me without the Princess; I only wish that there was a chance for me to go abroad this summer."

And in the midst of her own wave of the spring "Wanderlust," which is aroused each year in the hearts of the young and the old alike, the girl had a moment of unconsciousness of her companion's nearness and of the manner in which he had received her news. The next instant he had lifted his hat and with a few muttered words of apology for his haste, had walked off with his shoulders squarer than ever and his head more splendidly erect.

Meg's eyes followed him with admiration. "I hope you may look like Billy Webster some day, Horace," she said to the small boy at her side, who was now all long legs and arms and tousled hair. "But I don't know that I want you to be too much like him. Billy is the old-fashioned type of man, I think—honest and brave and kind. But he does not understand in the least that the world has changed for women and that some of us may not wish just to stay at home and get married and then keep on staying at home forever afterwards." And Meg laughed, feeling that her little brother was hardly old enough to understand her criticism or her protest. She herself hardly realized why she had made it, except that the spring restlessness must still be lingering within her. Meg was not usually a psychologist and there was no reason to doubt that Mollie would always continue a home-loving soul.

On the broad stone steps of the Wharton home, which was the largest and finest in Woodford, except the old Ashton place, Billy Webster was compelled to wait for several moments before the front door bell was answered. And then the maid insisted that the entire family had gone out. Mr. and Mrs. Wharton were both driving, Mollie was taking a walk with friends, and Polly paying a visit. Sylvia was not living in Woodford at present, but true to her Camp Fire purpose was in Philadelphia studying to become a trained nurse.

"Do you mean that Miss Polly gave you instructions to say she was not in?" the young man inquired, trying his best to betray no shadow of offended pride in his question. "Because if she did not, I am sure that you must be mistaken. I saw her leave the place where she was calling some little time ago and—"

But the maid was crimsoning uncomfortably, for at this moment there arose the sound of some one playing the piano in the music room near by.

"No, sir," the girl stammered, "no one asked to be excused. Miss Polly must have come in without my knowing." And in her confusion the girl ushered the visitor into an almost dark room, without announcing his name or even suggesting his approach.

However, the recent visitor was so much in the habit of going frequently to the Wharton home that he did not feel in any sense a stranger there. Besides, had he not spied the familiar scarlet coat and hat on a chair outside the music room, where no one but Polly would have placed them? And was it not like her to be sitting in the semi-darkness with the shutters of four big windows tightly closed, playing pensively and none too well on the piano, when the rest of the world was out of doors?

Billy felt a sudden and almost overmastering desire to take the musician's slender shoulders in his hands and give them a slight shake, as she continued sitting on the stool with her back deliberately turned toward him.

"I hope I am not disturbing you," he began with a little laugh, which even to his own ears did not sound altogether natural.

And then, when the girl had swung slowly around, he walked up toward her and leaning one elbow on the piano, with his eyes down, continued speaking, without giving his companion the opportunity even for greeting him.

"Polly," he said, "I have just heard that Miss Adams has invited you to go abroad with her this summer and that your mother has refused to let you accept. But I cannot entirely believe this last part of my news. I don't dare unless you tell me."

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### THERE WAS A SLIGHT SOUND FROM HIS LISTENER

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There was a slight sound from his listener, an effort at interruption, but the young man went on without regarding it.

"I did not mean to speak to you so soon. I know you are too young and I expected to wait another year. And certainly you have not given me much encouragement. Sometimes I have not felt that you liked me any better than when first we knew each other. But you can't have completely forgotten what I said to you that day in the woods two years ago. And you know I never change my mind. Now I can't bear to have you go so far away from Woodford without saying again that I care for you, Polly, in spite of our sometimes disagreeing about things and that I will do my level best to make you happy if you——"

But the girl at the piano had risen and Billy now lifted his eager blue eyes to her face. Immediately his expression changed, the hot blood poured into his cheeks, and he moved forward a few steps. Then he stood still with his hands hanging limply at his sides.

For the girl, whose pallor showed even in the semi-darkness of the room and whose lips trembled so that it was difficult for her to command her voice, was not Polly O'Neill! Although her hair was almost equally dark, her chin was less pointed, her lips less scarlet and her whole appearance gentler and more appealing.

"I am sorry," Mollie O'Neill faltered, "I did not understand when you began, Billy, or I should not have listened. But I didn't dream that you and Polly—oh, I didn't suppose that people could quarrel as you do and yet be fond of each other. And you were my friend, Billy, and Polly is my twin sister. I cannot understand why one of you did not tell me how you felt without waiting to have me find out like this." And in spite of her struggle for self-control, there was a break in Mollie O'Neill's soft voice that Billy would have given a great deal never to have heard, and a look on her face which, though he did not entirely understand, he was not soon to forget. She had put out one arm and stood steadying herself against the piano stool like a child who had been unexpectedly hurt and frightened and who wished to run away, yet felt that if she lingered a little longer she might better understand the puzzle.

Nevertheless Billy said nothing for a moment. He was too angry with himself, too worried over the surprise and sorrow in Mollie's eyes, to speak. For they were deeply attached to each other and nothing had come between their friendship since the morning, now almost five years ago, when she had cleverly bandaged up the wound in his head. They had been foolish children then, but so long an intimacy should surely have taught him by this time the difference between the twin sisters. If only the room had not been so dark when he came in, if only he had not been deceived by the crimson coat and cap and by his own excitement!

"There was nothing to tell you before, Mollie, at least nothing that counts," Billy began humbly. "Sometimes I have wanted to explain to you my feeling for Polly. We do quarrel and she makes me angrier than anyone I know in the world, and yet somehow I can't forget her. And I like being with her always, even when she is in a bad temper. Then I don't wish her to go on the stage. I

think it a horrid profession, and Polly is not strong enough. I would do anything that I could to prevent it. But you see, Mollie, I have no reason to believe that Polly cares for me; though now and then she has seemed to like me better than she once did. Still I am determined to try whatever means I can to keep her away from this Miss Adams' influence. For if once Polly leaves Woodford with her, the old Polly whom we both know and love will never come back to us again." And Billy appeared so disconsolate and so unlike his usual confident, masterful self, that Mollie smiled at him, a little wistfully it is true, but in a perfectly friendly and forgiving fashion.

"I'll go and find whether Polly has come home," she answered. "I ran in for a moment to call on Miss Adams and found that Polly had left there half an hour before. I wore her old coat and cap, so I think she must be dressed in her best clothes and paying visits somewhere." And Mollie laid a hand lightly on her friend's arm.

"Don't be discouraged at whatever Polly says to you," she begged. "You know that she may be angry at the idea of your opposing her having this European trip with Miss Adams. But she is not going. Mother is positive and Polly will not do more than ask for permission since there is a whole year more before her promise ends."

And Mollie slipped quietly away, grateful for the darkness and her old friend's absorption.

In the hall, a few feet from the music room door, she encountered Polly herself, with her eyes shining and her face aglow with the beauty and fragrance of the April afternoon. And before she could slip past her Polly's arms were about her, holding her fast, while she demanded, "Whatever has happened to make you so white and miserable, Mollie Mavourneen? Are you ill? If anyone has been unkind to you—"

But Mollie could only shake her head. "Don't be absurd; there is nothing the matter. Billy Webster is here waiting to see you."

Nevertheless, a moment afterwards, when Polly had marched into the music room and opened wide a shutter, her first words as she turned toward her visitor were, "Billy Webster, what in the world have you said or done to make Mollie so unhappy?"

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## CHAPTER II

### THE WHEEL REVOLVES

It was midnight, yet Polly O'Neill had not gotten into bed.

Instead she sat before a tiny, dying fire in her own bedroom with her hands clasped about her knees and her black hair hanging gypsy-fashion over her crimson dressing gown. Mollie had gone to her own room several hours before. In a moment there was a light knock at the door and Polly had scarcely turned her head when her mother stood beside her.

Mrs. Wharton looked younger than she had several years before, absurdly young to be the mother of two almost grown-up daughters! Her face had lost the fatigue and strain of another spring evening, when Betty Ashton had first hurried across the street to confide the dream of her Camp Fire club to her dearest friends. Of course her hair was grayer and she was a good deal less thin. Notwithstanding her eyes held the same soft light of understanding that was so curiously combined with quiet firmness.

"Why aren't you in bed, Polly mine?" she asked. "I saw that the gas was shining or I should never have disturbed you."

In answer Polly without rising pushed a low rocking chair toward her mother. "I wasn't sleepy. Is that the same reason that keeps you awake, Mrs. Wharton?" she queried.

In all their lives together Polly O'Neill and her mother had always held a different relation toward each other than ordinarily exists between most mothers and daughters. In the first place Mrs. Wharton was so very little older than her children that in the days in the cottage when they had lived and worked for one another, they had seemed more like three devoted and intimate friends. Of course the two girls had always understood that when a serious question was to be decided their mother remained the court of the last decision. However, in those years few serious questions had ever arisen beyond the finding of sufficient money for their food and clothes and occasional good times. So that there had been nothing to disturb the perfection of their attitude toward one another until Mrs. O'Neill's marriage to her former employer, Mr. Wharton. And then there is no doubt that Polly for a time had been difficult. Naturally she was glad for her mother's sake that she had the new love and wealth and position; nevertheless she was homesick for their old life and its intimacy and in her heart half sorry that her own dream of some day bringing fortune and ease to her mother and Mollie was now of so little account. And then all too soon, before matters had really become adjusted between the two families, had followed her own act of insubordination and deception and her mother's mandate.

Of course Polly had bowed before it and had even understood that it was both right and just. She had been happy enough in these last two years, in spite of missing Betty Ashton almost every hour, and had come to like and admire her stepfather immensely. Nevertheless there had

remained a slight shadow between herself and her mother, a misapprehension so intangible that Polly herself did not realize it, although Mrs. Wharton did.

"I suppose you are not sleepy, dear, because you are sitting here thinking that never in the whole world was there ever a mother so narrow and so dictatorial as I am," Mrs. Wharton began. "Oh, I have been in bed, but I have been lying awake for the past hour looking at myself with Polly's eyes."

Polly frowned, shaking her head, yet her mother went on without appearing to notice her.

"I wonder if you think that I have no realization of the wonderful opportunity I have just made you refuse. Do you think, Polly, that I don't appreciate what it must mean to a girl like you to have made a friend of a great woman like Margaret Adams? And to have her so desire your companionship that she has asked you to be her guest during her summer abroad? Why such a chance does not come to one girl in a hundred thousand and yet I have made you give it up!"

With a little protesting gesture Polly stretched out her hand. "Then let us not discuss it any further, mother of mine," she demanded. "I promised you not to speak of it again after our talk the other day and I am going to exact the same promise of you."

The girl shut her lips together in a tight line of scarlet and all unconsciously began rocking herself slowly backward and forward with her expression turned inside instead of out, as her sister Mollie used sometimes to say. But Mrs. Wharton leaned over, and putting her finger under Polly's chin tilted it back until her eyes were upturned toward hers.

"But was I fair to you, dear? Have I decided what was best for you, as well as for Mollie and me? We have not spoken of it; we have both felt that silence was the wisest course; but tonight I should like to know whether, when the three years of your promise to me have passed, do you still intend going upon the stage?" Mrs. Wharton asked.

"Would you mind so very, very much?" Polly inquired quietly. And then with a sudden rush of confidence, which she had never before shown in any of their talks together on this subject, Polly faced their old difference of opinion squarely. "It has always been hard for me to understand, mother, why you are so opposed to my trying to become an actress. You are broad-minded enough on other subjects. You have worked for your own living and ours; and you were willing enough to have Sylvia, who is younger than I am and who will be very rich some day, go away and study to become a trained nurse, just because she believed it her calling. Yet because I want to learn to act, why the whole stage and everything connected with it is anathema. You do not even like Miss Margaret Adams as much as you would if she were in some other kind of work. Oh, of course I appreciate that people used to feel that no woman could be good and be on the stage, but no sensible person thinks that nowadays." Polly stopped abruptly. "I don't mean to be rude, mother," she concluded.

But Mrs. Wharton nodded. "Please go on. I came in tonight to find out just what you were thinking. I don't believe you realize how little you have explained your real feeling to me on this subject since that unfortunate time in New York."

"I didn't want to trouble you," again Polly hesitated. "It is hardly worth while doing it now. Because honestly I have not made up my mind just how to answer the question that you asked me a few minutes ago. Whether at the end of another year, when you have agreed to let me do as I like, I shall still insist upon going upon the stage, knowing that you and Mollie are at heart unwilling to have me, I can't tell. Perhaps I shall give up and stay on here at Woodford and maybe marry some one I don't care about and then be sorry ever afterwards."

Instead of replying Mrs. Wharton got up and walked several times backwards and forwards across the length of the room, not glancing toward the girl who still sat before the fire with her hands clasped tightly over her knees. But Polly had small doubt where her mother's thoughts were. And a few moments afterwards she too rose and the next instant pulled her mother down on a cushion before the fire, and resting close beside her put her head on her shoulder.

"Dear, you were mistaken when you came in and found me awake," Polly explained, "in supposing that I was thinking of my own disappointment in not being allowed to make the journey with Miss Adams or feeling hurt or angry with you because you decided against it. Really, I never dreamed in the first place that you would be willing. Still, I was thinking of asking you to let me break my word to you after all! You said that I was to stay here in Woodford for three years, and yet I want you to let me go away somewhere very soon. I don't care where, any place will do."

Now for the first time since the beginning of their conversation Mrs. Wharton appeared mystified and deeply hurt.

"Is your own home so disagreeable to you, Polly, that you would rather go anywhere than stay with us?" she queried. And then to her further surprise, turning she discovered that tears were standing unshed in Polly's eyes and that her lips were trembling.

"I don't know how to tell you, mother. It is all so mixed up and so uncertain in my own mind and so foolish. But I wonder if you have ever thought that Mollie liked Billy Webster better than our other friends?"

"Mollie?" Mrs. Wharton could hardly summon her thoughts back from the subject which had lately absorbed them, to follow what she believed a quickly changing idea of Polly's. "Why, yes, I



think I have," she answered slowly. "But I have never let the supposition trouble me. Mollie is so young and her deepest affections are for you and me. Besides, Billy is a fine fellow and perhaps when the time comes I shall not be quite so selfish with her."

But Polly's cheeks were so crimson that she had to put up her cold hands to try and cool them.

"And you have always believed that Billy almost hated me, haven't you?"

Mrs. Wharton laughed. "Well, I have never thought a great deal about it, except that you argued a great deal about nothing and that each one of you was determined to influence the other without producing the smallest result."

"Yes, mother, and that is what makes what I want to tell you so horrid and silly," Polly went on, intentionally making a screen for her face with her dark hair. "Because Billy Webster has a perfectly absurd idea that he cares for me, simply because he wishes to manage me. And—and he was tiresome enough to tell me so this afternoon."

Surprise and consternation for the moment kept Mrs. Wharton silent. "But you, Polly?" she managed to inquire finally. "How do you feel? What did you answer him?"

Then for an instant the girl's former expression changed and the old Irish contrariness of spirit hovered in a half smile about her lips.

"Oh, I told him that I did not like him any better than I had in the beginning of our acquaintance and that I had only been nicer to him now and then lately because he was your friend and Mollie's. And no matter what happened to me, if I never, never stirred a foot out of Woodford, I should never dream of marrying him even when I am a hundred years old."

A sigh of some kind escaped Mrs. Wharton, partly of relief and partly of annoyance.

"Then why should you wish to go away, dear?" she queried. "If you said all that, surely Billy will never trouble you again!"

A characteristic shrug was Polly's first answer. "Oh, Billy only cares about me because he can't have me," she replied the next minute. "But he insists that he will go on trying to win me until doomsday. Still it isn't either about Billy or about me that I am thinking at present. Can't you understand, mother, without my having to explain? It is so hard to say. It's Mollie! Not for anything in the world would I have her feelings hurt or have her think that I had come between her and her friendship for Billy."

But Mrs. Wharton's manner was immediately quiet and reassuring. "Mollie would never think anything unfair of you, Polly. And perhaps it will be better for you to speak of this to her. If Mollie has had any false impression, if her feeling for Billy has been anything but simple friendliness, now it will not be difficult for her to adjust herself. When later—" However, Mrs. Wharton was not able to finish her sentence, for Polly had murmured, "She does know. Of course she has not said anything to me and I never want to have to refer to it to her. But you need not trouble. Billy was so stupid." Here Polly gave an irrepressible giggle. "He proposed to both of us this afternoon. And I think he was much more worried over Mollie's telling him that she should have been taken into his confidence sooner, than he was over my refusal."

The clock on Polly's mantel shelf was striking one long stroke. Hearing it Mrs. Wharton rose to leave the room, first pulling Polly up beside her. The girl was several inches taller than her mother.

"Polly dear," she said, "so far as Mollie is concerned I don't agree with the wisdom of your going away from home. But I want you to understand something else, something that I have never properly explained to you. It is not just narrowness or prejudice, this opposition of mine to your going upon the stage. You remember, dear, why your father left Ireland and came here to live in these New Hampshire hills. And you know you are not so strong as Mollie, and I used to be afraid that you had less judgment. Recently, however, you have seemed stronger and more poised. And I had almost decided before I came in to you tonight, that if in another year you are still sure that you wish to make the stage your profession, I shall not stand in the way of your giving it a fair trial. You don't know, but in your father's family not so many years ago there was a great actress. She ran away from home and her people never forgave her. I don't even know what became of her. Nothing like that must ever happen between you and me." Mrs. Wharton kissed Polly good night. "Have faith in me, dear, for I have understood the ambition and the heart-burning you have suffered better than you dreamed. I shall go to see Miss Adams again tomorrow. If you must try your wings some day, perhaps there could be no better beginning than that you should learn to know intimately one woman who has fought through most of the difficulties of one of the hardest professions in the world and has earned for herself the right kind of fame and fortune."

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## CHAPTER III

### FAREWELLS

Polly O'Neill was entertaining at a farewell reception. April had passed away and May and it was



now the first week in June. In a few days more she would be sailing for Southampton with Miss Margaret Adams to be gone all summer. The party was not a large one, for Polly had preferred having only her most intimate friends together this afternoon.

So of course the old members of the Sunrise Hill Camp Fire Club were there and a few outside people, besides the group of young men who had always shared their good times.

Moreover, the past two years had given the old Camp Fire Club an entirely new distinction, since one of its girl members had recently married.

At this moment she was approaching Polly O'Neill, and Polly held out both hands in welcome, as she had not seen the newcomer since the return from her wedding journey. Edith Norton it was, who was dressed, as she had always hoped to be, in a costume that neither Betty nor Rose Dyer could have improved upon, a soft blue crêpe with a hat of the same color and a long feather curling about its brim. For Edith had confessed her fault to her employer soon after her difficulty in the last story and had been forgiven. And, as a good-by present to Betty Ashton, she had promised never to have anything more to do with the young man of whom her Camp Fire friends had disapproved. The result was that she had married one of the leading dry goods merchants in Woodford, and hard times and Edith were through with each other forever.

Now her cheeks were flushed with happiness instead of the color that she had used in the days before her membership in the Camp Fire Club, and her pretty light hair made a kind of halo about her face.

"Apoi-a-kimi," Polly smiled at her guest, "you have not forgotten our Indian name for you, have you, Mrs. Keating, now that you are the first of us to acquire an altogether new name?"

Edith shook her head with perhaps more feeling than she might have been expected to show and at the same time touching an enameled pin which she wore fastened on her dress she said: "I am a Camp Fire girl once and forever, no matter how old I may become! And I never needed or understood the value of our experiences together so much as I do now. Tell Betty for me, please, that I sometimes think it is to our Camp Fire Club that I owe even my husband. He could not possibly have liked me had he known me before those good old times. So since Betty brought me into the club and has stood by me always——"

With a smile Polly now made a pretense of putting her fingers to her ears; nevertheless she glanced around with a kind of challenging amusement at the half a dozen or more friends who were standing near, as she interrupted her visitor.

"Betty! Betty!" she exclaimed. "I have been wondering the greater part of this afternoon whether this is a farewell party to me or an opportunity to send messages to Betty Ashton." Purposely Polly waited until she was able to catch John Everett's eye, for he stood talking to Eleanor Meade only a few feet away. John pretended not to have heard her. He had only returned to Woodford for the week in order to see his father and sister, for he had graduated at Dartmouth some time before and was now in a broker's office in New York City. And already he was under the impression that he had attained the distinction of a New York millionaire and that his presence in Woodford was a unique experience for his former village acquaintances. So he was now being extremely kind to his sister Meg's old friends, although it was, of course, absurd for any one to presume that he had more than a passing, pleasant recollection of any girl whom he had ever known in Woodford.

All this that he was thinking Polly appreciated when she had watched the young man's face for less than half a moment. And as she had a reprehensible fondness for getting even with persons, she then registered a private vow to let Betty hear just how much John Everett had changed.

However, she had but scant time to devote to this resolution, for almost at the same instant another young man, excusing himself from his sister, walked toward her with an expression which was rarely anything except grave and reserved.

Polly spoke to him with especial pleasure. For the past two years had changed not only her attitude toward Anthony Graham, but that of a good many other persons in Woodford.

Two years can be made to count for a great deal at certain times in one's life and Anthony had made the past two do for him the work of four. He was no longer an office boy and student in Judge Maynard's office, for he had graduated at law and was now helping the old man with the simpler part of his practice. And because Judge Maynard was seventy and childless he had taken a liking to Anthony and had asked him to live in his home, for the sake of both his protection and his society. And this perhaps was a forward step for the young fellow which the people in the village appreciated even more than the boy's own efforts at self-improvement; for Judge Maynard was eccentric and wealthy and no one could foretell what might happen in the future.

Edith had moved away to make room for the newcomer, so that Polly and her guest stood apart from the others.

Anthony was as lean as ever, although it was the leanness of muscular strength, not weakness; his skin was dark and clear and his hazel eyes gazed at one frankly, almost too directly. One had the sensation that it might be difficult to conceal from him anything that he really wished to know.

"Miss Polly," he began rather humbly, "I wonder if you would be willing to do a favor for me?" He

smiled, so that the lines about his mouth became less grave. "Oh, I have not forgotten that you did not altogether approve of Miss Betty's friendship for me when I came back to Woodford, and I do not blame you."

"It was not Betty's friendliness for you that I minded," Polly returned with a directness that was very often disconcerting.

The young man reddened and then laughed outright. "I thought it better to put it that way, but if you must have the truth, of course I know it was my liking for her to which you objected. But look here, Miss Polly, no one knew of my admiration except you. So I suppose you know also that every once in a while in these past two years Miss Betty has written me a letter—perhaps half a dozen in all. So now I want you to take her something from me. It does not amount to much, it is only a tiny package that won't require a great deal of room in your trunk. Still I have not the courage to send it her directly and yet I want her to know that I have never forgotten that what she did for me gave me my first start. I have improved a little in these past two years, don't you think? Am I quite so impossible as I used to be?"

Polly frowned in reply; but she reached forward for the small parcel that Anthony was extending toward her.

"Look here, Anthony," she protested, "for goodness sake don't make a mountain out of a molehill, as the old saying goes. Betty Ashton did not do anything more for you than she has done for dozens of other persons when she could afford it, not half as much. So please cease feeling any kind of obligation to her; she would hate it. And don't have any other feeling either. Goodness only knows how these past two years in foreign lands may have altered the Princess! Very probably she will even refuse to have anything to do with me, if ever Miss Adams and I do manage to arrive in Germany."

Polly ended her speech in this fashion with the intention of making it seem a trifle less impertinent. However, Anthony appeared not to have understood her. Nevertheless, having been trained in a difficult school in life perhaps he had the ability for not revealing his emotions on all occasions.

For Herr Crippen and Mrs. Crippen, Betty's father and stepmother, were at this moment trying to shake hands with him. Herr Crippen looked much more prosperous and happy since his marriage to the girls' first Camp Fire Guardian. He had now almost as many music pupils in Woodford as he had time to teach, while Miss McMurtry had lost every single angular curve that had once been supposed by the girls to proclaim her an old maid for life and as Mrs. Crippen was growing almost as stout and housewifely as a real German Frau.

In the interval after Anthony's desertion, as Mrs. and the Herr Professor had already spent some time in talking with her, Polly found herself alone.

She was a little tired and so glanced about her for a chair. Her mother and Mollie were both in the dining room as well as Sylvia, who had come home for a week to say farewell to her beloved step-sister. But before Polly could locate a chair for herself, she observed that two were being pushed toward her from opposite sides of the room. Therefore she waited, smiling, to find out which should arrive first. Then she sank down into the one that John Everett presented her, thanking Billy Webster for his, which had arrived a second too late.

Excitement always added to Polly O'Neill's beauty, and so this afternoon she was looking unusually pretty. As it was the month of June she wore a white organdie dress with a bunch of red roses pinned at her belt and one caught in the coiled braids of her dark hair.

She had been perfectly friendly with Billy, even more so than usual, since their April talk. For having her own way made Polly delightfully amiable to the whole world. Billy, however, had not responded to her friendliness. He was still deeply opposed to her going away with Miss Adams. And though he was doggedly determined to have his own will in the end, he seemed to have lost all his former interest and pleasure in being often at the Wharton home. For not only was Polly in what he considered a seventh heaven of selfish happiness at her mother's change of mind, but Mollie no longer treated him with her former intimacy. She was friendly and sweet-tempered, of course, but she never asked his advice about things as she once had, nor seemed to care to give him a great amount of her time. Instead she appeared to be as fond of Frank Wharton and as dependent upon him as though he had been in reality her own brother. And Frank having recently returned to Woodford to live, had gone into business with his father. Truly Billy felt that he had not deserved the situation in which he now found himself. Of course one might have expected anything from so uncertain a quantity as Polly, but to Mollie he had been truly attached and she had been to him like a little sister. So it was difficult to comprehend what had now come between them.

Billy had no special fancy for playing third person and remaining to talk to Polly and John Everett, so considering that both his chair and his presence were unnecessary, he moved off in the direction of the dining room.

Polly smiled up at her latest companion with two points of rather dangerous light at the back of her Irish blue eyes. Then she let her glance travel slowly from the tips of John Everett's patent leather shoes, along the immaculate expanse of his frock coat and fluted shirt, until finally it reached the crown of his well-brushed golden brown hair.

"It must be a wonderful feeling, John, to be so kind of—glorious!" Polly exclaimed, in a perfectly serious manner.

"Glorious," John frowned; "what do you mean?" He was an intelligent, capable fellow, but not especially quick.

"Oh, don't you feel that you are giving poor little Woodford a treat every now and then by allowing it the chance of beholding so perfect an imitation of a gentleman. I don't mean imitation, John, that does not sound polite of me. Of course I mean so perfect a picture. I have been feasting my eyes on you whenever I have had the opportunity all afternoon. For I want to tell Betty Ashton when I see her who is the most distinguished-looking person among us. And of course——"

John flushed, though he laughed good-naturedly. "What a horrid disposition you still have, Polly O'Neill. One would think that you were now old enough to make yourself agreeable to your superiors." He stooped, for whether by accident or design, the girl had dropped a small paste-board box on the floor.

"This is something or other that Anthony Graham is sending over to Betty Ashton," Polly explained with pretended carelessness. "I suppose you can remember Betty?"

But John Everett was at the present moment engaged in extracting a small pin from the lapel of his coat. "Don't be ridiculous, Polly, and don't impart your impressions of me to Betty, if you please. Just ask her if she will be good enough to accept this fraternity pin of mine in remembrance of old times."

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## CHAPTER IV

### UNTER DEN LINDEN

A tall girl with red hair and a fair skin, carrying a roll of music, was walking alone down the principal street in Berlin. She did not look like a foreigner and yet she must have been familiar with the sights of the city. For although the famous thoroughfare was crowded with people, some of them on foot, the greater number in carriages and automobiles, she paid them only a casual attention and finally found herself a seat on a bench under a tall linden tree near the monument of Frederick the Great. Here she sighed, allowing the discouragement which she had been trying to overcome for some little time to show in every line of her face and figure.

She was not handsome enough to attract attention for that reason, and she had too much personal dignity to suffer it under any circumstances. So now she seemed as much alone as if she had been in her own sitting room.

Only once was she startled out of the absorption of her own thoughts. And then there was a sudden noise near the palace of the Emperor; carriages and motor cars paused, crowding closer to the sidewalks; soldiers stood at attention, civilians lifted their hats. And a moment afterwards an automobile dashed past with a man on the back seat in a close fitting, military suit, with a light cape thrown back over one shoulder, his head slightly bowed and his arms folded across his chest. He had an iron-gray mustache, waxed until the ends stood out fiercely, dark, haughty eyes, and an intensely nervous manner. And on the doors of his swiftly moving car were the Imperial Arms of Germany.

The girl felt a curious little thrill of admiration and antagonism. For although she had seen him more than a dozen times before, the Kaiser Wilhelm could hardly pass so near to one without making an impression. And although the American girl was not in sympathy with many of his views, she could not escape the interest which his personality has excited throughout the civilized world.

But a moment after the street grew quiet once more and she returned to her own reflections.

In spite of her pallor she did not seem in the least unhealthy, only tired and down-hearted. For her eyes, though light in color, were clear and bright, and the lips of her large, firmly modeled mouth bright red. She wore a handsome and becoming gray cloth dress and a soft white blouse, her gray hat having a white feather stuck through a band of folded silk. The coolness and simplicity of her toilet was refreshing in the warmth of the late June day and a pleasant contrast to the brighter colors affected by the German Frauen and Fräulein.

Finally the girl opened her roll of music and taking out a sheet began slowly reading it over to herself. Then her dejection appeared to deepen, for eventually the tears rolled down her cheeks. She continued holding up her music in order to shield herself from observation. Even when she was disturbed by hearing some one sit down beside her on the bench, she did not dare turn her head.

But the figure deliberately moved closer and before she could protest had actually taken the sheet of paper out of her hands.

"Esther, my dear, what is the matter with you? Have you no home and no friends, that you have to shed your tears in the public streets?" a slightly amused though sympathetic voice demanded.

Naturally Esther started. But the next instant she was shaking her head reproachfully. "Dr. Ashton, however in the world did you manage to discover me?" she demanded. "I am resting here for the special pleasure of being miserable all by myself. For I knew if I went back to the pension Betty and your mother would find me out. And the worst of it is that neither one of them understands in the least why I am unhappy. Betty is really angry and I am afraid that Mrs. Ashton thinks I am stupid and ungrateful."

Instead of replying, Richard Ashton picked up Esther's hand and slipped it through his own arm. He looked a good deal older than his companion. For he was now a graduated physician with three years of added foreign experience, and besides his natural seriousness he wore the reserved, thoughtful air peculiar to his profession. So his present attitude toward Esther Crippen seemed that of an older friend.

"I don't know what you are talking about or what dark secret you seem to be trying to conceal," he returned. "All that I do know is that I have been sent out to find you and that you are please to come home with me. Betty and mother have been expecting you to return from your music lesson for an hour. And Betty is so in the habit of getting herself lost or of mixing up in some adventure where she does not belong, that she is convinced a like fate has overtaken you. Then I believe that something or other has happened which she has not confided to me, but which she is dying to tell you. There are times, Esther, when I wish that our sister, Betty, was not quite so pretty. I am always afraid that some day or other these German students, whom she seems to have for her friends, will be involved in a duel over her. And if that happens I shall very promptly send her home."

Dick and Esther had now left the broad, park-like square and had turned into a narrower side street adjoining it. Ordinarily any such suggestion concerning Betty would have aroused Esther's immediate interest and protest. However, whatever was now on her mind was troubling her too much for her to pay any real attention to what Dick had just said. So they walked on for another block in silence, until finally Esther spoke in her old timid, hesitating manner, quite unconsciously locking her hands together, as she had on that day, long ago, of her first meeting with Richard Ashton.

"I am sorry to be so stupid and unentertaining. It was good of you to come and look for me," she began apologetically. "I wish I could stop thinking of what troubles me, but somehow I can't. For Betty will insist on my doing a thing that I simply know I shall not be able to do. And I do hate having to argue."

They were still some distance from the German pension where Dick, his mother and sister and Esther were boarding, so the young man did not make haste to continue their conversation, as he and Esther knew each other too intimately to consider silences.

"Look here, Esther," Richard Ashton finally began, "you know that Betty considers me the worst old gray-beard and lecturer on earth. So I am going to be true to my reputation and lecture you. Why do you allow yourself to be so much influenced by Betty? Don't you realize every now and then that you are the older and that the Princess ought to come around to your way of thinking? Why don't you tell her this time that *you* are right and she is wrong and that you won't hear anything more on the subject that is worrying you."

Esther laughed, swerving suddenly to get a swift view of the earnest face of her companion. How often he had befriended her, ever since those first days of shy misery and rapture when she had made her original appearance in the Ashton home, little realizing then that the Betty whom she already adored was her own sister.

"I am not really afraid of the Princess, you know, Mr. Dick," she replied, laughing and using an odd, old-fashioned title that she had once given him. "The truth is that if you were able to guess what I have on my mind you might also disagree with me. Because in this particular instance there is a possibility that Betty may be right in her judgment and I in the wrong."

They had walked by this time a little distance beyond the crowded portion of the big city. Now the houses were private residences and boarding places. Finally they stopped before a tall yellow building, five stories in height, with red and yellow flowers growing in a narrow strip along its front. Before an open window on the third floor a girl could be seen sitting with a book in her lap. But she must have become at once aware of the presence of the young man and his companion, because the instant that Dr. Ashton's hand touched the door knob, she disappeared.

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## CHAPTER V

### CHANGES

Dick Ashton's laughing wish that his sister Betty were a little less pretty was not so unreasonable as you might suppose, had you seen her on this particular late June afternoon as she ran down the narrow, ugly hall of the German pension to greet her brother and sister.

She had on a pale blue muslin dress open at the throat with a tiny frill of lace. Her red bronze hair had coppery tones in it as well as pure gold and was parted a little on one side and coiled up

in the simplest fashion at the back of her head. The darkness of her lashes and the delicate lines of her brows gave the gray of her eyes a peculiar luster like the shine on old silk. And this afternoon her cheeks were the deep rose color that often accompanies this especial coloring.

She put one arm around Esther, drawing her into their sitting room, while Dick followed them. It was an odd room, a curious mixture of German and American taste and yet not unattractive. The ceiling was high, the furniture heavy and dark, and the walls covered with a flowered yellow paper. But the two girls had removed the paintings of unnatural flowers and fruits that once decorated them, and instead had hung up framed photographs of the famous pictures that had most pleased them in their visits to different art galleries. There was Franz Hals' "Smiling Cavalier" gazing down at them with irresistible camaraderie in his eyes which followed you with their smile no matter in what portion of the room you chanced to be. On an opposite wall hung a Rembrandt painting of an old woman, and further along the magical "Mona Lisa." In all the history of art there is no more fascinating story than that relating to this great picture by Leonardo da Vinci. For the woman who was the original of the picture was a great Italian princess whom many people adored because of her strange beauty. She had scores of lovers of noble blood and lowly, but no one is supposed to have understood the secret of her inscrutable smile, not even the artist who painted it. This picture was first the property of Italy and then carried away to hang for many years in the most celebrated room in the great gallery of the Louvre in Paris. From there it was stolen by an Italian workman, taken back into Italy and later restored to the French Government. But before Mona Lisa's return to her niche in the Louvre she made a kind of triumphal progress through the great cities of her former home, Rome, Florence and Venice. And in each place men, women and little children came flocking in thousands to pay their tribute to beauty. And so for those of us who think of beauty as a passing, an ephemeral thing, there is this lesson of its universal, its eternal quality. For the smile of one woman, dead these hundreds of years, yet fixed by genius on a square of canvas, can still stir the pulses of the world.

Betty happened to be standing under this picture as she helped Esther remove her coat and hat. And though there was nothing mysterious in her youthful, American prettiness, there is always a poignant and appealing quality in all beauty. Esther suddenly leaned over and placing her hands on both her sister's cheeks, kissed her.

"What have you been doing alone all day?" she asked. "Was your mother well enough to go out with you?"

Betty shook her head without replying and, though Esther saw nothing, Dick Ashton had an idea that his sister was merely waiting for a more propitious time for the account of her own day. For she asked immediately after: "What difference in the world does it make, Esther Crippen, what I have been doing? The thing I wish to know this instant is whether Professor Hecksher has asked you to sing at his big concert with his really star singers? And if he has asked you what did you answer?"

"So that was what was worrying you, Esther?" Dick said and walked over to the high window, pretending to look out.

For Esther was beginning to grow as pale and wretched as she had been an hour before and was once more twisting her hands together like an awkward child.

Betty caught her sister's hands, holding them close. "Tell me the truth," she insisted.

First the older girl nodded, as though not trusting herself to speak and then said: "Yes, Professor Hecksher *has* asked me. He wants me to make my musical *début* even though I go on studying afterwards. But I can't do it, Betty dear. I wish you and the Professor would both understand. I appreciate his thinking I can sing well enough, but it is not true. I should break down; my voice would fail utterly. Oh, I am sorry I ever came abroad to study. I have been realizing for months and months that my voice is not worth the trouble and expense father and the rest of you have taken. I am simply going to be a disappointment to all of you."

"Esther, you are a great big goose!" Betty exclaimed indignantly. "I thought we ended this discussion last night and you decided to let Professor Hecksher judge whether or not you could sing. One would think he might know, as he is the biggest singing teacher in Berlin. And certainly if you don't sing I shall die of disappointment. And I *shall* believe that you are ungrateful to father and to—to all of us."

She was obliged to break off, for Esther had left the room.

Then Dick swung around, facing his sister. "Look here, Betty," he began more angrily than she had often heard him speak. "Has it ever occurred to you that you may all be forcing Esther into a life for which she is not fitted, which will never make her happy? Of course there is no denying her talent; her voice is wonderful and grows more so each day. But she is intensely shy. She hates notoriety and strange people—everything that a musical life must mean. I don't think that you ought to insist upon her singing at this special concert if she does not wish it. You do not understand her."

Utter amazement during her brother's long speech kept Betty silent. For it was too absurd that any one should seriously suggest Esther's turning her back on the big opportunity for which she had been working for the past two years. Why, for what other purpose had they come to Germany? And for Esther to be invited to sing at Professor Hecksher's annual autumn concert

was to have the seal of his approval set upon her ability. For of course the great man selected from his pupils only those whose appearance in public would reflect credit upon him. And often an appearance at one of these much-talked-of recitals meant the beginning of a musical reputation in the outside world. So Betty stared at her brother curiously, at loss to appreciate his point of view. She felt offended, too, at the tone he had just taken with her.

"So you think you understand Esther better than I do, Dick?" she answered slowly. "I suppose you and Esther must have talked this matter over on your way home. Certainly it is Esther's own choice and I shall say nothing more about it. And I'll ask mother not to mention the subject either." Betty picked up a small piece of embroidery lying on a table near by and began sewing industriously, keeping her face bent over it so as to hide her flushed cheeks and the light in her eyes. For Betty had not forgotten her Camp Fire training in self-control. Besides, she did not like quarreling with her brother. Dick was ordinarily so reasonable, she felt even more mystified than hurt by his behavior. It was so unlike him to argue that one should turn back from a long-sought goal just because there were difficulties to be overcome. Had he not fought through every kind of obstacle for the sake of his profession?

The silence in the room was interrupted only by the ticking of a Swiss clock, until finally a deep gong sounded from below stairs. It might easily have given the impression that the house was on fire, but as neither Dick nor Betty appeared surprised, it was plainly a summons to the early dinner, which is so important a feature of German pension life.

Folding up her work Betty moved quietly toward the door. But she had only gone a few steps when she heard Dick coming after her. Then in spite of trying her best to hurry from the room, he caught up with her, putting his arms about her.

"Tell me you are sorry, Princess, or you shan't have any dinner," he demanded. For it had been a fashion of their years before when they were children to have the offender pretend to demand an apology from the offended. But Betty did not feel in the mood for jesting at present and so shook her head.

Then Dick met her gaze with an expression so unusual that Betty instantly felt her resentment fading.

"Perhaps I was wrong in what I said just then, little sister, I don't feel sure," he apologized. "But at least I realize that you wish Esther to gain fame and fortune for her own sake and not for yours. I was only wondering which makes a woman happier in the end, a home or a career? Now please relate me your day's experience, which you have been keeping such a profound secret, so that I may know I am forgiven."

"It is too late now," Betty returned, slipping away from his grasp. "I must find out whether mother is coming down to dinner. Perhaps I may tell you afterwards."

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## CHAPTER VI

### A COSMOPOLITAN COMPANY

Sitting opposite Betty at the dinner table were the two German youths to whom Dick most objected. And yet they were totally unlike both in appearance and position. For one of them was apparently a humble person, with long light hair hanging in poetic fashion below his shirt collar, a big nose and small, hungry, light-blue eyes that seemed always to be swimming in a mist of embarrassment. He was a clerk in a bank and occupied the smallest room on the highest floor of the pension. So it would have been natural enough to suppose from his manner and behavior that he was of plebeian origin. But exactly the opposite was the case. For the landlady, Mrs. Hohler, who was herself an impoverished gentlewoman, had confided to Mrs. Ashton that the strange youth was in reality of noble birth. He had an uncle who was a count, and though this uncle had one son, the nephew Frederick stood second in the line of succession. To Richard Ashton, however, this added nothing to the young man's charms, nor did it make him the less provoked over Frederick von Reuter's attitude toward Betty. Nevertheless he rather preferred Frederick, who seemed utterly without brains, to her second admirer, Franz. For Franz was dark and aggressive and had an extremely rich father, a merchant in Hamburg. Also Franz hoped to be able to purchase a commission in the German army, so that already he was assuming the dictatorial, disagreeable manner for which many German officers are unpleasantly distinguished.

However, neither young man had ever done anything in the least offensive either to Betty or to any member of her family, so that Dick Ashton's feeling was largely prejudice. And although Esther shared his point of view, Mrs. Ashton was somewhat flattered at the amount of admiration that Betty's beauty had excited ever since their arrival in Europe. As for Betty herself, she gave the whole question very little attention. All her life she had been accustomed to attention. Now and then her two suitors amused her and at other times she was bored by them. Notwithstanding she did not find it disagreeable to be able to tease her serious-minded brother. Moreover, the widow with her two daughters, about whom Betty and her mother had been making guesses for several years, continued making her home at the pension, and without a shadow of a doubt one of the girls regarded Dick with especial favor.

So tonight Betty, who had not yet entirely recovered from her irritation, was unusually gracious to the two young Germans. She even lingered downstairs in the small, overcrowded parlor after dinner with her mother, allowing Dick and Esther, who were not so friendly with the other boarders, to go up alone to their private sitting room.

"Fritz and Franz," as Betty's adorers were called, although Herr von Reuter and Herr Schmidt were their proper titles, were regarded with a good deal of quiet amusement by their fellow boarders. While this filled the autocratic soul of Franz with a variety of suppressed emotions, the gentle Fritz seemed totally unaware of it. He was content to sit silently on one side of the *schönes Fräulein*, even when she devoted the greater part of her attention to his rival. This evening, without openly flinching, he overheard her accepting with her mother's approval an invitation from the wealthy Franz for both of them to attend a performance at the Royal Opera House the next evening. Then, although Frederick's eyes grew mistier and his figure more dejected in consequence, he did not leave the parlor until Betty and her mother had gone up stairs. Late into the night, however, had anyone been in the German youth's neighborhood, strains of exquisitely melancholy music might have been heard drifting forth from a fifth floor back room. It was the music of the oboe.

Even after Betty Ashton had seen her mother in bed, helping her undress for the night, she did not immediately join Esther and Dick, although Mrs. Ashton had asked her to explain to them that she was not well enough to remain up any longer. Instead Betty went first into her own bedroom and there re-read the two letters which she carried in her pocket. For if Dick and Esther were of so much the same opinion in regard to her sister's refusal to sing in public, it was best that they be allowed to discuss the matter without interruption from her. For although she had promised not to speak of it again to her sister, Betty felt that it would be impossible for her to disguise how she actually felt. It was wicked of Esther, utterly foolish and unreasonable, to intend surrendering to her own shyness and lack of self-confidence, as with Dick's abetting she evidently intended doing. Why, Esther might have a truly great future! Professor Hecksher had assured Mrs. Ashton that she only required time, training and more self-confidence. For, although when Esther was finally under the sway of her music, she was able to throw her whole force and fervor into it, in the beginning of any performance she was often awkward and shy, alarming her audience with the impression that she might break down. Professor Hecksher had even suggested that Esther's voice might be beautiful enough for grand opera when she grew older and had more experience.

With this last thought still in mind, Betty finally returned to the sitting room to spend the rest of the evening with her brother and sister. Often she had thought of how curious it was that she could speak of Dick and Esther in this fashion when they bore not the slightest relation to each other!

She found them sitting on opposite sides of a small table, a complete silence pervading the room, although neither one of them was reading. Esther's face was flushed and Dick's a little pale. As Dick rose to give his chair to the newcomer, Esther spoke:

"Please don't go, Dr. Ashton," she said. And Betty wondered idly why Esther should suppose that Dick intended leaving the room. More often than not he spent his evenings at home with them. "I only want to tell you, Betty dear," she continued, "that you were quite right this afternoon in saying that I was wrong in refusing this chance to sing at Professor Hecksher's concert. Of course I am not going to give up my work now, when I have been struggling and struggling to learn even the little bit I know. Then if I never sing in public how am I ever to earn that fortune which I have promised to bestow on you, Princess?"

Esther laughed, but Betty frowned with an expression unusual to her.

"I don't want you to keep on with your singing, Esther, for my sake," she protested. "Mother and I are accustomed now to being poor and don't mind it. So if there is anything else you would prefer to do with your life, please don't waste a thought on me."

Esther shook her head reproachfully. "Don't be silly and don't be cross, Princess," she pleaded. "You know perfectly well that I can no more help thinking about you than I can help breathing. But so far as my keeping on with my music is concerned, I can't see that I shall ever have the right not to do that. So I am going to make the biggest effort I possibly can at the concert, and then if I fail, why at least I shall have been true to 'the Law of the Fire.'"

At this Betty's face softened, but Dick Ashton marched abruptly out of the room.

Neither of the two girls, though far away from their old Camp Fire circle now for two years, had ever forgotten its purposes and teaching. So often when they were lonely the three Wohelo candles were lighted and the old ceremony followed, usually ending by Esther's singing a Camp Fire song.

Tonight Betty walked over to a kind of shrine or shelf which they had erected in one corner of their room. German houses have queer stoves and no fireplaces. There she lighted three tall white candles. The long northern twilight was fading and the room had become almost dark.

A moment after, Betty came and sat down on a stool at Esther's feet.

"I had a letter from Polly today," she began. "She and Miss Adams have landed and are in England. They want to join us later if—if—if—"



"If what, Betty?" Esther demanded. "Surely you and Polly are not to be disappointed in being with each other!"

"Well, it is just this that I have been dying to tell you ever since you came home," Betty protested, her words now running over each other in her effort to tell all her story at once. "Polly wrote that Miss Adams would love to come and spend a part of the summer near us if we were only in some place in the country. But she is too worn out from her work last winter to feel that she can endure the city for any length of time. And you know mother and I have been getting pretty tired of Berlin ourselves lately, since the warm weather has come and you and Dick are away so much of the day. So this morning while you were out I got one of the maids to go with me and we went for miles into the country until we came to an enchanting place, all forests and brooks, near the village of Waldheim. I can't tell you all that happened to me or the queer experience I had, only that I found a delightful place where we may live. It is near enough for you and Dick to come back and forth into town. And it is so still and cool with such wonderful green hills behind it that somehow it made me think of Sunrise Mountain and our cabin and the girls and—" But in a sudden wave of homesickness Betty's voice failed and she dropped her face in her hands.

Esther's own voice was unsteady. "Then we will move out to this spot at once, Betty. And don't you ever dare tell me that I am not to think of you in connection with my music, when I realize how much you have given up for me. Oh, yes, I know you have enjoyed Europe and Berlin and all of our interesting experiences. Yet somehow I don't believe that you will ever be so fond of any place in the world as you are of your old home in Woodford. You see that is the way I comfort myself and Dr. Ashton about your new foreign admirers. You wouldn't, Betty, ever seriously care for anyone who lives in Europe, would you?" Esther asked so anxiously that her sister laughed, refusing to make a reply.

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## CHAPTER VII

### DAS RHEINGOLD

A girl sat on a flat rock beside a small stream of water, evidently drying her hair in the rays of the sun, for it hung loose over her shoulders and shone red and gold and brown, seeming to ripple down from the crown of her head to the ground. She was entirely alone and a close group of trees formed a kind of green temple behind her. It had been an extremely warm day so that even the birds were resting from song and from labor.

Suddenly the girl tore into small pieces the letter that she had been writing, tossing them into the air like a troop of white butterflies.

"There is no use of my trying to do anything sensible this afternoon," Betty Ashton sighed, "I am so happy over being in the country once more with nothing to do but to do nothing. I was dead tired of all those people at the pension, of Fritz and Franz and all the rest of them. It is lovely to be alone here in the German forests——"

Then unexpectedly Betty Ashton straightened up, looking about her in every possible direction in a puzzled fashion while hurriedly arranging her hair. For although she could see no one approaching, she could hear an unmistakable sound, a kind of mellow whistling, then flute-like notes and afterwards a low throbbing, as though the wings of imprisoned things were beating in the air.

Betty stared through the open spaces between the trees, since from that direction the sound was now approaching. But when and where had she heard that peculiar music before? However, the Germans were such a strangely musical race that probably any one of her neighbors could play.

Then with a smothered expression of vexation, the girl got up on her feet and took a few steps forward. There was no mistaking the figure slowly advancing, the long light hair, the mild eyes and timid though persistent manner. But how in the world had Frederick von Reuter found her, when she had been careful not to mention where they were going in saying farewell at the pension?

"Why, Herr von Reuter," Betty exclaimed, divided between vexation and the thought that she must not be rude, "what are you doing in this part of the world and how did you happen to discover me?"

At this question the young man abruptly ceased his sentimental playing, though instead of answering Betty in a sensible fashion, he pointed first toward her hair and then toward the water behind her and the circle of hills.

"I haf come in search of '*Das Rheingold*,'" he murmured in his funny, broken English, "and I haf found a Rhein *mädchen*, *nicht wahr*?"

Betty bit her lips. She was not in the mood for nonsense and it was difficult to conceive of her present companion as the hero of Wagner's great opera.

"Let's not be absurd," she returned coldly. "And please answer my questions." Betty did not mean to be disagreeable, for she did not actually dislike this young man—he was too queer and

apparently too simple. Nevertheless it was impossible for her to appreciate how unlike she was to any other girl with whom the young German had ever associated. Her frankness, her self-possession, her brightness and of course her beauty, all of which were ordinary characteristics of most American girls, were a kind of miracle to Fritz.

"I haf come into this place that I may see *you*," he replied. "And your *Mutter* has told me where I must come to look. But this neighborhood I know *sehr wohl*. It is the castle of my uncle which you may haf seen on a hill not far away. It is of stone with a high wall around it——"

But Betty's expression had now changed, her eyes were sparkling and her color rapidly changing. How could poor Fritz have guessed that no higher emotion than curiosity stirred her? She now pointed invitingly toward a fallen tree, seating herself on one end of it.



**"TELL ME MORE ABOUT THE PLACES NEAR HERE"**

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"Do tell me more about the places near here, if you know about them," she suggested. "I was perfectly sure that they had strange and romantic histories. I think I can guess which is your uncle's estate. Has it a long avenue of linden trees and a lodge covered with ivy and a lake with a waterfall?"

Betty hesitated, for even Fritz was looking somewhat startled at her knowledge of details.

"And it may all be yours some day!" the girl added, hoping to change the current of her companion's thoughts.

But the young man shook his head. "No," he returned honestly, "I haf in my heart no such idea. My cousin is younger than I am, stronger——"

Betty glanced over toward the blue rim of hills. "Is your cousin a girl?" she queried softly.

Young Herr von Reuter was again surprised. "I thought I haf told you. No, he is a man, like me. Oh, no, not like me," he added sadly. "My cousin is tall like me, but he carries of himself so otherwise." Fritz touched his own shoulders, owing their stoop perhaps to the long hours spent in going over his accounts in the bank. "And his hair it is light and his eyes blue. And there is a shine on his hair that makes it so golden as Siegfried's. And when he laughs!" Poor Fritz's face now wore the same expression of mild adoration which he had oftentimes bestowed upon Betty.

"But if you are so awfully fond of your cousin and he is a count living in that old stone castle, why does he not do something for you? I should think your uncle——"

"You do not *verstehen*, you *Amerikaner*" Fritz answered. "My uncle is *sehr* poor himself. It is hard to live as he must. Some day my cousin must marry a rich girl with his title and his good looks."

Betty laughed. "Oh, that's the plan, is it? Well, let us walk on back to the cottage and find mother.

I am sure she will enjoy talking to you."

Again Betty Ashton's manner had changed to its original indifference.

Fritz seemed bewildered and a little depressed. "It is *schöner* here," he replied. However, he got up and obediently followed Betty out of her retreat. She was more than half a mile from the cottage which they had secured for the summer time. And they were compelled to pass out of the woods and walk along a country lane for a part of the way. There were few persons using this lane at four o'clock on a hot July afternoon, and so Betty had felt that she would be perfectly safe from observation. She had left home with her hair still damp from washing and simply tucked up under a big summer hat.

Now she was feeling disheveled and uncomfortable and most devoutly anxious not to meet anyone on their return journey. It had been tiresome of her mother to have revealed her whereabouts.

Then all at once Betty found herself blushing and wishing that she could hide somewhere along the road. For there advancing toward them was a handsome riding horse. Could it be possible that Herr von Reuter's cousin was seeking him? She must not meet him under the present conditions, not if what she believed were true.

But the horse kept moving toward them with greater rapidity, while Fritz plodded on slowly at her side, telling her some story of the history of the neighborhood and not understanding that for the time being she had lost interest in it.

Betty glanced about her. There was no place where she might hide herself without being seen in the act; besides her companion could never be made to understand her behavior and would be sure to reveal his bewilderment. No, she must simply continue walking on with her head averted and her attention too concentrated upon Herr von Reuter's information to be conscious of anything else.

Now the low voice at her ear abruptly ceased, and turning in surprise to glance at him, Betty beheld Fritz's ordinarily placid countenance crimsoning with what certainly looked like anger instead of pleasure at the appearance of his admired cousin.

"*Ach Himmel!*" exclaimed poor Fritz, "is one never to lose him?"

Betty would have liked to stamp her foot with vexation. For the figure on horseback was wholly unlike the German knight whom her companion had recently described. Here was no Siegfried with shining hair and armor, but a small dark person whom she had hoped never to see again. He reined up his horse, slid off, and after a surprised scowl at Fritz, greeted Betty as though she could hardly fail to be gratified by his appearance.

"You had neglected to tell me where I might find you, but Frau Hohler was kinder," Franz Schmidt declared at once.

Surely Betty's manner might have discouraged almost anyone else, but not so pompous and self-satisfied a character as Franz. Money appeared to him as the only really important thing in the world and he had an idea that Betty Ashton had but little of it. Therefore she must be impressed by his attentions. Notwithstanding he decided at this moment she would soon have to choose between him and the ridiculous Fritz.

Franz was now walking along by the other side of Betty, leading his horse. And all the time the girl kept wondering what she could do or say to get rid of one or both of her escorts. Fortunately she would find no one at home except her mother. Esther's and Dick's train did not arrive for another hour. They doubtless would have been amused and Dick very probably angry. How nonsensical she must appear marching along in such a company!

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## CHAPTER VIII

### OTHER SCENES

A taxicab was driving slowly down Regent Street in the neighborhood of Piccadilly Circus in London with a woman and a girl inside it. The woman leaned back in a relaxed position with her eyes not on the scene about her, but on the face of the girl. For she was sitting upright with her hands clasped tight together in her lap, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks glowing.

It was nearly six o'clock in the afternoon, the hour when English people, having just finished their "afternoon tea," were returning to their homes, so that the streets were crowded with fashionably dressed men and women. And to the girl in the cab they were entirely absorbing and interesting. For whatever the closeness of their relation, American and English people when seen in any numbers are strikingly different in their appearance. The English are taller and fairer, the men better dressed than the women, and with less energy and less grace than Americans. And to a young girl's eyes there were also hundreds of other details of unlikeness and of fascination that older persons possibly might not have noticed. Besides there was the spectacle of big, beautiful, gray old London itself!

"Is there any other place on earth quite so wonderful?" Polly O'Neill queried, turning to glance shyly into the face of the woman beside her. "I feel that I should like to do nothing else for the rest of my life but just sit here in this cab and drive about Piccadilly."

Miss Adams smiled. For Polly's exaggerations, that oftentimes annoyed other people, merely amused her. Thus far, and they had been away for a number of weeks, the great lady had not repented her invitation to the girl to be her guest in Europe during the summer. For some reason she had taken an odd fancy to Polly. Moreover, she was weary of her usual summer amusements, wishing to enjoy life through younger eyes than her own. And the special value of Polly O'Neill as a companion was that with her ardent Irish temperament she could see and feel more in half an hour than many persons do in half a life time.

Now, however, with her swift vision of her companion's expression, the girl's altered. "You are tired," she murmured, with one of her quick changes of mood and of opinion, "and I am sure that I have seen all I wish to this afternoon. Don't you think we had better drive back to the hotel?"

Miss Adams made a little sign to the cabman. "It is getting late, Polly, and I forgot to tell you that I am having a friend to dinner."

The girl was silent for the next few moments after this speech, yet her cheeks were flushing and her eyes so intent that it was evident she was trying to say something without having sufficient courage to begin. Finally she did speak in an embarrassed fashion:

"Miss Adams, I don't quite know how to say this, but I have been wondering lately if you were not growing tired of London and staying on longer here on my account. You remember that you told me before we sailed that you were going to find some quiet place in the country to rest. And it has not been much rest for you showing me both Paris and London, with people after you all the time, even though you do refuse most of their invitations." A sudden overwhelming shyness confused the girl so that she could not continue for the moment. For in spite of the weeks of daily intimacy with her new friend, Polly was not yet able to think of her nor to treat her like any other human being. Not that Miss Adams was ever anything but simple and kind like most great people. She made no effort to be impressive and was not beautiful—only a slight, frail-looking woman with a figure like a girl's, chestnut brown hair and big, indescribably wonderful eyes. But to Polly she represented everything in life worth attaining. Although still comparatively young, Margaret Adams had won for herself the position of one of America's leading actresses. Moreover, she had the world's respect as well as its admiration, and besides her reputation a large fortune. So it was small wonder that Polly should not so soon have recovered from her first combination of awe and devotion for this celebrated woman, nor yet understand the miracle of her choice of her as a traveling companion. It was true that Miss Adams had no family and no close relatives except her cousin, Mary Adams, who had been Polly's elocution teacher in Woodford. The effort to persuade this cousin to accompany her on the European trip had been the cause of Margaret Adams' visit to Woodford earlier in the spring. There, finding that her cousin could not join her and yielding to a sudden impulse, she had transferred her invitation to Polly. And the thought that Miss Adams may have repented her rashness since their departure from home had oftentimes made Polly O'Neill grow suddenly hot and then cold. Some day, perhaps, her mother would discover that this trip of Polly's with Miss Adams was to teach her the lessons that at the present time she most needed—a new humility and the desire to place another person's comfort and wishes before her own.

Perhaps Miss Adams partly understood the girl's sensations, for without waiting for her to continue her speech she immediately asked: "What was the name of that place in the German forests about which your friends have written you? Did they not say that they had found a little house for themselves and another not far away for us? It might be pleasant to go there for a time."

In endeavoring to hide her excitement Polly now had to turn her head and pretend to be looking at something out of the opposite side of the cab. For this suggestion of Miss Adams represented the summit of her own desires. Of course she had adored the sights and experiences of the weeks in Paris and London, and life had never been so fascinating; yet never for a moment had she ceased to look forward and yearn for a reunion with Betty and Esther. Moreover, Betty's picture of the country where they now were sounded like a scene from one of the German operas.

But Polly only murmured: "The village is called 'Waldheim,'" and made no reply when Miss Adams returned: "Perhaps it may be a good idea for us to go on there in a week or ten days, if we can make the necessary arrangements."

By this time, however, their cab had stopped in front of a small, inconspicuous brown hotel, which was one of the quietest and yet most fashionable hotels in London, and within a few moments the two women disappeared into their own rooms.

Half an hour afterwards Polly walked into their private sitting room. There she sat down at a desk, intending to write to Betty Ashton before the dinner hour.

In making her European trip under such unusual circumstances Polly had not brought with her a great number of clothes. Nevertheless her stepfather had insisted that she have whatever might be necessary and Mrs. Wharton had taken great care and forethought to see that her things were beautiful and appropriate. For Polly was not an easy person to dress suitably. Persons who have more temperament than sheer physical beauty always are difficult. It is impossible that they should look well in any character of changing fashion or in the colors that are out of harmony

with their natures. For instance, one could never conceive of Polly O'Neill in a pale blue gown, though for Mollie or Betty Ashton it might be one's immediate choice. White and red, pale yellow or pink were Polly's shades for evening wear and either brown or green for the street.

Tonight at work on her letter she appeared younger than in truth she was, like a girl of sixteen instead of nineteen. For although her hair was worn in a heavy braided coil encircling her head, her dress was extremely simple. It was of messaline silk of ivory whiteness and made with a short Empire waist and narrow, clinging skirt. There was no sign of trimming, except where the dress was cut low into a square at the throat and edged with a fold of tulle.

On first coming into the sitting room, Polly, who had always an instinctive attraction toward bright colors, had taken a red carnation from a vase on a table and was now wearing the flower carelessly fastened inside her belt.

During the first absorption of her writing she had paid no heed to the door's quiet opening. Nor did she stir when a strange man entering the room took his seat before the tiny fire which Miss Adams always had lighted in the evenings, since the English summer is so often unpleasantly cool to American people. Neither did the man appear to have observed Polly.

When the girl finally did become aware of his presence she remembered that Miss Adams had neglected to mention the name of the guest whom they were expecting to dinner. And although Polly was becoming more accustomed to the almost daily meetings with strangers, she always suffered a few first moments of painful shyness.

The man happened to have his back turned toward her and had seated himself in a comfortable big leather chair. Nevertheless as soon as she stirred from her desk he got up instantly, facing her with a kind of smiling and vague politeness such as one often employs in greeting a stranger. Their guest was a good-looking man, with clear-cut features, a smooth face and brown hair. He wore evening dress, of course, and held himself with exceptional dignity and grace. He must have been about twenty-seven or -eight years old. There was nothing in the least formidable or disconcerting in his appearance, so it seemed distinctly ungracious and stupid of Polly to commence their acquaintance by stammering, "Oh, Oh, why—" and then continue to gaze into their visitor's face without attempting to finish her utterly unintelligible speech.

Also for the space of a moment the man seemed surprised and a trifle embarrassed by this odd form of greeting. Nevertheless the next instant he was staring at the girl in equal amazement. Then suddenly he held out both his hands. "It is the 'Fairy of the Woods,' or I am dreaming!" he exclaimed, closing and then opening his eyes again.

Polly at once dispelled all possible uncertainty. "If I am the 'Fairy of the Woods,' then you are 'Grazioso' in 'The Castle of Youth,'" she laughed, allowing her own hands to rest for the space of a second in those of her former acquaintance. "But as I happen to remember your real name, Mr. Hunt, and you cannot possibly recall mine, I am Polly O'Neill."

"Then will you please sit down and tell me everything that has been happening to you and how I chance to find you here in London with Miss Adams?" Richard Hunt insisted, drawing up a chair to within a few feet of his own.

Polly sat down. And quite unconsciously dropped her pointed chin into the palm of her hand, murmuring with her elbow resting on the arm of her chair:

"You remember that time when I met you in New York, we were both playing in a fairy story," she said. "Well, sometimes fairy stories come true," she said.

Ten minutes afterwards when Miss Adams entered the drawing room to greet her guest, to her surprise she found that he and Polly were already deep in intimate conversation, so much so that they did not immediately hear her approach. And Polly was ordinarily so diffident and tongue-tied with strangers!

"I am glad that you and Mr. Hunt have not waited for me to introduce you, Polly," Miss Adams began. Polly jumped to her feet, and her face grew suddenly white. For she had never spoken of her escapade of two years before to Miss Adams, and did not know just how the great lady might receive it. Richard Hunt waited politely for the girl to acknowledge her previous acquaintance with him. For if she did not wish to speak he must, of course, by no word or sign betray her. However, in less than a moment Polly had fought out a silent battle with herself. There was no positive reason why she should confess her misdeed to this woman whom she admired beyond all others. And yet to pretend a falsehood to her friend, Polly could not endure the thought.

The girl made a charming picture as she stood there in her white dress with her eyes cast down, not trusting herself to look into the face of either of her friends. Quite frankly, then, she told the entire story of her sudden yielding to temptation and of her two weeks' experience in stage life, which had resulted in her meeting with Mr. Hunt.

Nor did she allow her speech to take but a few moments of time, not wishing to draw too much attention to herself. At the instant of her finishing, it happened that dinner was announced, so that Miss Adams had no opportunity for expressing an opinion of Polly's conduct either one way or the other. As they walked out of the room, however, she did manage to give Polly's arm a tiny sympathetic squeeze, whispering, "I'll tell you of my own first stage appearance some day, dear, if you remind me of my promise."

# CHAPTER IX

## THE MEETING

"They are not coming, Esther, and I am so dreadfully disappointed I think I shall weep," Betty Ashton announced one afternoon about two weeks later. The two girls were waiting in front of a tumble-down little German station in the country, apparently several miles from any thickly settled spot. Esther was seated in a carriage with a driver, but Betty was leaning disconsolately over the station platform raised by a few steps from the ground. A few moments before she had been walking rapidly up and down in far too great a state of excitement and pleasure to keep still. Now, however, the train had pulled in and stopped, letting off several stout passengers, but revealing no sign of Polly O'Neill and the maid, whom Miss Adams was sending on ahead to make things ready for her.

"They must have missed the train; they will be sure to come down early in the morning," Esther comforted.

But Betty mournfully shook her head. "It won't be quite the same if they do. Of course I shall always be happy to see Polly O'Neill at any time or place in this world or the next; still, a postponed pleasure is not as agreeable as one that takes place on time. And think of all we had planned for this evening!"

Under the circumstances there was nothing for Betty to do now but to climb back into the carriage and take her seat next her sister. For the little station was by this time completely deserted and had few attractions for making one linger long in its neighborhood. It was too lonely and dilapidated. There was another station at Waldheim, where passengers usually got out, but the two girls had given Polly special directions to use this one, so that they might have a long drive home through the German forests at sundown, bringing her to their little house in the woods amid the best scenic effects.

"We won't even be able to receive a telegram tonight telling us what has occurred, the office closes so early," Betty continued. "I wish at least that Dick had not chosen to spend tonight in Berlin. Don't you think he is behaving rather curiously lately, Esther? He is so unlike himself and sometimes so cross. Of course I realized that he had a right to be angry when those absurd German youths came wandering out here. But I was glad enough to have him write to Franz Schmidt that he was never to see me again. And we have not exactly the right to forbid Frederick von Reuter's coming to this neighborhood. You don't believe, do you, Esther child, that Dick can be staying in town so often lately to see that abominable girl at our old pension?"

Esther chanced to be gazing at the beautiful landscape through which they were passing, so that the younger girl had no opportunity for observing her face. Moreover, Esther's rather weary and wistful expression would not have altogether surprised her, as both she and her mother had been worrying recently over Esther's appearance. Undoubtedly she was working too hard over her music. She went into town twice a week for lessons and the thought of her appearance in the early autumn might also be making her nervous.

Esther made no answer now to Betty's complaints, but instead pointed toward a hill at the left of them. Near the summit they could see a gray stone house, looking more like a prison than the American ideal of a home, and yet possessing a kind of lonely beauty and dignity.

"Whose castle is that, Betty, do you know?" Esther queried. Betty wondered if the question was intended to change the current of her thoughts.

"It looks far more like one of the castles that we saw during our trip along the Rhine than the estates near Berlin."

Then for some absurd reason Betty blushed. "It is Fritz von Reuter's uncle's place, I believe. I have always intended telling you, Esther, if you will promise not to mention it to Dick. The day I first came to this neighborhood to look for a place for us to live I had rather an odd experience."

Betty would have continued her confession, but at this moment they were driving through a wonderful stretch of woodland road. The way was narrow and on one side was a sharp decline and on the other a thick growth of evergreens. Moving toward them was a horse with a young man upon it in a suit of light gray riding clothes, which in the afternoon sunlight looked almost the color of silver. He was carrying his hat in his hand and his hair was a bright yellow such as one seldom sees except in young children. Indeed, he was so remarkably handsome that even Esther, who rarely paid much attention to strangers, gazed at him for the moment with interest, temporarily forgetting what Betty had been trying to confess.

To her amazement, however, the rider made not the faintest effort to give their carriage the right of way, but moved on directly in the center of the road. Their driver, evidently recognizing the young man as a person of distinction, then drove so close to the underbrush on their right that both girls felt a momentary fear of being tumbled out.

Betty kept her lips demurely closed and her head held upright, with the expression of pride and self-possession which she reserved for very special occasions. However, it was difficult to

maintain an atmosphere of cold dignity when one was in immediate danger of being tipped out of a rickety old carriage into a ditch.

The horse and rider approached nearly opposite the carriage, the young fellow gazing haughtily but none the less curiously toward the two American girls. Then almost instantly his unprepossessing manner changed and his face broke into a smile which was singularly charming. Neither of the two girls had often seen in Germany just this type of youth. He was of only medium height, but perfectly proportioned, with square military shoulders, and he rode his horse as though he and it were carved from the same block of stone. Nevertheless there was no doubt but that he was looking at Betty as if he expected some sign of recognition. He was mistaken, however, for she let him pass them without even turning her head in his direction.

It was after eight o'clock that evening when Mrs. Ashton, Betty and Esther had finally come to the end of their melancholy dinner. For there are few things drearier than eating alone the banquet prepared for a long expected guest, when the guest has failed to arrive.

The dinner table had a miniature pine tree in the center, which Betty had dug out of the earth with her own hands and decorated with the tiny Camp Fire emblems which she and Esther always carried about in their trunks, while waving from its summit was a tiny American flag. On either side of the tree were the three candles sacred to all their Camp Fire memories, and the table was also loaded with plates of German sweets and nuts and favors sent out from town for this evening's feast.

Esther and Mrs. Ashton had been trying to keep up a semblance of cheerfulness during dinner, but Betty had refused to make any such effort. Now the front doorbell unexpectedly rang and their funny little German *Mädchen* went out of the room to open it. Betty did not even glance up. She supposed that it must be Dick, who had changed his mind about remaining in Berlin and had taken a later train home. However, even Dick's return was of only limited interest this evening.

The next moment two arms were tight about her neck, almost stifling her. Then a voice that could only be Polly O'Neill's, though Betty could not turn her head, was whispering:

"Oh, Princess, Princess, has it been two years or two centuries since we met? And are you as pretty as ever, and do you love me as much?"

A little later, when both girls had laughed and cried in each other's arms, Polly was at last able to explain to Mrs. Ashton that she and her maid had made a mistake in their train and had taken one which did not stop at the out-of-the-way station mentioned in the girls' letters. So they had been compelled to go on further and then to have an automobile to bring them back to Waldheim.

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## CHAPTER X

### AN ADVENTURE

"Margaret, if you don't mind, we are going for a walk. Betty has been talking to some girls in the next village about starting a Camp Fire club with six dear little German maidens who make us think of Meg and Mollie when they were tiny. Would you care to come with us?"

Margaret Adams shook her head. She was lying in a hammock under a tree which made a complete green canopy above her head. At no great distance away was the brook where Betty had thought herself in hiding several weeks before, and by dint of keeping very quiet and concentrating all one's senses into the single one of listening, the music of the running water might be heard. The woman in the hammock had no desire for other entertainment. She had been thinking but a few moments before that she had not felt so well or so young in half a dozen years. The three girls, Esther, Betty and Polly, had been laughing and talking not far away from her for the past hour, but she must have been asleep since she had heard no word of what they were saying until Polly's direct question to her.

"I am awfully lazy, Polly dear," she apologized. "You know I have been insisting each day that the next I was going to do exactly what you girls do and try to pretend I am as young as the rest of you. But I have not the valor, and besides you will have a far more thrilling time without a chaperon. Kiss me good-by and take care of pretty Betty." And Margaret Adams waved her hand in farewell to the other two girls.

Since their stay in the German forests she had insisted that the girls treat her as much as possible like one of themselves, that they forget her profession and her age, and as a sign they were all to call one another by their first names.

To Betty Ashton this act of friendliness had not been difficult; it had actually been harder for Polly, who had known Miss Adams so much more intimately, and most trying of all to Esther because of her natural timidity.

In the first place Betty did not often think of their new acquaintance as a great actress. Once several years before she had been introduced to Miss Adams in Woodford, but later had considered her merely in her relation to Polly. She of course felt very strongly the older woman's magnetism, just as the world did, and was proud and grateful for this opportunity to know her.



Indeed, Polly in the past few days had to have several serious talks with herself in order to stifle a growing sensation of jealousy. Of course she perfectly appreciated how pretty and charming the Princess was and how she had attracted people all her life. Yet she was not going to pretend that she was noble enough to be willing to have Miss Adams prefer the Princess to her humble self.

As Polly joined her two friends she found herself surveying Betty with an air that tried hard to be critical; but there was no use in attempting it this morning. Betty was too ridiculously pretty and unconscious of it. For, seeing that Polly seemed slightly annoyed with her, she slipped her hand into hers, as the three of them started off for the village. In her other hand she carried her old Camp Fire Manual.

Betty was dressed in an inexpensive white muslin with a broad white leather belt and a big straw hat encircled with a wreath of blue corn flowers. Probably her entire outfit had cost less than a single pair of slippers in the days of their wealth.

"I hope, Esther, that you have not allowed Betty to go about the country alone before I joined you," Polly began in her old half-mocking and half-serious tones.

Betty laughed at the idea of Polly O'Neill grown suddenly conventional; however, Esther took the suggestion gravely.

"I don't know and I am truly glad you have arrived, Polly dear, for a great many reasons," she replied. "You know I have to be in Berlin two days every week and Dr. Ashton is away the greater part of the time. And somehow neither one of us has ever been able to persuade Mrs. Ashton or Betty to appreciate the difference between Germany and America. Betty seems to think she can wander about here as freely as if she were in Woodford."

"Well, I shall see that she does not wander alone any more if I can help it," Polly added with decision. And then, "Tell me, please, for goodness sake, Betty Ashton, how you are going to manage to start a Camp Fire club in Waldheim? In the first place do you know enough of the German language to teach other people, and otherwise how will you ever be able to explain all that the Camp Fire means, its ceremonies and ideals?"

For the moment Betty's face clouded, as any lack of faith on Polly's part had always checked her enthusiasm.

"I can't teach them *all* of anything, Polly, for in the first place I have never begun to understand myself one half that our Camp Fire organization stands for. But I have the feeling that because it has always given me so much help and happiness I should at least try to suggest the idea to other people. You see the Camp Fire is not just an American institution. It is almost equally popular in England, though there it is called 'The Girl Guides.' And of course in time its influence is obliged to spread to Germany, so I hope to be a pioneer. I have been to the school for girls in Waldheim and managed to interest one of the teachers. She has promised me that when we have read and studied enough together she will form a Camp Fire club among her pupils and be their first guardian. So you see I shall not count for much."

"Angel child!" exclaimed Polly enigmatically, but she offered no further criticism.

And indeed the three girls spent a wonderfully interesting two hours among Betty's new acquaintances. For Esther and Betty both spoke German extremely well after their two years' residence in Berlin, and although Polly had to be unusually quiet, she did remember enough of her school German to understand the others. And when their call had finally ended Betty promised to return twice each week to continue their work, and though Polly made no such promise, her enthusiasm was almost equally great.

Later on the girls found a tiny restaurant in the village where they drank hot coffee and ate innumerable delicious German cookies. For they had left word that they were not to be expected at home for luncheon, since the best of their excursion was to take place after the trip to the village.

For a long time Betty had a place in mind she had particularly wished Esther and Polly to see and now this was their first opportunity since Polly's arrival for a long walk.

"It is only a specially lovely bit of woods with a little house inside, which looks as though it might be the place where the old witch lived in the story of 'Hansel and Gretel,'" she explained. "The house is built of logs, but there are the same tiny window panes and a front door with a great bolt across it. It is so gloomy and terrifying that it is perfectly delicious," she concluded gaily, for they had been walking for some distance to get into her enchanted forest and so far no sign of it had appeared. Plainly the other two girls were growing weary.

Half an hour later, however, both Esther and Polly were sufficiently good sportsmen to confess that their long walk had not been in vain. For Betty's forest, as they chose to call the place, was entrancingly lovely, the greenest, darkest, coolest spot in all that country round. And so curiously secluded! Hundreds of great forest trees and shrubbery so thick that it must have been left uncut and untrampled upon for many years. Indeed, except for Betty's previous acquaintance with a path that led to the house in the woods, there could have been no possibility of the girls' discovering it. For once having climbed a low stone fence, they had seen and heard nothing except a solitary deer that had fled at their approach and an unusual number of wild birds.

Not far away from the little house Polly and Esther found seats within a few feet of each other on

the trunks of two old trees, while Betty stretched herself along the ground, closing her eyes as though she had been a veritable Sleeping Princess. The three girls had no thought of being disturbed, for the little house was locked and barred and entirely deserted.

Then in the midst of the peace and silence of the scene a bullet whistled through the air. And following the report of a rifle Esther tumbled quietly off her resting place.

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## CHAPTER XI

### AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Betty bent over her sister first, saying with a kind of quick intake of her breath: "Esther, what is the matter? Are you hurt? Oh, I have always been afraid that something dreadful would happen to you, you are so good!"

And at this Esther smiled, although somewhat faintly, allowing Polly to assist her to her feet.

"Well, I am not being punished for my virtues this time, Betty child," she answered. "I was just a ridiculous coward, and when that bullet passed so close to my head that I am quite sure it cut off a lock of my hair, it made me so faint and ill for an instant that I collapsed. I am all right now. But I wonder where the shot could have come from?"

Then the three girls stood silently listening, almost equally pale and shaken from their recent experience. In another moment they heard the noise of some one stirring about in the underbrush at no great distance away and walking in their direction. They waited speechless and without moving.

Then suddenly, before they could see the speaker, a voice called out angrily: "Don't try to escape; stay where you are or I shall fire again. For I will not endure this lawlessness any longer."

And almost immediately a young man appeared before them in a hunter's costume of rough gray tweed, carrying his gun in his hand. His expression was angry and masterful, his face crimson and his eyes had ugly lights in their blue depths. Yet instantly Esther recognized the speaker as the same young fellow whom they had met on horseback a week or ten days before.

At his first glance toward Esther and Polly his face changed; for obviously he was both startled and mystified. Then as he caught sight of Betty, who was standing just back of the other two girls, another wave of crimson crossed his face, but this time it was due to embarrassment and not anger. With a swift movement he lifted his hat and bowed so low that in an American it would have seemed an absurdity. Yet somehow with him the movement had both dignity and grace. Straightway Polly O'Neill, in spite of her vexation, decided that never before had she seen a more perfect "Prince Charming." The young man's hair was bright gold, his skin naturally fair and yet sufficiently browned from exposure, his features almost classic in shape. And while he was not exceptionally tall, his figure was that of a young soldier in action with the same muscular strength and virility.

"I shall never be able to express to you my chagrin and my regret," he began, including the three girls in his speech but in reality addressing himself to Betty. He spoke English with only the slightest foreign accent. "These happen to be my woods and I have been greatly annoyed recently by trespassers who destroy my game at a season of the year when there can be neither profit nor pleasure in it. And this when the park is posted with signs warning intruders."

"I am sorry that we did not chance to see the signs," Esther murmured.

"You can understand that we are strangers in this neighborhood, Americans," Polly defended more hotly. "But of course we should not have wandered in here without inquiring of some one whether or not we had the privilege. In the United States we know very little about game preserves and people are willing to have you enjoy the beauty of their forests. But we shall leave immediately and promise never to trouble you again."

"But that means that you have not forgiven me and I ask your pardon with all my heart. It is my pride, my great pleasure to have you consider my place worthy of your attention. Miss Ashton," the young foreigner now turned directly to Betty, "surely you can appreciate and pardon my mistake."

Neither of the other two girls had been paying any special attention to Betty, but at the stranger's surprising knowledge of her name they turned toward her at once. And both decided that they had never seen her look so pretty or so angry in her life. Apparently she had not spoken before because she had not been willing to trust herself. And Polly had a sudden sense of satisfaction in the knowledge that the Princess did not lose her poise and self-control in her anger, as she so invariably did.

"You ask us to understand and pardon your mistake," Betty now began quietly. "But suppose that the bullet which you fired so carelessly had killed my sister. Would you still have expected us to make the same answer? Of course we are just as much intruders upon your property as if we were men instead of American girls. But I presume that when you fired, thinking that we might

be poachers, you would have been indifferent had you wounded one of us. For I believe in Germany it is the fashion for the soldiers who are intended for the defense of their country to have little respect for the lives of their countrymen."

This was a long and bitter speech for a young girl to have made. But remember that Betty Ashton had been living in Germany for the past two years at a time when the army had been frequently criticized and had suffered just as most travelers do from the rudeness of German officers upon the streets and in places of public amusement. Moreover, she had not yet recovered from her moment of fright over Esther and was annoyed at having their pleasure so destroyed.

Her accusation so surprised the young man to whom it was addressed that for a moment he did not reply. For evidently he did not often find himself obliged to be placed on the defensive side in a discussion and the position did not please him.

"I regret to have frightened you. And I had no intention of injuring any one," he remarked stiffly. "It was my plan to fire into the air, but I stumbled at the critical moment. However, I did not suppose that the shot came anywhere in your direction. And I am sorry that you should consider this but another instance of the lack of courtesy in His Majesty's officers."

There was an awkward pause. Betty was holding her big flowered hat pressed close against her white dress, her lips were scarlet and her face so pale that her gray eyes looked almost smoke-colored. The wind and the long walk had loosened her hair until it was curling and blowing about her forehead like tiny red-gold clouds. Honestly no young man could have remained angry with her for any great length of time.

She slipped one arm through Esther's, as Esther had continued white and nervous, and beckoning Polly with the other to join them, with the merest inclination of her head the Princess started to lead the little company away. But before she had gone more than a few feet she stopped and turned around.

The young man was standing exactly where they had left him with his hat still in his hand and his face and figure rigid.

Betty advanced nearer toward him. "Lieutenant von Reuter," she said, "it is I who must now beg your pardon. You were kind to me once when my maid and I lost our way in trying to find the village of Waldheim. But under no circumstances should I have said anything that reflected upon you or your friends. I know that you are an officer in the German army, so naturally you must think as little of American courtesy as—" But not knowing just how to end her sentence Betty did the wisest possible thing and smiled.

And at once the young man was figuratively on his knees before her again. "Don't go away just yet," he pleaded; "you must know that I have been asking my cousin Frederick about you. It is he who has told me your name and he must also have spoken of me to you. You yourselves have said that it was lovely here in my forest and surely you must be weary enough to remain a little time longer. It is not as though we were entire strangers, with Frederick your friend and my relative."

This time Betty laughed outright. "Your cousin is scarcely our friend; we have only boarded in the same pension with him in Berlin while my sister was there studying music." She looked a little more searchingly at Esther. Esther had not been very well for several weeks and now certainly was unfit for the long walk home in the hottest part of the afternoon without more rest.

With an inclination of her pretty head the Princess surrendered.

"If you really are sure that you won't mind we should like to sit here in the shade a little longer," she confessed. "That is if we will not trouble you. You must not feel that you must remain with us, for I promise that we shall do nothing any harm."

Without replying, Carl von Reuter then led Esther to her discarded tree trunk, the other girls having already found seats.

"If you will be good enough to wait for a few moments I should like very much to bring you some tea. The little house there is my hunting lodge and I have all sorts of bachelor arrangements inside," he announced. And the suggestion was far too welcome for any one of the girls to decline.

Then in the five minutes of the young man's absence as rapidly as possible Betty sketched the outline of her acquaintance with him and the knowledge of his history which she had since been able to acquire. He was the son of the German count whose stone castle they had seen, and of course the heir to the title and estate. He was also, as she had already revealed, a lieutenant in the German army and probably about twenty-two or-three years old. The family was a very old and proud one and although they still owned a great deal of land, they were extremely poor.

But Betty had to cease her confidences abruptly, seeing that their unexpected host was coming toward them with four cups of tea and a tray of small crackers and cakes.

No American man could have performed these small social services with so little embarrassment, but as Carl explained he had had an English mother and had been taught to assist her with their guests from the time he was a boy.

And by the time the tea had been drunk and the cakes eaten the little company had apparently reached terms of complete friendliness, having already forgotten their uncomfortable earlier

meeting.

"I am dreadfully sorry to find that your little house in the woods is nothing but a hunting lodge," Betty confided. "For you see I have been telling my sister and Miss O'Neill that this place was a kind of enchanted forest where 'Hansel and Gretel' must once upon a time have lost their way."

However, Carl von Reuter shook his head protestingly. "Why not think of it instead as Siegfried's forest before he went forth in search of Brunhilde."

"Won't you tell us the story of Siegfried?" Polly asked. "I have never heard the opera and it has been such a long time since I read it."

Carl laughed. "I am a soldier, not a poet," he explained, "and the legend is too long and too complicated for me to repeat all of it to you. Besides, you are sure to recall it as soon as I begin. Siegfried, you remember, was the son of Siegmund and Sieglinde and the youth who knew no fear. He is brought up in a forest by a wicked dwarf named Mime, who desires that Siegfried wrest the magic treasure of the Nibelung from the giant Fafnir who guards it in the gaping cave of the Niedhole. With the sword of his father Siegfried goes forth and destroys the giant and then appears wearing the glittering tarn helmet, the invincible armor and the magic ring. From the blood of the dead Fafnir, with which Siegfried touches his lips, he is enabled to understand the voices of birds. And when one of these sings to him of a maiden surrounded by flames who can be won only by the man who knows no fear, Siegfried sets out in search of Brunhilde. On a grassy mound he discovers a sleeping figure clad in armor and surrounded by flames. Removing the shield and helmet, he sees a flood of red-gold hair rippling around the form of a sleeping woman."

The story teller stopped and Esther inquired:

"You know the story of Siegfried so well, I wonder if you sing?"

"Not very well," the young man replied. And then, as though to disprove his own words and without further urging, he began singing in a fine, clear tenor, glancing now and then toward Betty Ashton, the beautiful song of Siegfried's that awakens the sleeping Brunhilde:

"No man it is!  
Hallowed rapture  
Thrills through my heart;  
Fiery anguish  
Enfolds my eyes.  
My senses wander  
And waver.  
Whom shall I summon  
Hither to help me?  
Mother, mother!  
Be mindful of me."

Later in the afternoon when they had almost reached their own cottage in the woods, Betty suddenly slipped an arm across her older sister's shoulder. Polly had already said good-by.

"After all we did discover a kind of enchanted forest, didn't we, Esther?" she whispered.

But Esther was tired and annoyed. "Lieutenant von Reuter was an agreeable enough fellow for a foreigner, if that is what you mean, Betty," she returned. "But I got rather tired of his telling us the story of Siegfried which I certainly knew perfectly well. Besides, it seemed to me that he was trying to make an impression upon us. And I shall never, never be able to understand how you can like these German youths so much. I should feel a great deal happier about you and so would your brother if you were safely back in Woodford."

"Don't be a goose, dear," was Betty's only answer.

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## CHAPTER XII

### THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE

"Have you ever wished some days that you were nine years old instead of nineteen, Miss Adams—Margaret?" Polly O'Neill corrected herself hastily.

The girl and the older woman were sitting out in the yard in front of their funny little German cottage one afternoon just before twilight. Polly had been reading aloud until the dusk had settled down too thickly, and since then had been silent, gazing pensively at the far line of hills toward the west.

Margaret Adams looked closely at the girl before replying. For the past few days she had seen that there was something unusual weighing upon Polly's mind, since she was never able to conceal her emotions, and had wondered whether she was feeling homesick or if something had occurred to worry her. But she only answered lightly: "No, Polly, I am afraid when one is thirty-five one is more apt to wish to be nineteen than nine. But would you like to tell me, dear, what

special objection there is to your present age? Don't, if you feel that you would rather not, or if you would be betraying a confidence."

But Polly gave a characteristic shrug. "No," she returned, "I would not be betraying a confidence, only an imagination, and since the imagination happens to be my own, I suppose I have the right to betray it."

Not comprehending exactly what the younger girl was trying to say and yet understanding that she would make herself plain later on, the woman quietly waited. She was interested in the processes of Polly's mind and liked to see them work themselves out.

"Do you like foreign men?" was the girl's next apparently irrelevant question.

But by this time Miss Adams had begun to have a faint suspicion of what might be at the end of her companion's confession. For in the past two weeks since Polly's, Betty's and Esther's visit to the German forest, she too had become interested in some of its consequences. Yet she answered with entire truthfulness:

"Why, of course, Polly child, I like foreign men. Why should not one? It is absurd and prejudiced to like or dislike a person because of his nationality; it is the man's own character that counts."

"Oh, yes, I know that is what one should feel and say. I don't mean to be rude," Polly added quickly, blushing over her fatal habit of saying whatever was uppermost in her mind. "I was just wondering whether it was actually true. Don't most of us really in the end like best the kind of people and life to which we have been accustomed. Now, for example, just suppose that we take a girl who has been brought up in the United States almost all her life, where she has had boy acquaintances and friends whom she has known in a simple, intimate way, without thinking of any one of them seriously. Then bring her to a foreign country, take Germany, just when she is about grown. All of a sudden imagine a young fellow turning up entirely unlike her old boy friends, handsome, charming and behaving as though he were falling in love with her. Do you believe that the girl could honestly care for him? Don't you think that it would just be a mistaken fancy on her part and that some day when she grew older she would want her old friends and associations again. Why, she might even meet one of her former acquaintances and find that she liked him best, because after all he was also an American and thought about life and women and lots of other things more in the way that she did."

Margaret Adams covered both ears with her hands. "My dear Polly," she began, "if you think I have imagination enough to follow all those supposings and all those mixed-up sentences and ideas, you must consider me cleverer than I am. But as long as I happen to be able to guess whom you are talking about, don't you think we might be straightforward. We will never speak of it to any one else, nor to each other if it seems wiser not. But of course you mean——"

"Betty!" finished Polly. And then sighing profoundly: "You see, ever since our meeting in the woods the other day with Carl von Reuter he has been coming to see Betty. He brought his father, the old count, to call on Mrs. Ashton and has been sending Betty flowers and they have been riding together and he does not even pretend not to admire her tremendously. He makes Esther and me perfectly miserable, for you see Germans seem so different from Americans, so sentimental and silly, I think. Why, I overheard Lieutenant von Reuter calling Betty Brunhilde, and instead of being bored she actually appeared pleased. Esther and I can't understand it. Of course we realize that it is absurd to believe that people can learn to care for each other in two weeks, yet just the same Betty is behaving strangely. And Esther wonders if it is her duty to speak to Richard Ashton before things go any further. Mrs. Ashton would be no good; she is too pleased over Betty's being admired by a member of the German nobility. She would never be able to see all the mischief that might result from it. But then Esther and Dick Ashton are not friends as they once were. Dick has hardly anything to do with Esther nowadays—even leaves on an earlier train the mornings that she has to go into Berlin for her music lessons. And yet when Esther first came to live with Mrs. Ashton, when she was a hundred times less attractive than she is now, why he was kinder to her than any of the rest of us. Oh me, oh my, it is a strange world!" And down went Polly's chin into the palm of her hand in a characteristic manner.

For a moment Margaret Adams did not reply. For perhaps a good deal better than Polly she appreciated the disaster that might result from the present circumstances. Betty was only nineteen and of course Polly was right in presuming that she could hardly know her own mind. And yet the romance and beauty of her surroundings, the good looks of the young lieutenant with the glamour of his title and position, were sufficiently strong influences to affect a much older person.

Yet notwithstanding Betty's beauty and charm, Miss Adams did not have the same uneasiness that Esther and Polly suffered. For she did not believe that Lieutenant von Reuter could marry a girl without a dowry, no matter what his personal inclination might be. And Betty had no money and so far as any one knew no chance of receiving any amount except what her brother and sister might some day be able to earn. The danger that the older woman dreaded was that Betty herself might possibly misunderstand the young foreigner's attentions and that she might learn to care for him more than would be wise for her happiness.

Frowning, Miss Adams waited for a moment without speaking. And yet she looked so entirely interested and sympathetic that Polly dropped to the ground at her feet, taking one of her slim hands in hers and pressing it softly to her lips. For it was wonderfully kind of this famous lady to have forgotten herself so completely that she felt as deep a concern over Betty Ashton as though

she had known her all her life.

"It was Betty herself who told me that young Count von Reuter had been brought up with the idea that he must marry a wealthy girl. Don't you suppose that she understands that anything else is impossible for him?" she asked. "The family is deeply in debt and even if the young man had the faintest knowledge of any kind of work it would be regarded as a disgrace for him to engage in it. Besides, he has chosen his career of a soldier, which also requires a fortune back of him. Don't you think we might be able to make Betty see this, even supposing that she does not already appreciate it?" Margaret Adams finally inquired.

"I don't know," Polly answered. "For you see, Margaret, it is like this. All her life Betty Ashton has never known anything but love and admiration. Why, when we were little children and began having beaux that nobody knew about except just ourselves, we always expected the admirers to be Betty's and were surprised when they were not. Oh, I don't mean that she expected it. The Princess used to be spoiled in lots of ways before our Camp Fire club and the change in their family fortunes, but she never has been silly or vain. Then when we grew up together it was pretty much the same thing. I remember how cross I once was in Woodford because a young fellow there, who was not Betty's equal then in any kind of way, in money or family or education, had the presumption to feel a kind of fancy for her. But now I wish that he or John Everett or any one of our old friends would turn up here and show her how much nicer an American fellow is. Any old kind of an American!" Polly ended almost viciously.

Miss Adams laughed, touching the girl's dark braids of hair and looking closely into her emotional, sensitive face.

"Don't let us worry before it is necessary," she suggested. "But tell me, Polly, and I am not asking you for curiosity, with all these admirers whom you insist your beloved Betty has had, hasn't there ever been any one who has cared for you and whom you may some day care for?"

For the moment the unexpectedness of this question took Polly's breath. And then to her deep chagrin she felt herself blushing, even while vigorously shaking her head in denial.

And yet at the same time in her intense desire to be perfectly straightforward with her new friend she was wondering if her denial had been entirely truthful. Or was it her duty to confess Billy Webster's stupidity?

"There was some one once," she murmured after her little period of hesitation had passed. "But really, Margaret, he did not care for me a bit; he only wanted to manage me. And I—I didn't care for him in the least. I never shall care for anybody," Polly insisted with the absolute conviction of youth.

Then completely forgetting everybody and everything else, Polly O'Neill put both arms about her slender knees and there on the grass at the feet of the great Miss Adams began slowly swaying herself backwards and forwards as she always had ever since she was a little girl when in the thrall of some dominant idea.

She did not look at Miss Adams; she did not even look at the hills or trees, nor feel the summer darkness that was beginning to close about them like a soft cloak. For Polly was having one of her moments when the things inside her mind were so much more visible and important to her than any outside scene. Never since leaving New York had she mentioned to Miss Adams her own desire to go upon the stage. It had not seemed fair to take advantage of her friend's kindness by annoying her with her own ambition. For it might look as though she expected or hoped for aid and advice from Miss Adams' friendship. But tonight Polly had forgotten her past resolutions and reserves.

"I shall not care for anyone, Margaret, because you know in another year I intend either going upon the stage in some little part, or if mother will give me the money, I shall go to a dramatic school. For I am going to make the stage my career whether I succeed or fail." There was a catch in the girl's breath and although it was too dark to see her face, the older woman could imagine the glow in her cheeks and the light in her curious blue eyes. She looked like an elf or a sprite, something born of the woods or the sky and hardly an ordinary flesh-and-blood girl, as she sat in her curious position, dreamily rocking herself back and forth in the evening dusk and silence.

"I suppose there are some women great enough to have a career and to marry besides," she added so solemnly that Miss Adams did not dare smile, "but I don't believe I am one of them. And I want a career. Yet it is odd, isn't it? I don't think I have any special talent and Esther Crippen is so talented we think she is almost a genius. I wish you could hear her sing, but she is too afraid of you yet. Nevertheless Esther does not want to be famous one bit and Betty and I don't even dare mention the word 'career' before her. I am sure she would much rather marry some day and have babies and sing to her husband and to them, or perhaps in a church where no one would think much about her. For she does love her music for itself."

"But why then does she go on working so intensely, if she does not intend making a profession of her singing? The poor child is actually wearing herself out," Miss Adams avowed.

"Why, don't you know?" Polly faced her companion and though it was now almost entirely dark, they could yet catch the outlines of each other's faces. "Esther Crippen does not care for money for herself, but she cares for it beyond anything for Betty. You see, she and Betty were separated during all their childhood and now that they have found each other again Esther fairly worships

her sister. She is going to earn all the money she can with her voice so as to be able to lavish on Betty the things that she used to have when the Ashtons were rich. Of course Betty does not know that this is the chief reason that is urging Esther to sacrifice everything in the world for her work. For naturally Betty thinks that Esther has so wonderful a talent that she ought to wish to cultivate it for its own sake. And so does their father, Herr Crippen. I believe he has the feeling that he has failed with his own music, but that if Esther succeeds in some way it will redeem his failure. In a way it does seem rather hard upon Esther if she should ever happen to fall in love."

But before Miss Adams could answer her maid had announced an unexpected visitor.

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## CHAPTER XIII

### RICHARD ASHTON

Esther Crippen ran out of the front door of their little house with her coat still on her arm, so great was her hurry.

"Dr. Ashton," she called several times. And at last the young man striding on ahead turned and glanced back in surprise. Esther was carrying her usual music roll, a book and a box of lunch which she always bore into town on her lesson days.

Richard Ashton took these from her.

"I beg your pardon, Esther. I did not know that you were going in on the early train or of course I should have waited. What is taking you in so soon? Have you a special appointment?"

And Esther could only blush and stammer nervously. For intimately as she had known Dick Ashton, living in the same house with him for several years in a curious position as though she were a member of his family yet without any real bond of relationship between them, she could not now quietly tell him that she was taking this train into town because she wished to accompany him. At one time in their acquaintance this would have been a simple and natural enough confession, but recently Dick Ashton had been so unlike his former self. Or at least if he had not changed personally, his manner toward her was different. And in these weeks in the country when Esther had been pondering over the change it had seemed to her that she could almost remember the day and hour when the transformation began.

Now as Esther made no reply to his question Richard Ashton looked at her more steadily. He was a physician and the girl's pallor and weariness were more conspicuous to him than to other people, although he was not alone in noticing it.

"There isn't any point in your going into the city at daybreak for these singing lessons of yours," the young man protested in a friendly tone. "I should think that your wretched old Professor would have brains enough to know that you won't do him or yourself half as much credit if he wears you out completely before the date of his concert. When does it take place?"

"In October," Esther returned, apparently with little interest. However, Dick was walking her toward the station with such rapidity that she had little breath for any other exertion. And yet they had plenty of time, there was no reason for such hurry. The young man himself did not seem to be aware of their haste.

"Look here, Esther," he began a little later, "I am glad of this chance for our having a talk together. There is something that I have had on my mind to say for some time without having had the courage or the opportunity."

Just for the moment Esther's pallor left her, a slight flush coming into her cheeks and her lips parting.

"You see, I think it will be better for you to break the news to mother and Betty than for me to speak of it first," he continued. "But I—I have got to go back to the United States this autumn for good. I have spent all the time studying over here that I have the right to spend and if ever I am to make a success of my profession I have to get down to hard work building up a practice. I suppose they will both take it kind of hard, my deserting them in this way, but they must have anticipated it."

In reply Esther's voice was less interested and sympathetic than Dick Ashton was accustomed to hearing it.

"Why, I don't believe they will mind half so much as you think; at any rate your mother will not," she returned. "I have heard Mrs. Ashton say half a dozen times lately that she wished we were all to go home when Polly and Miss Adams sail in November. And as far as Betty is concerned I shall be glad to have you take her back with you."

"Take Betty home with me!" Dick Ashton's exclamation was in itself a denial of any such intention. "Why, Esther, I hadn't the faintest thought of either mother or the Princess coming along with me. You don't mean that Professor Hecksher has suggested that *you* take a rest and that you are going to see your father?"



With a frown and a sudden nervous movement of her hands Esther shook her head. But they were now within sight of their little station, where several other passengers were waiting and no other word of intimate conversation was possible between them until they were on the train. And Esther made no protest when Dick, in spite of their poverty, discarding his regular ticket, bought seats for them both in an empty first-class coach. There they could be alone and without interruption. And there was no denying that their conversation, which had just been broken off so abruptly, must be continued as soon as possible. They were both too full of things too long left unsaid.

"Of course you know, Dr. Ashton, that there is not the remotest chance of my going back home for a long time," Esther went on when once again they were settled, just as though no interruption to their talk had ever taken place. "For you see after I make my *début* at this concert I have to go on studying. I have even to make a reputation here in Europe if I can before I return to the United States. Professor Hecksher says that it is absolutely necessary, and he is willing to help me get engagements to earn some money, so I shall not continue to be so dreadful an expense."

"Sounds rather glorious, doesn't it, Esther, fame and fortune all ready and waiting to drop at your feet? What a wonderful thing it is to be born into this world with a great talent and how it must make you look down on us poor mortals who have to grind and grind for just a bare existence. I'll be proud some day to say that I have had the honor of knowing you. You won't forget we were acquaintances, will you, Esther?" the young man concluded, it was hard to tell whether in bitterness or joking.

And his companion turned her face away, pretending to glance out of the car window at the uninteresting stretch of country and the rapidly disappearing telegraph poles.

"I shall never forget that I was a girl being raised in an orphan asylum and that your mother took me to her home and did what she could to give me my first start in learning to sing, if that is what you mean, Dr. Ashton," Esther continued. "Neither can I forget what you have always done for Betty, though I feel of course that Betty will more than repay all the people who love her. But if you mean that you only wish us to be acquaintances in the future, why—" But in spite of her strong effort at self-control Esther's lips were trembling and the tears gathering in her eyes.

Nevertheless she made no effort at withdrawal when Dick Ashton for an instant placed his hands over her own tightly clasped ones.

"You are not playing fair, Esther," he urged, "for you know in your heart that I meant no such thing."

Then both the girl and the man were silent with the vision of their possible futures before them. If only Dick Ashton could have asked Esther to give up the career ahead of her, to renounce her music, to come back home with him to the United States to be his wife. But what had he to offer in exchange for these great sacrifices? He was a penniless young doctor without more than a hundred dollars in the world once he had paid his passage home and set up some kind of office. Moreover, suppose he should win patients and success sooner than other men? Did he not owe his first earnings to his mother and to his sister, Betty, whose courage and resourcefulness had helped him prepare for his career? Besides, what did Esther not also feel that she owed to this same sister? Plainly she had let him know her views on that afternoon some time ago when he had tried dissuading her from making her *début* if the thought of a professional life made her unhappy. Esther had then said that she felt that she must work until she was able to take care of herself and Betty and even to assist her father and new stepmother. For Herr Crippen was growing older and had nothing except what he earned by his music pupils. No, Esther's way was straight before her and one owed it to a great talent like hers to make the best of it. She had never manifested for Richard Ashton more than a warm friendliness which was natural enough to their position. Neither had he ever given Esther any reason to believe that the old kindness and sympathy which he had once felt for her had deepened into emotions much stronger. Yet, to him Esther's plain face, with its pallor and serious sweetness, with its big mouth and splendidly modeled lips was more beautiful than all his sister Betty's vivid prettiness.

"Betty!" The thought of her brought him back to the every-day world again. He laughed good-humoredly.

"Esther, Betty has everlastingly been saying that you had a perfectly determined passion for sacrificing yourself. Please get it out of your head at once that I have the faintest idea of taking Mistress Betty home with me. For if ever you needed her in all your life it seems to me you will need her in the next few years. And as long as half your effort is being made for her sake don't you think that she might at least be allowed to stand shoulder to shoulder with you? The Princess is rather a nice person, you know, Esther, in spite of us, and I don't believe that all the pleading in the world that I could do would persuade her to desert you."

"But it must," Esther replied so solemnly that Richard Ashton stared at her in fresh astonishment. For now that they were talking of Betty and not of herself she was looking directly at him.

"You see, it is for just this reason that I wanted to talk to you alone," Esther went on hurriedly. "Of course I may be mistaken or perhaps I have not exactly the right to interfere, but I am awfully afraid, Dick, that Betty is learning to care for that young German fellow, Carl von Reuter. Oh, I can understand that you may consider it absurd of me to be so suspicious, because Betty has been having dozens of admirers ever since we came to Germany. But I am sure this affair is quite

different. In the first place the man himself is so much more attractive. He is heir to an old title and——"

"But Betty could not be such an utter goose as to care about a title," Dick interrupted; "and this fellow is as poor as a church mouse and she has only known him a few weeks. Don't you think it is rather looking for trouble? Why, I shouldn't dream of allowing Betty to consider the fellow seriously. I'll tell him not to come to the house again, as I did that other youth, if you say the word. Anyhow, I'll give Betty a piece of my mind tonight."

"You won't do any such a thing, Richard Ashton," Esther remarked firmly, actually shaking the young man's arm to express her scorn of his stupidity, "for if you do you will involve us all in a great deal of discomfort if nothing worse. In the first place I don't think Betty yet dreams that she is beginning to care seriously for this young German and perhaps she won't if no one says anything to her. But from what Polly and I have seen she does like him a great deal already and she tries to see him by himself without Polly or me. And you know that isn't in the least like the Princess. But she is awfully interested in her Camp Fire club in the village and perhaps if you take her home pretty soon nothing serious will happen. Lieutenant von Reuter is awfully poor, I know, and everybody says he simply has to marry a rich girl. But I don't know which I should hate the most: to have Betty care for him and he not return her affection or to have them both care and——"

"For goodness' sake, don't say another word, Esther, or I shall take the next train back home and sit and watch every breath Betty draws for the rest of the day," Dick answered miserably. "Please remember that I have a particularly hard lecture on anatomy in another hour. But I shall meet you on the train going out this afternoon and perhaps we can think up some plan of campaign together."

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## CHAPTER XIV

### BETTY'S STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE

When Dick and Esther returned home just before dusk on that same afternoon, Betty was not there. They found Mrs. Ashton in tears from nervousness and fright, Polly O'Neill divided between anger and solicitude, and only Miss Adams sufficiently composed to have been making the necessary investigations.

So far as the newcomers could learn Betty had left the cottage at about eleven o'clock in the morning to go to the village of Waldheim for the work with the Camp Fire club which she had recently organized. But instead of waiting for Polly to accompany her after their regular custom she had seemed restless and in a most unusual hurry, and when Polly happened to be ten or fifteen minutes late for their appointment, Betty had gone off without her, taking their little German maid-of-all-work as her companion for the walk.

Afterwards the maid had reported that *das Fräulein* had arrived safely at the school and had joined her German friend, who was learning the business of a Camp Fire guardian. Later the girl had returned home expecting Betty to appear at lunch time; but it was now half-past five and no word had come from her, notwithstanding that several hours before Mrs. Ashton herself had gone into Waldheim and learned that Betty had presumably started for the cottage a short time after noon.

She had no other acquaintances in the village to detain her, so that the mystery of her disappearance was complete. There were, however, several persons who claimed to have seen her leaving for home at about the accustomed hour.

Naturally for the first few moments after their arrival both Dick and Esther were more astounded and stunned over the Princess' unaccountable behavior than frightened. For it seemed impossible to imagine that anything serious could have happened to her. Yet ten minutes later both the girl and man were suffering from even greater apprehension than Mrs. Ashton had endured. For whatever had induced Betty to attempt the walk from the village to their cottage alone? Of course the neighborhood in which they were spending the summer was presumably a quiet and peaceful one; still the two older women and Richard Ashton had objected to any one of the girls going any distance from their homes without companionship. And Betty was ordinarily obedient to her mother's slightest wish, fearing to cause her anxiety.

Rather helplessly Richard Ashton turned toward Margaret Adams, as a stranger is oftentimes of more use in an emergency of this kind than a member of one's own family.

"I had better go down to the village at once, don't you think?" he suggested. "There must be police, some one to whom I can appeal for assistance. If we were only in our own country one would know so readily what to do."

"I will go with you, Dick," Polly answered, beginning to put on her hat and light wrap. "No, Esther dear, you look tired to death already and some one must stay here with Mrs. Ashton and Margaret. In all probability Betty will return before we are able to get back."

Esther had gone to their front door to look out, but at Polly's words she returned and faced Mrs. Ashton.

"Don't you think we had best find Lieutenant von Reuter and ask his assistance?" she volunteered. "We know no one in this part of the country who would have so much influence. If Betty has lost her way, if the woods have to be searched, why no one could give us such valuable aid."

Mrs. Ashton's expression changed; she looked much relieved. "Esther dear, you are such a comfort. Why in the world did I not think of that idea at once? Lieutenant von Reuter is such a friend of Betty's and of mine that I am sure he will tell us what to do, even if he is unable to discover Betty himself." She put her hand on her son's shoulder, for Dick Ashton was growing more and more stern and uneasy. "Don't you think you had best drive up to the castle and see him yourself? Or if you could telephone that would be quicker."

"I dislike very much asking a stranger to have any part in a family affair of this kind, mother," Dick answered severely. "I have met Lieutenant von Reuter only two or three times and it surprises me to find that you appear to regard an acquaintance of a few weeks as a friend. I shall prefer to make my own investigations first without asking his advice."

So accustomed was Mrs. Ashton to yielding to her son's wishes that for the moment, although she was plainly unconvinced of his wisdom, she seemed about to give up. However, Esther Crippen laid her hand quietly on Richard Ashton's arm. "Please, please," she whispered so faintly that no one else could catch her exact words, "don't let anything that I have been saying to you today influence you or keep you from following the wisest course. Mrs. Ashton and I are right. And besides," Esther's voice trembled in spite of her effort at self-control, "we must find Betty no matter what method we use. I am afraid she has been taken ill and is among strangers unable to let us hear. I—I can't imagine what else could have occurred."

Dick's face softened. Why did Esther's advice always seem to him so much more admirable and intelligent than other persons'? Possibly because she so seldom thought first of herself!

"Dr. Ashton, do hurry," Polly O'Neill now urged impatiently. "I want to study every foot of the way from here into Waldheim before it grows too dark for me to see. If our Camp Fire training only will come to our aid! For if Betty has lost her way, surely she ought to be able to give us one of our old signals which we may recognize."

She was hurrying out of the door when Margaret Adams, who was sitting next Mrs. Ashton, trying to soothe the older woman's nervousness, said in a voice whose thrilling and sympathetic quality never failed to hold any audience that heard it. "Please wait for a moment, Dr. Ashton and Polly. There is something I want you to hear—a confession I must make. Earlier this afternoon when we first began to feel afraid that Betty was not coming home it occurred to me that perhaps Lieutenant von Reuter might know something about her. You must not think I intended being officious, but was there not a possibility that she might have gone for a walk or drive with him? You see, American girls so often fail to understand that they cannot do away from home the things they do in the United States without any thought of harm. And so I wondered if the walk or drive together might not have become a longer one than they realized or if an accident might not have taken place so as to delay them unaccountably. Therefore at about four o'clock this afternoon I telephoned to the castle and asked to speak to Lieutenant von Reuter. The man servant told me that he was not at home, that he had left the castle at an early hour in the morning without saying where he was going or when he would return. However, I left word begging him to let us hear as soon as he came in. I made the message so emphatic that I hardly think it could have failed to be delivered. Notwithstanding we have heard nothing thus far. But if Dr. Ashton feels that it would be best to inquire again, I want him to know what I have done and \_\_\_"

Never in their acquaintance had Polly O'Neill before shown impatience with her new friend. Now, however, her loyalty to Betty Ashton seemed the most important issue in the world. Particularly when on the faces of Mrs. Ashton, of Dick and even Esther, she could observe that Miss Adams' suggestion had left its influence. Well, she and Betty had been like sisters always, members of the same Camp Fire club. She knew that Betty could do no such thing as Margaret Adams suggested, even in a spirit of thoughtlessness. It would seem too much like an effort to mislead her mother and deliberately to desert her.

Just as emphatically as of old Polly shook her head, although she did manage to speak with more than her usual restraint. "You are mistaken, Margaret, in supposing that Betty's disappearance has anything to do with Carl von Reuter. Oh, yes, I—I know it is partly my fault because I told you the other afternoon that Esther and I were both uneasy because she seemed to like him so much. But that did not mean that she would ever do anything wilful or foolish because of him. You see, dear, you are confusing the Princess and me. Betty thinks before she does things; I don't as often as I should, though I hope I have improved." Deserting her position next Richard Ashton, Polly slipped across the room, dropping on one knee before her friend. "You must not think we do not appreciate your kindness in trying to help us, but if you had known the Princess as long as I have you would not misunderstand her."

"Bravo, Polly," whispered Margaret Adams kindly. Then she turned gracefully toward Mrs. Ashton. "I hope you do not feel as offended with me as Polly does. Truly I did not mean that my suggestion should reflect seriously upon Betty. It has not taken me so long a time to understand

her as one might think. But it did not seem to me that taking a walk or a drive with a friend would be thought so serious an offense. Also there is the possibility that she may have met Lieutenant von Reuter on her way home and that without reflecting on your possible uneasiness ——"

But Miss Adams could not continue her apology, for at this moment there was an unexpected noise of some one approaching the front door. And as the sitting room was so close to the small hall everybody started up with broken words of relief. Betty was doubtless arriving and within a few seconds would be able to explain the mystery of her delay.

Almost at the same moment Dick Ashton and Esther managed to reach the little front door together, although it was Dick's hand that opened it. The changed expression in his usually serious eyes showed the burden of anxiety that had been so suddenly lifted from him.

However, he made no outward sign—it was Esther who gave the muffled cry of disappointment—when outside they discovered the figures of two young men, Lieutenant von Reuter and his cousin Frederick.

"I have been in Berlin for the day," Carl von Reuter explained formally, "and when I returned, bringing my cousin with me, I found the message that some one here wished to speak to me. It seemed best that I come in person. I do not understand, but if I can be of service——"

Brushing past Richard Ashton, Esther held out her hand.

"You are very kind, Lieutenant von Reuter. Won't you both please come in? For you see my sister Betty has been lost for five or six hours and as we are dreadfully worried, we hoped you would be kind enough to try to help us find her."

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## CHAPTER XV

### THE FINDING OF BRUNHILDE

From twilight until almost midnight Dick Ashton, the other two young men, Polly and Esther and a number of people from the village of Waldheim searched the surrounding country for Betty Ashton. It seemed utterly incredible that she could not be found! She was not a child; she was almost a woman and could not have been lured away by strangers. But why if she were lost did she not make some sign? There were several signals learned in her Camp Fire days, which Polly and Esther would assuredly have understood.

Earlier in the evening by the aid of a lantern Polly O'Neill had insisted that she had discovered tracks that were surely Betty's, turning from the main road which would have brought her to the cottage, into a small stretch of woods. But at night it was quite impossible to follow these tracks over the brush and bracken, and after the woods had been thoroughly searched and no other suggestion of a wanderer discovered, Polly's idea did not carry much weight. Moreover, the two girls were too utterly exhausted and frightened to continue the investigation, though neither of them would consent to return home.

By chance the two girls, Richard Ashton and Carl von Reuter had separated from the others and were resting for a moment by the side of a low stone fence enclosing a forest.

Dick was leaning over Esther urging her to let him take her into the village, where a carriage was in waiting to drive any one of them who might have news, back to Mrs. Ashton and Miss Adams, who were still together at the cottage. Carl von Reuter happened to be standing close to Polly, but he was not speaking to her nor observing her. All through the evening he had seemed as anxious and interested about Betty as her brother and even more nonplussed at their inability to find any trace of her; because, of course, he knew so thoroughly well every inch of ground in the surrounding country and had also called in his servants from the castle to assist in the search.

Suddenly Polly clutched at the young lieutenant's arm. She had risen unexpectedly to her feet and was pointing ahead apparently at nothing so far as her companions could see.

The night had been dark and cloudy, the atmosphere sultry with suggestions of a September storm. Therefore the task of finding Betty, should she be out of doors, had been the more difficult and the more imperative.

"Look, Esther," Polly called sharply, "there over in the woods toward the west. Do you see anything?"

Esther had gotten up on her feet more slowly and was leaning on Dick Ashton's arm. She had become weary of false clues and false hopes. And Polly with her sanguine temperament had been more often deceived than any one else.

"That is only a mist you see rising between the trees, Miss O'Neill," Carl von Reuter answered before the others spoke. "It very often occurs in these damp old forests on sultry nights."

Polly made no reply for the moment, only walking over to where Esther was standing she whispered something to her that no one else could hear. And Esther took tight hold of Polly's

hand and without regarding their escorts they both stared unceasingly in the direction that Polly had first indicated. Were the light clouds they saw at so great a distance away, rising and floating lightly in the night air like pale ghosts, really nothing but mist? Then it was curious that the mist should rise always in double clouds, the one within a few feet of the other.

A second time the two girls together watched this phenomenon and then after an interval of ten minutes, during which neither one of them would change her position, for the third time they saw the two light clouds unfurl and this time, though they may not have been perfectly certain of this detail, there appeared tiny sparks and cinders amid the clouds.

Polly turned deliberately toward Carl von Reuter. "Lieutenant von Reuter," she said, "Betty is somewhere within your woods. I am perfectly sure of it and so is Esther by this time. You may not understand, but we have lived together in the woods for over a year and have studied woodcraft until we know almost as much about it as Indian women. The two columns of smoke which we have discovered rising at regular intervals are a woodsman's signal for help. We must go to Betty at once. It is dark and we are not familiar with your forests, so that it would take us a longer time to reach her alone. Will you be good enough to lead the way?"

There was no disputing the girl's quiet conviction, and as Esther was now equally convinced, neither young man advanced any denial. Only Carl von Reuter plunged ahead so rapidly that following him was almost out of the question.

By some magic he seemed to know the open spaces between the trees and where the underbrush could be safely trodden down. Neither did he make any effort to assist either of the two girls, leaving that task entirely to Richard Ashton. And though under ordinary circumstances neither girl would have needed help, tonight Esther was strangely tired. All day, since the early hour of leaving their little German cottage, she had been under unusual strain. So that now, though she was ashamed of it, remembering her long training in outdoor life, now and then she did manage to stumble and to have to clutch either at Polly or at Dr. Ashton for support.

In one of these moments of delay, Carl von Reuter did hesitate for an instant, calling back over his shoulder: "We will reach the path in a short time. It is the same path which you took through the woods to my hunting lodge several weeks ago."

But when they finally reached this path their leader had disappeared into the distance ahead of them, leaving the three strangers to stumble on through the darkness alone.

And if ever in her life Polly O'Neill was to recognize the need which any woman may some day require of a knowledge of the woods and fields, she needed it tonight. For here the three of them were in an unknown forest in a strange land with no light except that made by the dark lantern which some one in the village had loaned Dick. Esther was too tired to be of much assistance, and Richard Ashton did not understand half so much of outdoor life as the two Camp Fire girls. Always he had been too devoted a student of books for the right kind of acquaintance with nature. Moreover, Dick was extremely angry at Lieutenant von Reuter's desertion of them. Of course Betty must be found as promptly as possible, if it were true that she was signaling for their aid from some place in the woods. But if Dick had realized it, in his prejudice against their new acquaintance, he would honestly have preferred that Betty should have to wait for her deliverance a few moments longer than that this young foreigner should manage to be her deliverer. And this in spite of the fact that an occasional drop of rain was beginning to fall and that now and then a line of lightning streaked the sky.

Under other circumstances nothing would have persuaded Carl von Reuter to have so failed in courtesy as his present action showed. For whatever the difference in points of view between an American and a foreigner, there is little difference in the code of good breeding between one civilized nation and another. And Lieutenant von Reuter was a member of the old German nobility. Indeed, one of the objections to him which both Esther and Polly had expressed was that he was almost too formal, too conventional in his manner and behavior for their simpler American taste. So of course there was some unusual impulse, some strong emotion and design now urging him ahead almost to the complete forgetting of his other companions.

But not since the hour of their original meeting had the young German failed to acknowledge to himself that Betty Ashton had a charm for him which no other girl had ever before possessed. He had known no other American girls until now, and his acquaintance with German girls of his own position in life had been at solemn parties, where they were usually too frightened and self-conscious to have much to say for themselves. Of course he had always been told that American girls were unlike any others and yet had failed to imagine that they could have the beauty and fascination that Betty Ashton had for him. Why, he had not even tried to find out anything about her family, about her position in the world! For it is a curious fact that foreigners who care so much for class distinctions in their own countries have no such attitude toward Americans. Because we have no titles, because a family that is poor and obscure in one generation may be rich and distinguished in the next, they consider that all Americans are of equal position except in the matter of wealth. And this fact Carl von Reuter had learned in connection with Betty Ashton. She was poor, there was no possibility of doubting it. One could see it plainly enough in the simple fashion in which they were living and through their ordinary conversation. Moreover, Betty had made no effort to hide the fact. Indeed, it had seemed at times as if she were anxious to speak of it for some secret reason of her own. Yet she need not have felt this necessary, since there could be no uncertainty in the young count's mind. Frederick von Reuter, who seemed to have almost forgotten his own emotion in his deep interest in his cousin's, having made careful

inquiries through his bank, had sadly reported that Miss Ashton could not possibly be regarded as an American heiress.

This information, tragic as it may have sounded at the time, had no place in Carl's thoughts tonight. He was only possessed of the one thought that the girl whom he admired and liked so much was alone in the woods, probably hurt and needing his aid. And that at any moment she might be caught in a fierce thunderstorm.

As the young fellow strode swiftly along—he had hunted too frequently in his own forests not to be entirely familiar with them—he began to realize that the signal which his two girl companions had recognized first was coming from the same neighborhood where he had had a previous meeting with them. For as he drew nearer, once again the signals flashed, though dimmer now because of the increasing strength of the storm.

Curiously enough, as he strode along he was recalling the story of Siegfried and Brunhilde which he had repeated to the three girls at Polly's request. And the words of Siegfried's song came back to his mind. This was not just an idle coincidence. The Germans are a far more sentimental and music-loving race of people than we can fully understand. And from the hour when Carl von Reuter had first seen Betty, the beauty of her gold-red hair had suddenly made him think of his small boy dream of this best-loved heroine in all the old German legends. There was hardly a time in his childhood when he had not been devoted to this story, which is usually unfamiliar to American boys and girls until such time as they are grown and begin seeing Wagner's wonderful operas, written about these tales of the Nibelung.

And in truth the young man found Betty Ashton as much encircled by fire as ever the famous Brunhilde could have been and with the thunder and lightning playing over her head like the final scene in "Siegfried."

The girl lay on the ground between two smouldering fires from which only feeble columns of smoke were now arising, although there were flames enough still left among the embers to reveal the outline of her form. Nevertheless, though Carl von Reuter called her name aloud long before he could reach her side, Betty made no response. A short time after the reason was sufficiently plain, for she had fainted.

For half a moment the young lieutenant stood silent, staring down upon her, too full of feeling to trust himself to speak. She looked so utterly worn out and exhausted. Her thin summer dress of some light color and material was torn and soiled and her hair had come unfastened and was hanging loose about her shoulders, making a kind of vivid pillow against the darker background of the earth. For when another sudden flash of lightning followed the girl's hair was the color of the flame.

"Miss Ashton," Carl von Reuter called.

It was evident enough even in these first few minutes what had taken place. For one of Betty's shoes was off and her ankle had been put into splints and bandaged with the sleeve torn from her gown. She must have dragged herself about collecting wood and underbrush for her camp fires and there was at present no way of guessing how many she may have had to build before her signals were discovered.

"Miss Ashton—Betty!" Lieutenant von Reuter called again. But the girl made no answer and the heavens suddenly seemed to part wide open, letting forth a heavy downpour of rain.

In the same instant the young man gathered up the girl in his arms and ran toward the shelter of his hunting lodge. He had always the key with him, so that the door was quickly opened. Placing her on a couch, he then lighted candles; but the next moment, now that Betty was safe, he had a sudden appreciation of the struggle and anxiety of his three companions, whom he had so unceremoniously deserted. With a silver hunting whistle to his lips he blew loudly and then waited for an answer. None succeeded and he tried again and again. The third time an answering "hello" came from the lips of Richard Ashton.

When the young count finally turned and re-entered the room he discovered that Betty's eyes were now open and that she was looking gratefully and with entire consciousness at him.

But without attempting to do anything more than smile at her reassuringly the young lieutenant knelt and started a fire in his big open fireplace. And before it had done more than flicker into a light blaze, Polly, Esther and Dick were also crowding into the room, the girls kneeling beside Betty, while Carl von Reuter apologized to Dr. Ashton for his desertion.

It was now past midnight and out of the question for any one of the three girls to attempt the journey home. So after seeing that his four guests were made as comfortable as possible in his lodge for the night, it was the young German officer who tramped the long distance back through the rain to assure Mrs. Ashton and Miss Adams of Betty's discovery.

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## CHAPTER XVI

### A HEART-TO-HEART TALK

Several days later Betty Ashton was driven over to spend the day with Polly and Miss Adams. Her accident had not been a serious one, since by putting her ankle into splints at once she had saved it from dangerous swelling. Nevertheless she was unable to walk about except on crutches and so the tedium of staying at home was trying. Particularly as this was one of Esther's days in Berlin devoted to her music lesson, Betty wished to be with her friends.

The three women had spent the morning out of doors, but after lunch, as it grew unexpectedly cool, Polly suggested that a small fire be laid in their queer German stove, which was built of porcelain and stood like an odd-shaped monument in a corner of the sitting room.

Betty was resting on the sofa, Miss Adams writing letters at her desk and Polly sitting on a low stool as close as possible to the few embers visible near the base of the stove. She had never forgotten her old devotion to a camp fire and this was as good a substitute as one could obtain in their little German household.

Strangely enough no one of the little company had spoken a single word for the past ten minutes, so that it might have appeared as though all possible confidences had been exchanged during the morning. Margaret Adams finally got up and coming across the room, seated herself on the edge of Betty's sofa. She was wearing a soft, dark-blue silk made with no other trimming than a girdle and a little round collar of lace, and she seemed very few years older than her two companions.

The Princess looked at the great lady admiringly. It had been difficult to think of Miss Adams today except as one of themselves. She had been so gay and friendly, laughing over their jokes and apparently never once thinking or talking of herself. How wonderful to be able to accept fame and wealth in so simple a spirit, and what an object lesson for erratic Polly! Yet some benefit must Miss Adams have received from her friend, for surely she was looking years younger since her arrival in the German forests and so rested that she might soon be able to go back to her work with renewed talent. Think of being rested by being in Polly O'Neill's society! How surprised Polly's mother and Mollie would be by this information! And unconsciously Betty began smiling into the lovely face now bending over hers.

Could it be possible that Miss Adams was actually blushing, that she was returning her gaze with a kind of gentle timidity that somehow recalled either Mollie or Meg?

Then suddenly Margaret Adams said, "Betty, I have been wishing to apologize to you ever since the day of your accident. I know that no one else will tell you, but on the evening when we were so worried over deciding what might have become of you, I suggested that you might have gone for a walk or drive alone with Lieutenant von Reuter without thinking to let your mother know, and that some accident had occurred to delay you. At the time Polly scolded me dreadfully for my lack of faith in you, yet I don't feel that it would be quite fair to you unless I make this confession."

What on earth would Betty Ashton not have given at this moment to have prevented her cheeks from suddenly crimsoning in such a ridiculous fashion? Would she never hear the end of her escapade? Excepting her mother, her own family had been curiously severe and unsympathetic over what had seemed to her only an act of foolishness on her part, scarcely a crime. And here was Polly O'Neill also frowning upon her at this present instant as if she had been a saint herself during all her past life.

"It is all right, Miss Adams, of course," Betty murmured. "I am not in the least offended by your conjecture. It was natural enough under the circumstances, I think." And here Betty raised herself on one elbow, forgetting everything else in her earnestness. "Won't you tell me, please, Miss Adams, if it would have been so dreadful a thing if I had done what you supposed? Of course I should have let mother know, but otherwise I should not have thought anything of it. Why, it seems to me that it would have been much better had I had a companion on my walk. Because when I was such a goose as to catch my foot in a tangle of vines and tumble headlong, had Lieutenant von Reuter been with me he could have helped me home or at least let mother hear so that I need not have given so much trouble and uneasiness."

Miss Adams kissed the girl impetuously, failing to see that Polly was frowning at them both.

"Yes, dear, since you honestly wish to know, it would not have been wise," the older woman answered, "though I understood at the time that you might have done the thing without thinking. You know there is an old expression—and of course these old expressions bore us so that we are apt to forget how vital they are—that when we live in Rome we must do as the Romans so. I wish American girls would remember this adage a little better when they are traveling in Europe. You see, these old countries over here have had their customs much longer than we have had ours, and a walk with a friend would have meant nothing of any importance to you, but to them——"

"Margaret," Polly O'Neil broke into the conversation abruptly, "I don't mean to be rude in interrupting you. But there is one thing that Betty Ashton has never yet explained to my satisfaction or anybody else's, and I don't see why she should not do it now. Will you please tell me, Betty, whatever induced you to start off on such a journey by yourself? You must have known that the walk would take you several hours at least, even if nothing unforeseen had happened. Surely you had sense enough to know that your wandering around in a strange woods alone without anyone's knowing where you were would not be safe at any time or place. What made you do it?"

Betty bit her lips. It was true that she and Polly had never failed in the past in being absolutely



honest with each other, nor had she ever hesitated to ask of Polly anything that she herself desired to know. Yet it was hardly fair that she should be asked this particular question before a comparative stranger. It had been difficult enough to make Dick and Esther accept her explanation as a reasonable one after several days of discussion. So what should she now answer Polly? For her friend's eyes were upon her with that queer searching gaze they sometimes wore, and her high cheek bones were flushed with determination—and something else.

"Answer me," Polly repeated firmly.

"Why, I thought I told you the other morning," Betty returned meekly. "I had no very special reason for taking the walk. I was just nervous and restless and kind of worried and all of a sudden as I started for home, why it seemed to me that I could not bear to go indoors so soon. And then I thought of the beautiful woods where we were together a while ago and I believed that if I could rest there for a little I should be——"

"Be what, Betty Ashton?" Polly demanded almost savagely. And then she shook her head sagely and with her arms about her knees relapsed into her old habit of rocking herself thoughtfully back and forth. "You need not try to explain anything further to me or to any one else for that matter. Your explanations are too absurd. Because if you don't know yourself what is the trouble with you, Esther and I both do. You are falling in love. You have not been like yourself for weeks! Why do you suppose that just now when I asked you a simple question that you should hesitate and flush? You went to that same old place in the forest alone just because you wanted to think about——"

But the Princess was now getting up from her place on the sofa and the other girl understood perfectly well her pretty air of offended dignity.

"Miss Adams," Betty began quietly, "it is growing late and if you don't mind will you ask your maid to send for my carriage. I have had a lovely day with you. Thank you for having asked me." And as she started limping into the other room for her wraps it was the older woman who slipped her arm affectionately about her, in the meantime frowning at Polly with more displeasure than she had ever before shown.

But Mistress Polly did not stir from her stool nor cease from rocking herself after the other two women had disappeared. Nor did she even repent sufficiently to help Betty out to her carriage, in spite of her friend's temporary lameness and need of her. The maid and Margaret could this time fill her place. But it was not only bad temper nor was it exactly repentance for her impertinence that kept Polly so steadfast in her childish position. It was ridiculous of her, certainly, and yet she could not keep back her tears. She had been fearful that her beloved Betty was beginning to care for this young foreigner; now she felt absolutely assured of it. For Betty would not even deny her accusation nor quarrel with her effrontery. How grown-up she had become, her dear Princess! And what a gracious, high-bred manner she had! It was too dreadful to have to think of leaving her behind in a foreign country forever and ever, married to a man whose ideas of life must be so different from theirs. Well, for her part she should fight against such a marriage taking place to the bitter end!

Nevertheless this resolution did not keep Polly from feeling like a very rude and much-snubbed little girl for the rest of that afternoon and evening. Miss Adams did not refrain from assuring her that she had behaved like a bad-mannered child. For whether or not the Princess was beginning to care for the young lieutenant, it was both unjust and unkind in Polly to try to tear away the delicate veil of romance which in the beginning should cover all young eyes.

As for Betty herself, she of course made no comment on the day's experiences to her family, except to say that she had had a pleasant enough time, but was tired. No one of them paid her as much attention as usual, for they were too deeply interested in some news which Dick Ashton had just received in an American letter. Anthony Graham had written saying that old Judge Maynard had recently died and that Betty had been mentioned in the old man's will. The will had not yet been probated, but would be within the month, when full particulars would be furnished them. At the time of his death Anthony had been with the old Judge, who had asked that the Ashton family be advised of his intention.

It was odd that under the circumstances Betty should appear to be the least interested of the four persons about their small dinner table in the news of her own good fortune.

"I wonder how much the legacy will amount to, mother—only a few hundred dollars, I presume," Dick Ashton suggested. "It is an amazing thing to me, however, why Judge Maynard should have left Betty a cent. Of course he is an old bachelor with no heirs, but he seemed to have taken a great fancy to this Graham fellow. And moreover, Betty was entirely an outsider."

Mrs. Ashton would not entirely agree to her son's line of argument. For Judge Maynard and her husband had been great friends, and interested in a number of business ventures together in earlier days, when Mr. Ashton had helped make the Judge's fortune as well as his own. And the older man had not had the misfortune to lose his. Moreover, he had been devoted to Betty when she was a small girl and later had shown much interest in her effort to hold on to the old Ashton place.

"I should not be in the least surprised, dear, if the old Judge has left you as much as a thousand dollars," Mrs. Ashton insisted as she helped Betty undress and kissed her good-night.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE DAY BEFORE ESTHER'S DÉBUT

Three weeks had passed and Betty Ashton had fully recovered from her accident. Today she had been doing a hundred small tasks in the house, marching up and down their little garden, sometimes alone and sometimes with Polly, yet never getting beyond calling distance of home. Now and then she would tiptoe softly to a small bedroom and stand outside for a moment listening silently. If a voice called her she went inside for a little while, but if not she would go quietly away. For a solemn edict had been issued in the family the evening before, that on the following day no matter what should take place Esther must have absolute rest. At four o'clock, however, she was to be aroused, dressed and given a light tea, since at five they were to start for Berlin, where Esther was to make her *début* as a singer at Professor Hecksher's celebrated autumn concert.

And curiously enough, Esther had been able to sleep the greater part of the morning. For weeks before it had seemed to her that she had slept neither day nor night, so intense had been her nervousness and dread. Suppose she should make a ghastly failure of her songs; suppose as she stepped out on the stage, facing an audience largely composed of German critics and musicians,—that one of her old attacks of shyness should seize her? Her own disgrace she might be able to bear, but not Betty's, nor her father's, who was writing such eager, excited letters from Woodford with the sailing of each ship to their port; and not Richard Ashton's, who had always been her good friend. Through his kindness had she not first been allowed to play the grand piano at the old Ashton homestead, in those early days when her hunger for music had been almost as strong as her hunger for love?

But after her breakfast, which Betty brought to her sitting beside her on the bed while she ate, Esther for the time at least forgot her fears. There was nothing more that she could do—no further thought or study or preparation of any kind that she could give to her evening's work. So a feeling of gentle lassitude stole over her with the conviction that she was now in the hands of fate, and that it was useless to struggle further.

But if Esther was spared this final nervous tension before her *début*, Betty Ashton experienced a double portion of it. Indeed, in after years she often used to say that never at another time in her life had she suffered anything like it—not even on her own wedding day when every girl supposedly reaches the climax of excitement.

It was not because Betty had any lack of faith in her sister's talent, for no one who had heard Esther sing in the past few months could have doubted her ability. Even Miss Adams, who had heard most of the world's great singers, had assured them that they need have no fear for her future. Yet Betty knew her sister's disposition so well, knew how little self-esteem Esther had, how little of the vanity that sometimes seems necessary to success, and there was a harrowing possibility that she might suddenly be made ill from stage fright. Yet of course the younger girl recognized her own foolishness in allowing her imagination to dwell on such remote chances. Hardly was she able to explain even to herself the exact reasons for her feeling of stress and strain on that day which seemed so interminably long. Of course she and Polly had made up their difficulty long before—they had been having quarrels and making up ever since they were tiny girls—but today even Polly's society had failed to offer her any consolation, until at last Polly had gone back home to rest for an hour or two before dressing for their journey into Berlin.

And Mrs. Ashton had insisted upon Betty's doing the same thing. The girl could not make up her mind to stay shut up in the house, for although it was early October, the day was delightfully warm, so she lay down in a steamer chair under a tree in the yard, and covering herself with a light-blue shawl, fell at once into her former train of thought.

For in some way it was not just this thought of Esther's concert alone that had so filled her mind, but the idea that this concert in a measure was to be a turning point in their lives. Soon after it was over Polly and Miss Adams intended returning to America and Dick Ashton was to go with them. For not long after his talk with Esther on the train he had also discussed the same matter with his mother, and though she and Betty were both deeply grieved over giving him up, it was plain enough to them that Dick's future now lay in the United States. There he must make his reputation and establish himself in his profession. Nevertheless Betty could not now leave Esther to fight her battles alone, and just as surely Mrs. Ashton must remain with Betty. So Dick was to begin his struggle without his family. He had received a fine opening with a prominent physician in Boston, an old friend of his father's who had always known of his devotion and success in his chosen work, so that except for his loneliness there was no special reason for troubling about his immediate future. Notwithstanding, Betty was troubled. For Dick was not in the least like himself, had not been all summer, and now was becoming more and more solemn and stern as the time of his leave-taking approached. Of course she had always remembered him as more serious than most other young men; yet he had never before been morose or unhappy. All their lives had they not been having wonderfully good times together? And now—well, for one thing, Betty knew perfectly that her brother was feeling uneasy over her friendship with Lieutenant von Reuter and had not hesitated in telling her so, expressing his own disapproval of any further intimacy between them. And assuredly she had failed in giving him any satisfaction in return. For

Betty had made no clearer revelation of her feeling toward the young foreigner to her brother than she had to Polly O'Neill. She had positively declined having their friendship interfered with, and as Richard Ashton knew nothing against him he was forced to yield to his sister's wish. Mrs. Ashton entirely sympathized with Betty, and made no effort to hide her pleasure in Carl von Reuter's attentions.

As the girl lay almost as if she were asleep in her big chair, now and then opening her eyes to glance up at the deeply blue October sky, it did not seem to her that her own obstinacy in this one particular was a sufficient reason for Dick's dejection. And yet what other reason could there be? He had promised to come home from Berlin earlier this afternoon in order to escort them back again. And probably if Esther's *début* was a tremendous success he might be made more cheerful.

And then in all probability Betty must have fallen asleep for about ten minutes, because when next she opened her eyes, Dick was standing within a few feet of her and some one else was beside him.

"Betty," she heard her brother's voice saying, "wake up, please, won't you and speak to an old friend? For otherwise you would never guess in half a lifetime who has arrived and come to me in Berlin today."

Making a tremendous effort to attain her usual dignity, Betty opened wide her gray eyes, stared, tried to get up out of her chair, and then finding her feet tangled in the blue shawl, stumbled and would have fallen except for the newcomer's outstretched arm.

Yet even when he had restored her to her usual equilibrium she did not immediately recognize their visitor, although she found herself looking up into a pair of clear hazel eyes and at the strong, clean outline of a typical American face. The young man must have been about twenty-three or four years old. He had dark hair, resolutely forbidden to curl, and curiously brilliant skin; but the contour of his face was almost too lean and the expression of his lips and chin too set and firm for so young a fellow.

"Miss Ashton," he began unsmilingly, "am I always to have to tell you who I am each time we meet?"

And then, just as she had once several years before, Betty held out both hands in a surprised and happy greeting.

"Why, it is Anthony Graham! But you must please forgive me, because how in the world could I ever have dreamed of seeing you here? What in the wide world has brought you to Germany?"

And as Anthony did not answer at once, Dick Ashton walked away, coming back a moment later with two porch chairs, which he placed near his sister's larger one.

"Sit down again, please, Betty," he asked. "I realize that we have very little time, but I think it better that you should hear at once what Mr. Graham has come all the way across the ocean to tell you." And Dick's face was so queer that it was quite impossible to tell what his emotions might be, so that Betty clutched the sides of her chair, white and frightened.

"Yes, please, if it is bad news, tell me at once," she whispered.

Anthony Graham's smile, appearing now for the first time, was immediately reassuring.

"But it is not bad news and we should not have frightened you," he began at once. "It is news that almost anybody in the world would be more than happy to hear. Judge Maynard has left you the greatest part of his fortune, which will amount to about fifty thousand dollars, I believe, and as he made me his executor, I have come over to try and make matters clear to you and your mother and brother."

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### "FIFTY THOUSAND DOLLARS TO ME!"

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"Fifty thousand dollars to me!" Betty Ashton heard the tones of her own voice distinctly and yet was hardly conscious of what she was saying. "Why, what could have influenced Judge Maynard to leave me so much money? I simply can't understand it."

"You don't have to understand it, Miss Betty; you just have to accept and enjoy it," Anthony argued. "But some day when we have more time I should like to tell you some of the things Judge Maynard said to me at about the time he was writing his last will. He was a peculiar, childless old man and he had always been more fond of you than you or any member of your family dreamed. And after your father's death, when you went on so cheerfully with your life in spite of the change in your fortune, he made up his mind to look after your future."

"But you, Anthony. Polly told me that it was to you the Judge had taken such a great fancy that most of the people in Woodford expected him to make *you* his heir. I cannot take your inheritance."

Anthony Graham laughed, at the same moment getting up from his chair. "I have to take the next train back to Berlin, but I mean to see you tonight at Miss Esther's concert. And please, Dr. Ashton, won't you explain to your sister that she cannot take from me an inheritance which I never had nor dreamed of having. Judge Maynard believed that a man should make his own way in the world. So he has left me the chance to go on with his law practice if I am big enough to hold on to it, and besides that a legacy of five thousand dollars."

"But how could you have come away from home at such a time, running the risk of losing so much?" Betty queried thoughtfully. "I suppose you might have written us all the details of my inheritance if you had chosen."

Richard Ashton appeared a little annoyed at what seemed to him a lack of appreciation and of proper friendliness in his sister's speech. Their guest, however, showed no hurt or concern. He merely looked steadfastly at Betty, saying with a directness and honesty that was to distinguish him for the rest of his life, "I don't wonder at your being surprised. But I have never been out of the state of New Hampshire before in my life. And it seemed to me about time that I should learn something more of the outside world. And besides I was not willing to have many more months go by without seeing you once again."

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## CHAPTER XVIII

### THAT NIGHT

Although six persons left the little station at Waldheim to attend the concert in Berlin by special arrangement, Esther and Betty were allowed to occupy a coach in the train together without any

one else being with them. Esther had particularly asked that this might be arranged. The two sisters did not speak very often during the trip, but sat quietly looking out the window holding each other's hands. Judging from the two faces, one might reasonably have supposed that it was Betty Ashton who was about to make her *début* that evening instead of Esther. For the older girl's eyes shone with a new happiness and content. Just while she was dressing for her concert her sister had managed to tell her the news of Judge Maynard's surprising will. And from that moment Esther had almost forgotten the trying ordeal ahead of her in her joy over Betty's good fortune. For now she need no longer worry over her little sister's future, no longer grieve over the change in her fortune. Why, she might even fail tonight and Betty would not suffer.

She gave a sigh, and the Princess drew closer to her.

"You are not to think about a single thing that has any connection with the concert tonight, Esther," the younger girl reminded her. "Professor Hecksher says that you know your song perfectly and your encore is to be a surprise even to me. Let us talk about our old Camp Fire days in the woods. Don't you remember when we thought poor little Nan Graham must have stolen that wretched money of mine, when I had only lost it in the woods and Polly had discovered it. Dick says that Anthony Graham told him Nan has a fine position as a teacher of domestic science in a high school in Dartmouth. And it seems that his father has reformed and gone to work and the whole family now is quite different. Anthony gives all the credit of the changes to Nan and Nan ascribes them to what she learned in our Camp Fire club at Sunrise Hill. It is lovely to think that may be true, isn't it?"

"Yes, and even better to reflect that Betty Ashton originated the club," Esther returned.

"Yes, and that Esther suggested the idea to her by singing an exquisite song and then with her own hands starting a fire," Betty added.

So the two girls talked on fitfully while the train carried them swiftly onward toward the great German city.

The concert was to be held in a small opera house close to one of the more fashionable avenues. It was an old building, but was considered a particularly fine one for musical purposes. And immediately upon their arrival Mrs. Ashton and Betty went with Esther to remain in her dressing room until a short time before her appearance.

Dick Ashton, Miss Adams and Polly had a box reserved for them near the stage, where Betty and Mrs. Ashton were to join them. But before they appeared Anthony Graham in immaculate evening clothes came around to the box door to extend his greetings to Polly, and Dick insisted that he be one of their party. And five minutes afterwards Lieutenant von Reuter also joined them, Betty having invited him several days before.

The concert was to be a serious musical affair commencing with the playing of a stringed orchestra led by the great Professor Hecksher himself. And as Polly had never seen him before, she amused herself while waiting for Betty's return and fighting off her own apprehensions about Esther by never taking her eyes from the great man's face. He must have weighed two hundred and fifty pounds and yet had the face of a glorified cherub. His hair was long and light, hanging down to his shoulders and he wore spectacles over his burning, heavy-lidded brown eyes.

The first singer on the program was supposed to be the famous teacher's star pupil. But because she seemed old and ugly to Polly O'Neill and because the girl could hardly wait for her own friend to be heard, she took little interest in the really remarkable solo and was almost vexed with Miss Adams and with Carl von Reuter for their evident admiration of a stranger. It was a comfort to her to observe that Richard Ashton seemed to be feeling just as she did and that he spent the greater part of his time studying the audience, trying to discover just how many important musical critics were present.

Anthony Graham also had the air of waiting for something or some one.

A quartette followed, and then a violin solo, and afterwards Betty and Mrs. Ashton stole quietly in, taking the two chairs left vacant for them. Polly and Miss Adams were in the front row with Dick Ashton at one side of them, near the back of the box and yet facing the stage. In the second row Betty had the outside seat and she kept her elbow resting on the plush railing with her chin in her hand, entirely unconscious of the large crowd about her. Next her Carl von Reuter had arranged his chair, leaving Mrs. Ashton and Anthony in the rear.

A young man sang before the time for Esther's appearance, but Betty never recalled having seen or heard him. She had left her sister composed and not especially nervous; but there was no way of guessing what a surge of feeling might since have overtaken her.

And then Esther's moment came.

Notwithstanding that Betty had dressed her, fixed her hair and kissed her only a few moments before, she hardly recognized her own sister as she walked slowly to the front of the stage. For had they not always thought of Esther as the homeliest of their group of Camp Fire girls? What had happened to her, what wonderful transformation had taken place? Polly O'Neill almost gasped aloud. Of course every one of her friends had appreciated how much Esther had improved in appearance in the past two years, but it was hardly credible that she could look and behave like this, a girl brought up in an orphan asylum with no friends and no opportunities for so long a time! Well, one should understand that into each life certain wonderful hours may come when

one seems to transcend one's self. And tonight such an hour had come to Esther.

She was to sing Elizabeth's farewell song from the opera of Tannhäuser. And though the concert was not to be sung in costume, so far as possible in selecting and arranging Esther's dress Betty had been mindful of the character and the circumstances of her song.

In the opera there is seen a wayside shrine where the Princess Elizabeth appears each day to pray for the soul of her lover, the knight Tannhäuser, who has gone on a pilgrimage to Rome to ask that his sins may be forgiven him. On this last day the pilgrims have passed on their journey homeward and among them Elizabeth sees no sign of her lost lover, so that she knows he must be unforgiven. She then sings this final song, asking that peace may come to her at last.

Esther wore a long white gown of *crêpe de chine* made in simple classic lines, with the draped tunic which is a modern fashion copied after a far older model. Ordinarily she was too tall and angular in every-day clothes, but this toilette seemed to give her just the grace and dignity her figure and character needed. Her red hair, which had grown a little darker as she grew older, was tonight a crown of glory, so that the pallor of her long grave face did not matter, for her always beautiful mouth had a look both of power and of wistfulness that surprised the strangers in the audience.

"The girl is far too young for the song her teacher has chosen for her," the critics whispered among themselves. It is not fair to make such an experiment, for this song of Elizabeth's is one of the favorites among the great prima donnas. What would this young girl do with it? Would she be too theatrical, too showy, or fail altogether?

While the orchestra played the opening chords Esther waited with her hands clasped lightly together in front of her, but not moving them with her old nervous gesture. Neither did she seem to be looking at anything or anybody. Not once did she even glance toward the box where her sister and friends were watching her, though in a kind of subconscious fashion she was aware of the white intensity in Betty's pretty face and the look of grave strength and helpfulness in Richard Ashton's.

Then Esther began to sing—and Betty, Dick, Polly, Mrs. Ashton and indeed all her friends, both new and old, had a sudden sensation of bitter disappointment. The tears came into Betty's eyes, rolling unheeded down her cheeks, though Polly slipped her hand back through the opening in her chair to press it sympathetically. However, Richard Ashton only set his lips, hardly breathing for the space of half a moment. Did he not recall a similar beginning on Esther's part some years before, when she had sung the Indian Love Song before a group of their Woodford acquaintances, which he had at first believed would end in a failure? Esther would not find this audience so ready to forgive or admire should she take too long a time before winning their attention.

"O blessed Virgin, hear my prayer!  
Thou star of glory, look on me!"

These lines were whispered in so low a tone that they were almost inaudible except to the persons nearest the stage and Esther's voice trembled with nervousness. Was she frightened as she had expected to be? It was difficult to decide, because she stood so still.

"Here in the dust I bend before thee,  
Now from this earth oh set me free!  
Let me a maiden pure and white,  
Enter into thy kingdom bright!"

Betty's tension relaxed. "Bravo," Miss Adams whispered under her breath. Richard Ashton felt a glow which was oddly commingled of pleasure, pride and sorrow. Yet one could not think, could not feel any other emotion now except wonder and delight as the beautiful voice in perfect sympathy with the music and its theme filled every shadowy space in the opera house with harmony.

Betty witnessed the expressions on several previously bored faces near them changing first to surprise, then interest and finally frank pleasure. Small wonder that the old German music master had allowed this young American girl to appear unheralded before them! She could only be twenty-one or twenty-two years old at the most. What a future lay before her!

Still Esther sang on:

"If vain desires and earthy longing  
Have turn'd my heart from thee away,  
The sinful hopes within me thronging  
Before thy blessed feet I lay.  
I'll wrestle with the love I cherished,  
Until in death its flame hath perish'd.  
If of my sin thou wilt not shrive me,  
Yet in this hour, oh grant thy aid!  
Till thy eternal peace thou give me,  
And on thy bounty I will call,  
That heav'nly grace on him may fall."

And with the closing words of her song Esther suddenly seemed to have reached the realization of all her worst fears. Surely she had failed abjectly, for was there not a silence everywhere about her, chilling and cruel? Would not a single pair of hands applaud? She dared not try to find the face of her master, for she hoped never to have to see Professor Hecksher again so long as she lived. Yet here miraculously enough he had appeared on the stage standing next her, with one of his powerful hands holding tight to her cold one, bowing and smiling, while the noise of many bravos and of almost a tumult of applause shook the house. Esther then wondered why she only felt dreadfully tired and had a childish disposition to cry as the great maestro led her off the stage.

But when the girl returned for her encore she was smiling, and her cheeks were more flushed than ever in her life. And in her hands she held a great bunch of pink roses which had mysteriously appeared in her dressing room. And this time she allowed herself to glance smilingly at Betty and Polly and Mrs. Ashton and even to exchange a single quiet glance with Richard Ashton.

Then to the surprise, to the mystification and yet to the pleasure of her listeners, Esther sang the verses which had first touched Betty Ashton's heart and inspired her ardor on that day long ago, the song that is to remain an inspiration to many thousands of women for many years to come, the Camp Fire song of "The Soul's Desire."

"Lay me to sleep in sheltering flame,  
O Master of the Hidden Fire.  
Wash pure my heart, and cleanse for me  
My soul's desire.

"In flame of sunrise bathe my mind,  
O Master of the Hidden Fire,  
That, when I wake, clear-eyed may be  
My soul's desire."

And ten minutes after the finishing of this second song Esther, Betty and Richard Ashton were driving to their old pension where the entire party was to spend the night, Mrs. Ashton, Polly and Miss Adams meaning to join them when the concert was over.

And in the carriage, again it was Esther who seemed quiet and composed, while between tears and laughter Betty poured forth her joy and pride in her sister's wonderful success.

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## CHAPTER XIX

### TEA AT THE CASTLE

Several days after Esther's concert Lieutenant von Reuter persuaded Mrs. Ashton and Miss Adams to bring Betty and Polly with them to afternoon tea at the castle with his father. And as Anthony Graham, not knowing their plans, had come from Berlin for a farewell visit on the same day, he of course was included in the little company. Esther had been urged and had almost promised to be one of them, but when the morning of the party arrived she had pleaded to be excused. Immediately then Polly and Betty had both insisted that she change her mind and had tried coaxing and scolding and almost every possible form of influence until at last Mrs. Ashton had come to her rescue. For Esther had been extremely tired since her *début* and very unlike herself both girls considered. Indeed, they even went further in thinking that she failed in proper appreciation and gratitude for her own success. However, Esther naturally believed that her friends were overestimating her achievement, yet she had recently scarcely understood herself. For it was odd and stupid of her not to feel more elation and more interest in her own future. Had not Professor Hecksher himself written her that she had sung better than he expected? And this from the master was praise indeed! However, he had also written that she was to allow herself a complete rest before they had a talk about her future plans. So with this defense and Mrs. Ashton's additional authority Esther was finally allowed the privilege of staying at home alone except for their maid.

"Dick may be back a little earlier this afternoon, dear," Betty said as she kissed her sister good-by. "He has not so much to do in Berlin now that he has finished his lectures and is just closing up his affairs. Keep him with you if you feel like talking to him, but if not, ask him to come over to the castle and drive back home with us. It is absurd for Dick to be so prejudiced against Lieutenant von Reuter and dreadfully embarrassing to me. For I am sure he hasn't a reason in the world, and yet it is plain enough to everybody."

And as Betty walked away after this final speech Esther had a momentary pang of regret that she had not conquered her own disinclination and gone along with them. For they and Mrs. Ashton were leaving the country for Berlin as soon as the others sailed, and this might prove an excellent chance for the young foreigner to declare his feeling for Betty, *if* his admiration really was serious. Also Esther regretted that she had failed in asking Polly to keep a careful watch upon them, although this she understood that Polly was more than inclined to do without further suggestion.

After Betty and her mother had climbed into the carriage, Anthony Graham accompanying them, and Betty had waved her hand in farewell, Esther, who was standing on the porch watching them depart, suddenly recalled Richard Ashton's half-jesting wish that their sister Betty were not quite so pretty. And this afternoon for the first time Esther believed that she agreed with him. It was absurd to send a girl looking like the Princess did at this present moment into a young man's home with the hope that he would cease to feel an interest in her.

Because it was cold Betty wore a long white cloak over a china blue silk dress of her favorite shade and a white felt hat with a band of the same material about it. No costume could have been simpler, and yet excitement or pleasure or some unusual emotion had made the girl's color brighter in her eyes, her cheeks and even her hair, so that there seemed a kind of mysterious shining about her like a star—a glow which Polly O'Neill recognized instantly as she took her place beside her in the carriage with Anthony Graham in front with the driver and Miss Adams and Mrs. Ashton together on the back seat. Indeed, it inspired Polly to give her friend rather a malicious pinch which actually hurt a little and yet for which she would neither apologize nor explain. Betty presumed that it must have something to do with Anthony Graham's presence, since Polly immediately began making herself more than usually agreeable to him, insisting that he give them his impressions of Germany and the Germans, when Anthony would much have preferred remaining silent. Polly hoped that thus she might be enabled to make her friend realize how much cleverer and more worth while an American fellow was than any blond Siegfried whom she might have met by accident in a foreign land.

Carl von Reuter's old feudal estate, however, was picturesque enough to excite even Polly's undivided admiration, as they drove along an avenue of oak trees, some of them more than a century old, and crossed a drawbridge over a moat, which now formed the bed of a stream flowing down from the hills.

Outside in the garden in front of the house the visitors found Lieutenant von Reuter, his cousin Frederick and his father walking about in the afternoon sunshine waiting to receive their guests. And the young count wore his full dress uniform as an officer in one of the Kaiser's regiments. He was undeniably handsome, and there was no doubt but that he and Betty made a striking picture as they stood side by side for a moment before entering the house, while the young man showed the girl the view of their hunting forests over to the right where she had had her accident.

Tea was served in the most splendid apartment that either the two American girls or Anthony Graham had ever seen before in their lives. Perhaps there was some motive in their host's inviting them into the big banqueting hall in an upper part of the castle rather than in the shabby drawing rooms on the first floor, where the poverty of the family was so much more apparent. But even if this were true, the selection was a happy one, for which his guests were unfeignedly thankful. The great room was fifty feet long and about two-thirds as broad. It had heavy black oak paneling midway to the ceiling, which was formed of heavy beams and rafters of the same wood. And along the ledge of the wainscoting were old tankards of silver and pewter, plates hammered deep with the armorial bearings of different branches of the family. Shields hung against the walls and battered helmets, while standing in groups or in solemn solitary dignity were the "iron men" or the "knights in armor," who had fought for their war lords long before Germany was an empire.

The old count, although he spoke English much less well than his son, led his guests toward a circular space underneath a great stained-glass window, where the light of the afternoon sun shone rose and gold upon the carved table and high-back chairs. He appeared genuinely pleased with their interest and enthusiasm over his estate and the country near by, until Polly, whose sense of the dramatic was always stronger than any other, felt herself becoming as ardently admiring of the older man as she was critical of his son. And after tea was over and the others sat discussing unimportant matters, in a moment of thoughtlessness, Polly allowed the old count to lead her and Anthony Graham to another part of the house in order to show them his library. Mrs. Ashton and Miss Adams had expressed themselves as too tired for the climbing of more stairs, while Betty, Carl and Frederick von Reuter, though making no excuses, yet failed to join them.

When nearly midway down the room it did occur to Polly as unwise to be leaving Betty unchaperoned by her own vigilance, yet as Betty now shook her head, declining positively to be lured into this excursion, there was nothing to do but to trust her friend to Mrs. Ashton and Margaret Adams for a few moments.

Nevertheless Polly should have understood that Mrs. Ashton would not oppose any suggestion for a more intimate conversation with Betty that the young lieutenant might chance to make. And of course it was impossible for Miss Adams to object unless Betty's mother did. As for Frederick von Reuter, the attraction he once entertained for the American girl seemed to continue now only in a kind of transferred interest in his cousin's success.

So that five minutes after Polly disappeared out of one door at the far end of the hall, Carl von Reuter led Betty through another, ostensibly to show her a celebrated portrait in the family gallery, but without inviting the others to accompany them. And Betty seemed quite willingly to have accepted his invitation.

Once inside the gallery, she appeared more deeply interested in the pictures than the young man expected or desired. For the greater number of them were ugly old men and stout elderly *Frauen* with no very strong attraction even for their descendant. And there at the end of the dark room



near a window hung with a faded velvet curtain, stood a small oak seat, while beyond was a particularly fine view of the park.

But Betty could only be lured to this seat by long effort and the moment after seating herself suggested that they had best return to the others now that the pictures had been seen, since it must be almost time for leaving for home. Nevertheless, as her host did not stir or even seem to have heard her request, Betty subsided for a few moments. She was honestly weary, being unaccustomed to such a vast house with its miles of steps and endless passage-ways.

"Miss Ashton," said Lieutenant von Reuter suddenly and quite formally, "will you do me the honor to become my wife? In my country you know it is the custom to speak first to the parent, but I understand that it is not so in your United States."

Then as Betty gazed at him without answering, although her face had flushed deeply, he went on with more feeling: "You know I have cared for you always since our first meeting. I have been unable—I have not cared to conceal it."

Frightened and uncertain, Betty bit her lips to keep them from trembling. This was her first proposal, and she could not help thinking of that for a moment; besides it was so romantic! No one of her friends would ever be apt to experience anything like it. Here she and Lieutenant von Reuter were in his splendid, shabby old castle sitting together in the shadow of his ancestors. Why, what he had just said to her meant that she might some day be a countess if she wished! But Betty brought herself together with a slight frown and a feeling of distaste and shame of herself. What absurd ideas were in her mind in the presence of so tremendously serious a subject! Here she was thinking and behaving like a foolish dreaming child. Did she care for Carl von Reuter for himself? Would she have cared had he been of more humble origin, had he been less handsome? Betty glanced at the young fellow almost fearfully. She had been trying to decide how much she liked him before this without success. Yet because until today he had not declared his feeling toward her, she had not felt it necessary wholly to make up her mind.

"But I thought, Lieutenant von Reuter," Betty answered slowly, "that it was impossible for you to marry any one who was not wealthy, that your estates were mortgaged and that your father looked to you to make your old name prominent once more."

Until now she had kept her head slightly turned away; but with her question Betty faced her companion, her expression grave and interested.

Yet she was surprised to see that the young man's blue eyes now closed slightly while his fair face flushed with what appeared to be an odd combination of satisfaction and regret.

"But you are no longer poor, Miss Ashton," he answered unexpectedly. "I have lately heard of your good fortune, and while it is very little compared to the amount my father expected me to marry, it may be enough. At least, I have been able to persuade him that I care for you so much that we must make it do."

Carl von Reuter spoke quite frankly without any special embarrassment, for it did not seem to him that his speech was in any way remarkable. Indeed, it should make Betty realize the extent of his admiration for her that he had been able to overlook the smallness of her inheritance in comparison with his own needs. Why, a week before he should not have been able to make any declaration of his own feelings! Yet now he was offering his title, his castle, almost his whole future, to an American girl whose estate was so small that it could scarcely do more than cover their debts. And that Betty should not be honored by his offer was beyond his point of view. A German girl would have appreciated the sacrifice he was making; so why not an American?

Betty sat perfectly still during his explanation, with her hands clasped tightly together, showing white against the blue folds of her dress. In her whole life she had never felt so astounded, so completely overwhelmed, and in truth so angry. How could any man coolly say to her that he was willing to marry her in spite of the smallness of her fortune, plainly insinuating at the same moment that unless she had had the good luck to come into her unexpected inheritance she should never have received the honor at all.

The girl's cheeks first flushed hotly and then she felt herself growing pale and self-possessed. Never in her life had she had a more important demand made upon her dignity and good sense. For she must not show any kind of ill-feeling. Thank goodness that she was able to give the only kind of reply that could carry any kind of weight or conviction to her companion and that she could say it with all truthfulness. For never had Betty Ashton felt less affection for any friend she had ever had than she did at this instant for the young nobleman.

"You are very kind, Lieutenant von Reuter," she now answered quietly, "and I greatly appreciate the honor which you feel you have given me. But I don't care for you in the way that you wish me to and I am very, very sure that I never can. Do you not now think it time for us to go and join the others?"

And Betty talked pleasantly and unaffectedly of other things, while her host led her back on the return journey between his lines of distinguished ancestors, although the young man himself scarcely made a reply to one of her remarks.

# CHAPTER XX

## ESTHER AND DICK

Not long after the others had driven away Esther found that it was quite impossible for her to take a nap as she had planned. She seemed to be growing more restless and fatigued with every moment spent upon the bed. Besides, had she not been indoors far too much recently, when they would so soon be going back to the city where only a comparatively small amount of outdoor life would be possible?

Esther did not stop to dress with any care; she merely fixed her hair and slipped a long brown coat over her dress, tying a light scarf about her hair. And because both Mrs. Ashton and Dick had insisted that no one of the three girls go any distance from home alone after Betty's misfortune, she wandered about idly in their small enclosed garden for a few moments and then sat down in Betty's empty steamer chair under their single tall linden tree. The light gusts of the October wind sent down little showers of curled-up yellow leaves and shriveled flowers upon her head and shoulders, until Esther, glancing up at them, smiled. When she dropped her eyes again she saw that Dick Ashton was on his way toward her along the short path from the gate. And he held a bundle of letters in his hand which he had stopped by the village post-office to secure. Two of them he dropped into Esther's lap and then sat down on the ground near her, sighing quite unconsciously.

"Are you all by yourself?" he inquired.

Esther nodded. "Yes, I did not feel like being polite to any one this afternoon. Betty told me to ask you to walk over and join them if you are not too tired."

"I am not too tired, yet I have not the remotest idea of going," Dick returned quietly. "Though I declare to you, Esther, that it seems to me if Betty really does care for this German fellow, it will be about the last straw."

Always if you had asked Esther Crippen's friends what they considered the dominant trait of her character the answer would have been "sympathy." So now, observing Richard Ashton's anxiety and depression, she almost entirely forgot her own.

"The last straw, Dr. Ashton?" she repeated. And then smiling and yet wholly gentle she asked, "Why do you say 'the last straw' in such a desperate fashion? Surely things are not going so wrong with you! If you feel so dreadfully unhappy over leaving Betty and your mother behind, why you know I don't wish to be selfish. Take them with you; I shall manage somehow."

Leaning over, Dick Ashton touched Esther's hand lightly with his lips in such a friendly, kindly fashion that the girl did not flush or draw it away.

"Who says that I am so desperate over leaving mother and the Princess to take care of our future great American prima donna?" he asked half-joking and half-serious.

The girl's brows drew together in her effort to understand and appreciate her friend's real meaning. "Why, I don't see what else there can be to make you unhappy," she replied thoughtfully. "You are going back to your own country, which you know you have learned to care more for with each year that you have spent away from it. And you are going to commence the practice of the profession you have always loved since you were a child. But of course if there is anything else that is worrying you which I have not the right to know, I don't want you to think that I am trying to make you confide in me. I can sympathize with you without understanding."

"Then you have a very rare and wonderful gift, Esther," Dick Ashton replied. "But please read your letters and don't consider me."

Slowly the girl read a letter from her father, which besides its interest in her work was so full of bits of Woodford interest and gossip that she felt herself growing sharply homesick. Then, tucking this letter inside her dress, to re-read to her sister later, Esther slowly opened the one from her music master in Berlin. It was just what she had expected. Professor Hecksher felt that she might have a future in grand opera, only she was far too young and too untrained to attempt it for several years. So she must stay on in Germany, working unceasingly with him until they could both understand more thoroughly her capabilities.

Esther let this single sheet of paper slip out of her hand to the ground, where Dick picked it up, returning it to her. But not before he had recognized the master's handwriting and letter head.

"It is all right, isn't it?" he queried, surprised at the girl's expression.

"Oh, yes, I suppose so," she replied, not looking at him but at a far stretch of country with her eyes and of years with her mind. "Only I expect I am what both Betty and Polly think me, an ungrateful and unreasonable person with no ambition and no imagination."

Dick was silent for a moment and then answered, "No, Esther, I do not believe you appreciate what a great gift you have; you are too modest and care too little for the applause most of the people in the world are willing to sacrifice everything for."

Richard Ashton turned his serious dark eyes upward toward the tall, pale girl sitting in the chair near him. "Esther," he said, "I want to tell you, to make you believe what a great gift you have. I

love you, and more than anything on earth I want you to be my wife. The other day when Anthony Graham came with the news from Woodford that Betty had inherited a small fortune I was happier than I can ever tell you. And it was not for Betty's sake or even mother's; it was a selfish happiness. For then I believed that both you and I were released from our first duty to them and that I had the right to tell you that I cared for you and meant to try and make you love me. Then came the night of your concert, when I heard you sing. And since then, Esther, I have realized that I have no right to ask you to give up the career that is before you and to ask you to share my uncertain future. For with my work I could not follow yours and my profession is the one thing I have learned. I had not meant to tell you this, but, after all, Esther, I don't know why I should not. A girl can never be hurt by knowing that a man loves her."

And for the second time Dick kissed Esther's hand and then turned his face away.

The next moment the girl had risen from her chair. "Dr. Ashton, will you take a walk with me?" she asked. "I am tired sitting here."

Then, without referring to what had just been said between them, the girl and man walked along, talking quietly of other things until they came to the stream of water sheltered by trees, with a rim of hills along the other side. Away from the possibility of being interrupted Esther stopped, putting her hand on her companion's arm.

She did not look like her usual self; her face was flooded with color and her shyness and reserve for the moment seemed swept away.

"You were not fair to me just now," she declared. "You had not the right to tell me you cared for me without asking me what my feeling was for you. Why does everybody in the world think that because I have a talent I have to sacrifice my whole life to it? I love my music, but I don't wish to be an opera singer. I hate the kind of existence it forces one to lead. I want a home of my own and some one to care for me. Why do people nowadays think that girls are so changed, that all of us are wishing to be independent and famous? Why, it was because our old Camp Fire club taught us that all the best things of life are centered about the hearth fire that means home, that I first cared for it so much. I wonder if any one realizes because I was brought up in an orphan asylum and then lived with other people that I have never had a home of my own in my life. But of course this would not count, Dick, if I did not care for you more than I do for my music, or even for Betty. Tell me, then, is it my duty to go on with my work in Berlin, to give up everything I wish for a career I don't desire?" And here, overcome by the rush of her own feelings and her own words, Esther ceased speaking, feeling her old stupid, nervous trembling seize her.

But Richard Ashton's arms were about her, holding her still.

"The most perfect home that my love can make for you, Esther, shall be yours so long as we live. And there are other ways where the gift of a beautiful voice may bring pleasure and reward outside of the life you dread."

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## CHAPTER XXI

### SUNRISE CABIN

It was Christmas once more at the Camp Fire cabin and a wonderful white night. Everywhere there was snow and enchantment under the "Long-night Moon."

Dinner was over, for from the inside of the great living room came the sound of music and dancing and many gay voices.

Built like a magic circle about the log house were seven camp fires, uncurling their long fingers of flame into the frost-laden air. And now and then fire-makers came out of the cabin, usually in pairs, to pile more logs and pine branches where the need was greatest.

First Eleanor Meade and Frank Wharton, and Eleanor looked tall and picturesque in her Indian costume with a white shawl over her shoulders. But when they had finished with their fire building they walked on a few yards and then lingered for a moment close to the tall Totem pole, which still stood like a faithful sentinel outside the Sunrise Cabin door, its colors bright with the history of the Camp Fire club it had been chosen to tell.

"I thought I was going to be a great artist when I painted that pole and the walls of our cabin, Frank," Eleanor whispered. "But the paths of a woman's glory sometimes lead——"

"To the altar," Frank returned. "Never mind, dear, there is no place where one so needs to keep the white lights burning." And a little later he and his companion disappeared along the path that led to the grove of pines closer to the foot of the mountain.

For nearly ten minutes no one else opened the cabin door; then two muffled figures stole out and industriously piled wood on half a dozen of the dying fires. Out of breath they afterwards paused and began talking to each other. They were the two girls in the Camp Fire club at Sunrise Hill who were now the closest friends.

"I am awfully glad to hear of your new position, Nan. Are you going to make more money?" Sylvia Wharton asked with her old-time bluntness.

And as Nan Graham nodded, she went on, "I want everybody in our club to understand that no matter what any one of us accomplishes, you are the best of the lot. Because the rest of us have had money and aid from other persons, but you have done every blessed thing for yourself and have helped other people besides."

"Yes, but I don't have to help now," Nan explained. "Anthony is able to do everything for the family that is necessary beyond what father earns. And he has made me promise to go to college next year and study all the courses in domestic science that I can manage, besides chemistry and physiology and hygiene. I shall be a wonderfully learned person if I ever know half the things he wishes me to."

"Anthony is splendid," Sylvia announced, "and you will have a chair in a college some day."

At the absurdity of this suggestion, which nevertheless might one day come true, Nan laughed, putting her arm across Sylvia's shoulder. "We must go back indoors or you may take cold, Dr. Wharton," she teased. "Truly I am glad that your father and mother have made you undertake the study of medicine instead of going on with nursing. For my part I shall always prefer you as a physician to Dr. Ashton, even though he has a good many years' start of you."

Never could Sylvia take things humorously. "Then you will show very poor judgment, Nan Graham. Richard Ashton is going to be a perfect wonder. Betty and Esther both say I may be his partner, but I shall not. I am coming back to Woodford after I graduate and help Dr. Barton. Thank heavens, he and Rose Dyer finally decided to marry last month. It will take both of them to look after little Faith. That child is so queer and fanciful I am afraid she may turn out a poet." And Sylvia did not smile or have the least understanding that she had said anything amusing when her friend led her back inside the cabin living room.

Then Meg Everett and her brother John strolled out into the night air, arm in arm, and went and piled logs on the camp fire farthest away from the house.

Meg wore nothing on her head in spite of the cold, so that her yellow-brown hair blew about her face in shocking confusion. Yet her elder brother did not seem to be in a sufficiently critical mood tonight to notice it.

"Don't stay outdoors too long or go far away from the cabin, Betty; I am so afraid you may take cold," Esther Ashton whispered ten minutes after John and Meg had come in, wrapping her own long white fur coat about her sister. Esther had been married now for two weeks and she and Richard Ashton had returned from their honeymoon journey to spend the holidays with their own people before leaving for Boston. So Esther was in bridal white, with no other color than her crown of red hair. Betty wore the last frock she had bought in London before sailing for home, having paid a great deal more for it than she felt that she should, just to taste the joy of being extravagant once again. It was of blue velvet with a silver girdle, with silver embroidery about the throat. Instead of jewelry she wore her chains of Camp Fire honor beads.

"No, I won't be gone long, dear," Betty answered. "I have promised too many people to dance with them. But it is such a glorious night! And I have told Anthony Graham that I would look at the beautiful picture our cabin makes with the camp fires burning around it. The moon is now just above the top of the old hill."

At this moment Dick Ashton joined them. "Moon, Betty Ashton," he began with a pretense of sternness, "is the very last word I wish to hear from your lips."

Then, as Betty ran away from the possibility of his further objecting to her departure, Dick turned seriously to Esther.

"Esther, if you have any influence with Betty, do please stop allowing her to have admirers. Tell her that she is not to be permitted to consider any one seriously, say for five or ten years."

As Esther laughed, he added, "Who is it that she has gone off in the moonlight with this time? Anthony Graham? Well, he is a fine fellow, but has his way to make, and thank fortune cannot think of marrying for several years!"

Down by the lake, which was frozen over with a thin coating of ice, forming a kind of mirror for the silver face of the moon, Anthony and Betty were at this moment standing in the shadow looking out over its surface.

"I want to tell you something I never have mentioned, Anthony," Betty said gravely. "I want to thank you for coming to Germany to bring me the good news of my inheritance. Oh, it is not that I could not have waited longer to have heard, but that if the news had not come just when it did, I might have been the unconscious cause of making the two people I love almost best in the world unhappy all their lives. For you see I did not dream that Dick cared for Esther or she for him. So I kept on urging Esther to devote herself to her music, when all the time she and Dick wanted to be married, and Esther was only going on with her music because she wanted to earn money for me and for father. As though either one of us wished her to sacrifice herself!"

"Still, your brother was a brave fellow to ask a girl to give up such a future," Anthony Graham returned. "I don't think I could have done it."

Betty frowned at him. "Why not?" she demanded.

Turning toward her, Anthony now looked at her so steadfastly that the girl's white lids drooped.

"Well, once I cared for a girl who was miles and miles above me in family, position, beauty, brains, oh, everything that is worth having, except one thing!" he explained. "Neither she nor her people had money; they had lost it through misfortune. So I used to work and dream that some day I might be able to climb that *one* hill. But before I was even halfway up my hill—oh, I can't talk in figures of speech, I must speak plain English—why the girl inherited a lot of money. So now she has everything and I have nothing worth while to offer her. Yet I don't wish her to think that I have ever ceased caring for her or ever will."

"Anthony," Betty replied unexpectedly, "I always wear that little enameled pin representing a pine tree that you sent me by Polly a long time ago. But I have been thinking lately that perhaps you did not remember that one of the meanings of the pine tree is faithfulness."

Then she moved away toward the cabin and, as the young man walked along beside her without speaking, she said half to herself and half to him, "Not long ago I had one person declare that he cared for me because I had inherited a fortune. And here is another person who has ceased caring because I have money. Yet, if I have to choose between the two, I believe I like the American way best."

"You don't mean that you like *me*, do you, Betty?" Anthony pleaded.

The Princess shook her head. "I don't mean anything—yet, Anthony," she answered.

Inside the living room on their return they found at least a dozen friends urging Esther to sing. To Margaret Adams' request she finally yielded. For Miss Adams had lately come to Woodford to spend the week with Polly O'Neill's family. And now Polly was standing with her arm slipped caressingly through her friend's.

"I shall never, never be able to understand how Esther Crippen could give up her art and her career for Dick Ashton's sake, fine as he is," Polly murmured in Miss Adams' ear. "If I only had one-half of Esther's talent for the work I hope to do I should be down on my knees with gratitude." Then Polly gave the arm she was holding fast a slight pressure. "But mother says perhaps I may come and have a small part in your company next spring, as you said I might. And surely if anybody in the world can teach me to be a great actress it is you!"

Then Polly's lips twitched and her expression changed in its odd Irish fashion, for across the room she now caught sight of her old enemy and friend, Billy Webster, still glowering disapprovingly at her. But the next instant he had turned and was smiling a reply to some question that Mollie O'Neill had just put to him.

Then no one spoke or moved for several moments, under the spell of Esther's "Good-night" Camp Fire song.

"Beneath the quiet sentinel stars, we now rest.  
May we arise to greet the new day, give it our best.  
Good-night, good-night, God over all."

The next volume in the Camp Fire Series shall be known as "The Camp Fire Girls' Careers." The group of girls who first came together to spend a summer as a Camp Fire Club in the woods are now grown up and life has, of course, altered and widened for all of them. The question now is, What will each girl do to make her future happy and successful? Will she marry well or ill, or will she choose to follow some career in which marriage has no part? Although the fifth volume is to deal with the original number of heroines, it will be more largely devoted to the most brilliant and erratic of the twelve Camp Fire Girls, Polly O'Neill.

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