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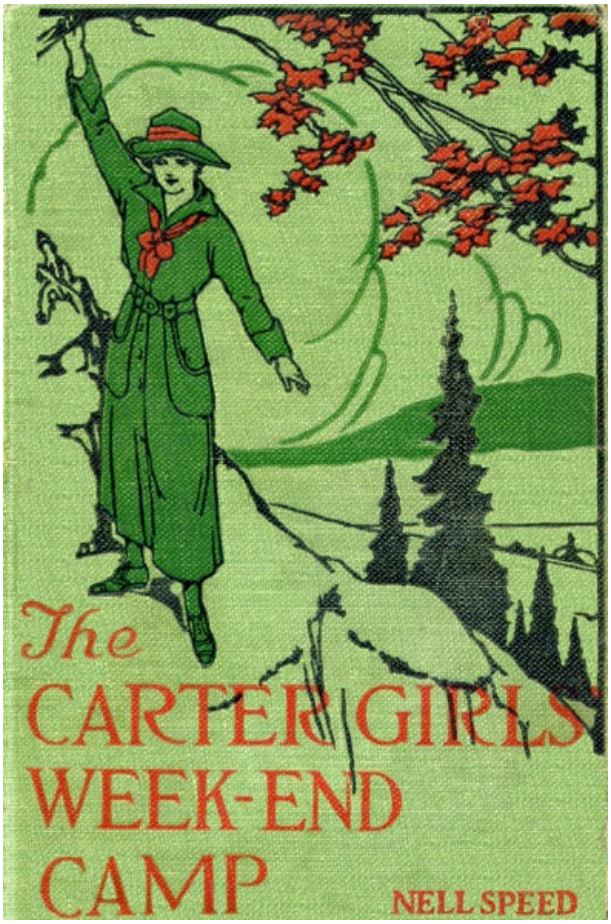

She found Douglas sitting in a forlorn heap in their tent.
(*Frontis*)

(*The Carter Girls' Week-End Camp*)

THE CARTER GIRLS' WEEK-END CAMP

By NELL SPEED

AUTHOR OF

"The Molly Brown Series," "The Tucker Twins Series," etc.

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The Carter Girls' Week-End Camp

CHAPTER I

A LETTER

From Douglas Carter to her mother, Mrs. Robert Carter

Greendale, Va., August —, 19—.

My darling Mother:

Words cannot express the joy and gratitude all of us feel that father is really getting well. I shall never forget the miserable time last spring when Dr. Wright came into the library where Helen and Nan and Lucy and I were sitting and told us of his very serious condition. I had felt he was in a very bad way but did not realize it was quite so dreadful. I am sure you did not, either. And when Dr. Wright said that you must take him on a long sea voyage and we understood that we were to be left behind, the bottom seemed to drop out of the universe.

And now, dear mother, I have a confession to make: You took for granted we were going to the springs when we wrote we were to spend the summer in the mountains, and we thought with all the worry you had about father, perhaps it was best to let you go on thinking it. Of course you did not dream of the necessity of our doing anything to make money as father had never told you much about his finances. Well, mother dear, there was about $80 in the bank in father's private account. Fortunately for the business, which Mr. Lane and Dick have carried on to the best of their ability, there was some more in another account, but we have managed without touching that. I hope I am not going to shock you now, but you shall have to know it—we have rented our lovely home, furnished, for six months with privilege of a year, and we have sold the car, dismissed the servants—all but Susan and Oscar, who are up here at Greendale with us. This is what might shock you: We are running a week-end boarding camp here in the mountains and the really shocking part of it is—we are making money!

It was a scheme that popped into Helen's head and it seemed such an excellent one that we fell to it, and with dear Cousin Lizzie Somerville chaperoning us and Lewis Somerville protecting us, we have opened our camp and actually would have to turn away boarders except that the boys are always willing to sleep out-of-doors and that makes room for others not so inclined.

We see Dr. Wright quite often. He comes up for the Sunday in his car whenever he can spare the time. He has been kindness itself and has helped us over many rough places. There have been times when we have been downhearted and depressed over you and father, and then it has been his office to step in and reassure us that father was really getting better. He and Bobby are sworn friends and there is nothing Bobby will not do for him—even keep himself clean. [8]

We are well. Indeed, the mountain air has done wonders for all of us. Helen is working harder than any of us, but is the picture of health in spite of it. Nan is more robust than she has ever been in her life. I think the tendency she has always had to bronchitis has entirely disappeared. Dr. Wright says it is sleeping out-of-doors that has fixed her. Lucy has grown two inches, I do believe. She has been very sweet and helpful and as happy as the day is long with her chum Lil Tate here for the whole summer. Mrs. Tate brought her up for a week-end and the child has been with us now for over two months. We have two boys of fifteen who are here for the summer, too, Frank Maury and Skeeter Halsey. They are a great comfort to me as I feel sure Lucy and Lil will be taken care of by these nice boys.

Of course, the original idea of our camp was to have only week-end boarders, but we find it very nice to have some steadies besides as that means a certain fixed amount of money, but I am not going to let you worry your pretty head about money. We have a perennial guest, also—none other than pretty, silly Tillie Wingo. She came to the opening week-end and proved herself to be such a drawing card for the male sex that we decided it would be good business to ask her to visit us indefinitely. It was Nan's idea. You know Tillie well enough to understand that she is always thoroughly good-natured and kind without being helpful in any way. All she has to do is look pretty and chatter and giggle. Of course she must dance, and she does that divinely. She is a kind of social entertainer, and the number of youths who swarm to Week-End Camp because of her would astonish you. She is certainly worth her keep. Here I am touching on finances again when I did not mean to at all. [9]

We are so happy at the thought of having you and father with us for the rest of the summer. Dr. Wright thinks the life here will be almost as good for father as that on shipboard, provided the week-enders do not make too much racket for him. If they do, we are to have a tent pitched for him out of ear-shot. Poor Cousin Lizzie Somerville is very happy over your coming because it will release her. Her duties as chaperone have not been very strenuous, but the life up here has been so different from anything she has ever had before that it has been hard on her, I know, harder than she has ever divulged, I am sure. Now she can go to her beloved springs and play as many games of cards as she chooses. [10]

Dr. Wright says it would be better for you not to go to Richmond at all before coming here, as father might want to go to work again, and it is very important for him to be kept from it for many months yet. He is to meet you in New York and bring you straight to Greendale. I can go down to Richmond with you after we get father settled here, and we can get what clothes you want for the mountains. We have everything in the way of clothes stored at Cousin Lizzie Somerville's.

It is very lovely here at Greendale, and I do hope you and father will like it as much as we have. Dr. Wright will tell you more about it when he meets you in New York on Wednesday. I am sending this letter by him as it seems safer than to trust to Uncle Sam. [11]

We only hope the life up here will not be too rough for you. We will do all we can to smooth it for you; but a camp is a camp, you know, dear mother. Our best love to father.

Your loving daughter,
DOUGLAS.

CHAPTER II [12]

THE RETURN

"Oh, Douglas, I'm all of a tremble!" declared Helen Carter, as she knotted her jaunty scarlet tie and settled her gray felt hat at exactly the proper angle. "To think that they are really coming back!"

"I can hardly believe it. The time has gone quickly and still it seems somehow as though we had been living in this camp for ages. I am afraid it will go hard with the poor little mother."

"Cousin Lizzie stood it and she is years and years older than mother," and Helen looked critically at her dainty nose and rubbed a little powder on it.

“Yes, I know, but Cousin Lizzie is made of sterner stuff than poor little mumsy. I think that mother is the kind of woman that men would fight to protect but when all is told that Cousin Lizzie is the kind who would go out and help fight if need be. I can fancy her loading rifles and handing them to the men——” [13]

“So can I,” laughed Helen, “and saying as she loaded: ‘To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven; a time to kill and a time to heal.’”

“I am ashamed of myself—but somehow I am glad Cousin Lizzie did not think it was her duty to defer her going until mother and father got here. She has been splendid and too good to us for anything, but it is a kind of relief for her to be out of the cabin and away before they come,” said Douglas as she completed her rapid dressing by pulling an old khaki hat down over her rather refractory, if very lovely Titian hair.

“I know just what you mean. I hoped all the time she would realize that the morning train was much the better one for her to get off on, and then she could reach the springs in time for an afternoon game. It was a feeling I had that she might be too critical of poor little mumsy. You see we don’t know just how camp life is going to appeal to mumsy,” said Helen. [14]

“Exactly! It may take her a while to get used to it,” and Douglas let a little sigh escape her. “I wish they could have arrived on any other day than Friday. Our week-ends in August have been so full. I fancy many of the week-enders will want to stay on for holidays, too.”

“If it is only not too much for father. Dr. Wright thinks it won’t be. He says noise in the open air is so different from housed noises for nervous persons.”

A honk from the faithful old mountain goat, a name they had given the ancient Ford that Bill Tinsley had contributed to the camp’s use, warned them it was time to start for the station. One more dab of powder on Helen’s nose completed her toilet and calling to Nan and Lucy to pile in, they started their ever perilous descent of the mountain to Greendale.

Bobby, who had been captured by a determined Susan and washed and dressed in honor of his returning parents, was occupying the seat of state in Josh’s cart, clean but indignant at the outrage committed. [15]

“’Tain’t no sense in washin’. I mos’ wisht I’d been born a pig. If I had, I betcher I’d a been a pet pig an’ some fool woman would er wanted to curl my tail and tie a bow ’round my neck.”

Such pessimism was too much for Josh, who shook with laughter as the slab-sided mule, Josephus, limped cheerfully down the mountain road.

To think that mother and father were really coming! The Carter girls lined themselves along the little station awaiting the train bearing the beloved passengers. What a healthy-looking quartette they were after a whole summer in the open. Douglas’ fair skin was reddened from exposure and her hair showed the lack of care that her mother had always exacted. Douglas attached very little importance to her appearance, and was constantly being put to rights by the more correct Helen. Even now, as they waited for the train, Helen was regretting that she had permitted her older sister to wear the very disgraceful-looking khaki hat. [16]

“Khaki color is certainly unbecoming to blondes,” she thought. “I do want Douglas to look her best for mother. Father will think all of us are beautiful, anyhow, no matter what we wear,” and Helen could not help a feeling of satisfaction over her own very becoming cold-gravy costume with the touch of scarlet at her throat. It had seen much service but still had that unmistakable air of style that was characteristic of all of Helen Carter’s belongings.

Nan was quite robust-looking for Nan. She had inherited from her mother that soft black hair and those dusky eyes and a complexion of wondrous fairness that is seen sometimes in a rare type of Creole beauty. Mrs. Carter’s almost angelic beauty (her few enemies called it doll-like) was repeated in her daughter in a somewhat more sturdy edition. Nan’s mouth was larger and her eyes not quite so enormous; her nose a bit broader at the base and her chin squarer. Her attractive countenance showed a mixture of poetic feeling and sturdy common sense with a plentiful seasoning of humor and gave promise of her development into a very enchanting woman. All Nan asked of life was plenty of books and time to read them and a cloak of invisibility so that she would not be noticed. She was gradually overcoming the shyness that had always made her think that next to a cloak of invisibility the greatest boon her fairy godmother could grant her would be seven-league boots, so that she could get away from all embarrassing persons even if she could not hide from them. The summer of camping had certainly taken from her the look of fragility that had always been a source of uneasiness to her father but which her beautiful mother had rather prided herself on as it was in her eyes a mark of race and breeding. [17]

Lucy Carter, the youngest of the four, was developing rapidly into a very attractive girl. Her resemblance to Helen was growing more marked, much to her pretended disgust, but to her secret delight. Already her long legs had shot her saucy head up to within a level of Helen’s, which made the younger sister ecstatically confident of her equality with the elder, whom in her heart of hearts she considered a paragon of perfection but with whom she was usually on sparring terms. [18]

Bobby, the idolized little brother, had changed more than any of the Carters during that summer. He had lost forever the baby curves and had taken on a lean, wiry spareness. His almost unearthly beauty was gone by reason of a great gap in his face caused by the loss of his first

teeth. One permanent tooth had found its way through and, as is the way with the first permanent tooth, seemed very enormous in contrast to the tiny little pearls that had hitherto passed for teeth. His knees were scarred and scratched as were his lean brown legs. Two sore toes were tied up in dirty rags, having been ministered to by Aunt Mandy, the kind old mountain woman who bore the proud distinction in Bobby's mind of being the mother of Josh the boy and the owner of Josephus the mule. [19]

"I hear the whistle!" exclaimed Lucy, prancing with excitement.

"So do I, but it is the saw mill over in the hollow," drawled Nan.

"Won't it be terrible if the train is late and all the week-enders get here before mother and father?" wailed Helen.

"Awful!" exclaimed Douglas. "If we can only get them settled in the cabin before the hullabaloo begins, maybe it won't seem so bad to them. I just can't stand it if the camp is going to be too much for father."

"I'm most sure he will like it, but it's mother who will be the one to kick," said Nan. Kicking was not a very elegant way to express what no doubt would be the state of Mrs. Carter's mind over the rough camp life.

"She's a-comin' now!" shouted Bobby. "I kin hear her a-chuggin' up grade! Listen! This is what she says: 'Catch a nigger! Catch a nigger! I'm a-comin'! I'm a-comin'!'" and the scion of the Carter family whistled shrilly through his sparse teeth, an accomplishment that had but recently come to him by reason of his loss. [20]

It was the train and on time, which would give the youthful proprietors of the week-end boarding camp time to get their invalid father and dainty mother safely stowed away in the cabin before the onrush of harum-scarum guests should begin.

"Thank heaven!" was the pious ejaculation of the older girls.

Douglas and Helen felt all the qualms and responsibilities that had been theirs on the opening of the camp at the beginning of the summer. It had proved such a success that confidence had come to them, but now that their parents were to join them, although they were very happy at the thought of seeing them, they had grave doubts about the way in which their mother would look upon their venture and about the ability of their father to endure the noise and confusion.

Dr. Wright, who had gone to New York to meet the steamer, got off first, laden with parcels. Then came Mrs. Carter, looking so young and pretty that her daughters felt suddenly very mature. Mr. Carter followed his wife. He also was laden with bandboxes and bundles, while the grinning porter emerged with some difficulty from under a mass of suitcases, steamer rugs and dress boxes. Lewis Somerville extricated him in time for him to jump on the departing train as it made its laborious way up the steep grade, still singing the song that Bobby had declared it sang: "Catch a nigger! Catch a nigger! I'm a-comin'! I'm a-comin'!" [21]

"My girls! My girls!" Mrs. Carter flew from one to the other like a butterfly who cannot tell which flower to light on, but Robert Carter dropped his parcels and enfolded all of them in a mighty embrace. How lean and brown he was! On sight he seemed like his old self to Helen, who was the first to find her way to his eager arms and the last to leave their encircling shelter. A closer scrutiny of his face, however, told her there was still something wrong. His snap and vim were gone. Intelligence shone from his kind blue eyes and his countenance bespoke contentment and happiness, but his old sparkle and alertness were missing. The overworked nerves had lost their elasticity and a certain power that had been a part of Robert Carter was gone forever. It was the power of leading and directing, taking the initiative. There was something very pathetic about it all, just as though a great general had been reduced to the ranks and must ever after serve as a private. What made it sadder was that he seemed content to follow. Someone else must work out the problem of how to keep his expensive family in all the luxuries they had demanded. It was no longer up to him! That was the way his expression impressed Helen. She escaped from the others and ran behind the little station. [22]

"Father! Father!" she sobbed in an agony of love and misery. "He is not well yet! He never will be!"

"Oh yes, he will," said a quiet, deep voice. It belonged to George Wright, who had come around the other side of the waiting room after helping Lewis Somerville deposit the luggage in Josh's cart. "He is much better, better than I dared dream he would be. You see, he has had only four months and I said all the time it would take a year of rest and maybe more. What makes you think he is still so badly off?" [23]

Dr. Wright had a ridiculous notion that he could explain to Helen much better her father's condition if she would only put her head on his shoulder and do her sobbing there, but he buried his hands firmly in his pockets and made no intimation of his idea. He had constantly to take himself to task for forgetting that Helen was little more than a child. "You must wait, you fool!" he would reason with himself.

"But suppose someone else doesn't wait and she gets snapped up before your eyes—what then?" But wait he felt he must, and in the meantime Helen often felt that his sternness meant disapproval and wondered what she had done to merit it—that is, what new thing. Of course she [24]

always knew she had merited his disapproval by her behavior when he had given the verdict that her father must go off on the voyage for health. And now when he said: “What makes you think he is still so badly off?” he sounded very stern and superior.

“He seems so—so—meek,” she faltered.

“Well, who would not be meek with all those parcels?” he laughed. “Your mother had only part of a day in New York, but she bought out the town. I’m meek myself.”

The conversation was interrupted by Lucy, who was always eager to find out what Helen was doing so she could do it too. When she saw her sister’s tear-stained countenance she bitterly regretted her dry eyes but cry she could not, especially as she did not see anything to cry about.

Mrs. Carter, meanwhile, after flitting from daughter to daughter, had cried out: “But Bobby! Where is my precious Bobby?”

“Here me!” said that youngster. “We uns ain’t fur.”

“Bobby! Bobby! I didn’t know you! Where are your teeth? Why did you have your hair cut so [25] short? My baby, my baby!” and the poor little lady enfolded a rather abashed boy in her arms.

“Baby your grandmother! I ain’t nobody’s baby. We uns is Dr. Wright’s shover cept’n when we uns is in the mountings and thin we uns is the ’spressman’s sisterant.”

“We uns? What do you mean, Bobby?” wailed the mother.

“I say we uns whenever we uns thinks to do it. That’s the way mountingyears talks.”

“Robert! Robert, look at Bobby and listen to him!”

Mr. Carter did look at Bobby and the remembrance of his own boyhood came back to him and he laughed as he seldom did now-a-days.

“Well, bless my soul, what a great big son I have got!” and he slapped Bobby on the back. “I fancy you are too big to kiss, you rascal!”

“I ain’t too big to kiss if you uns comes behind the station where Josh’n Josephus can’t see us,” [26] and Bobby led his willing parent behind the station where Helen had gone to shed a bitter tear and where Dr. Wright had discovered her and where Lucy had discovered them.

“Oh, shucks! They’s too many folks here,” he declared.

“Will all of you please step out of the way?” begged Mr. Carter. “Bobby has an important thing to discuss with me and we should like the back of the station to ourselves for a moment.”

Left alone, the big man held his little son tight in his arms and in spite of Bobby’s boasted manhood he was very happy to be once more hugged and kissed by his father.

Dr. Wright smiled into Helen’s reddened eyes and said: “Bobby will do more for your father than anyone else now. If he can be a boy again he will get entirely well.”

The many parcels were at last stowed away in the cart and Josh clucked sadly to Josephus.

“I reckon Bobby’s done left us all, now that his paw is come,” he said sadly to the sympathetic [27] mule. But Bobby came running after him.

“Hi there! Wait, Josh! Father says he would sooner trust his bones to us than that old Tin Lizzie. You’n him’n me can squzzle in on the front seat.”

“Sho’ we kin!” declared the delighted Josh. He hadn’t lost an old friend after all, but gained a new one.

Mr. Carter proved even more agreeable to the little mountain boy than his idol, Lewis Somerville. He had such wonderful things to tell of ships and things and seemed to understand a boy so well. Mr. Somerville was right strict with a fellow, expecting him to be clean all the time and never forget, but somehow, Mr. Carter was a little easier.

“You are frightfully burned, Douglas,” complained Mrs. Carter as they finally got themselves stowed away in the faithful mountain goat. “I can’t see why you do not protect your skin. Your [28] neck will take months to recover from such a tanning.”

“Well, I don’t think that will make much difference,” laughed Douglas. “I fancy it will be many a day before I go décolleté.”

“I don’t see that. If you are not going to college, I see no reason why you should not make your debut next winter.”

Douglas looked at her mother in amazement. Could it be that even now she did not understand? She said nothing, feeling that it would be wiser to wait until she and her mother were alone. Never having economized in her life, Mrs. Carter did not know the meaning of the word. The many parcels that were borne from the train gave Douglas a faint feeling. Had her mother been buying things in New York?

“I brought you a perfect love of a hat, darling,” Mrs. Carter chattered on, “but of course you shall have to bleach up a bit for it to be becoming to you. I did not dream you were so burned or I

should not have selected such pale trimmings. I have a delightful plan! Since you are to come out next winter, I think a fortnight at the White in late August would be charming—give you that poise that debutantes so often lack. We can leave the children with your father and go together ——” [29]

“But, mother——”

“Oh, we shan’t go quite yet! I know you want to see your father for a few days before you leave him even for a fortnight.”

Douglas was speechless; Nan, who was crowded in by her, gave her a sympathetic squeeze.

“It is lovely to be with my girls again,” the little lady bubbled on. “Of course your letter was a great surprise to me, Douglas. The idea of my children making money!” and she gave a silvery laugh. “I am delighted that you have, because now no doubt your coming out will be even more delightful than I had anticipated. Of course those persons who are in our house in Richmond will simply have to get out.”

“But, mother——”

“Simply have to—how can a girl come out suitably unless she is in her own home?”

CHAPTER III [30]

THE PROBLEM

The cabin was looking very sweet and fresh after a thorough cleaning from the willing hands of Susan, who was in a state of bliss because her beloved mistress was returning. Gwen had found some belated Cherokee roses and with a few sprays of honeysuckle added had glorified the plain room.

“You think Miss Lizzie Somerville is el’gant! Well, you jes’ oughter see my missis. She is the mos’ el’gantes’ lady in the whole er Richmond. I bet Mis’ Carter ain’t never in all her life done a han’s turn. Gawd knows what she gonter say ’bout these here young ladies er hern workin’ like they was in service,” Susan remarked to the little English Gwen, who had done many a hand’s turn herself and still had an elegance all her own, so evident that the colored servants recognized her as a “lady bawn.”

“I think it is very wonderful that the Carter girls should be able to work so well when they have never been brought up to it,” said Gwen as she hung the last freshly laundered sash curtain. [31]

“That’s they paw in ’em,” declared Susan. “He is the wuckinest gemman I ever seed. ’Tain’t nothin’ he won’t turn his han’ ter. He don’t never set back and holler fer help when he wants the fire fixed er sech like. No’m, he jes’ jumps up an’ waits on hisself. Sometimes he used ter git Mis’ Carter kinder put out ’cause he’d even do his own reaching at the table. Miss Douglas is the spittin’ image of him. None of the gals favors her much ’cep Miss Nan. She looks like her but she ain’t so langrous like when they’s work on hand. Miss Helen is the same kind er spender as her maw. I believe my soul them two would ruther buy than eat. Cook used ter say that Mis’ Carter an’ Miss Helen spent like we done come to the millionennium. Great Gawd! Here they is an’ I ain’t got on my clean apron. That’s one thing that Mis’ Carter’ll certainly git cross over—aprons.” [32]

She did not, however. Too pleased to see the faithful Susan, Mrs. Carter overlooked the doubtful apron.

“What a charming room! Is this where I am to be? And you girls in the tents beyond? And Bobby—where does Bobby sleep?”

“He is with Lewis Somerville and his friend, Bill Tinsley. I believe he wrote you about Bill,” said Helen, “—the young man who was shipped from West Point when Lewis was.”

“Oh yes, I remember! I am glad to see you have not let yourself run down like Douglas, my dear. Your hair looks well kept and your complexion is perfect.”

Douglas, much perturbed over her mother’s plans, had rushed off to be alone for a moment to compose herself.

“But, mother, I don’t burn like Douglas, and then Douglas’ hair is so lovely it doesn’t make any difference what she does to it. Mine must be well kept to pass muster. I hope you are not going to find it too rough here for you, mumsy,” and Helen put a protecting arm around the little mother, who was more like a sister, and a younger one at that, than a mother to these great girls. [33]

“Oh, I think it is delightful for a while. Of course I have been on shipboard so long that I really am longing for some society. Did you hear me tell Douglas what my plan is for her and me? I should like to include you, too, but perhaps it would be best for you to wait a year.”

“No, I did not hear; you see the car is such a noisy one that one never can hear. What is your plan?”

“I want to take Douglas to the White for several weeks preparatory to her making her debut this winter.”

“Debut!” gasped Helen. “White Sulphur!”

“Certainly, why not?”

“But, mother, we haven’t money for clothes and things.”

“Nonsense! Our credit is perfectly good. I fancy there is not a man in Richmond who has paid his [34]
bills so regularly as Robert Carter, and now that he is not able to work for a few months I feel sure there is not a single tradesman with whom we have always dealt who would not be more than pleased to have us on his books for any amount.”

“I wanted to charge a lot of things I thought we needed, but Douglas just wouldn’t have it. She never does realize the importance of clothes. I don’t mean to criticize Douglas, she is wonderful, but she is careless about clothes.”

“Well, I shall put a stop to that, now that I am back with my children. Your father is so much better I can give my time to other things now. How exciting it will be to have a daughter in society! I never did want Douglas to go to college. What made her give it up? She never did say what her reason was. Letters are very unsatisfactory things when one is on shipboard.”

“It was money, of course,” said Helen. “There was no money for college.”

“Oh, to be sure! I forgot that college takes cash. Well, I am heartily glad she has given it up. I [35]
think college girls get too independent. I am dying to show you my purchases in New York.”

“I am dying to see them, too, but, mumsy, I shall have to leave you now and run and do a million things. We have a great crowd of week-enders coming up on the late train.”

“Can’t Susan attend to the things?”

“Oh, Susan does a lot, but I am the chief cook and Douglas is the brains of the concern and looks after all the money and does the buying. Nan attends to all the letter writing, and you would be astonished to see how much she has to do because we have showers of mail about board. Lucy sees to the setting of the tables, and all of us do everything that turns up to be done. Even Bobby helps.”

“How ridiculous! Well, take care of your hands, darling. I hate to see a girl with roughened hands. There is simply no excuse for it.”

Helen was dazed by her mother’s attitude.

“She is just presenting a duck-back to trouble,” thought the girl, looking rather ruefully at her [36]
shapely hands which were showing the inevitable signs of work.

She found Douglas sitting in a forlorn heap in their tent. Her countenance was the picture of woe.

“Helen! Helen! What are we to do?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be so bad to take a trip to the White, and you certainly deserve a change. Poor mumsy, too, is bored to death with such a long sea trip and she needs some society.”

“But, honey, the money!”

“Oh, I don’t see that we need worry so about that. Mother says that there is not a tradesman in Richmond who would not be pleased to have us on his books for any amount. I, for one, am longing for some new clothes. I don’t mind a bit working and cooking, but I do think I need some new things—and as for you—why, Douglas, you are a perfect rag bag.”

Douglas looked at her sister in amazement. The lesson, then, was not learned yet! She had [37]
thought that Helen understood about the necessity of making no bills as the bills were what had helped to reduce their father to this state of invalidism, but here she was falling into the mother’s way of thinking—willing to plunge into debt to any amount.

“But Dr. Wright——”

“Oh, always Dr. Wright!”

“But, Helen, you know you like Dr. Wright now and you must trust him.”

“So I do. I like him better and trust him entirely and he himself told me at the station that father was getting well fast. He said it would take a little more time but that he would be perfectly well again—at least that is what I gathered. I know father would be the last man in the world to want his girls to go around looking like ash cats and you know it would make him ill indeed to think that mother wanted to go to White Sulphur for a while and could not go because of lack of money.”

“Of course it would, but surely neither you nor mother would tell him that she wanted to go if you [38]
know there is no money to pay for such a trip.”

“But there is money!” exclaimed Helen with some asperity. “You told me yourself that the camp was paying well enough for us to begin to have quite a bank account.”

“Yes—but——”

“Well now, if we have some money you must think that I have helped to earn it!”

“Why, Helen dear, you have done more than any of us. You are so capable——”

“I don’t say I have done more, no one could have worked harder than you have—in fact, everybody has worked, but if I have done my share of the work, then I am certainly entitled to my share of the money and I intend to take my share and send mother to White Sulphur for a change. Of course you will simply have to go with her as she has set her heart on it.”

“I will not,” announced Douglas, her girlish face taking on stern determination.

A shout from Bobby heralded the arrival of Josephus with the luggage. The discussion ended for [39]
the time being as Douglas and Helen were both needed to prepare for the inroad of week-enders that were to arrive in a few minutes. Mr. Carter alighted from the cart, already looking better. He was most enthusiastic over the camp and all of its arrangements.

“I am going to be your handy man,” he said, putting his arm around Douglas. “Are you well, honey? You look bothered.”

“Oh yes, I am as well as can be,” said Douglas, trying to smooth her wrinkled brow. How she did want to talk all the troubles over with her father, but he of all persons must not be bothered. The old habit of going to him with every worry was so strong that it was difficult to keep from doing it now, but she bit her lips and held it in.

“I’ll tell Lewis,” she thought. “He will at least sympathize.”

What was she to do about her mother and Helen? They seemed to have no more gumption about
money than the birds. Even then parcels were being carried into the cabin from the cart that [40]
must have meant much money spent in New York. Where did mother get it? The rent from the house in town had been sent to Mrs. Carter for running expenses on shipboard and hotels at the many places where they had stopped, but that must have gone for the trip. Could she have charged the purchases in New York? Poor Douglas! She had felt that the problem of making her sisters see the necessity of economizing had been a great one, but she realized that it was nothing to what she must face now. She felt that all her former arguments had been in vain since Helen was dropping into her mother’s habit of thought and upholding that charming butterfly-like person in all her schemes of extravagance. Lucy was sure to follow Helen’s lead and begin to demand clothes, treats, trips and what-not. Nan, dear sensible, unselfish Nan, would be the only one who would sympathize with her older sister in regard to the necessity of continuing the strict
economy they had practiced since early in May, when Dr. Wright had declared that the only thing [41]
that would save their father’s reason was an immediate change, a long rest and complete cessation of all business worries.

Nan’s tastes were simple, but she had a passion for color and beautiful textiles and sometimes indulged that taste in adorning her dainty little person. As a rule, however, she was quite satisfied to behold the color in a Persian rug or the wings of a butterfly. Beauty was to the girl the most important thing in life whether it was of line, color, sound or idea. She was perfectly happy with a good book and a comfortable place in which to curl up. Her fault was laziness, a certain physical inertia which her indulgent mother always attributed to her delicate constitution; but the summer in the mountains with the enforced activity had proven that the delicate constitution was due to the inertia and not the inertia to the delicate constitution. Up to that time in her life there had been no especial reason for exerting herself, but Nan was very unselfish and
when she realized that her sisters were one and all busying themselves, she threw off her lazy [42]
habits as she would an ugly robe, and many tasks at Week-End Camp fell to her share.

Douglas, in this trouble that had arisen, felt that she could go to Nan for comfort and advice. Nan’s mind was as normally active as her graceful little body was inactive and she had a faculty of seeing her way through difficulties that the conscientious but more slowly thinking Douglas much envied her.

“Nan, it’s fifteen minutes before train time when the week-enders will come piling in—I’m dying to have a talk with you.”

“Well, don’t die—just talk,” drawled Nan, looking up from her book but never stopping turning the crank of the mayonnaise mixer. This was a job Nan loved, making mayonnaise. She had gotten it down to a fine art since she could mix and read at the same time. She declared it was a plain waste of time to use your hands without using your head and since turning a mayonnaise
mixer crank required no intelligence beyond that of seeing that the funnel was filled with olive [43]
oil, she was able to indulge in her passion for poetry while she was making the quarts of mayonnaise that the young housekeepers dealt out so generously to their week-enders.

“Listen to this!” and Nan turned the crank slowly while she read:

“‘Alas for all high hopes and all desires!
Like leaves in yellow autumn-time they fall—
Alas for prayers and psalms and love’s pure fires—

The crank stopped and all of the oil flowed through the funnel while Nan softly turned the leaves of Marston’s “Last Harvest.”

“Yes, honey, it is beautiful, but you had better read a livelier form of verse or your salad dressing will go back on you.”

“Heavens, you are right! I’ve got ‘Barrack Room Ballads’ here ready in case I get to dawdling,” laughed Nan.

“I want to talk about something very important, Nan. Can you turn your crank and listen?”

“Yes, indeed, but you’ll have to talk fast or else I’ll get to poking again. You see, I have to keep [44] time.”

So Douglas rapidly repeated the conversations she had had with her mother and later with Helen.

“What are we to do? Must I tell Dr. Wright? I am afraid to get them started for fear father will be mixed up in it. He must not know mother wants to go to White Sulphur—he would be sure to say let her go and then he would try to work again before he is fit for it, and he would certainly get back into the same state he was in last spring.”

“Poor little mumsy! I was sure she would not understand,” and once more the mixer played a sad measure.

“I was afraid she wouldn’t,” sighed Douglas, “but I did think Helen had been taught a lesson and realized the importance of our keeping within our earnings and saving something, too, for winter.”

“Helen—why, she is too young for the lesson she learned to stick. She is nothing but a child.” [45]

“Is that so, grandmother?” laughed Douglas, amused in spite of her trouble at Nan’s ancient wisdom (Nan being some two years younger than Helen).

“Why, Douglas, Helen has just been play-acting at being poor. She has no idea of its being a permanency,” and Nan filled the funnel again with oil and began to turn her crank with vigor.

“But what are we to do? I am not going to White Sulphur and I am not going to make my debut—that’s sure. I have never disobeyed mother that I can remember, but this time I shall have to. I don’t know what I am to say about the trip to the White. Helen is saying she has helped to earn the money and she means to spend her share giving poor mumsy a little fun after her tiresome long journey on the water. I wish we had never told her we were able to put something in the bank last month. It was precious little and Helen’s share would not keep them at White Sulphur more than two or three days. Helen thinks I am stingy and mother thinks I am stubborn and ugly [46] and sunburned—and there’s the train with all the week-enders——” and poor Douglas gave a little sob.

“And I have turned my wheel until this old mayonnaise is done—just look how beautiful it is! And you, poor old Doug, must just leave it to me, and I’ll think up something to keep them here if I have to break out with smallpox and get them quarantined on the mountain.”

“Oh, Nan! Is there some way out of it without letting father know that mother wants something and cannot have it for lack of money?”

“Sure there is! You go powder your nose and put on a blue linen blouse and give a few licks to your pretty hair while I hand over the mayonnaise to Gwen and see that Lucy has counted noses for the supper tables. I’ve almost got a good reason already for mumsy’s staying here aside from the lack of tin, but I must get it off to her with great finesse.”

“I knew you would help!” and Douglas gave her little sister and the mayonnaise bowl an impartial [47] hug, and then hastened to make herself more presentable, hoping to find favor in the eyes of her fastidious mother.

CHAPTER IV [48]

ROBERT CARTER’S ASTONISHING GIRLS

August, the month for holidays, was bringing much business to the proprietresses of Week-End Camp. Such a crowd came swarming up the mountain now that Lucy, who had set the tables with the assistance of her chum, Lil Tate, and the two sworn knights, Skeeter Halsey and Frank Maury, and had carefully counted noses according to the calculations Nan had made from the applications she had received, had to do it all over to make room for the unexpected guests.

“Just kilt-plait the places,” suggested Lil.

“If they keep on coming we’ll have to accordeon-plait ’em,” laughed Lucy.

“Gee, I’m glad your eats don’t land in your elbows!” from Skeeter.

“Me, too!” exclaimed Frank. “Miss Helen tipped me a wink that there’s Brunswick stew made out [49]
of the squirrels we got yesterday. And there is sho’ no elbow room at these tables.”

“Look at ’em swarming up the mountain. Where do you reckon they’ll sleep?” asked Lil.

“Have to roost in the trees.”

“I bet more than half of them didn’t bring their blankets,” hazarded Lucy.

“Yes, that’s the way they do, these town fellows,” said Skeeter, forgetting that he too had been a town fellow only a few weeks before that time.

The summer in the mountains was doing wonders for these youngsters. Sleeping in the open had broadened their chests. They were wiry and tanned and every day brought some new delightful duty that was never called a duty and so was looked upon by all of them as a great game. Theirs was the task of foraging for the camp, and no small job was it to find chickens and vegetables and fruit for the hungry hordes that sought the Week-End Camp for holiday and recreation.

They had found their way to many a remote mountain cabin and engaged all chickens hatched [50]
and unhatched. They had spread the good news among the natives that blackberries, huckleberries, peaches, apples, pears and plums were in demand at their camp. Eggs were always needed. Little wild-eyed, tangled-haired children would come creeping from the bushes, like so many timid rabbits, bringing their wares; sometimes a bucket of dewberries or some wild plums; sometimes honey from the wild bees, dark and strong and very sweet, “bumblebee honey,” Skeeter called it. All was grist that came to the mill of the week-enders. No matter how much was provided, there was never anything to speak of left over.

“These hyar white folks is same as chickens,” grumbled old Oscar. “They’s got no notion of quittin’ s’long as they’s any corn lef’ on the groun’.”

“They sho’ kin eat,” agreed Susan, “but Miss Douglas an’ Miss Helen done said we mus’ fill ’em up and that’s what we is hyar fur.”

The above is a conversation that, with variations, occurred during almost every meal at the camp. [51]
Oscar and Susan, the faithful servants the Carters had brought from Richmond, were proving more and more efficient now that the first sting of the country was removed and camp life had become a habit with them. They were creatures of habit and imbued with the notion that what was good enough for white folks was good enough for them. Their young mistresses were contented with the life in the camp, so they were, too. Their young mistresses were not above doing any work that came to hand, so they, too, must be willing to do what fell to their lot. Susan forgot the vows she had so solemnly sworn when she became a member of the housemaids’ league, to do housework and nothing else. She argued that a camp wasn’t a house and she could do what she chose. Oscar had, while in town, held himself above any form of labor not conducive to the dignity of a butler serving for many years in the best families. But if Mr. Lewis Somerville
and Mr. Bill Tinsley, both of them belonging to fust famblies, could skin squirrels, why then, he, [52]
Oscar, must be a sport and skin them, too.

These week-ends in August were hard work for all concerned and now there was talk of some of the guests staying over for much longer and spending two weeks with them. That meant no cessation of fillin’ ’em up. Previous to this time, Monday had been a blessed day for all the camp, boarders gone and time to take stock and rest, but now there was to be no let up in the filling process.

Susan, for the time completely demoralized by the return of her beloved mistress, had left her work to whomsoever it might concern and had constituted herself lady’s maid for Mrs. Carter. She unpacked boxes and parcels, hovering over the pretty things purchased in New York; she fetched and carried for that dainty lady, ignoring completely the steady stream of week-enders climbing up the mountain or being carried up by the faithful and sturdy mountain goat, with the silent Bill as chauffeur.

Helen had reluctantly torn herself from the delectable boxes and parcels and was busily engaged [53]
in concocting a wonderful potato salad, something she always attended to herself. Gwen was making batter bread after having put to rise pan after pan of rolls. Oscar had begun to fry the apples, a dish ever in demand at camp. The Brunswick stew had been safely deposited in the fireless cooker early in the day and all was going well.

“There!” exclaimed Helen, putting the finishing touch to the last huge bowl of salad and stepping back to admire her handiwork. “That substantial salad unites beauty and utility.”

“It sho’ do, Miss Helen, it sho’ do!” declared Oscar, adroitly turning his apples just as they reached the proper stage of almost and not quite being candied. “They’s nothin’ like tater salid fer contitutioning a foumdation stone on which to build fillin’ victuals. It’s mo’ satisfying to my min’ than the staft of life itself. All I is a-hopin’ is that they won’t lick the platter befo’ I gits to it.”

“You are safe there, Oscar, as I made this extra dishful to be kept back so you and Susan will be [54]
sure to get some.”

“Susan, indeed!” sniffed her fellow-servant. “She ain’t called on to expect no favors at yo’ han’. To be foun’ by the wayside, a fallin’ down wantin’ jes’ at this crucible moment!”

“I think she is helping mother.”

“Then I’s got nothin’ to say—but I ’low she helpin’ yo’ maw with one han’ an’ Susan Jourdan with yudder.”

Mr. Carter and Dr. Wright looked into the kitchen a moment. Dr. Wright had been showing his patient over the camp, as all of the daughters were occupied. Mr. Carter was delighted with the arrangements and amazed at the scope of the undertaking. Could this be his Helen, the queen of the kitchen, attending to the preparation of this great quantity of food? He never remembered before seeing Helen do any more strenuous work than play a corking good game of tennis, and here she was handling a frying pan with the same skill with which she had formerly handled a racquet, looking after the apples while Oscar cracked ice and carried up into the pavilion the great pitchers of cold tea destined to quench the thirst of the week-enders. [55]

Helen was looking wholly lovely in her becoming bungalow apron, with her flushed cheeks and hair a bit dishevelled from the hurry of getting things done without the assistance of the capable Susan. Robert Carter looked in amazement at the great bowls of potato salad and the pans of rolls, being taken from the oven to make room for other pans.

“In heaven’s name, what is all this food for?” he asked, laughing.

“Have you seen the week-enders swarming up the mountain?”

“Why yes, but they couldn’t eat all this.”

“Don’t you fool yourself!” and Helen gave her dear father a fried apple hug. She was very happy. The beloved parents were back with them. Dr. Wright assured her that her father was improving. The camp had been her very own idea and it was successful. They were making money and she was going to take her share of the profits and give her mother a trip. She, Helen Carter, only eighteen, could do all of this! She had no idea what the profits amounted to, but Nan and Douglas had only the week before congratulated themselves that they were putting more money in the bank than they were drawing out. She cared nothing for money in the bank except as a means of gratifying the ones she loved. The poor little mumsy had been shut up on shipboard for months and surely she deserved some recreation. She was astonished at Douglas for being so stingy. It was plain stinginess that would make her think more of having some paltry savings than of wanting to give to their charming, beautiful little mother her heart’s desire, so Helen thought. [56]

Dr. Wright was smiling on her, too. He seemed to think she was a very remarkable girl, at least that was what one might gather from his expression as he stood by the kitchen and gazed in through the screening at the bright-eyed, eager young cook. [57]

“Where are the other girls?” asked Mr. Carter.

“Oh, they have a million things to do! We always divide up and spread ourselves over the whole camp when the train gets in. Lucy has just finished setting the tables, and that is some job, I can tell you, but Lil Tate and Frank Skeeter always help. Nan has been making mayonnaise enough to run us over Sunday, and now she has gone with Douglas to receive the week-enders and show them their tents and cots. Douglas is the great chief—she does all the buying and supervising, looks after the comfort of the week-enders and sees that everything is kept clean and sanitary. Nan writes all the letters, and believe me, that is no little task. She also makes the mayonnaise and helps me here in the kitchen when I need her, but Gwen is my right hand man. But what am I thinking of? You haven’t even met Gwen!”

The young English girl was looking shyly at the big man and thinking what she would give to have her own father back again. Dr. Wright had told Mr. Carter of Gwen and her romantic history, how Helen had found the wallet in the scrub oak tree containing all of the dead Englishman’s papers, of old Abner Dean’s perfidy in taking the land from Gwen when the receipt had not been found, although the child was sure her father had paid for the side of the mountain before he had built his cabin there. Mr. Carter had been greatly interested in the recital and now his kind friendliness brought a mist to the eyes of the girl. [58]

“I am very glad to know you, my dear. Dr. Wright has told me of you and now I hope to be numbered among your friends.”

Gwen looked so happy and grateful that Helen had to give her father one more fried apple hug before she pushed him out of the kitchen to make room for the important ceremony of dishing up supper.

“Where did I ever get them, Doctor, these girls? Why, they are perfect bricks! To think of my little Helen forgetting the polish on her fingernails and actually cooking! I don’t see where they came from.” [59]

It was rather wonderful and George Wright was somewhat at a loss himself to account for them as he watched the dainty mother of the flock trip lightly across the rough mountain path connecting the cabin with the pavilion. Robert Carter himself had character enough to go around, but when one considered that his character had been alloyed with hers to make this family it was a wonder that they had that within them that could throw off tradition and environment as they

had done and undertake this camp that was proving quite a stupendous thing for mere girls.

“Well, Dr. Wright,” trilled Mrs. Carter, “isn’t this a delightful adventure for my girls to have amused themselves with? The girl of the day is certainly an enterprising person. Of course a thing like this must not be carried too far, as there is danger of their forgetting their mission in life.”

“And that mission is——?” [60]

“Being ornaments of society, of course,” laughed the little lady.

Mrs. Carter had long ago overcome the fear she had entertained for the young physician. He had been so unfailingly kind to her and his diagnosis of her husband’s case had been so sure and his treatment so exactly right that she could have nothing but liking and respect for him. She even forgave him the long exile he had subjected her to on that stupid ship. It had cured her Robert and she was willing to have cut herself off from society for those months if by doing so she had contributed to the well-being of her husband. She had been all devotion and unselfishness in the first agony of his illness. The habits of her lifetime had been seemingly torn up by the roots and from being the spoiled and petted darling she had turned into the efficient nurse. As his health returned, however, it had been quite easy to slip back into her former place of being served instead of serving. It was as much Robert Carter’s nature to serve as it was hers to be served. [61] The habits had not been torn up by the roots, after all, but only been trimmed back, and now they were sprouting out with added vigor from their pruning.

Very lovely the little lady looked in her filmy lace dress. Her charming face, framed by its cloud of blue-black hair, showed no trace of having gone through the anxiety of a severe illness of one whom she loved devotedly. Nothing worried her very long and she had the philosophy of a young child, taking no thought of the yesterdays or of the morrows. Dr. Wright looked on her in amazement. Her speaking of the camp as an adventure chosen by the girls as something with which to amuse themselves would have been laughable had it not been irritating to the young man. And now, forsooth, their business in life was to become ornaments of society!

“Humph!” was all he said, although he had to turn on his heel and walk off to keep from asserting that their mission in life should be to become useful members of society. [62] He had a dread of appearing priggish, however, and then this was Helen’s mother and he wanted to do nothing to mar in any way the friendship that had sprung up between that elusive young person and himself.

“Where are all the children, Robert?” asked Mrs. Carter, wondering in her well-bred mind why Dr. Wright should be so brusque.

“There aren’t any children, Annette,” sighed Mr. Carter, “but I shouldn’t sigh but be glad and happy. Why, they are perfect wonders! Helen is in the kitchen, not eating bread and honey, but cooking and bossing, and all the other girls are flying around taking care of the boarders.”

“Boarders! Oh, Robert, what a name to call them! I can’t contemplate it. Who are all those people I saw coming up the road?”

“They are the boarders.”

“Not all that crowd! I thought they had only a select few.”

“No, indeed, they take all that come and I can tell you they have made the place very popular. [63] I did not know they had it in them. I believe it was a good thing I went off my hooks for a while, as it has brought out character in my girls that I did not dream they had.”

“It seems hardly ladylike for them to be so—so—successful at running a boarding place. I wonder what people will say.”

“Why they will say: ‘Hurrah for the Carter Girls!’ At least, that is what the worth-while people will say.”

“Well, if you think it all right, I know it must be,” sighed the poor little lady, “but somehow I think it would be much better for them to have visited Cousin Elizabeth Somerville until we got back or had her visit them in Richmond. I don’t at all approve of their renting my house. Douglas is so coarsened by this living out-of-doors. She has the complexion that must be guarded very carefully or she will lose her beauty very early. I think the summer before a girl makes her debut should be spent taking care of her complexion.”

Robert Carter laughed. He was always intensely amused by his wife’s outlook on life and society [64] and looked upon it as one of her girlish charms. Common sense had not been what made him fall in love with her twenty years before, so the lack of it did not detract in any way from his admiration of her in these latter years. She was what she had always been: beautiful, graceful, sweet, charming; made to be loved, served and spoiled.

“Where is Bobby? He, at least, cannot be busy with these awful boarders.”

“Bobby? Why, he is now engaged in helping Josh, the little mountain boy who is serving as expressman for the girls, to curry Josephus, the mule. These boarders are not awful, my dear. You will find many acquaintances among them. Jeffry Tucker came with his two girls, the twins, and a friend of theirs from Milton, Page Allison is her name. There are several others whom you will be glad to see, I know. I think it would be well for us to go up in the pavilion where they dine

and then dance, and you can receive them there as they arrive."

Mrs. Carter patted her creamy lace dress with a satisfied feeling that she was looking her best. It [65] was a new creation from a most exclusive shop in New York—quite expensive, but then she had had absolutely no new clothes for perfect ages and since the proprietor of the shop had been most pleased to have her open an account with him, the price of the gown was no concern of hers. It set off her pearly skin and dusky hair to perfection. She was glad Jeffry Tucker was at the camp. He was a general favorite in Richmond society and his being there meant at least that her girls had not lessened themselves in the eyes of the elite. Surely he would not bring his daughters to this ridiculous camp unless he felt that it would do nothing toward lowering their position.

The pretty, puzzled lady took her place at one end of the great long dining pavilion as the week-enders swarmed up the steps, attracted hither by the odor of fried apples and hot rolls that was wafted o'er the mountainside.

CHAPTER V

[66]

THE TUCKERS

There had been general rejoicing at Week-End Camp when Nan had announced that Jeffry Tucker and his daughters were to come up for a short stay. The Tuckers were great favorites and were always received with open arms at any place where fun was on foot. Mr. Tucker had written for accommodations for himself and daughters and their friend, Miss Allison.

No one would have been more astonished than Jeffry Tucker, the father of the Heavenly Twins, at the kind of reputation he had with a society woman of Mrs. Carter's standing. For her to think that his bringing his daughters to the camp meant that he considered it to their social advantage —at least not to their social detriment—would have convulsed that gentleman. He thought no [67] more of the social standing of his daughters Virginia and Caroline (Dum and Dee) than he did of the fourth dimension. He came to the camp and brought his daughters and Page Allison just because he heard it was great fun. He had known Robert Carter all his life and admired and liked him. His daughters had gone to the kindergarten and dancing school with Douglas and Helen and when rumor had it that these girls were actually making a living with week-end boarders at a camp in Albemarle, why it was the most natural thing in the world for the warm-hearted Jeffry Tucker immediately to write for tent room for his little crowd.

I hope my readers are glad to see the Tuckers and Page Allison. The fact of the business is that they are a lively lot and it is difficult to keep them in the pages of their own books. They might have stayed safely there had not the Carter girls started this venture in the mountains. That was too much for them. Zebedee had promised Tweedles again and again to take them camping, and [68] since what they did Page must do too, of course she was included in the promise. This is not their own camp and not their own book but here they are in it!

"Douglas Carter, we think you are the smartest person that ever was!" enthused Dum Tucker as Douglas showed them to their tent where three other girls were to sleep, too. "Isn't this just too lovely?"

"I'm not smart, it's Helen who thought up this plan," insisted Douglas. "We are so glad you have come and we do hope you will like it."

"Like it! We are wild about it," cried Dee, and Page Allison was equally enthusiastic.

"Where is Helen?" demanded Dum.

"She is chief cook and can't make her appearance until she has put the finishing touches to supper."

"Does she really cook, herself?" cried Dee. "How grand!"

"Sometimes she cooks herself," drawled Nan, coming into the tent to see the Tuckers, who were great favorites with her, too, "sometimes when we get out of provisions, which we are liable to do [69] now as six persons have come who had not written me for accommodations."

"Mother and father got here from a long trip this afternoon," explained Douglas, "and we are so upset over seeing them that we are rather late. Helen usually does all she has to do before the week-enders come."

"Let us help!" begged Dee. "Dum and I can do lots of stunts, and Page here is a wonderful pie slinger."

"Well, we would hardly press Miss Allison into service when she has just arrived," smiled Douglas.

"Please, please don't Miss Allison me! I'm just Page and my idea of camping is cooking, so if I can

help, let me," and Page, who had said little up to that time, spoke with such genuine frankness that Douglas and Nan felt somehow that a new friend had come into their circle.

"We'll call on all three of you if we need you," promised Douglas, hastening off with Nan to see [70] that other guests had found their tents and had what they wanted in the way of water and towels.

"Isn't this great?" said Dee. "I'm so glad Zebedee thought of coming. I think Douglas Carter looks healthy but awful bothered, somehow."

"I thought so, too. I'm afraid her father is not so well or something. Think of Helen Carter's cooking!" wondered Dum.

"Why shouldn't she?" asked Page. "Is she so superior?"

"No, not that," tweedled the twins.

"Helen's fine but so—so—stylish. Mrs. Carter is charming but she is one butterfly and we always rather expected Helen to be just like her—more sense than her mother, but dressy," continued Dee.

"You will know what Mrs. Carter is, just as soon as you look at her hands," declared Dum. "If the lilies of the field were blessed with hands they would look exactly like Mrs. Carter's."

"Well, come let's find Zebedee. I smelt apples frying," and the three friends made their way to [71] the pavilion where Mrs. Carter was receiving the week-enders with all the charm and ceremony she might have employed at a daughter's debut party.

Her reception of the Tuckers was warm and friendly. It had been months since she had seen anyone who moved in her own circle and now there were many questions to ask of Richmond society. Jeffry Tucker, who could make himself perfectly at home with any type, now laid himself out to be pleasant to his hostess. He told her all the latest news of Franklin street and recounted the gossip that had filtered back from White Sulphur and Warm Springs. He turned himself into a society column and announced engagements and rumors of engagements; who was at the beach and who was at the mountains. He even made a stagger at the list of debutantes for the ensuing winter.

"I mean that Douglas shall come out next winter, too," said the little lady during the supper that [72] followed. Nan, seeing that her mother was having such a pleasant time with the genial Jeffry Tucker, arranged to have the Tuckers placed at the table that had been set aside for their mother and father. The Carter girls made it a rule to scatter themselves through the crowd the better to look after the hungry and see that no one's wants were unsatisfied.

"Ah, is that so? I had an idea she was destined for college. It seems to me that Tweedles told me she had passed her Bryn Mawr exams."

"So she did, but I am glad to say she has given up all idea of that foolishness. I am very anxious for her to make her debut."

Nan, who was making the rounds of the various tables to see that everyone was served properly, overheard her mother's remark and glanced shyly at Mr. Tucker. She caught his eye unwittingly but there was something in the look that he gave her that made her know he understood the whole situation and was in sympathy with Douglas, who was very busy at the next table helping [73] hungry week-enders to the rapidly disappearing potato salad.

There was a rather pathetic droop to Douglas' young shoulders as though the weight of the universe were getting a little too much for her. Mr. Tucker looked from her to Robert Carter who seemed to be accepting things as he found them with an astonishing calmness. He was certainly a changed man. Remembering him as a person of great force and energy, who always took the initiative when any work was to be done or question decided, his old friend wondered at his almost flabby state. Here he was calmly letting his silly wife, because silly she seemed to Jeffry Tucker, although charming and even lovable, put aside his daughter's desires for an education and force her into society. He could see it all with half an eye and what he could not see for himself the speaking countenance of the third Carter, Nan, was telling him as plainly as a countenance could. He determined to talk with the girl as soon as supper was over and see if he could help her in some way, how, he did not know, but he felt that he might be of some use. [74]

The supper was a very merry one in spite of the depression that had seized poor Douglas. She tried not to let her gloom permeate those around her. Helen was in a perfect gale and the Tucker Twins took their cue from her and the ball of good-humored repartee was tossed back and forth. Tillie Wingo was resplendent in a perfectly new dancing frock. The beaux buzzed around her like bees around a honey pot. The silent Bill Tinsley kept on saying nothing but his calf eyes were more eloquent than any words. He had fallen head over heels in love with the frivolous Tillie from the moment she offered to tip him on the memorable occasion of her first visit to the camp. Lewis Somerville, usually with plenty to say for himself, was almost as silent as his chum, Bill. It seemed as though Douglas' low spirits had affected her cousin.

"What is it, Douglas?" he whispered, as he took the last plate of salad from her weary hand. "You [75] look all done up. Are you sick?"

"No, indeed! Nothing!"

“When the animals have finished feeding, I want to talk to you. Can you give me a few minutes?”

“Why, of course, Lewis, as many as you want.”

Douglas and Lewis had been friends from the moment they had met. That had been some eighteen years before when Douglas had been crawling on the floor, not yet trusting to her untried legs, and Lewis, just promoted from skirts to breeches, had proudly paraded up and down in front of his baby cousin. There never had been a problem in Douglas’ life that she had not discussed with her friend, but she felt a delicacy in talking about this trouble that had arisen on her horizon because it would mean a certain criticism of both her mother and sister.

“Walk after supper?” Bill whispered to Tillie. “Something to say.” Tillie nodded an assent.

Supper over, the tables and chairs were piled up in a twinkling and the latest dance record put on the Victrola. [76]

“Why, this is delightful!” exclaimed Mrs. Carter, looking around for Mr. Tucker to come claim her for the first dance, but she saw that gentleman disappearing over the mountainside with Nan.

“Nan is entirely too young for such nonsense!” she exclaimed with some asperity, but partners were forthcoming a-plenty so she was soon dancing like any girl of eighteen, while her indulgent husband smoked his pipe and looked contentedly on.

Susan and Oscar washed the dishes with more rattling than usual as Oscar had much grumbling in store for the delinquent Susan.

“Wherefo’ you done lef’ yo’ wuck to Miss Helen?”

“I’s a-helpin’ Mis’ Carter. She kep’ me a-openin’ boxes an’ hangin’ up things. I knowed Miss Helen wouldn’t min’. She thinks her maw oughter have what she wants. I done heard her tell Miss Douglas that she means to see her maw has her desires fulfilled. Sounded mos’ lak qua’llin’ the way the young missises was a-talkin’.” [77]

“Well, all I got to say is that Mis’ Carter ain’t called on to git any mo’ waitin’ on than the young ladies. They’s as blue-blooded as what she is an’ even mo’ so as they is got all the blood she’s got an’ they paw’s beside. I bet she ain’t goin’ to tun a han’ to fill any of these folks up. There she is now a-dancin’ ’round like a teetotaller a-helpin’ the boarders to shake down they victuals. I’ll be boun’ some of these here Hungarians will be empty befo’ bed time.”

CHAPTER VI [78]

POSTPRANDIAL CONVERSATIONS

It was a wonderful night. The sun had set in a glory of clouds while Oscar was still endeavoring to fill ’em up. The moon was full and “round as the shield of my fathers.” It was very warm with not a breeze stirring. Jeffry Tucker drew Nan down on the first fallen log they came to out of reach of the noise from the pavilion.

“It is fine to be able to leave the city for a while,” he said, drawing in deep breaths of mountain air. “And now, Miss Nan Carter, I want you to tell me what was the reason for the S. O. S. that you sent out to me as plain as one pair of eyes can speak to another. I am a very old friend of your father, have known him ever since I was a little boy at school where I looked up to him and admired him as only a little boy can a big one. I see he is in poor health, at least in a nervous state, and I am wondering if there isn’t something I can do. I don’t want to butt in—you understand that, don’t you? But if I can help, I want to.” [79]

And then Nan Carter did just exactly what everybody always did: she took Jeffry Tucker into her confidence and told him all of the troubles of the family. He listened attentively.

“I see! The rent from the house in Richmond is the only income you can depend upon just now, and your mother wants to live at home again and have Miss Douglas make her debut in state. She has given up college for lack of funds, but she is to make her debut instead—a much more expensive pastime, I fancy. What does your father say?”

“Oh, that is the terrible part of it! We don’t want anyone to appeal to father—he is sure to say that mother must do just as she chooses. He always has said that and he thinks that he is put on earth just to gratify mother’s every wish. Mr. Tucker, please don’t think mother is selfish—it isn’t that—she is just inexperienced.” [80]

“Certainly not! Certainly not!” But that gentleman crossed his fingers and quickly possessed himself of a bit of green leaf, which was the Tucker twins’ method, as children, when they made a remark with a mental reservation, the remark for politeness and the mental reservation for truth.

“You see, if father begins to think that mother wants things that it will take more money to buy, he will go back to work, and Dr. Wright says that nothing but a complete rest will cure him—rest

and no worries."

"Can't Dr. Wright have a plain talk with your mother and explain matters to her?"

"Ye-e-s, but there is a kind of complication there, too. You see, Dr. Wright had a horrid time at first trying to beat it into us that father was in a bad way. Helen kicked against his diagnosis like I don't know what, treated Dr. Wright mighty badly. He was fine about it and so patient that by and by Helen came to her senses, and began to appreciate all he had done for father, and she and [81] Dr. Wright are real good friends. Now Helen is siding with mother and thinks that whatever mother wants to do she should do. She even wants Douglas to go to White Sulphur with mother for several weeks, right now in our very busiest season."

Mr. Tucker could not help laughing at the child by his side, so seriously discussing the trials of her family and now talking about their busiest season like some veteran hotel keeper.

"White Sulphur would mean an added expense, too," he suggested.

"Of course, and Helen says she will take her share of the summer's earnings and send mother. Helen is very generous and very impulsive, with no more idea of saving for winter than a grasshopper."

"This is what I take it you want me to do: make your mother change her mind about going to White Sulphur and decide of her own accord that this winter it would be a mistake to bring Miss [82] Douglas out to make her bow before Richmond society."

"Exactly! Oh, Mr. Tucker, if you only could without having father even know that mother is not having everything she wants!"

"I'll do my best. I may have to take Dr. Wright into consultation before I get through. Already a plan is surging in my brain."

"Let's fly back to the pavilion then and you start to work!"

Nan forgot to be shy in her eagerness to thank Mr. Tucker for his interest in their affairs and her hurry to get him launched in the undertaking of coercing her mother without that little lady's knowledge. She wondered if she had spoken too plainly about Dr. Wright and Helen. Nan was sentimental, as one of her poetic nature would be apt to be, and the budding romance that she thought she could spy springing up between Dr. Wright and her sister, far be it from her to blight. She felt sure Dr. Wright would feel it to be his duty to protect his patient from mental worry, but she was also sure that Helen would be quite impatient if Dr. Wright ventured to [83] criticize her mother. What a relief it was to have unbosomed herself to this dear, kind Mr. Tucker, who understood her so readily and still did not seem to think her poor little mother was selfish or silly! (The crossing of fingers and holding something green had escaped her notice.)

"I won't tell Douglas I have said anything to him," she promised herself. "It would be difficult to explain that I caught his eye at the supper table and he divined that I was in trouble. That is the truth, though, no matter how silly it sounds."

She wondered what the plan was that had begun to surge but she determined to leave it to Mr. Tucker. That gentleman, whatever his idea of attack, did not immediately approach her mother but made his way to the middle of the pavilion where he awaited his chance to break in on a dance with Page Allison, his daughters' friend.

"She may be part of his plan! Who knows? At any rate, I believe he is going to get us out of the [84] trouble somehow."

As Douglas and Lewis left the pavilion they took the path straight up the mountain. "Let's go this way and shake the crowd for a little while," suggested Lewis.

"But we mustn't be long. Helen will have too much entertaining to do. We can't get it out of our heads that we must treat these boarders as though we were having a house-party."

"Well, I reckon that's the reason you have been so successful. I have heard some of the fellows say that they never hear the chink of coin here. It really seems like a house-party."

"I am so glad, but I am glad of the chink of coin, too."

"But, Douglas, I did not bring you out here to talk about boarders and coin—I have got something else to say. Bill and I have just been waiting until Cousin Robert and Cousin Annette got back because we couldn't leave you without any protection——"

"Leave us! Oh, Lewis!"

"Do you mind really, Douglas?" [85]

"Mind? Why, I can't tell you how much I mind!"

"We know we have no business staying here indefinitely and we feel we must get to work. We are going to enlist for the Mexican border. We have got over our grouch against Uncle Sam for firing us from West Point and now that he needs us, we are determined to show him we are ready to serve him in any capacity. You know we are right, don't you?"

"Ye-e-s, but——"

By that time Lewis had taken possession of Douglas' hands and with a voice filled with emotion, he said:

"I can't bear to leave you, but now Cousin Robert is here he will make it safe for you. I have tried to help some——"

"Oh, and you have! We couldn't have done a thing without you and Bill."

"I don't know about that. I believe there is no limit to what you Carter girls can do—but, Douglas —honey—before I go to Mexico—I—I just have to tell you how much I love you. I don't mean like a [86]
cousin—I'm not such close kin to you after all—I mean I love you so much that the thought of leaving you is agony. You knew all the time that it was no cousin business, didn't you, Douglas?"

"Why, Lewis, I never thought of such a thing. You are almost like my brother," and Douglas devoutly wished the moon would hurry up and get behind a big black cloud that was coming over the mountain.

"Brother much! I'm not the least little bit like a brother. Bill's got sisters and I don't believe he is bothering about leaving them one-tenth as much as he is leaving Tillie Wingo. Why, honey, ever since I can remember I have been meaning to get you to marry me when we both grew up. Of course, I can't ask you to marry me now as I haven't a piece of prospect and will have to enlist in the ranks and work up, but I mean to work up fast and be so steady that I'll be a lieutenant before Carranza and Villa can settle their difficulty. Won't you be engaged to me so I'll have [87]
something to work for until I can see you again?"

"Engaged to you! Why, Lewis, I—I—how can I be when it is so sudden? You never told me before that you cared for me the least little bit."

"Told you before! Ye Gods and little fishes! I've been telling you for pretty near eighteen years."

"Well, I never heard you!"

"Why don't you say you don't give a hang for me and let me go?"

"But, Lewis, I give a whole lot of hangs for you and I don't want you to go."

"Oh, I know the kind of hangs you give: just this brother and sister business," and the young man dropped the girl's hands.

Douglas felt like crying, but Lewis was so absurd she had to laugh. What time had she to think about getting engaged? She felt as though the whole world rested on her young shoulders. Here was her mother wanting her to make a debut, and Helen wanting to spend on a silly trip the [88]
pitiful little money they had begun to save from their boarding camp. And now Lewis Somerville and Bill Tinsley, the brawn and sinew of their undertaking, suddenly deciding that they must enlist and hike out for the Mexican border!

"We must go back to the pavilion," she said wearily. Her voice sounded very tired and she stumbled a little as she turned to go down the path.

"Now, Douglas, I have distressed you," and Lewis was all thoughtfulness and consideration. "I didn't mean to, honey—I just want you to say you love me the way I love you."

"And I can't say it, because I never thought of your caring for me in any different way. You are the best friend I have in the world."

"Well, that is something and I am going to keep on being it. Maybe when I come back from Mexico you will think differently. You will write to me, won't you?"

"Why, of course I will, Lewis! Haven't I always written to you?"

"Douglas, don't you think you could love me a little?" [89]

"But, Lewis, I do love you a whole lot!"

"But I mean be engaged to me?"

"Lewis Somerville, would you want me to be engaged to you when you know perfectly well that I have never thought of you except as the very best friend I've got in the world, and if not as a brother, at least as a cousin who has been almost like a brother? If I did engage myself to you, you wouldn't have the least bit of respect for me and you know you wouldn't; would you?"

But Lewis would not answer. He just drew her arm in his and silently led her back to the pavilion. The big cloud had made its way in front of the moon and he took advantage of the darkness to kiss her hand, but he was very gentle and seemingly resigned to the brother business that he had so scorned. His youthful countenance was very sad and stern, however, as he turned and made his way to the tent that he shared with Bill and Bobby.

Bill Tinsley and Tillie Wingo, too, were walking on the mountainside, Bill as silent as the grave [90]
but in a broad grin while Tillie kept up her accustomed chatter. It flowed from her rosy lips with no more effort than water from a mountain spring.

"Do you know, Mr. Tinsley, that I have danced out five dresses this summer? As for shoes! If Helen had not given me some of her slippers, I would be barefooted this minute. I don't mind this

rough dressing in the day time, but I must say when evening comes I like to doll up. I believe Mrs. Carter feels the same way. Isn't that a lovely dress she has on this evening? There is no telling what it cost. If their mother can buy such a frock as that, I think it is absurd for the girls to be working so hard—and believe me, they are some workers. Now, I'm real practical and know how to dress on very little and, if I do say it that shouldn't, I bet there is not a girl in Richmond who makes a better appearance on as little money as I spend, but I know what things cost—you can't fool me—and I'm able to tell across the room that that filmy lace effect that Mrs. Carter is [91] sporting set her back a good seventy-five."

"Whew!" from Bill.

"Easy, seventy-five, I say, and maybe more! It would take a lot of week-enders to pay for it and I bet she no more thinks about it than she does about the air she breathes. Now she wants to bring Douglas out and you know she wouldn't be willing to let her come out like a poor girl—no sirree! Douglas would have to have all kinds of clothes and all kinds of parties. She would have to come out in a blaze of glory if her mother has a finger in it. Girls who come out that way don't have such a lot on the ones who just quietly crawl out—like I did, f'instance. I just quietly crawled—you could not call it coming——"

Here Bill gave one of his great laughs, breaking his vow of silence. At least it seemed as though he must have made such a vow as through all of Tillie's chatter he had uttered not one word more than the "Whew" over Mrs. Carter's extravagance. The picture of Tillie's quietly crawling [92] got the better of his risibles.

"You needn't laugh! I can assure you I came out in home-made clothes and during the entire winter I had not one thing done for me to push me in society—not a cup of tea was handed in my name. One lady did put my card in some invitations she got out, trying to relaunch a daughter who had been out for three seasons and gone in again, but she had an inconvenient death in the family and had to recall the invitations; so I got no good of it after all. Not that I cared—goodness no! I had all the fun there was to have and I'm still having, although I'm not able to keep in the swim, giving entertainments and what not. Of course, I was not included in select luncheons and dinner dances and the like. Those expensive blowouts are given with a view of returning all kinds of obligations or of putting people in your debt so you are included in theirs—but I got to all the big things and got there without the least wire-pulling or working. Of course, I did get to some of [93] the small things because I was run in a lot as substitute when some girl dropped out. I wasn't proud and did not mind in the least being second or third choice. People who never entertain need not expect to be on the original list. I just took a sensible view of the matter. I tell you, if a girl wants to have a good time she's got no business with a chip on her shoulder. Society is a give-and-take game and if you are poorish and want to get without giving, you've got to be willing to do a lot in the way of swallowing your pride. At least, I had no slights offered me where the dancing men were concerned. I made every german and that is something many a rich debutante can't say for herself."

Tillie paused for breath and then Bill opened his mouth to speak, but the loquacious Tillie got in before he could begin and he had to wait.

"Now I believe Douglas would have lots of attention even if her mother did nothing to help on, but Mrs. Carter would enjoy having a daughter in society more than a daughter would enjoy [94] being there, I believe, and she would be entertaining and spending money from morning until night. Of course, Lewis Somerville would be lots of help as he would stand ready to take Douglas anywhere that she did not get a bid from some other man——"

"But Lewis'll be gone," broke in Bill.

"Gone! Nonsense! Now that he is out of West Point I'll be bound he will just dance attendance on Douglas. He is dead gone on her. That helps a lot in a girl's first year: to have a devoted—that is, if he is not silly jealous."

"He'll be gone."

"Gone where?"

"Mexican border!"

"But he is out of soldiering."

"Both of us enlisting!" Tillie was absolutely silenced for a moment and Bill went on: "See here, Miss Wingo, Tillie! I'd be glad if you would—if—I'm stuck on you for sure."

"Oh, come off! You know you think I'm the silliest ever."

"I think you are about the prettiest, jolliest ever. I wish you would let me go off to Mexico [95] engaged to you. It would make it lots easier to work and I mean to work like a whole regiment and make good. Won't you, Tillie?"

"Well, I don't care if I do. You are a fine dancer and I think a heap of you, Bill. I'd rather keep it dark, though, if you don't mind, as it queers a girl's game sometimes if she gets engaged."

"Lord, no! I don't mind just so I know it myself," and the happy Bill enfolded his enamorata in his arms, although she carefully admonished him not to crush her new dress.

“I never dreamed you were thinking about me seriously,” she confessed as she emerged from his embrace.

“Honest? Been dotty about you ever since you took me for a jitney driver and tipped me a quarter. Got it yet.”

“Look how dark it is! I believe we are going to have a storm. What a great black cloud! Let’s hurry, as I have no idea of getting my frock wet.”

Hurry they did and reached the pavilion just as great drops began to fall. Bill was in a state of [96] happy excitement over his engagement, although it was something he must keep to himself. He felt like shouting it on the housetops, but instead he gave one of his great laughs that startled Mrs. Carter so she stopped dancing and hunted up Bobby.

“It sounded like bears and lions,” she declared, “and I felt uneasy about my baby.”

She found that youngster fast asleep cuddled up in his father’s arms, the father looking very happy and peaceful. Robert Carter felt quite like a little child himself with his great girls taking care of him.

CHAPTER VII [97]

THE STORM

That storm was always known as “The Storm” by everyone who was at the Week-End Camp on that night in August. Greendale had been singularly free from severe storms that season and the Carters had had no difficulty up to that time in keeping dry. They had had rain in plenty but never great downpours and their mountain had escaped the lightning that on several occasions had played havoc not many miles from them.

The day had been exceptionally warm but very clear. The full moon had taken the place of the sun when night came on and so brilliant was the glow from that heavenly orb, one could almost fancy heat was reflected as well as light. The great black cloud that came rolling over the [98] mountain was as much an astonishment to the dancers in the pavilion as it was to the moon herself. They refused to recognize the fact that a storm was coming up and the moon also held her own for some time after the downpour was upon them. She kept peeping out through rifts in the clouds and once when the storm was at its fiercest she sailed clear of all clouds for a few moments, and then it was that the rarest of all beauties in Nature was beheld by the damp and huddled-up crowd of week-enders: a lunar rainbow.

It stretched across the valley, a perfect arc with the colors as clearly defined as a solar bow but infinitely more delicate than any rainbow ever beheld before.

There was no such thing as keeping dry. When Lewis Somerville and Bill Tinsley built the pavilion, they had kept exactly to the architect’s plans, drawn so carefully by Robert Carter’s assistant, Mr. Lane. The roof projected so far on every side that they had remarked at the time [99] that nothing short of horizontal rain could find its way under that roof. Well, this rain was horizontal and it came in first one direction and then another until every bit of floor space was flooded. The thunder sounded like stage thunder made by rolling barrels of bricks down inclined planes and helped out with the bass drum. Great clouds rested on the mountain tops and a wind, that seemed demoniacal in the tricks it played, bent over great forest trees as though they were saplings and then let them snap back into place with a deafening crack.

“Save the Victrola,” whispered Tillie to Bill. “I want to dance with you once before you go off, and water will ruin it.”

That was enough for the devoted Bill. He took off his coat and wrapped it tenderly over the top of the Victrola, which was still playing a gay dance tune as no one had had the presence of mind to stop it. Then he made a dash for the kitchen just as a river of water was descending and in a twinkling was back bearing in his arms a great tin tub. This he placed over the top of the [100] precious music-maker. He felt very tender toward Tillie just then for although her new dress was being ruined, still her first thought had been for the Victrola so she could dance with him.

The storm having come up so suddenly found the crowd totally unprepared. Tent flys had been left up and the windows and door of the cabin, where Mrs. Carter was installed, were wide open for the four winds of heaven to blow through. Sad havoc they played with the dainty finery that Mrs. Carter and Susan had left spread out on the bed. The wonderful hat, brought as a present for Douglas, was picked up the next morning half way down the mountain; at least the ruin was supposed to be that hat but it was never quite identified as it had lost all semblance to a hat.

Lewis, after hearing the ultimatum from Douglas, as I have said, made his solitary way to his tent where he threw himself on his cot to fight it out with his disappointed self. A dash of rain on his [101] tent aroused him and then a mighty gust of wind simply picked up the tent and wafted it away

like thistledown.

“Well, of all——” but Lewis never finished of all the what, but in a twinkling he had rolled up the bed clothes belonging to himself and his tent mates, and then rushing to the neighboring tents that were still withstanding the raging hurricane he rolled up blankets found there and piled cots on top of the bundles.

It was a real fight, strong man that he was, to make his way to the pavilion. Trees were bending before the wind and he found the only way to locomote was to crawl.

“Just suppose the pavilion doesn’t hold!” was ringing in his mind; but the young men “had builded better than they knew.” It did hold although the roof was straining at the rafters and Lewis and Bill feared every moment it might rise up and float off as their tent had done.

Lewis came under cover wetter than he would have been had he been in swimming, he declared. [102] Swimming just soaks the water in but the rain had beat it in and hammered it down. The wind was still driving the rain in horizontal sheets and the pavilion was getting damper and damper. The week-enders were a very forlorn looking crowd and no doubt the majority of them were far from blessing the day that had brought them to the camp in Albemarle. They ran from corner to corner trying to get out of the searching flood.

“I know they are blaming it on us!” cried Nan to Mr. Tucker.

“Who is blaming it on you?” laughed Page Allison. “Why, honey, it may be doing worse things in other places. We should be thankful we are on a mountain top instead of in a valley.” Then she drew Mr. Tucker aside and whispered to him: “See here, Zebedee, don’t you think it is up to us somehow to relieve this situation? If we get giddy and act as though it were a privilege to be wet to the skin, don’t you think we might stir up these people and make a lark of this storm instead of a calamity? You remember you told me once that you and Miss Jinny Cox saved the day for a [103] picnic at Monticello when a deluge hit you there?”

Zebedee was the Tucker Twins’ pet name for their father, and Page Allison, their best friend, was also privileged to use the name for that eternally youthful gentleman.

“I’ve been thinking we must do something, but the lightning is so severe that somehow I think I must wait.”

“You are like Mammy Susan who says: ’Whin the Almighty is a-doing his wuck ain’t the time fur a po’ ole nigger ter be a-doin’ hern.’”

“Exactly! But it is letting up a bit now, that is, the lightning is, but the rain is even more terrific.”

A great crash of thunder, coming simultaneously with a flash of lightning that cracked like a whip, put a stop to conversation, and Page, in spite of her bravery, for she was not the least afraid of storms as a rule—clung to Mr. Tucker. Everybody was clinging to everybody else and in [104] the stress of the moment no one was choosy about the person to cling to. Bill cursed his stars that Tillie was hanging on to Skeeter, as pale as a little ghost, when she might just as well be hanging on to him, while he, in turn, was supporting a strange person he had never even met.

“That hit close to us!” exclaimed someone.

“I believe it hit me!” screamed a girl.

“Where are Susan and Oscar?” cried Douglas. “They will be scared to death.”

“When I went down in the kitchen after the tub for the Victrola, Oscar was under the table and Susan was trying to get in the fireless cooker, head first,” volunteered Bill. “The kitchen is really the dryest place on the mountain, I fancy.”

“You forget the shower bath,” suggested Helen. “Turn it on full force and it would still be a thousand times dryer than any place here.”

“I tell you what let’s do!” spoke Dum Tucker with an inspiration that all regretted had not come [105] sooner. “Let’s climb up and sit on the rafters!”

Suiting the action to the word, she lightly ascended the trunk of the huge tulip poplar tree that had been left in the center of the pavilion as a support to the roof. The branches had been sawed off, leaving enough projecting to serve as hat racks for the camp. These made an admirable winding stair which an athletic girl like Dum Tucker made nothing of climbing.

“Splendid!” and Dee Tucker followed her twin. In short order many of the more venturesome members of the party were perched on the rafters where they defied the rain to reach them. Even poor Mrs. Carter, her pretty lace dress, if not absolutely ruined, at least with all of its first freshness gone, was persuaded to come up, too, and there she sat trembling and miserable.

“Come on up, Page!” shouted Dee to her chum.

“I’ll be there soon,” but Page had an idea that she meant first to propose to Douglas.

Poor Douglas, this was a fitting ending to a day of worry and concern. She felt like one [106]

Of course country folk are always made to feel in some intangible way that they are responsible for the weather when the weather happens to be bad and city folk are visiting them. Douglas thought she had enough not to bear the weight of the storm, but somehow she felt that that, too, was added to her burden.

“I know exactly what you are thinking,” said Page, coming up and putting her wet arm around Douglas’ wet waist. “I have lived in the country all my life and whenever we have a big storm at Bracken or unseasonable weather of any sort, we are always held personally responsible for it by a certain type of visitors. You think this is going to harm your camp and keep people from coming, don’t you?”

“Why, how did you know?”

“A little bird told me—a stormy petrel. Now I tell you what we must do: we must whoop things up [107] until all of these week-enders will think that the storm was about the most interesting thing that ever happened at Camp Carter and they will come again hoping for a repetition of the experience.”

“Oh, Page! How can we?” and Douglas smiled in spite of herself.

“Well, let’s call a council and appoint a committee on ways and means.”

Mr. Tucker was first on the list, then Helen and Dr. Wright, Bill Tinsley and Lewis Somerville. Nan was so busy looking at the beauties of Nature that she had to be called three times before she answered.

“Come on, Miss Nan!” begged Mr. Tucker. “Your wise little head is wanted on this committee.”

“Only look at that bank of clouds as the lightning strikes on the edge of it! It looks like the portals of heaven.”

“Yes, and it came mighty near being that same thing,” muttered Mr. Tucker.

The storm was really passing. Flashes of lightning and peals of thunder grew farther and farther [108] apart. The rain gave one big last dash and stopped as suddenly as it had begun and then the moon asserted herself once more.

Every member of the hastily called council had some suggestion to make and every suggestion was eagerly taken by the committee on ways and means, that committee being composed of the entire council.

Page said hot coffee for the entire camp must be made immediately and she would do the making. Dr. Wright said a fire would be a pretty good thing if it could be managed, and Bill Tinsley remembered some charcoal braziers that Susan used for ironing and a box of charcoal in the corner of the kitchen. Lewis went to gather up all the blankets in the camp and those that were damp were draped along the rafters by the climbers. Soon the brazier had a glow of coals that sent up heat to the rafters, and Bill also put into use the great iron pot that had hung over the camp fire just for picturesqueness. It had never had anything in it but water, all the cooking [109] being done on kerosene stoves and in a fireless cooker. This made an excellent brazier and the coals were kept red hot with the help of the automobile tire pump in lieu of bellows. Helen had ambition for a welsh rarebit and started in with chafing dishes. This called into requisition more workers and all of the camp was soon busy cutting up cheese and toasting bread and crackers.

The Victrola was relieved of its tub and a ragtime record put on that made all of the workers step lively, which did much toward starting their circulation and warming them up generally. The Victrola ever after that was called Diogenes, after a certain wise man who lived in a tub.

Everybody danced at his work and everybody was laughing and happy. The moonlight was so dazzling in its brilliancy that it was difficult to realize that not ten minutes before the biggest storm Greendale had ever known had been making even the strong men tremble. Nan seemed to be the only person who had not been afraid. Even those who had never before minded a storm [110] had been cowed by this one.

Page declared she had always liked storms before; even when a big gum tree on the lawn at Bracken had been struck before her very eyes she had not been afraid, but this time she was scared to death.

Dum said it seemed to be such a personal storm somehow and each flash seemed to mean her. “I felt my naked soul was exposed to my Maker,” she said, as she gave her beloved father a hug. “I have got all kinds of things to ’fess to you, Zebedee, things that I never thought made any difference before,” she whispered.

“Why, Dumdeedledums! What on earth?”

“Only this evening I smoked a cigarette, although I know you hate it—I owe a little bill for soda water at Miller’s, although I know you don’t want me to charge things—there are other things but I can’t think of them just now. Suppose—only suppose that I had winked out without telling you or worse than that, suppose you had——” but Dum couldn’t finish for the big tears that rolled out [111] of her eyes and which Tucker-like she made no attempt to conceal. Zebedee lent her his

handkerchief and then had to wipe his own eyes, too.

“That is all right, honey, but don’t do it any more. And now you turn in and help these Carter girls and Page jolly up this crowd. Page is making coffee and I am going with Somerville to right the tents and take stock of the damage done by the storm.”

When Page had first entered the kitchen she found the two negroes bent over in abject woe. Oscar was praying while Susan moaned and groaned with occasional ejaculations like a Greek chorus in a tragedy of Euripides.

“Oh my Gawd, let the deep waters pass over me and let me come out whiter than the snow and sweeter than the honey in the honey comb—let me be putrified by fire and let the rollin’ thunder’s shock pass me by, leavin’ me stand steadfast, a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night like unto a lily of the valley, a bright an’ mawnin’ star that casts its beams on the jest an’ the onjest——” [112]

“Yes, my Gawd!” wailed the chorus. “An’ the jest an’ the onjest shall lie down together like the lion an’ the lamb in that great an’ mighty day an’ who Gawd has united let no man pull acinder.”

“Yes! Yes! In that day when the Rock of Ages shall smite the Shibboleth and the Urum an’ Thurum may be delivered not—remember thou thy servant Oscar——”

“Yes! Yes, Lord! an’ thy handy maiden Susan!”

Page entered and put a stop to the impassioned appeal by asking for the coffee pot, while Bill Tinsley bore off the big brazier full of charcoal.

“The storm is over, I think,” said Page, with difficulty restraining her smiles. “It was very terrible indeed.”

“Turrible ain’t no word for it; an’ now you say the white folks wants to eat agin? Lord love us if ev’thing don’t make these here week-enders emptier an’ emptier. Feedin’ of them is like pourin’ water down a rat hole.” [113]

“Well, you see, uncle, they all of them got so wet that it is wise to give them something hot to drink, and then, too, we want them to forget the terrible storm and think of the camp only with pleasure. You see they might not come back again.”

“Forget it! forget it! You can’t lose these here folks. They’d ride all the way from Richmond jes’ to fill theyselves up, if for no other reason. They is the empties’ lot I ever come acrost.”

Dee Tucker followed Page to the kitchen to see if she could be of any assistance in making the coffee. She felt keenly sorry for the Carters on account of this storm. Not being connected with them in any way, the grumblers had not hesitated to criticize the whole thing in Dee’s presence when they got wet and scared. Dee had done all in her power to soften their judgment, but there were several who did not hesitate to blame the Carter girls because of their wetting. Nothing is so catching as criticism and it spreads like wildfire with the genus boarder. She told Page of her fears. [114]

“We’ll have to put a stop to it. You get Tillie Wingo and you and she soft soap the men who are grouching, and then get Zebedee to go after the females. He can make them believe they only dreamed it stormed.”

CHAPTER VIII [115]

THE DAMAGE DONE

Jeffry Tucker and his daughter Caroline, otherwise known as Dee, were surely the most tactful human beings in the world. They could almost always gain any goal by tact. They set out now to make the grouchy week-enders dry up and cheer up, and in half an hour after the storm was over they had attained their object. Page overheard Mr. Tucker pacifying a very disconsolate maiden lady whose hair had come out of curl and whose rosy cheeks had run off—not far, however—only to her jaws.

“This is a most outrageous way to treat boarders!” she exclaimed. “The idea of having no proper shelter for them—charging an enormous price, too! I certainly intend to leave tomorrow and I will stop some friends of mine who were planning to come up next week. Isn’t it strange how these places are overrated? Anyhow, I’ll not give it a good name but will get out the first thing in the morning.” [116]

“Oh, don’t do that,” begged the wily Zebedee. “I had planned to get you to take a walk with me tomorrow evening. The moon will be gorgeous and there are some wonderful spots around here—romantic spots.”

“Well, of course I wouldn’t think of going if it clears up.”

“It has already cleared up! Just look at the moon! I almost think we might take a walk now, but it might be very muddy. Let’s fox trot instead.”

“‘Done, for a ducat!’” laughed Page to herself, as Mr. Tucker and the much mollified week-ender danced off together. “I am afraid poor Zebedee will have his whole holiday taken up showing the moon to wet hens.”

What Mr. Tucker accomplished with the females, Tillie and Dee did likewise to the males. Tillie exercised all her fascinations on some hallroom boys, while Dee went in for some old bachelors who loved their ease and comfort and did not at all relish the idea of wet sheets on soggy cots. [117]

“Here is some hot coffee!” she said, with a very winning smile. “Two lumps, or one?”

“None for me, miss,” from a terrible old grouch who had been particularly loud in his praise of Nature before Nature had shown what she really could do. “I don’t expect to sleep a wink as it is. I am perfectly sure the beds will be damp.”

“But I am sure they will not be. Douglas is seeing about it now and she says they have plenty of dry bed linen. You had better have some coffee and I will dance with you until you get sleepy.”

“Egad, that would be very pleasant! I am going back to the city tomorrow and I could sleep on the train, perhaps.”

“Oh, please don’t go tomorrow. I thought you would be here over Sunday and we might get up a little crowd and go sit on the rocks and read aloud or something.”

“Well, if it clears I may change my mind.”

“It has already cleared! Goody! Goody! Now you will have to stay. Wouldn’t the old-fashioned waltz go well with that record Helen has just put on? Do you know I adore the old-fashioned waltz?” [118]

As the old-fashioned waltz was the only thing that staid bachelor could dance, never having been able to master the new dances, this put him in rare good humor. He swallowed his coffee hastily, pronouncing it excellent, and in a twinkling he and Dee were dancing the dances of the early eighties and one more week-ender was saved to the Carters to give the camp a good name.

After a severe storm sometimes it is more of a wonder what the damage isn’t than what it is. It seems at the time that nothing will ever be dry and straight again, and then in a very short while the world looks normal once more.

Camp Carter recuperated in a miraculous manner. Only one tent had been blown away and those that stood the test of wind had also stood the test of rain. Some of the blankets were damp but most of them, thanks to Lewis’ foresight, had been protected. The drainage on the side of a mountain is naturally perfect so there were no disconcerting puddles, and the rocky paths were hardly muddy, so hard and driving had been the downpour. [119]

Lewis and Bill Tinsley went with Douglas and Nan to take stock of the damage and to repair what they could. Their relief was great at the state of affairs until they entered the cabin. The wind and rain had gone straight through it. The pretty rag rugs were sopping wet and, as I have said before, all the dainty finery spread out on the bed, was blown hither and yon. Douglas looked at the havoc in dismay. Would her mother want to buy more things to replace these that were ruined? She missed the pretty hat intended for her own fair head and was in a measure relieved that she would not have to wear it.

“Let’s build a fire immediately,” and Nan began to pile up paper and chips in the open fireplace, the cabin boasting the one chimney in camp where a fire was possible. “Now this will dry out the room before mother comes in to go to bed.” [120]

“Yes, and we had better put a cot in here for Bobby, now that our tent is blown off,” suggested Lewis.

“But where will you and Bill sleep?” asked Douglas.

“Oh, we can curl up on the floor of the pavilion. Our cots are soaking. I kept the blankets dry, though.”

“But I am so afraid you won’t be comfortable.”

“Oh, that’s all right! Get us in training for the border! Bill and I have been living so soft I fancy a little roughing it will be good for us.”

Lewis sounded rather bitter and Douglas felt that she would give worlds if she could tell him that she had decided she did care for him as he wanted her to. Other girls pretended, why not she? But there was an uprightness about Douglas Carter that would not let her be a party to any form of deceit. She was sorry, very sorry, but she could not be like Tillie Wingo and engage herself to anyone on a moment’s notice. [121]

“We are going to miss both of you ever and ever so much. Think what it would be in a time like this without you to help! I can hardly contemplate running the camp without you.”

“Oh, that will be easy enough! Skeeter and Frank can do what we have done. You won’t miss us at all.”

“I didn’t mean just the work you do,” faltered poor Douglas.

“Oh, well, the rest won’t amount to much,” declared Lewis, determined to be difficult.

Bill listened to his chum in amazement. He was in such a seventh heaven of bliss himself that he could not understand anyone’s being anything but happy. For his part he could not see why Lewis didn’t settle matters with his cousin before going to the border. It never entered his head that anyone could refuse a Greek god of a fellow like Lewis Somerville. If a belle like Tillie Wingo could put up with him, why, there was not a girl living who would not jump at his friend. [122]

Nan sniffed a romance in the air where she had not expected to find it. She, like all her family, was so accustomed to the friendship between her elder sister and Lewis that she had not thought of a more serious relationship being the outcome. Lewis was certainly sounding cold and formal and Douglas was looking distressed.

“I see how it is,” she said to herself; “Lewis has proposed to Douglas and Douglas has turned him down. He told her he was going to enlist and proposed all in one breath and poor old Doug couldn’t adjust herself fast enough. She no doubt does love him but doesn’t know it. Just wait until he gets out of sight!”

The week-enders were finally all put to bed in dry sheets and warmed blankets, after having drunk hot coffee and eaten a rarebit that was so tender even the grouchiest of the grouchy could not get up indigestion over it. The leaven of good-humor spread by the Tuckers and Page Allison had begun to work and all were rising to the occasion and quite proud of themselves over taking [123] everything so philosophically.

The maiden lady who had threatened to leave on the morning train but had been persuaded by Zebedee to stay over to take a moonlight walk with him was now loud in her praise of camp life.

“I say the only way to get along is to take things as they come. I was just telling Mr. Tucker that one can’t expect the comforts of the Jefferson Hotel up in camp, but then if one wants the comforts of the Jefferson one had better go there and not come to the country. Now I would give up any comforts for the beauties of nature!” and so on, and so on!

Dee danced the old-fashioned waltz until she almost forgot how to do a single modern step. The grouchy bachelor forgot to worry about the possibility of damp sheets and babbled along about the dances of the eighties, and promised to teach his young partner the racket and the heel and toe polka if any of the records would fit those defunct dances.

The sprightliness of that particular bachelor was catching, and the two others, who had begun to [124] inquire about time tables with a view to beating a hasty retreat to the safety-firstness of the city, found themselves cheering up, too; and warmed by the good hot coffee, they began to dance with youthful ardor and actually grumbled when the crowd broke up for needed repose.

“Aren’t the Tuckers splendid?” said Douglas, when she and her sisters were undressing.

“Indeed they are,” agreed Helen, “and I like that little Allison girl a lot, too. She waltzed in and helped with the eats as though she were one of us.”

“I think Mr. Tucker is kind of gone on her,” drawled Nan.

“Nonsense! You are always thinking somebody is gone on somebody,” laughed Helen.

“Well, somebody always is. He treats her just like he does the twins, only different.”

“How’s that, like triplets?”

But Nan had gone to sleep before she could formulate her ideas about how Mr. Tucker treated [125] Page. She only devoutly hoped he would devise some method by which he could persuade her mother to give up the idea of going to White Sulphur and let Douglas alone about making her debut the following winter.

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[126]

CHAPTER IX

MR. MACHIAVELLI TUCKER

Nan wondered what Mr. Tucker had in mind to relieve the situation which she had so ingenuously disclosed to him on that little walk in the moonlight. The next morning she watched him closely and there was something about the businesslike way in which he sought out Mrs. Carter, when that lady appeared long after breakfast, that made her divine he had something up his sleeve.

The charming lady was looking especially lovely in a white linen morning dress. She said she had slept splendidly in spite of the fact that she rather missed the rolling of the ship. Again she had kept Susan so busy waiting on her that the labor of serving breakfast properly had fallen on

Helen. A tray of breakfast had to be arranged exactly as though they were still in the city, and Susan made many trips from the cabin to the kitchen. [127]

Mrs. Carter was one of those persons who was always treated as more or less of an invalid because of a certain delicate look she had, but her girls could not remember her having had a real illness. She must not be awakened in the morning and she must never be asked to go out in bad weather. She must have the daintiest food; the warmest corner in winter and the coolest in summer. She had never demanded these things, but they had always been given her as though she had a kind of divine right to them. Her husband had, from the moment he saw her, the belle of belles at White Sulphur, felt that she was to be served as a little queen and the children had slipped into their father's way.

No one would have been more astonished than Annette Carter had anyone accused her of selfishness. Selfishness was something ugly and greedy and no one could say that she was that. She never made demands on anyone. In fact, she quite prided herself on not making demands. [128] Everyone was kind and thoughtful of her, but then was she not kind and thoughtful of everyone? Had she not brought a present to every one of her girls and a great box of expensive toys for Bobby? It was not her fault that Bobby preferred currying that disgraceful-looking old mule to playing with the fine things she had purchased for him at the most exclusive toy shop in New York. Had she not even remembered every one of the servants, not only Susan and Oscar but the ones who had been in her service when she had left Richmond? The fact that she had charged all of these gifts and that the money to pay for them was to be worked for by her daughters had not for a moment entered her mind.

"And how is camp life treating you this morning?" asked Jeffry Tucker, as he led the little lady to a particularly pleasant corner of the pavilion that commanded a view of the beautiful apple orchards of that county of Virginia famous for the Albemarle pippins. "Did you ever see such a [129] morning? I can hardly believe that only last night we were in the throes of the fiercest storm I have ever seen."

"Oh, I am quite in love with camp life. It is not so rough as I expected it to be when I arrived yesterday. I have a very comfortable bed and a nice bright fire cheered me up wonderfully after I left the pavilion last night. I must confess I was scared to death during the storm, although I held on to myself wonderfully."

"Yes, wonderfully!" but Jeffry Tucker crossed his fingers and reached out for a bit of green from the pine tree growing close to the post. He could not but picture the little woman of the evening before hanging on to her husband, intent on protecting her dress and shrieking at every close flash of lightning or loud clap of thunder.

"I am so glad you are here because I am thinking of leaving my girls at the camp for a while, and of course I could not think of doing it unless you were here to chaperone them."

"Oh, I never thought of my presence being necessary as a chaperone! You know I am thinking of [130] taking Douglas to the White for a fortnight."

"Oh, I am sorry. Of course I could not leave my girls unless they are to be chaperoned."

"But Robert will be here; he is enough chaperone surely."

"Yes, enough in our eyes but not the eyes of the world. You see, I think one cannot be too careful about what Mrs. Grundy will say," and Jeffry Tucker crossed his fingers again and reached for more green, "especially when girls are about the age of mine and yours, too, about to be launched in the world, as it were."

He was devoutly thankful that his girls could not hear him indulging in this homily. If there ever lived a person who scorned Mrs. Grundy that was this same Jeffry Tucker. He devoutly hoped that Mrs. Carter would not hear that Page Allison was in the habit of being chaperoned by him, if one could call it being chaperoned. He well knew that as a chaperone Robert Carter had him beat [131] a mile but he felt that a little subterfuge was permissable in as strenuous a case as this.

"Why, Mr. Tucker, I did not dream you were such a stickler for the proprieties!"

"Ahem—I am more so than I used to be. Having these girls almost grown makes me feel I must be more careful than—my nature—er—er—dictates."

"Exactly! I respect you for it. I, too, think it very important, especially if a girl is to make a debut as I mean that Douglas shall. I am very sorry, though, that you could not leave Virginia and Caroline up here in Robert's care. I am sure it will be all right for once. I have quite set my heart on White Sulphur for a few weeks. I think it gives a girl a certain poise to be introduced to society in an informal way before she makes her debut."

"Well, I am sorry, too, sorrier than I can say. You see, I had planned to come up again myself next Saturday and I thought I would bring with me Hiram G. Parker. He would like this sort of thing [132] and fit in nicely with these young girls. You know how much he takes to the girls before they are quite grown."

"Ye—es!" and Mrs. Carter was lost in a revery.

She well knew that the name of Hiram G. Parker was one that controlled society. He was the Beau Brummel of Richmond and in some unaccountable way had become the dictator of society,

that is of the debutante society. He passed the word about whether or not a girl was to be a belle and his judgment was seldom gainsaid. Mrs. Carter was thinking that no doubt the presence of Hiram G. Parker in their camp would be of more benefit than a trip to White Sulphur. Her position in society was of course assured beyond a doubt but that did not mean a successful debut for one of her daughters, certainly not for one who was to be persuaded if not forced to be a debutante. The business of coming out must be taken quite seriously and the importance of it not belittled. Poor Douglas was taking it seriously enough, but not in a way her mother thought [133] desirable for success.

“Do you know, Mr. Tucker, I have half a mind to give up the trip to White Sulphur.—It is so pleasant here and so delightful to be with my children again; and if your daughters and that sweet little friend of theirs care to remain with us, I shall be more than pleased to chaperone them.”

“Oh, you are kind!” exclaimed the wily Zebedee. “I cannot thank you enough. If you choose to make it so, Camp Carter will vie with White Sulphur as a resort. I shall certainly bring Parker up next week.”

Mr. Tucker grasped the first opportunity to inform the anxious Nan of his successfully performed mission.

“Oh, how did you do it?”

“By just a little twist of the wrist. You shall have to put up with my girls though for another week or so. Your mother has promised to chaperone them until I fetch them away.”

“Splendid! Do they want to stay?”

“They are dying to. I only hope they won’t tear things wide open at camp. They are terribly [134] hoydenish at times.”

“Mr. Tucker, tell me: did you really get mother to give up White Sulphur just to chaperone the twins and Page?”

“You ask her! I think she thinks she did.”

“I believe I’ll call you Mr. Machiavelli Tucker.”

“Don’t flatter me so yet. Wait until I accomplish the seemingly impossible of making your mother decide of her own accord that your sister had better not come out yet.”

“Can you do that, too?”

“I don’t want to sound conceited but I believe I can. This is our secret, so don’t tell a soul that we have any hand in this matter. Just let Douglas think it is fortune smiling on her.”

“All right, but nothing can ever make me forget your kindness!” and Nan held his hand with both of hers with no more trace of shyness than Hiram G. Parker might have shown in dancing a german.

“What on earth have you done to make Nan so eternally grateful?” demanded Dum Tucker, [135] coming suddenly around a spur of rock on the mountain path where her father had accosted Nan.

“I am going to leave you girls up here for some days longer. Isn’t that enough for her to be grateful over?”

“We—ll, I don’t know—that sounds rather fishy.”

“And besides, I am going to send her up a ouija board to pass the hours away until I return. How about that?”

“Oh, now you are talking! That is something to be grateful about. We are all of us dying to try it,” but Dum could not see why Nan was blushing so furiously and evidently trying to hold in the giggles, and she plainly caught a wink passing between her dignified parent and the demure Nan.

“He’s up to something, but it wouldn’t be very gentlemanly of me to try to find out if he doesn’t want me to know,” she said to herself.

The Tucker Twins had been motherless since they were tiny babies and their ridiculously young [136] father had had the rearing of them alone and unaided. Many stepmothers had been picked out for these irrepressible girls by well meaning friends and relatives, but Jeffry Tucker had remained unmarried, much to the satisfaction of the said twins.

“He is much too young and inexperienced to marry,” they would say when the matter was broached by wily mammas who hoped to settle their daughters. And so he did seem to be. Time had no power to age Jeffry Tucker. He was in reality very young to be the father of these great girls, as the romance of his life had occurred when he was only twenty, still in college, and the little wife had died after only a year of happiness.

In rearing his girls he had had only one rule to go by: they must conduct themselves like gentlemen on all occasions. “I don’t know what ladylike rules are but I do know what is expected of a gentleman, and if my girls come up to that standard I am sure they will pass muster,” he had [137] declared. As a rule the twins did pass muster. They were perfectly honorable and upright and the

mischief they got into was never anything to be ashamed of—only something to be gotten out of, never too serious to tell their father all about.

The fact that they were to stay longer than the week-end was greeted with joy by the Carters. Page had already made herself popular, too. Douglas was soon informed by her mother that she had given up the trip to the White, so some of the load was lifted from the poor girl's heart. There was much more talk, however, of the proposed debut and Helen upheld her mother in thinking that since Douglas was not going to college she must come out.

"But, Helen, the money for a debut! And if we go into our house and turn out the desirable tenants, where are we to get an income to exist on?"

"Oh, always money, money! It can be gotten, and mother says our credit is as good as the U. S. mint. She has often heard father say so." [138]

"Of course it was as good, but now that father is no longer able to earn money it would not be quite square to presume on that credit when we have no way of paying the bills." Douglas would go over and over the same argument and Helen would still not be convinced.

"Are we to spend the rest of our lives digging and delving for gold and then not use the money? How does our bank account stand now?"

"I don't know, but it is not so large that we could make a debut on it," smiled Douglas.

"But we could make a start and then earn some more."

"But why spend it on me when I don't want to go into society?"

"Why, for mother's sake, goose. She has set her heart on it and you know we have always let her do whatever she wanted to. It would make father miserable to think mother wanted something and could not have it."

"Yes, I know! He mustn't know she wants it and can't have it." [139]

"But she must have it. She is planning all the time for your being a great belle."

"Dr. Wright said that father——" but Helen flounced off, refusing to hear what Dr. Wright said. She had overcome all of her antipathy for that young physician and in fact liked him rather more than anyone of her acquaintance of the male persuasion, but she still resented any tendency on his part to dictate to her.

Mrs. Carter, having given up her trip to White Sulphur, felt that virtue must be rewarded and so actually persuaded Douglas to protect her complexion. She was not allowed to go in the sun at all and in the shade she must wear a great hat tied under her chin, with a curtain of blue veiling draped over it. Every night she must be anointed with some kind of cucumber cream and her hair must be brushed with one hundred licks every night and morning.

Lewis Somerville and Bill Tinsley made their sorrowful adieux. Everyone missed them. They seemed as important to the camp as the great poplar tree in the center of the pavilion was to that edifice. There was a feeling that everything might topple over now that those two young men were gone. It didn't, however. Skeeter Halsey and Frank Maury did what they could to fill their places, but as they expressed it, they "sho' did rattle 'round in 'em." [140]

Mr. Carter, too, delighted to be of use and to find something he could do without using his poor fagged brain too much, was busy at something from morning until night. First the reservoir must be repaired after the heavy rain had caved in part of the dam; then the roof of the cabin needed a shingle here and there. A rustic bench must be put by the spring which formed the reservoir, and then a table was added so that afternoon tea might be served there on occasions. He was so busy and so happy in being busy that it was delightful to see him. Bobby was his companion at all times, even deserting the beloved Josh and Josephus to be with his father. This was a new father, one who had time to play and talk. Together they made wonderful little water wheels and put them in a tiny mountain stream where they turned continuously to the delight of Bobby. The successful architect of other days drew plans for bird houses and he and his little son whittled them out of stray bits of lumber and cigar boxes and placed them in the trees, no doubt filling a long felt want for suburban villas in bird society. [141]

The miracle was happening! The cure that Dr. Wright had predicted was taking place. Robert Carter was on the high road to recovery.

CHAPTER X [142]

MR. HIRAM G. PARKER

Susan had been kept very busy all week doing lady's maid work for her mistress. Susan's usefulness in the kitchen was about over, the Carter girls feared. There never seemed to be a

moment that she was not wanted to wait on Mrs. Carter. When she took the daintily arranged breakfast tray to the cabin she was kept to fetch and carry and do a million foolish little nothings that an idle woman can always find to occupy other persons. Then the many new dresses must be pressed and white skirts must be laundered. Mrs. Carter always had worn white in the summer, and although washing was something of a problem at the camp, she still must wear white. Not a speck must be on those snowy garments even if it did take all of Susan's time to keep them in condition.

"There is no excuse for letting oneself go even if it is necessary to live in a camp," she would assert. "I think it is very important to look nice wherever one happens to be." [143]

"It sho' is, Mis' Carter, an' you jes' call on me to washanirn all the things you need. That's what I'm here fur," and Susan, who much preferred the job of lady's maid to that of assistant cook, gathered up an armful of rumpled skirts and blouses and carried them off to launder. She adored her mistress and saw no reason at all why the girls need mind doing extra work so that she could give all of her attention to the whims of the mother.

"What's all that?" grumbled Oscar, who saw many reasons why Miss Helen should not be doing Susan's work. "You ain't a-goin' to do no washinanirnin' in this hyar kitchen today. You know puffectly well that them thar week-enders is a-comin' pilin' in hyar this ebenin', all of 'em as empty as gourds."

"Well, these here langery is got to be did up, an' I is got to do 'em up, an' as fur as I know thain't no place to do 'em up but in the kitchen. It's jes' because of some of these here week-enders that they is got to be landered. You is so ign'rant that you don't know that one of these here week-enders what is a-comin' is what Mis' Carter call a arbitrator of sassiety." [144]

"Well, I may be ign'rant but I knows one thing, that ifn a nice little gal named Miss Page Allison hadn't a come in an' helped Miss Helen an' I, we wouldn't a got breakfast on the table. Miss Gwen warn't here this mornin' cause that ole po' white mounting ooman what she calls Aunt Mandy done took with cramps in the night an' Miss Gwen couldn't leave her. This is a been the busiest week of the camp an' you—you ain't been wuth standin' room in de bad place all week. You an' yo' mistress with yo' langery an' yo' arbors of sassiety. I don't know who he is a-comin' but whoever he is, he ain't no better'n our folks."

"He's Mr. Hiram G. Parker hisself!"

"What, that little ole Hi Parker? He ain't nuthin'. If he's done riz to the top er sassiety it's caze he's the scum an' the scum jes natch'ly gits on top. Who was his folks? Tell me that, who was they? You don't know an' neither do lots er folks but I knows an' he knows. That's the reason he's so partic'lar 'bout who he consorts with. He has to be! Yi! Yi! He has to be! Arbor er sassiety much! Back po'ch er sassiety, mo' lak!" and Oscar chuckled with delight at his wit. [145]

"I betcher Mis' Carter better not hear you a-talkin' thataway."

"Well, she ain't a-goin' ter hear me—'cause I ain't a-goin' ter talk thataway befo' her, but that ain't a-keepin' me from knowin' all about little Hi Parker's fo-bars. Thain't much ter know 'cause he warn't troubled with many. His grandpap had a waggin with a bell on it an' went aroun' hollerin: 'Ragsoleioncopperanbrass! Ragsoleioncopperanbrass!' I 'member it mighty well 'cause my mammy uster say she goin' ter thow me in the waggin an' sell me ter ole Parker if I didn't 'have myself."

"Well, howsomever it might a-been, tain't thataway now! Mis' Carter is 'cited over his a-comin'. She done made po' Miss Douglas sleep with some kinder wax on her competence las' night to peel off the remains of the sunburn an' she done made her promus not to wear that there cowboy suit for supper. Mis' Carter says she thinks Miss Douglas oughter be dressed in diafricanus interial." [146]

"Humph! The missus is all right, but she better let these here young ladies run this here camp like they been doin'. If they take to dressin' up it'll mean all yo' time'll be spent pressin' an' fixin' an' I want ter know who'll be a-doin' yo' work. Not me! By the time I get through butlerin' these here week-enders, I ain't got the back ter washanwipe all the dishes."

Susan quietly started the charcoal brazier and put her irons to heat. She knew that the mistress' word was law and that although Oscar might grumble until he was even blacker in the face than nature had made him, he would go on washing dishes until he dropped in his tracks rather than make a real disturbance.

Nan and Dum Tucker came to the kitchen after breakfast and helped him while Susan washed and ironed the many white things that Mrs. Carter had discarded as too soiled to appear before Mr. Hiram G. Parker. [147]

"I'll wash and you wipe," suggested Nan.

"No, please let me wash," begged Dum, "I adore sloshing in suds."

"Well, they's lots er suds here ter slosh in," grinned Oscar, bringing a great steaming dish pan, "an' if you is so enjoyful of suds, mebbe you young ladies could spare me altogether an' let me pick them there chickens 'gainst it's time ter fry 'em for supper."

"Yes, indeed! Go!" from Dum. "We can do them in no time, can't we, Nan?"

“We can do them, but not in no time,” drawled Nan. “I can’t think it is right for people to use so many dishes. Wouldn’t it be grand to be like Aeneas and put your food on a little cake and then eat the cake?”

“Yes, but if you can’t do that, I think the feeders should at least have the grace to lick their plates. What on earth do you do with all the scraps?” asked Dum as she vigorously scraped plates, a part of the work that everyone hates. [148]

“Fatten chickens for killin’,” answered Oscar, sharpening a great knife fit for the deed he had to do. “For land’s sake, Miss Dum, don’t arsk none of the week-enders ter lick they plates. They don’t leave nothin’ now for my chickens. The gals even eat the tater peelin’s. They say it gwine make they har curl, but they eat so much they don’t leave no room for they har ter curl.”

Dum and Nan had become fast friends during that week at camp. The several years’ difference in their ages was as nothing. The feeling for beauty which both of them had to a great degree was what drew them together. Nan was so quiet and unostentatious in her unselfishness, few at the camp realized how much she did. For instance: the person who cooks a meal is usually praised by the hungry ones, but the person who patiently scrapes and washes dishes is hardly thought of at all by the satiated. On that Friday morning, Helen had, with the help of Page, produced a wonderful breakfast; and when these two girls came to that meal flushed but triumphant in the knowledge that their popovers popped over and that their omelettes had risen to the occasion, the breakfasters had given them three rousing cheers. No one thought of who was going to wash up. [149]

While Dum was sloshing in the suds and Nan was busily drying the dishes that piled up to such great heights they looked like ramparts, Page and Helen came in to try their hands at pies for Saturday’s picnic. Page had on one of Helen’s bungalow aprons and seemed as much at home as though she had been born and bred in camp. Page always had that quality of making herself at home wherever she happened to drop. Dee used to say she was just like a kitten and wasn’t particular where she was, just so it was pleasant and people were kind.

“What kind of pies shall it be?” asked Helen.

“Something not too squashy!” pleaded Dum. “Nan and I have found the most adorable spot for a picnic: a fallen tree about half a mile around the mountain—not a freshly fallen one but one that must have fallen ages and ages ago as it has decided just to grow horizontally. Any old person could climb up it, just walk up it in fact—such seats were never imagined—the limbs all twisted into armchairs.” [150]

“Of course if we are going to eat up a tree we had better have mighty solid pies,” laughed Page. “How about fried turnovers like Mammy Susan makes?”

“Grand!” from Dum. “Apple?”

“Yes, apple,” laughed Helen, amused at Dum’s enthusiasm, “also some lemon pies, don’t you think? I mean cheese cakes.”

“Splendid and more and more splendid!”

The girls went to work, Page on the fried turnovers and Helen on the cheese cakes. Such a merry time they were having, all busy and all talking! Oscar sat outside picking chickens and of necessity Susan was driven to the extreme corner of the kitchen with her heap of washing and ironing. [151]

“I think you are awfully clever, Helen, to learn to make pastry so quickly. How did you do it?” said Page, deftly forming a turnover.

“I don’t know—I just did it. It seems to me as though anyone can cook who will follow a recipe. I had a few lessons at the Y. W. C. A. in the spring and I learned a lot there. How did you learn?”

“Well, when I was a kiddie I had no one to play with but Mammy Susan, so I used to stay in the kitchen and play cooking. I’ve been making thimble biscuit and eggshell cake ever since I could walk.”

“How do you make eggshell cake?”

“Just put the left-over scrapings of batter in the eggshells and bake it. It cooks in a minute and then you peel off the shell. Scrumptious!”

Dee came running in with the mail, having been to the post office at Greendale with Josh and Bobby and the faithful Josephus.

“A letter from Zebedee and he will be up for sure this evening! Ain’t that grand? But guess who is coming with him—old Hiram G. Parker! I believe Zebedee must have lost his mind. I am really uneasy about him.” [152]

“Why, what is the matter with Mr. Parker?” asked Helen, who had been much interested in what she had heard of that gentleman’s charms and graces.

“‘No matter, no matter, only ideas!’ as the idealist said when the materialist saw him falling down stairs, bumping his head at every step, and asked him what was the matter,” laughed Dee. “Didn’t you ever meet Mr. Parker?”

“No, but I have always understood he was all kinds of lovely things.”

“Oh, he’ll do,” put in Dum, “if you like wax works. He wears the prettiest pants in town and has more neckties and socks than an ordinary man could buy if he went shopping every day. He knows all the latest jokes and when they give out, he starts in on the others. He makes jokes of his own, too—not like Zebedee’s—Zebedee always bubbles out in a joke but Hiram G. leads up to his. First he gets one, a joke I mean, and then he gets a crowd of listeners. Then he directs the conversation into the proper channel and dams it up and when it is just right he launches his joke.” [153]

“You certainly do mix your metaphors,” laughed Page, crimping her turnovers with a fork. “You start out with bubbling brooks and end up with the launching of ships.

“‘She starts! she moves! she seems to feel
The thrill of life along her keel.’”

“Well, Zebedee does bubble and Hiram G. Parker doesn’t; neither does a boat, so there. Oh, oh! Look at the goodies. How on earth do you make such cute edges to your tarts? Just see them, girls!”

“I did mine with a broken fork but Mammy Susan says she knows an old woman who always did hers with her false teeth.” After the shout that went up from this had subsided, Helen begged to know more of Mr. Parker.

“Is he a great friend of your father?” [154]

“Why no, that is the reason I can’t divine why he is bringing him up here. I believe Zebedee likes him well enough—at least I never heard him say anything to the contrary. There is no harm in the dude that I ever heard of. Of course he is the Lord High Muck-a-Muck with the buds. He decides which ones are to ornament society and which ones to be picked for funerals. He has already looked over Dum and me at a hop last Thanksgiving at the Jefferson; Page, too. I believe he thinks we’ll do, at least he danced us around and wrote on our back with invisible chalk: ‘Passed by the Censor of Society.’ I believe he thinks a lot of Zebedee, but then everyone does who has even a glimmering of sense,” and Dee reread her father’s letter, a joint one for her and her sister, with a postscript for Page.

“Well, all he says is that he is coming and going to bring the immaculate Hi and we must behave,” declared Dum, reading over Dee’s shoulder. “I don’t know whether I am going to behave or not. That Mr. Parker gets on my nerves. He’s too clean, somehow. I’m mighty afraid I’m going to roll him down the mountain.” [155]

“Mis’ Carter is fixin’ up a lot for the gent,” said Susan, who had been busily engaged with her wash tub while the girls were talking, “if it’s Mr. Hiram G. Parker you is a-speakin’ of. She done say he is a very high-up pusson. I do believe it was all on account of him that she done made Miss Douglas look after her hide so keerful this week.”

“Why, does mother know he is coming up?” asked Helen. “She never told me. Nan, did you know he was coming?”

Nan hadn’t known, but she had a great light break on her mind when she heard that her mother knew he was to come: Mr. Tucker had certainly used this visit of Mr. Parker’s to persuade her mother to give up the trip to White Sulphur.

“No! I never heard a word of it,” Nan answered sedately but her eyes were dancing and it was with difficulty that she restrained a giggle. [156]

How could her mother be so easily influenced? She must consider Mr. Parker very well worth while to stay at camp just to see him. That was the reason for all of this extra washing and ironing Susan had on hand. Nan loved her mother devotedly but she had begun to feel that perhaps she was a very—well, to say the least—a very frivolous lady. Nan’s judgment was in a measure more mature than Helen’s although Helen was almost two years her senior. Where Helen loved, she loved without any thought of the loved one’s having any fault. She wondered now that her mother should have known of Mr. Parker’s coming without mentioning it, but as for that little lady’s dressing up to see this society man, why, that was just as it should be. She had absolutely no inkling of her mother’s maneuvering to push Douglas toward a successful debut. Susan’s intimation that Douglas was to preserve her complexion for Mr. Parker’s benefit was simply nonsense. Susan was after all a very foolish colored girl who had gotten things mixed. Douglas was to protect her delicate blond skin for all society, not for any particular member of it. [157]

The train arrived bearing many week-enders and among them Zebedee and the precious Mr. Hiram G. Parker, looking his very fittest in a pearl gray suit with mauve tie and socks and a Panama hat that had but recently left the block. Zebedee could not help smiling at the fine wardrobe trunk that his companion had brought and comparing it with his own small grip with its changes of linen packed in the bottom and the boxes of candy for Tweedles and Page squeezed on top.

“Thank Heaven, I don’t have a reputation to keep up!” he said to himself.

The wardrobe trunk was not very large, not much more bulky than a suitcase but it had to be

carried up the mountain by Josephus and its owner seemed to be very solicitous that it should be stood on the proper end.

“One’s things get in an awful mess from these mountain roads. A wardrobe trunk should be kept [158] upright, otherwise even the most skillful packing cannot insure one that trousers will not be mussed and coats literally ruined.”

Mr. Tucker felt like laughing outright but he had an ax to grind and Hiram G. Parker was to turn the wheel, so he bridled his inclination. He had asked the society man to be his guest for the week-end, intimating that he had a favor to ask of him. Parker accepted, as he had an idea he would, since the summer was none too full of invitations with almost no one in town. His position in the bank held him in town and he must also hold the position, since it was through it he was enabled to belong to all the clubs and to have pressed suits for all occasions. He had no idea what the favor was but he liked to keep in with these newspaper chaps since it was through the newspapers, when all was told, that he had attained his success, and through the society columns of those dailies that he kept in the public eye. He liked Jeffry Tucker, too, for himself. There was something so spontaneous about him. With all of Hiram Parker’s society veneer there was a [159] human being somewhere down under the varnish and a heart, not very big, but good of its kind.

On the train en route to Greendale Mr. Tucker had divulged what that favor was. He led up to it adroitly so that when he finally reached it Mr. Parker was hardly aware of the fact that he had arrived.

“Long list of debutantes this season, I hear,” he started out with, handing an excellent cigar to his guest.

“Yes, something appalling!” answered Mr. Parker, settling himself comfortably in the smoker after having taken off his coat and produced a pocket hanger to keep that garment in all the glory of a recent pressing. “I see many hen parties in prospect. There won’t be near enough beaux to go round.”

“So I hear, especially since the militia has been ordered to the border. So many dancing men are in the Blues. I heard today that young Lane is off. He is Robert Carter’s assistant and since [160] Carter has been out of the running has been endeavoring to keep the business going. I fancy it will be a blow to the Carters that he has had to go.”

“Yes, too bad! Quite a dancing man! He will be missed in the germans.”

Jeffry Tucker smiled as he had been thinking the Carters might miss the assistance that Lane rendered their father, but since Mr. Parker’s mind ran more on germans than on business that was, after all, what he was bringing him up to Greendale for.

“Lewis Somerville has enlisted, too.”

“You don’t say! I had an idea when he left West Point he would be quite an addition to Richmond society.”

“I think Mrs. Carter thought he would be of great assistance to her eldest daughter,” said Mr. Machiavelli Tucker.

“Oh, I hadn’t heard that one of Robert Carter’s daughters was to make her debut. I haven’t seen her name on the list. Is she a good looker?”

“Lovely and very sweet! I think it is a pity for her to come out and not be a success, but her [161] mother is determined that she shall enter the ring this winter.”

“Yes, it is a pity. This will be a bad year for buds. There are already so many of them and such a dearth of beaux I have never beheld. I don’t care how good-looking a girl is, she is going to have a hard time having a good time this year,” and the expert sighed, thinking of the work ahead of him in entertaining debutantes. He was not so young as he had been and there were evenings when he rather longed to get into slippers and dressing gown and let himself go, but a leader must be on the job constantly or someone else would usurp his place. Many debutantes and a few society men meant he must redouble his activities.

“I hope you will be nice to this girl, Hi. She is a splendid creature. Since her father has been sick, she has taken the burden of the whole family on her shoulders. All of the girls help and the second one, Helen, is doing wonders, too—in fact, all of them are wonders.” [162]

“So——” thought the leader of germans, “we are coming to the favor. Tucker wants me to help launch this girl. Well, I’ll look her over first. No pig in a poke for me!” He took another of the very good cigars, not that he wanted it at that moment, but he might need it later on.

“Now this is what I want you to do, this is how I want you to be good to her.” Hi Parker smiled a knowing smile. How many times had he been approached in just this way? “I don’t want you to ask her to dance a german with you——”

Oh, what was the fellow driving at, anyhow?

“No, indeed! There is no man living that I would ask to do such a thing. I feel it is a kind of insult to a girl to go around drumming up partners for her.”

Mr. Parker gasped.

“What I want you to do for me is to persuade Mrs. Carter that this is a bad year to bring a girl out. You have already said you think it is, so you would be perfectly honest in doing so. The [163] Carters’ finances are at a low ebb and this fine girl, Douglas, is doing her best to economize and have the family realize the importance of it, and now her mother is determined that she shall stop everything and go into society.”

Mr. Tucker, during the journey to Greendale, succeeded in convincing Mr. Parker that it was an easy matter to persuade Mrs. Carter to give up the project.

“I’ll do what I can, but if you take the matter so much to heart why don’t you do it yourself, Tucker? I make it a rule not to butt in on society’s private affairs if I can possibly keep out of it.”

“I ask you because I believe in getting an expert when a delicate operation is needed. You are a social expert and this is a serious matter.”

The upshot was that Mr. Hiram G. Parker was flattered into making the attempt and Mrs. Carter’s opinion of that gentleman’s social knowledge was so great and her faith in him so deep- [164] rooted that she abandoned her idea of forcing Douglas out for that season. She gave it up with a sigh of resignation. Anyhow, she was glad she had made Douglas bleach her complexion before Mr. Parker was introduced to her. The girl was looking lovely and the shyness she evinced on meeting that great man was just as it should be. Too much assurance was out of place with a bud and this introduction and impression would hold over until another year.

CHAPTER XI [165]

THE BIRD

“Softly a winged thing
Floats across the sky,
And earth from slumber waketh
And looketh up on high,
Sees it is only a bird—
A great white bird—
That floating thro’ the darkness undisturbed
Floats on, and on, and on.”

Late sleeping in a tent is rather a difficult feat as the morning sun seems to spy out the sleeper’s eyes and there is no way to escape him. Some of the campers tied black ribbons around their eyes and some even used black stockings, but the first rays of the sun always found Nan stirring. It was not that she was especially energetic, she was indeed rather lazy, according to her more vigorous sisters, but the charm of the early morning was so wonderful that she hated to miss it [166] lying in bed. It was also such a splendid time to be alone. The camp was a bustling, noisy place when everyone was up, and early morning was about the only time the girl had for that communing with herself which was very precious to one of her poetic temperament.

She slept in a tent, not only with her sisters but with Lil Tate and Tillie Wingo, now that the week-enders had swarmed in on them at such a rate, stretching their sleeping accommodations to the utmost. Of course it was great fun to sleep in a tent but there were times when Nan longed for a room with four walls and a door that she could lock. The next best thing to a door she could lock was the top of the mountain in the early morning. Unless some enthusiastic nature-lover had got up a sunrise party she was sure to have the top of the mountain to herself.

Mr. Tucker had divulged to her the night before that her mother had abandoned the designs she [167] had been entertaining for Douglas, and she in turn had been able to pass on the good news to Douglas. Mrs. Carter had not told her daughter herself but was evidently going to take her own good time to do so. Their mother’s being a bit cattish was not worrying either Douglas or Nan. They were too happy over the abandonment of the plan. Of course they could not help feeling that since the plan was abandoned, it would have been sweet of their mother to let Douglas know immediately since she was well aware of the fact that the idea was far from pleasing to her daughter. And since it would have been sweet of her to let her know the moment she had abandoned the plan, it was on the other hand slightly cattish of her to conceal the fact. Of course the girls did not call it cattish even in their own minds—just thoughtlessness. Douglas had no idea of how the change had come about, and Nan held her counsel. It was Mr. Tucker’s and her secret.

As she crept out of the cot on that morning, before the sun was up, she glanced at her elder sister [168] and a feeling of intense satisfaction filled her heart to see how peacefully Douglas was sleeping. Her beautiful hair, in a great golden red rope, was trailing from the low cot along the floor of the tent; her face that had looked so tired and anxious lately had lost its worried expression—she looked so young—hardly any older than Lucy, who lay in the next bed.

“Thank goodness, the poor dear is no longer worried,” thought Nan devoutly as she slipped on her clothes and crept noiselessly out of the tent.

What a morning it was! The sun was not quite up and there was a silver gray haze over everything. The neighboring mountains were lost, as were the valleys. The air had a freshness and sweetness that is peculiar to dawn. “‘The innocent brightness of a new-born day is lovely yet,’” quoted Nan. “If I can only get to the top of the mountain before the sun is up!” She hurried along the path, stopping a moment at the spring to drink a deep draft of water and to splash the [169] clear water on her face and hands. She held her face down in the water a moment and came up shaking the drops off her black hair, which curled in innumerable little rings from the wetting. She laughed aloud in glee. Life was surely worth living, everything was so beautiful.

The sides of the mountain were thickly wooded but at the top there was a smooth plateau with neither tree nor bush. One great rock right in the middle of this clearing Nan used as a throne whereon she could view the world—if not the world, at least a good part of Albemarle county and even into Nelson on one hand and Orange on the other. Sometimes she thought of this stone as an altar and of herself as a sun-worshipper.

On that morning she clambered up the rock just a moment before the sun peeped through a crack in the mist. She stood with arms outstretched facing the sun. The mists were rolling away and down in the valley she could distinguish the apple orchards and now a fence, and now a [170] haystack. There a mountain cabin emerged from the veil and soon a spiral of thin blue smoke could be spied rising from its chimney.

“I wonder what they are going to have for breakfast!” exclaimed the wood nymph, and then she took herself to task for thinking of food when everything was so poetical. Just as she was wondering what the mountaineers who lived in that tiny cabin were going to cook on the fire whose smoke she saw rising in that “thin blue reek” the sun came up. A wonderful sight, but the sun has been rising for so many æons that we have become accustomed to it. Something else happened at that moment, something we are not quite accustomed to even yet: Far off over the crest of a mountain Nan thought she saw an eagle. The first rays of the sun glinted on the great white wings. For a moment it was lost to view as it passed behind a cloud and then it appeared again flying rapidly.

“It is coming this way, a great white bird! I am almost afraid it might pick me up in its huge [171] talons and carry me off, carry me ’way up in the air—I almost hope it will—it would be so glorious to fly!”

She stood up on her throne and stretched her arms out, crying an invocation to the winged thing.

She heeded not the buzzing of the aeroplane as it approached. To her it was a great white bird and she only awakened from her trance when the machine had actually landed on her plateau.

The humming had stopped and it glided along the grass, kept closely cropped by Josephus, as this was his grazing ground when he was not busy pulling the cart. Nan stood as though petrified, a graceful little figure in her camp-fire girls’ dress. Her arms were still outstretched as when she cried her invocation to the great white bird.

The machine came to a standstill quite close to her altar and a young man in aviator’s costume sprang from it. Taking off his helmet and goggles, he made a low bow to Nan.

“Oh, mountain nymph, may a traveler land in your domain?” [172]

“Welcome, stranger!”

“And may I ask what is this enchanted land?”

“This is Helicon—and you—who are you?”

“I am Bellerophon and yonder winged steed is Pegasus. Maid, will you fly with me?”

He held out his hand and Nan, with no more thought of the proprieties than a real mountain nymph would have had, let him help her into his machine. He wrapped a great coat around her, remarking that even nymphs might get cold, and seemingly with no more concern than Bill Tinsley felt over starting the mountain goat, he touched some buttons and turned some wheels and in a moment the aeroplane was gliding over the plateau and then floating in the air, mounting slowly over the tree tops. Up, up they went and then began making beautiful circles in the air. Nan sighed.

“Are you scared?” and the aviator looked anxiously at his little companion. He had not resumed his helmet and goggles and his eyes were so kind and so merry that Nan felt as though she had [173] known him all her life.

“Scared! Of course not! I am just so happy.”

“Have you ever flown before?”

“Not in reality—but it is just as I have dreamed it.”

“You dream then a great deal?”

“Yes! ‘In a dream all day I wander only half awake.’ I am sure I must be dreaming now.”

“I, too! But then the best of life is the dreams, the greatest men are the dreamers. If it had not been for a dreamer, we could not have had this machine. Look! Isn’t that wonderful?”

Nan was looking with all eyes at the panorama spread out below them. The sun was up now in good earnest and the mountains had shaken off the mist as sleepers newly aroused might throw off their coverlids. The orchards in the valleys looked like cabbage beds and the great mansions that adorn the hills and are the pride and boast of the county seemed no larger than doll houses. [174] From every chimney in the valley smoke was arising. Nan was disgusted with herself that again the thought came to her:

“What are all of these people going to have for breakfast?”

They dipped and floated and curvetted. Nan thought of Hawthorne’s description of Pegasus in the “Chimæra” and the very first opportunity she had later on she got the book and reread the following passage:

“Oh, how fine a thing it is to be a winged horse! Sleeping at night, as he did, on a lofty mountain-top, and passing the greater part of the day in the air, Pegasus seemed hardly to be a creature of the earth. Whenever he was seen, up very high above people’s heads, with the sunshine on his silvery wings, you would have thought that he belonged to the sky, and that, skimming a little too low, he had got astray among our mists and vapors, and was seeking his way back again. It was very pretty to behold him plunge into the fleecy bosom of a bright cloud, and be lost in it for a [175] moment or two, and then break forth from the other side.”

Once they went through a low-hanging cloud. Nan felt the drops of water on her face.

“Why, it is raining!” she cried.

“No, that was a cloud we dipped through,” laughed her companion. “Are you cold?”

“Cold? I don’t know! I have no sensation but joy.”

The young man smiled. There was something about Nan’s drawl that made persons want to smile anyhow.

“You forgot your hat and goggles,” she said as she noticed his blue eyes and the closely cropped brown hair that looked as though it had to be very closely cropped to keep it from curling.

“That’s so! Some day maybe I shall go back after them. Now shall we fly to ’Frisco? How about High Olympus? Remember we are on Pegasus now and he can take us wherever we want to go.”

“Breakfast first,” drawled Nan. “Come with me and I can feed you on nectar and ambrosia.” [176]

“Oh what a wonderful wood nymph! She understands that mortal man cannot feed on poetry alone.”

They glided to the plateau and landed again by the great rock.

“This is a wonderful place to light,” said the birdman. “And now, fair mountain nymph, please tell me who you are when you are not a nymph—and what you are doing on the top of a lonely mountain before the sun is up.”

“Nan Carter! And if you think this is a lonely mountain, you ought to try to get by yourself for a few minutes on it. Before sunrise, on the tip top point, is the only place where one can be alone a minute——”

“And then great creatures come swooping down out of the clouds and carry you off. It was very kind of you to go with me.”

“Kind of me! Oh, Mr. Bellerophon, I never can thank you enough for taking me. I have never been so happy in all my life. It is perfect, all but the noise— I do wish it wouldn’t click and buzz so. I [177] know Pegasus did not make such a fuss—only the swish of his wings could be heard and sometimes, as the maiden said, the brisk and melodious neigh.”

“Don’t you want to know my name, too, Miss Nan Carter? I have a name I use sometimes when I am not mounted on Pegasus.”

“I don’t want to know it at all, but perhaps my mother, who is chaperoning the camp and who is rather particular, might think Mr. Bellerophon sounded rather wily Greekish.”

The young man laughed. Such a nice laugh it was that Nan could not help thinking it sounded rather like a melodious neigh. He was possessed of very even white teeth and a Greek profile, at least it started out to be Greek but changed its mind when it got to the tip of his nose which certainly turned up a bit. On the whole he was a very pleasant, agreeable-looking young man, tall and broad-shouldered, clean-limbed and athletic-looking. What Nan liked most about him were his eyes and his hands.

“I hate to tell you my name, wood nymph. It sounds so commonplace after what we have done [178] this morning. I am afraid when you hear it you will simply knock on one of these great oak trees and a door will open and you will disappear from my eyes forever.”

“Not before breakfast,” drawled Nan. “But you must tell me your name before breakfast because I shall have to introduce you to the others.”

“What others? Not more wood nymphs!”

“More Carters—and week-enders!”

“You don’t mean I have actually landed at Week-End Camp? Why, that is what I have been looking for, but I had no idea of striking it the first thing, right out of the blue, as it were. I heard about the camp at the University, and want to come board there for a while.”

“Well, I am the one to apply to,” said Nan primly.

“Apply to a wood nymph for board! Absurd!”

“Not at all! Of course, I can’t take you to board without knowing your name and—er—number.”

“Well, if you must, you must—Tom Smith is my name—as for my number—there is only one of me.” [179]

“I mean by your number, where you live.”

“Oh, I live in the air mostly. Sometimes I come down to have some washing done and to vote—at least, I came down once to vote—that was last June, but as no elections were going on just then and as my having arrived at the age of twenty-one did not seem to make them hurry, I went up in the air again. When I do vote, though, it will be out in Louisville, Kentucky. That’s where I have my washing done. You don’t say what you think of such a name as Tom Smith.”

“It is not very—romantic, but it must have been a nice name to go to school with.”

“Great! There were so many of us that the lickings didn’t go round.”

The girl was leading the way down the mountain path and they came to the spring where she had performed her ablutions earlier.

“This is the fountain of Pirene.”

“Ah! I fancied we would come to it soon,” and he stooped and drank his fill, shaking the drops from his crisp curls as he got up. [180]

“I love to drink that way,” cried Nan. “I had a big deep drink as I went up the mountain.”

“Of course you drink that way! How else could a wood nymph drink? You might make a cup of your little brown hand, but even that is almost too modern. Ah, there is the camp! How jolly it looks! Are there any people there? It looks so quiet.”

“Any people there? Quiet! It is running over with people. They are all asleep now, that is the reason it is so quiet. There will be noise enough later.”

As she spoke there were shouts from the shower bath where some of the youths from the camp had assembled for a community shower, and as the cold mountain water struck them they certainly made the welkin ring.

“There is father! Come, and I’ll introduce you.”

Mr. Carter was coming from the kitchen bearing a cup of coffee for his wife, who stuck to the New Orleans habit of black coffee the first thing in the morning, and Mr. Carter loved to be the one to take it to her bedside. [181]

“Father, this is Mr. Bel—Smith. He flew over here this morning,” and Nan suddenly remembered that she was not a wood nymph and that this mountain in Albemarle was not Helicon. Also that it was not a very usual thing for well-brought-up young ladies to go flying with strange young men before breakfast, even if strange young men did almost have Greek profiles. For the first time that morning Nan blushed. Her shyness returned. She could hardly believe that it was she, Nan Carter, who had been so bold. Her Bellerophon was plain Tom Smith and Pegasus was a very modern flying machine lying up in Josephus’s pasture, that pasture on top of a prosaic mountain in Albemarle County and not Mount Helicon. The fountain of Pirene was nothing but the spring that fed the reservoir from which they got the water supply for the shower bath where those boys were making such an unearthly racket. She was not a wood nymph—there were no wood nymphs [182] —but just a sentimental little girl of sixteen who no doubt needed a good talking to and a reprimand for being so very imprudent. What would her mother say to such an escapade?

With all of Mrs. Carter’s delicate spirituelle appearance there was nothing poetical in her make-up. She would never understand this talk of forgetting that one was not a wood nymph. There was more chance of the father’s sympathy. Nan took the bull by the horns and plunged into her confession.

“Father, I have been up in Mr. Bel—Smith’s flying machine. I don’t know what made me do it except I just—it was so early—I—I forgot it wasn’t a flying horse.”

Mr. Carter looked at his little daughter with a smile of extreme tenderness. He had taken flights on Pegasus himself in days gone by. He seldom mounted him now—the burden of making a living had almost made him forget that Pegasus was not a plough horse—not quite, however, and now as his little girl stood in front of him, her hair all ruffled by her flight, her cheeks flushed and in her great brown eyes the shadow of her dream, he understood. [183]

“It is still early in the morning, honey, for you—no doubt the aeroplane is Pegasus. I envy you the experience. Everyone might not see it as I do, however, so you and Mr. Belsmith and I had better keep it to ourselves,” and he shook the birdman’s hand.

“Smith is my name—Tom Smith,” and the young man smiled into the eyes of the older man.

“I am very glad to see you, and just as soon as I take this coffee to my wife, I will come and do the honors of the camp,” and Robert Carter hastened off, thinking what a boon it would be to be young again in this day of flying machines.

Nan found her tent about as she had left it. The inmates were still asleep. “How strange,” she said to herself, “that I should have been to the top of Helicon and taken flight with Bellerophon on Pegasus while these girls have slept on not knowing a thing about it! I wonder where their [184] astral bodies have been! Douglas looks so happy, poor dear, I fancy hers has been in heaven.”

Aloud she cried: “Get up, girls! Wake up! It is awfully late—the camp is stirring and there is a lot to do. I have found a new boarder! He dropped from the clouds and is starved to death.”

CHAPTER XII [185]

PLEASE REMIT

Of course everyone was vastly interested in Mr. Tom Smith and his aeroplane. That young man, however, exhibited a modest demeanor which was very pleasant to members of his sex. He promised to take any and all of the campers flying if his machine was in good order. He thought it needed a little tinkering, however, as he had noticed a little clicking sound above the usual clack and hum of the motor.

“How on earth did you happen to land here?” asked someone.

“Airman’s instinct, I reckon. I was looking for the camp and had heard there was a mountain with a smooth plateau around here somewhere. A place to land is our biggest problem. The time will come when there will be landing stations for flyers just as they have tea houses for automobilists [186] now. There is great danger of becoming entangled in trees and telegraph wires. A place looks pretty good for lighting when you are up in the clouds and then when you get down you find what seemed to be a smooth, grassy plain is perhaps the top of a scrub oak forest.”

After breakfast the whole camp of week-enders marched to the top of the mountain to view the great bird, but the Carter girls had to stay behind to prepare for the picnic. Many sandwiches must be made and the baskets packed. Nan had her usual bowl of mayonnaise to stir. She looked very demure in her great apron but her eyes were dancing with the remembrance of her morning’s escapade.

“You look very perky this morning, honey,” said Douglas, as she packed a basket of turnovers and cheese cakes with great care not to crush those wonders of culinary art.

“You look tolerable perky yourself,” retorted her sister. Just as the sophomores and seniors of a college seem to fraternize, so it is often the case with the first and third members of a family. [187] Douglas and Nan hit it off better with one another than they did with either Helen or Lucy.

“I feel like flying!” declared Douglas. “I don’t mean in an aeroplane but just of my own accord. I am so happy that mother has given up that terrible plan for me, given it up without father’s knowing anything about it. I wish I knew who had persuaded her or how it came about. She is rather—well, not exactly cold with me—but not exactly chummy. She has not told me yet, but if you say it is so, I know it is so. I went to her room this morning so she could tell me if she wanted to, but she didn’t say a thing about it. She got a lot of letters from New York by the early mail. I am mighty afraid they are bills.”

“Pretty apt to be,” sighed Nan. “I hope she won’t give them to father.”

“Oh, she mustn’t do that. I shall have to ask her for them. I hate to do it. She thinks I am so stern.”

“Let me do it,” said Nan magnanimously. “I wonder how much they amount to.”

“Oh, Nan! Would you mind asking for them?” [188]

“Well, I am not crazy about it, but I’ll do it,” and do it she did.

She found her mother in a dainty negligee writing notes at a little desk her devoted husband had fashioned from a packing box.

“Ah, Nan, how sweet of you to come to me! I see so little of my girls now, they are so occupied with outside interests. Here, child, just run these ribbons in my underwear. It really takes a great deal of time to keep one’s clothes in order. Susan should do such things for me, but she is

constantly being called off to do other things, at least she says she is. What, I can't for the life of me see."

Nan dutifully began to do her mother's bidding, but when she saw the drawer full of things she was supposed to decorate with ribbons she had to call a halt.

"I am very sorry, mumsy, but I am helping Douglas pack the lunch baskets. This is a day for a picnic, you know."

"No, I didn't know. Who is going?" [189]

"Everyone, we hope, as that gives Oscar and Susan a chance to get a thorough cleaning done, with no dinner to cook."

"Oh, how absurdly practical you girls have become! I just hate it in you. What business has a girl of your age to know about who does thorough cleaning and when it is done?" Nan restrained a giggle. She had come to a full realization of what a very frivolous person her little mother was and while it made her sad in a way it also touched her sense of humor irresistibly.

"I am deeply disappointed in the fact that Douglas is not to come out next winter. Mr. Parker advises me strongly against trying to launch her. He says there are so many debutantes already and that he is engaged up to every dance and that all of the dancing men are in the same fix. Of course if I should go against his advice Douglas would fall as flat as possible. She has no desire to come out as it is and no doubt would do nothing to further her cause. I do not feel equal to the task of bringing her out and of putting spirit into her at the same time. She has been so lifeless and listless lately." [190]

Nan smiled, thinking of how she had left Douglas actually dancing as she packed the goodies and smiling all over her happy face.

"What a lot of letters you have, mumsy! You are almost as busy as I am with letters. It takes me hours every day answering applications for board."

"Oh, yes, I have many notes to answer—friends, welcoming me back to Virginia. This pile over here is nothing but bills—things bought in New York, on my way home. I think it is most impertinent of these tradespeople to send them so promptly. They were so eager for me to open accounts, and now they write to me as though I were a pickpocket. 'Please Remit' at the bottom of every bill, and one man actually accuses me of being slow in payment. He says he understood I was to send money as soon as I reached Virginia. I have no money myself. I shall just have to hand them over to your father——"

"Oh, mother, please don't do that!" [191]

"Why not? How else am I to get them paid?"

"But, mother, the doctor said no money matters must be brought to father for at least a year and maybe not then. It was bills that made him ill, and bills would be so bad for him now."

"Bills, indeed! It was overwork! I did my best to make him relax and not work so hard, but he would not listen to me. Many a time I tried to make him stop and go to the opera with me or to receptions, but it was always work, work, work!—day and night. I'm sure no one can accuse me of selfishness in the matter—I did my best."

"Yes, dear, I know you did," said Nan solemnly and gently, as though she were soothing a little child who had dropped a bowl of goldfish or done something equally disastrous and equally irreparable. "I tell you what you do, though, honey, you give me the bills. You see, I write all the letters for the camp and I will attend to them."

Mrs. Carter handed over the offensive pile of envelopes with an air of washing her hands of the matter. [192]

"There is one thing, mumsy: if I were you, I'd withdraw my patronage from such persons. I'd never favor tradespeople like these with another order."

"Never!" exclaimed the mother. "'Please Remit,' indeed! I never imagined such impertinence."

Nan bore off the sheaf of bills. They were not quite so large as they had feared. Mrs. Carter had unwittingly managed very well since she had accidentally struck August sales in New York and the things she had bought really were bargains.

"We will pay them immediately, Nan," said Douglas. "I am so thankful that father did not see them. It would be so hard on him that I am sure much of the good that has come to him from the long rest would be done away with."

"Do they make you blue, these bills?"

"No, indeed! Nothing will make me blue now that mother has given up making me be a debutante. I can go on working and make more money to take the place of this we shall have to take out of the bank to pay for these things mother bought. But just suppose she had carried her point and forced me into society. I could have earned no money and would have had such a lot spent on me. Why can't she see, Nan?" [193]

"She is color blind, I think, unless it is couleur de rose. We must be patient with her, Douglas."

“All right, grandma!” And if Mrs. Carter could have heard the peal of laughter from Douglas, she would not have thought her lifeless and listless. “You are such a dear little wise old lady, Nan!”

CHAPTER XIII [194]

TEAKETTLE

The fallen tree where Nan and Dum Tucker had chosen to have the picnic proved to be most attractive. It was a great oak that had attained its growth before it had been felled in some wind storm, and now it lay like some bed-ridden old giant who refuses to die. Part of the roots held to the soil while part stood up like great toes, poking their way through the blanket of ferns and moss that were doing their best to cover them. This tree not only clung to its old branches but had actually the hardihood to send out new shoots. These branches were not growing as the limbs of an oak usually grow, with a slightly downward tendency from the main trunk, but shot straight to the sky, upright and vigorous.

“It is just like some old man who has to stay in bed but still is open to convictions of all kinds, who reads and takes in new ideas and is willing to try new things and think new thoughts,” suggested Page Allison. [195]

“Yes, that strong green branch struggling to the light there might be equal suffrage,” teased Mr. Tucker.

“Yes, and that one that has outstripped all the others is higher education of women,” declared Douglas.

“These little ferns and wild flowers that are trying to cover up his ugly old toes are modern verse. He even reads the poetry of the day and does not just lie back on stuffy old pillows and insist that poetry died with Alfred Tennyson,” whispered Nan, who did not like much to speak out loud in meetin’. Tom Smith heard her, however, and smiled his approval of her imagery.

“Well, I only hope while we are picnicking on his bed he won’t decide to turn over and go to sleep. It would certainly play sad havoc with cheese cakes,” laughed Helen.

Much to the satisfaction of the Carter girls, all the week-enders did decide to come on the picnic, also their mother. They knew very well that had that lady made up her mind to remain in camp, Susan’s time would have been taken up waiting on her and the thorough cleaning that the pavilion and kitchen were crying out for would never be accomplished. [196]

Mr. Hiram G. Parker, in faultless morning costume, had proffered himself as squire of dames and was assisting that dainty little lady on the rough journey to the fallen tree. She, too, had attired herself with thoughtful care in sheer white linen lawn with a large picture hat of finest straw and a ruffled lace parasol. The girls were in strong contrast to their chaperone, since one and all, even Tillie Wingo, were dressed in khaki skirts and leggins. The only variation in costume was that some wore middies and some sport shirts.

First a fire must be built and a big one at that, as it takes many hot coals to roast potatoes. Lucy and Lil Tate, with their faithful followers, Skeeter and Frank, had gone on a little ahead, and when the rest of the crowd reached the spot the fire was already burning merrily. In a short time [197] it was ready to drop the potatoes in, Irish potatoes and great yams that looked big enough for the bed-ridden giant himself to make a meal of. Then the roasting ears of corn must be opened, the silk removed and the ears wrapped carefully in the shucks again and placed in just exactly the right part of the fire to cook but not to burn.

There was some kind of work for all of those inclined to usefulness, and any who were not so inclined could wander around admiring the scenery or climb up in the tree to secure the choice seats. There were seats for all and to spare in the gnarled old limbs of the giant oak. Mrs. Carter was enthroned in a leafy armchair while Hiram G. perched beside her. Evidently he was prepared to be waited on and not to wait. Bobby climbed to the tiptop of one of the great branches where he looked like a “little cherub that sits up aloft.”

“I’m a-gonter let down a string and pull my eats up here,” he declared.

“Oh, Bobby!” shuddered his mother. “Don’t say such words!” [198]

“What I done now?” cried that young hopeful, peeping down through the leafy screen, with an elfish, toothless grin.

“Don’t say eats! Say luncheon!”

“Yes, I won’t! If I say luncheon, they’ll send me up ’bout ’nough to put in my eye. I’ve a great mind to say victuals like Oscar and then they’ll send me up something sho’. Hi, Helen! Put my victuals in a bucket and tie it to this string!” he cried, dangling a string before Helen’s eyes as she stooped under the tree, unpacking the basket containing the paper plates and Japanese

napkins.

“I won’t put anything in the bucket unless you mind mother,” said Helen severely, but her eye was twinkling at Bobby’s philological distinction.

“Well, then, Helen dear, be so kind as to put my luncheon in that there little bucket what you see turned up over yonder by the fire. But, Helen,” in a stage whisper, “please don’t put it in like a [199] luncheon but like it was jes’ victuals. Luncheons ain’t never ’nough for workin’ mens.” So all in good time Helen packed a hefty lunch in the bucket for her darling and he drew it up to his castle in the tree and feasted right royally.

When everyone was too hungry to stand it another moment the potatoes were done, all burnt on the outside and delicious and mealy within. There never were such sandwiches as Helen’s; and the corn, roasted in the shucks, was better than corn ever had been before. The cheese cakes and fried turnovers proved very good for tree eating and not too squashy. Boxes of candy appeared like magic from the pockets of masculine week-enders. Mr. Tucker produced three, one for each of his girls.

“Oh, Zebedee!” exclaimed Dum. “I am so relieved. I thought you were getting hippy. It was candy all the time.”

When every vestige of food was devoured and all the paper plates and papers carefully burned, as Nan said, to keep from desecrating Nature, someone proposed that they should play games.

“Let’s play teakettle!” exclaimed Skeeter, so teakettle it was. Some of the company had to be [200] enlightened as to the game and perhaps some of my readers may have to be also. This is the way: whoever is “It” or “Old Man” must go out of ear shot and then the company selects a word. The “Old Man” then returns and asks a question to each one in turn. The answer must contain the chosen word, but in place of the word, “teakettle” must be inserted.

“You go out, Zebedee, you are so spry,” suggested the irreverent Dum.

“No, that’s not fair! We must count out,” declared Dee, determined that her parent must be bossed only by her own sweet self.

“I bid to count!” from Lucy. “‘Eny, meny, miny mo, cracker, feny, finy, fo, ommer noocher, popper toocher, rick, bick, ban, do, as, I, went, up the, apple, tree, all, the, apples, fell, on, me, bake a, pudding, bake, a, pie, did, you, ever, tell, a, lie, yes, you, did, you, know, you, did, you, broke, your, mammy’s, tea, pot, lid, did, she, mind?’” She stopped at Lil Tate, who was equal to the [201] occasion.

“No!” cried Lil; and Lucy took up her counting out in the sing-song we hear from children engaged in that delightful occupation of finding out who is to be “It.” No matter where one lives —east, west, north or south—it is the same except for slight variations in the sense of the incantation.

“N, o, spells, the, word, no, and, you, are, really—It!” An accusing finger was pointed at Nan, who perforce must crawl from her comfortable perch and go around the side of the mountain while the assembled company chose a word.

After much whispering, Mr. Tucker hit on a word that appealed to all of them, and Nan was whistled for to return.

“Helen, what do you enjoy most in camp life?”

“Teakettles!” was the prompt response.

“Skeeter, did you and Frank get any squirrels yesterday?”

“No, not one! We told them if they would let us shoot them that they could come with us on the [202] picnic—but they said: no teakettles for them!” Indignant cries from Skeeter’s chums ensued.

“You came mighty near giving us away, you nut!”

Nan thought a moment.

“Is it pies? Helen certainly enjoys pies, and if the squirrels had come on the picnic it would have been in a pie.”

“No; guess again! Guess again!”

“Mother, are you comfortable up there?”

“Yes, my dear; I had no idea one could have an armchair at a teakettle.”

“‘Picnic!’ ‘Picnic!’ I know that is the word. Mumsy gave it away. You have to go out, mumsy.”

“Picnic” was the word and everyone thought Nan very clever to guess it so quickly. Mrs. Carter was loath to leave her leafy bower, so Mr. Parker gallantly offered to take her place and be “It.”

A word was quickly chosen for Mr. Parker although they feared it would be too easy. That [203] gentleman was really enjoying himself very much. Climbing trees was not much in his line, but he congratulated himself that while his suit no doubt looked perfectly new, it was in reality three years old and was only his eighteenth best. The lapels were a little smaller than the prevailing

mode and the coat cut away a bit more than the latest fashion. He could not wear it much longer, anyhow, and in the meantime he was having a very pleasant time. The girls were a ripping lot and he would no doubt have the pleasure of bringing them out in years to come. He might even stretch a point and ask some of them to dance the german with him before they made their debuts. That little Allison girl from the country was a charmer and as for the Tucker twins—the only trouble about them was he could not decide which one would take the better in society. Helen Carter was sure to win in whatever class she entered. Douglas Carter had deceived him somewhat. The evening before, while looking very pretty she had lacked animation. He had been [204] quite serious in his advice to Mrs. Carter not to bring her out that year. With the scarcity of beaux only a girl who was all animation had any show of having a good time in her debutante year. Now today this girl had thrown off her listlessness and was as full of life as anyone. She was really beautiful. If a complexion could show up as well as hers did in the sunlight what would it not do in artificial light? And her hair! Hair like that could stand the test of dancing all night, and Mr. Hiram G. Parker had found out from long experience that not much hair could stand the test.

"Always coming out of curl and getting limp!" he muttered, but just then they whistled for him and he returned to the tree.

"Ahem! Miss Douglas, are you expecting to miss the boys who have gone to the border with the Blues?"

"Yes, indeed!" blushed Douglas; "but if I were a teakettle it would be even worse."

"Is it a mother? Of course it would be worse if you were a mother! Ah, maybe you have been [205] promising to be a sister to one of them."

Douglas blushed so furiously that she almost fell off her precarious perch.

"'Mother' isn't the word—neither is 'sister'!" shouted the crowd. "Guess again!"

"Miss Dum Tucker, are you going to remain long in camp?"

"I am afraid I shall have to leave on Monday, but if the teakettle fancier is no longer here, I don't believe I should care to remain."

"Teakettle fancier! Sounds like spinsters. I can't see what it is. Miss Dee, what are these teakettles like?"

"There are as many styles of teakettles as there are teakettles, tall and narrow, short and squat, with snouts of all shapes."

"Heavens! Still no light on the subject! Tucker, what is your opinion of the war? Will it last much longer?"

"I hope not, although I hear it is an excellent way to dispose of last year's teakettles. They are [206] using so many of them in the Red Cross service."

"Oh, come now! I must do better than this. Mrs. Carter, have you any of these teakettles about you?"

"No, Mr. Parker, I haven't a single teakettle—ye-et," rather sadly.

"Mr. Smith!" That young aviator, not expecting to be called on, almost fell out of the tree, which would have been an ignominious proceeding for one accustomed to the dizzy heights of the clouds. "Do you come across any of this stuff, whatever it is that these crazy folks call teakettles?"

"Yes, I do occasionally. Even here in this camp there is a lot of the stuff that teakettles are made of—the raw material, I might say, but if I should, no doubt future teakettles would climb up the tree and mob me."

"'Debutantes!' 'Debutantes!' That is the word! Stupid of me not to guess it sooner. Thank you, Miss Dum, for the compliment you just paid me, or did you mean your father? Because I understand that he is somewhat fond of young girls himself." [207]

"I meant you in the game—but Zebedee in reality," declared Dum, who had no more idea of coquetting than a real teakettle.

"Mr. Smith is 'It'!" shouted Lucy. "We are going to get a hard one for him."

Skeeter wanted to take "flying machine" but that was too easy. Many suggestions were made but Nan finally hit on a word that they were sure he could never guess.

"The trouble is it is hardly fair to take a word that is so obscure," objected Mr. Carter, who had been quietly enjoying the fun as much as any of the party.

"Well, it is a compliment to give him a hard one," declared Mr. Tucker. "It means we have some reliance on his wit."

Tom Smith was proving himself a very agreeable companion and old and young were feeling him to be an acquisition to the camp.

"You youngsters up there in the top of the tree, come down and be questioned!" cried the "Old [208]

Man.” “You, Bobby, what are you doing up there?”

“I’m a-playin’ I’m one er them there teakettles,” said that ready-witted infant. Everyone shouted for joy at his answer.

“And you, Frank Maury! Do you want to take a trip with me some day?”

“Sure! I’d ruther be a birdman than—a—teakettle,” said Frank lamely.

“Did you ever see one of these teakettles, Skeeter?”

“Naw, and nobody else.”

“But you didn’t use the word, Skeeter,” admonished Lil.

“Then you use it for him,” suggested the questioner. “I take it then if he never saw a teakettle and no one else has ever seen one, that it is some kind of mythological creature. Am I right?” he appealed, following up the advantage Skeeter had given him.

“Yes, a teakettle is a mythological being,” said Lil primly.

“Skeeter can give more things away without using the word than most folks can using it,” [209] declared Lucy cruelly.

“Miss Nan, did I ever see a teakettle that you know of?”

“I have an idea you thought you saw a teakettle once,” drawled Nan.

“‘Wood nymph!’” exclaimed Tom Smith.

Everyone thought he was very clever to have guessed a very difficult and obscure word in five questions.

“Nan’s turn again! That isn’t fair when Skeeter really and truly was the one who got him going. You’ve got to go, Skeeter,” and Frank and Lil and Lucy pounced on their chum and dragged him from the tree.

“Yes, I haven’t! I’d never guess c-a-t. Get somebody else.”

“I’ll go,” Mr. Tucker volunteered magnanimously.

“Let him; he’s dying to!” exclaimed the twins in one breath.

“Well, don’t tweedle!” commanded their father. He always called it tweedling when his twins [210] spoke the same thing at the same time.

A word was hard to hit on because as his daughters said Mr. Tucker had what men call feminine intuition.

“You can’t keep a thing from him,” Dum said.

“And sometimes he sees something before it happens,” declared Dee.

“Oh, spooks!” laughed Page.

“‘Spooks’ would be a good word,” suggested someone, but Mrs. Carter had a word which was finally determined on. Zebedee was whistled for and came quickly to the front.

“Mr. Smith, tell me, while flying through the air would you like to have one of these teakettles with you? I mean would it be the kind of thing you could carry with you? Would it be of any value on the journey?”

“We—el, I can’t say that a teakettle would be of any great practical value on a flight, but it would certainly be great to have one. I believe I’d rather have one than anything I can think of. In fact, I mean to take one with me some day.”

Mr. Tucker looked into the glowing countenance of the young birdman. He saw there youth, [211] character, romance.

“A ‘teakettle’ is a ‘sweetheart,’” he said simply.

“Talking about spooks—what do you know about that?” cried one of the crowd.

“Well, what did I tell you? Didn’t I say you couldn’t keep anything from Zebedee?” said triumphant Dee.

“I betcher I ain’t a-gonter take no sweetheart with me when I gits me a arryplane,” shouted Bobby from his vantage ground. “I’m a-gonter take Josh and Josephus, ander—ander—father.”

The picnic in the tree had been a decided success. It was one more perfect day for the week-enders to report as worth while to the possible future boarders. Even Mr. Parker was enthusiastic, although he was not as a rule much of an outdoor man. He was conscious of the fact that he shone in a drawing room, and under the “great eye of Heaven” did not amount to quite so much as he did under electric lights with pink shades.

CHAPTER XIV

[212]

THE FORAGERS

“Miss Douglas, them week-enders done cl’ared the coop. Thain’t nary chicken lef’ standin’ on a laig. Looks like these here Hungarians don’t think no mo’ of ‘vourin’ a chicken than a turkey does of gobblin’ up a grasshopper.”

“All of them gone, Oscar?”

“Yas’m! Thain’t hide or har of them lef’. If I hadn’t er wrung they necks myself, I would er thought somethin’s been a-ketchin’ ’em; but land’s sakes, the way these week-enders do eat chicken is a caution!”

“All right, I’ll get our young people to start out today and find some more for us. A big crowd will be up on Friday.”

“Yes, I’ll be bound they will, and all of them empty. I should think the railroad cyars would chawge mo’ ter haul the folks back from this here camp than what they do to git ’em here. They [213] sho’ goes back a-weighing mo’ than what they do whin they comes a-creepin’ up the mountain actin’ like they ain’t never seed a squar’ meal in they lives.”

Oscar’s grumbling on the subject of the amount of food consumed by the boarders was a never failing source of amusement to the Carter girls. They were never so pleased as when the boarders were hungry and enjoyed the food. No doubt Oscar was pleased, too, but he was ever outwardly critical of the capacity of the week-enders.

Lucy and Lil, Skeeter and Frank were delighted to be commissioned to go hunting for food. Many were the adventures they had while out on these foraging parties and many the tales they had to tell of the inhabitants of the mountain cabins. There were several rules they must obey and besides those they had perfect liberty to do as they felt like. The first rule was that they must wear thick boots and leggins on these tramps. The snake bite Helen had got early in the summer had been a lesson learned in time and now all the campers were made to comply with the rule of [214] leggins whenever they went on hikes. The second rule was that they must be home before dark and must report to Douglas or Helen as soon as they got home. The third was that they must tell all their adventures to one of the older girls. If they obeyed these three rules they were sure to get into no trouble.

“Fix us up a big lunch, please, Helen. We are going ’way far off. There’s a man on the far side of Old Baldy that Josh says has great big frying-sizers,” declared Lil.

“Well, be sure you are back before dark,” admonished Helen, in her grownupest tone, according to Lucy.

“All right, Miss Grandma, but I don’t see why I have to get in before dark if you don’t. You know you and Doctor Wright came in long after supper one night—said you got lost, but you can tell that to the marines,” said Lucy pertly.

“Just for that, I’ve a great mind to put red pepper in your sandwiches,” said Helen, blushing in spite of herself.

“Well, I suppose if we get lost, we won’t have to get in before dark, either,” teased Lucy. [215]

“Yes, but don’t you get lost. Douglas and I are always a bit uneasy until you are back, as it is,” pleaded Helen. “You know mother would have a fit if you were out late.”

“Oh, don’t listen to her, Miss Helen. We’ll take care of the girls and bring ’em back safe. Frank and I couldn’t get lost on these mountains if we tried,” and Skeeter drew himself up to his full height, which was great for a boy of fifteen and seemed even greater because of his extreme leanness.

“Can’t we take our guns, Miss Helen?” pleaded Frank.

There was another rule that the boys must not take the guns if the girls were along. Guns are safe enough if there are no bystanders.

“Oh, Frank, ask Douglas! I am afraid to be the one to let you do it.”

“Can I tell her you say yes if she does?”

“Yes, I reckon so! But if she does say yes, please be awfully careful.”

“Sure we will! I tell you, Miss Helen, if anything happens to these girls, Skeeter and I’d never [216] show our faces in camp again.”

“I know you will look after them,” said Helen. These boys were great favorites with Helen, and they admired her so extravagantly that sometimes Lil and Lucy, their sworn chums, were a bit jealous. “I’ve made your kind of sandwiches, Frank, sardines. And I’ve stuffed some eggs with

minced ham the way you like them, Skeeter."

"Bully!" exclaimed both knights.

"And I s'pose what Lil and I like or don't like didn't enter your head," pouted Lucy.

"Why, Lucy, you know you like sardine sandwiches better than anything, you said so yourself," admonished Lil.

"Helen didn't know it."

"If you don't like what I put up, you can do it yourself next time," snapped Helen.

"'Tis dog's delight
To bark and bite,'"

sang Douglas, coming into the kitchen to spy out the nakedness of the land preparatory to sending her order for provisions to the wholesale grocer in Richmond. "What are you girls scrapping about?" [217]

"Helen said——"

"Lucy's always——"

"Yes, I haven't a doubt of it," laughed the elder sister, who was ever the peacemaker. "I haven't a doubt that Helen did say it, but she was just joking, and I know Lucy is always trying to help and is a dear girl. Now you children trot along and bring back all the chickens you can carry. Have you got your bags?" Gunnysacks were always taken to bring home the provender. "And money to pay for the chickens? If you see any eggs, buy them, and more roasting ears, but don't try to carry everything you see. Have the mountaineers bring them to camp. Good-bye! Be sure to come back before dark."

"Ask her about the guns," whispered Frank to Lil.

"Douglas, can the boys take their guns? Helen says she says yes if you say yes. They won't carry 'em loaded." [218]

"We—ll, I believe we can trust you; but do be careful, boys."

With a whoop the boys flew to their tent for the guns. The sizable lunch was dumped in the bottom of a gunnysack and slung over Skeeter's shoulder, and the cavalcade started, after many admonitions from Douglas and Helen to be careful of their guns and to come back before dark.

"Ain't they the scared cats, though?" laughed Lucy.

"Yes; what on earth could happen to us?" said Lil.

"Nothing, I reckon, with Skeeter and me here to protect you—eh, Skeeter?"

"I just guess we could hold a whole litter of bears at bay with these guns. I almost wish we would run into some kind of trouble just so Frank and I could show your big sisters we are responsible parties."

"Maybe we will," and Lil danced in glee at the possible chance of getting into trouble so their devoted swains could extricate them. "Maybe we will meet a drunken mountaineer—or maybe it will be a whole lot of drunken mountaineers, a camp of moonshiners—maybe they will capture Lucy and me and carry us to their mountain fastness and there hold us for ransom." [219]

"Huh! And what do you think Skeeter and I'll be doing while they are carrying you off?" sniffed Frank. "Standing still, I reckon, and weeping down our gun barrels!"

"Well, s'pose they are all of them armed to the teeth, a company of stalwart brigands," suggested Lil, who, by the way, was something of a movie fan, "and they come swooping down on us, the leader bearing a lasso in his brawny hand."

"Yes," put in Lucy, "and he will swirl it around and will catch both of you in the same coil and then will tie you to a tree there to await his pleasure. I think there had better be two leaders, though, Lil. So you can have one and I can have one. I bid for the biggest."

"Bid for him! If you girls don't beat all! I do believe you would like to be attacked by outlaws," and Skeeter looked his disgust at the eternal feminine. [220]

"Of course we'd like it if it came out all right; that is, if the leaders fell in love with us and reformed and turned out to be gentlemen who took to moonshining and highwaying because they had been cheated out of their inheritances by fat-faced uncles in Prince Albert coats," and Lil looked very saucy as she switched on ahead of the others down the narrow trail.

"And where would we come in?" asked Frank whimsically. "We would have to stay tied to the tree while you and Lucy acted about a thousand feet of reels. I tell you what I mean to do. I mean to train a squirrel to come gnaw me free. What you say to that, Skeeter?"

"Squirrel much! I'm going to be so quick with my gun that the bold brigands will wish they had stayed with Uncle Albert. As for lassoing—I am some pumpkins myself with the rope. Look at

this!” and twirling the gunnysack around with the lunch serving as ballast, Skeeter caught his chum neatly around the neck. [221]

“Oh, oh! You’ll mash the sandwiches!” wailed the others.

“Let’s sit down and eat ’em up now,” suggested Skeeter. “I am tired of being made the beast of burden. I believe in distribution of labor.”

“Why, Skeeter, we haven’t walked a mile yet, and it can’t be more than ten o’clock.”

“Well, then, my tumtum must be fast. I shall have to regulate it. It tells me it is almost twelve.” No one had a watch so there was no way to prove the time except by the shadows, and Skeeter declared that the shadows on the mountain perforce must slant even at twelve.

“Let’s eat part of the lunch,” suggested Lucy. “That will keep poor Skeeter from starving and lighten the load some, too. There is no telling what time it is, but if we are hungry I can’t see that it makes much difference what time it is. I’m starved myself almost.”

“Me, too,” chorused the others.

They ate only half, prudently putting the rest back in the gunnysack for future reference. [222]

“Gee, I feel some better,” sighed Skeeter, whose appetite was ever a marvel to his friends since it never seemed to have the slightest effect on his extreme leanness. Oscar always said: “That there young Marster Skeeter eats so much it makes him po’ to carry it.”

“Do you boys know exactly where we are going?” asked Lil. They had walked a long distance since the distribution of burdens and now had come to a place where the trail went directly down the mountainside.

“Of course we do! Josh said that when we got to a place where the path suddenly went down we were almost over the cabin where Jude Hanford lives. Didn’t he, Frank?”

“He sure did!”

“But there was a place back further where a path forked off. I saw it, didn’t you, Lucy?”

“Yes, but I thought it was maybe just a washed place.”

“This is right, I’m sure,” said Skeeter confidently, so the young people clambered down the [223] mountainside following Skeeter’s lead. The path went almost exactly perpendicularly down the mountain for fifty yards and then, as is the way with mountain paths, it changed its mind and started up the mountain again.

“This is a terribly silly path,” declared the self-constituted guide, “but I reckon it will start down again soon. Josh said that Jude Hanford lives almost at the foot of the mountain.”

“Let’s keep a-going; there’s no use in turning back,” said Frank. “This path is obliged to lead somewhere.”

“Maybe it leads to the brigand’s cave,” shivered Lil.

“Which way is home?” asked Lucy.

“That way!”

“Over there!”

“Due north from here!”

But as the three of her companions all pointed in different directions, Lucy laughed at them and chose an entirely different point of the compass as her idea of where Camp Carter was situated. [224] They had been walking for hours and as far as they could tell had not got off of their own mountain. No one seemed to be the least worried about being lost, so Lucy calmed her fears, which were not very great. How could they get lost? All they had to do was retrace their steps if they did not find Jude Hanford’s cabin, where the frying-sized chickens and the roasting ears were supposed to thrive.

“Let’s eat again,” suggested the ever empty Skeeter.

They had come to a wonderful mountain stream, one they had never seen before in their rambles. It came dashing down the incline singing a gay song until it found a temporary resting place in a deep hole which seemed to be hollowed out of the living rock.

“What a place to swim!” they exclaimed in a breath.

“I bet it’s cold, though, cold as flugians.” Lil trailed her fingers through the icy water and a little fish rose to the surface and gave a nibble. “Look! Look! Isn’t he sweet?”

“Let’s fish,” suggested Lucy. [225]

“Fish with what? Guns?” asked Skeeter scornfully.

“No, fishing lines with minnows for bait,” and Lucy found a pin in her middy blouse and with a narrow pink ribbon drawn mysteriously from somewhere tied to the pin, which she bent into a

fine hook, she got ready for the gentle art. A sardine from a sandwich made excellent bait, at least the speckled beauties in that pool thought so as they rose to it greedily.

“E—e-ee!” squealed Lucy, flopping an eight-inch trout out on the bank. “I caught a fish! I caught a fish!”

“Oh, gimme a pin, please,” begged the boys, so Lucy and Lil had to find fish hooks for their cavaliers and more strings and in a short while all of them were eagerly fishing.

“I never saw such tame fish in all my life,” said Frank. “They are just begging to be caught. It seems not very sporty to hook them in, somehow.”

“I didn’t know there were any trout in these streams. Doctor Wright says there used to be but the [226]
natives have about exterminated them. Gee, there’s a beaut!” and Skeeter flopped a mate to Lucy’s catch out on the grass.

“Let’s stop fishing and fry these,” he suggested, “I’m awfully hungry.”

“Hungry! Oh, Skeeter! I’m right uneasy about you,” teased Lil.

“Well, I never did think sandwiches were very filling. Somehow they don’t stick to your ribs. Come on, Frank, we can get a fire in no time.”

“How can we fry anything without lard and a pan?”

“Oh, we won’t fry, we’ll broil.”

“We, indeed!” sniffed Lucy. “You know mighty well, you boys, that when cooking time comes, Lil and I’ll have to do it. I know how to cook fish without a pan—learned in Camp-Fire Girls. Just run a green switch through the gills and lay it across on two pronged sticks stuck up on each side of the fire. You go on and make the fire while Lil and I try to catch some more fish. I wonder what [227]
Doctor Wright will say when we tell him we caught game fish with a bent pin tied on lingerie ribbon. He brought up all kinds of rods and reels and flies and whipped the streams for miles around and never caught anything but Helen’s veil.”

The trout seemed to have become sophisticated when two of their number had been caught and refused to be hooked any more with bent pins and lingerie ribbon, although it was pink and very attractive. The fire went out and Lucy and Lil had to try a hand at it before it could be persuaded to burn.

“It looks to me like fire-making must be woman’s work because they certainly can do it better than us men,” said Skeeter solemnly, and the others laughed at him until Lil slipped into the water. Only one foot got wet, however, so there was no harm done.

The fire finally burned and the two little fish, after being scaled and cleaned, were strung across on a green wand. Of course the fire had not been allowed to get to the proper state of red embers [228]
so the fish were well smoked before they began to cook.

“Umm! They smell fine!” cried the famished Skeeter.

“They smell mighty like burnt fish to me,” said Frank.

They tasted very like burnt fish, too, when they were finally taken from their wand and the young folks drew up for the feast. They lacked salt and were burnt at the tail and raw at the head, but Skeeter picked the bones and pronounced them prime.

“I believe it’s getting mighty late and we have not found Jude Hanford’s cabin yet. You stop stuffing now, Skeeter, and let’s get along,” said Frank, gathering up the gunnysacks and guns.

“Do you think we had better cross this stream?”

“Sure, if we go back, it will just take us home. We won’t dare show our faces at camp unless we have at least the promise of some chickens and roasting ears. I hope to carry back some in the gunnysacks.”

“Of course we must go on,” chorused the girls. “We are not one bit tired and if we go on we are [229]
sure to come to Jude’s cabin.”

Go on they did, how far there was no telling. The path went down, down, down, but led only to another spring. The boys shot some squirrels and the girls found a vine laden with fox grapes.

“Let’s get all we can carry so we can make some jelly. Helen was wishing only the other day she had some. They make the best jelly going,” said Lucy, and so they pulled all they could reach and decided the ones that hung too high would be sour.

“Do you know I believe it’s most supper time—I’m getting powerful empty,” declared the insatiable Skeeter.

“Supper time! Nonsense! I betcher ’tain’t three o’clock,” and Frank peered knowingly at the sun. “That mountain over yonder is so high, that’s the reason the sun is getting behind it. I betcher anything on top of the mountain it is as light as midday.”

“I do wish we could find Jude’s cabin. This has been the longest walk we ever have taken,” sighed [230]
Lil. “Not that I am the least bit tired.” Lil was not quite so robust as Lucy, but wild horses would

not drag from her the admission that she could not keep up with her chum.

“Let’s sit down a minute and rest,” suggested Frank, “and kinder get our bearings. I’m not sure but perhaps it would be less loony if we start right off for home.”

The sun had set for them and it was growing quite gloomy down in the valley where the path had finally led them. Of course they well knew that it was shining brightly on those who were so fortunate as to be on the heights, but the thing is they were in the depths.

“All right, let’s go home,” agreed Skeeter. “We will strike them at supper, I feel sure.”

They retraced their steps, stopping occasionally to argue about the trail. There seemed to be a great many more bypaths going up the mountain than they had noticed going down.

“This is right. I know, because here is the fox grape vine we stripped on the way down,” cried Lucy, when there was more doubt than usual about whether or not they were on the right road. [231]

“Well, more have grown mighty fast,” declared Skeeter. “Look, this is still full.”

“But we couldn’t reach the high ones and decided like Brer Fox that they were sour.”

“Brer Fox, indeed! That wasn’t Brer Fox but the one in Aesop,” laughed Lil.

“Well, he acted just like Brer Fox would have acted, anyhow, and I bet Aesop got him from Uncle Remus. But see, Lil! This isn’t the same vine. We never could have skipped all these grapes. Only look what beauts!”

“We might just as well pick ’em,” said Skeeter, suiting the action to the word. “They might come in handy later on for eats if we can’t find our way home.”

“Not find our way home!” scoffed Frank. “Why, home is just over the mountain. All we have to do is keep straight up and go down on the other side. These paths have mixed us up but the mountain is the same old cove. He can’t mix us up.”

CHAPTER XV [232]

BABES IN THE WOOD

The pull up that mountain was about the hardest one any of those young people had ever had. As a rule Lil and Lucy required no help from the boys, as they prided themselves upon being quite as active as any members of the opposite sex, but now they were glad of the assistance the boys shyly offered.

“Just catch on to my belt, Lil; I can pull you up and carry the grapes and my gun, too,” insisted Frank, while Skeeter made Lucy take hold of his gun so he could help her.

“We are most to the top now,” they encouraged the girls. Their way lay over rocks and through brambles, as they had given up trying to keep to a trail since the trails seemed to lead nowhere. They argued if they could get to the top they could see where they were.

The top was reached, but, strange to say, it wasn’t a top, after all, but just an excrescence on the side of the mountain, a kind of a hump. It led down sharply into a dimple covered with beautiful green grass, and then towering up on the other side of this dimple was more and more mountain. [233]

“Well, ain’t this the limit? I didn’t know there was a place like this on our mountain!” exclaimed Frank.

“Th’ain’t! This is no more our mountain than I’m Josephus,” said Skeeter.

“Do you think we are lost?” asked Lil.

“Well, we are certainly not found,” and Skeeter’s young countenance took on a very grim expression.

“Somebody please kick me, and then I’ll feel better,” groaned Frank.

“Why kick you? You didn’t lose us; we lost ourselves,” said Lucy.

“You just say that to keep me from feeling bad. I said all the time we were on our own mountain and I was certainly the one to suggest our climbing up to the top. I don’t see how or when we managed to get in this mix-up.” [234]

“You see, we were down at the foot of the mountain and we must have spilled over on another one without knowing it. They so kinder run together at the bottom,” soothed Lucy.

Lil was so worn out after the climb that she could do no more than sink to the ground; but she smiled bravely at poor self-accusing Frank as she gasped out:

“What a grand, romantic spot to play ‘Babes in the Wood’! I bid to be a babe and let you boys be the robins.”

“In my opinion it is nobody’s fault that we have got lost, but lost we are. Of course Frank and I ought to have had more sense, but we didn’t have it, and I reckon what we ain’t got ain’t our fault.—But if it wasn’t our fault for losing you girls, it is sure up to us to get you home again and now we had better set to it somehow.”

[235] Skeeter deposited his gunnysack of squirrels beside the one of grapes and threw himself down beside Lil on the green, green grass of the unexpected dimple.

“Well, Lil and I are not blaming you. If we haven’t got as much sense as you boys, I dare one of you to say so. We could have told we were getting lost just as much as either one of you, and it is no more your business to get us home than it is our business to get you home, is it, Lil?”

“I—I—reckon not,” faltered Lil; “but I’ve got to rest a while before I can get myself or anybody else home.” Poor Lil! She was about all in but she kept up a brave smile.

“There must be water here or this grass would not be so pizen green in August,” said Skeeter. “Let’s go find the spring first, Frank.” The boys wanted to get off together to discuss ways and means and hold a council of war.

“Say, Skeeter, what are we going to do?” asked Frank, as they made for a pile of rocks down in the middle of the dimple, where it seemed likely a spring might be hidden.

“Darnifiknow!”

[236] “Do you know it’s ’most night? I thought when we got to the top there would be lots of light, but all the time we were coming up the sun was going down, and blamed if it hasn’t set now.”

“Yes, and no moon until ’most morning. What will Miss Douglas and Miss Helen say to us?”

“I’m not worrying about what they will say, but what will they think? I am afraid Lil can’t take another step tonight. She is game as game, but she is just about flopped.”

“We might make a basket of our hands and carry her thataway,” suggested Skeeter.

“Yes, we might! Lil is not so big but she is no dollbaby, and I don’t believe we could pack her a mile if our lives depended on it.”

“Well, what will we do? Can you think of anything?”

“Well, I think that one of us must stay with the girls and the other one go snooping around to try to find somebody, a house, or something. You stay with them and I’ll go. I bid to!”

“All—right!”

[237] But Skeeter did think, considering he was at least two months older than Frank and at least three inches taller, that he should be the one to go the front. The rôle of home guard did not appeal to him much, but when a fellow says “he bids to,” that settles it.

The spring was found down low between the rocks—such a clear, clean spring that even the greatest germ fearer would not hesitate to drink of its waters.

“Look, there’s a little path leading from the other side! It must go somewhere!” cried Frank.

“Yes, it must go somewhere just as all the trails we have followed today must—but where? Don’t tell me about paths! They are frauds, delusions and snares. I reckon there won’t be any supper for us tonight, so I might just as well fill up on water,” and Skeeter stooped and drank until his chum became alarmed. Skeeter’s capacity was surely miraculous.

“Let’s not tell the girls we might not be able to get back before night. It might get them upset,” cautioned Frank.

[238] They reckoned without their host, however, in this matter. When the boys returned to the forlorn damsels bearing a can of water for their refreshment, the can having been discovered by the spring, they found them not forlorn at all. They had spunked up each other and now were almost lively. Lil was tired and pale and Lucy had a rather bedraggled look, but they called out cheerily:

“What ho, brave knights!”

“Listen! Don’t you hear a strange sound, kind of like music without a tune?” said Lucy.

There was a sound, certainly. It might be the wind in the pines and it might be a giant fly buzzing in a flower that had closed its doors for the night.

“It is coming closer,” cried Lil. “Maybe it is the bold brigands who are to bear us off to captivity in their mountain fastnesses. I tell you, if they want me they will have to bear me. I can’t hobble.”

[239] Just then there came through the scrub growth on the opposite side of the green dimple where our young people had made their temporary abiding place, a strange figure. It was a tall, lean young man dressed in a coat of many colors, a shirt that seemed to be made of patches, no two patches of the same color and none of them matching the original color of the shirt, which was of a vivid blue. His trousers were of bright pink calico, the kind you see on the shelves of country

stores and that is usually spoken of as “candy pink.” His head was bare; his hair long and yellow. A large tin bucket was hung on his arm while he diligently played a jew’s-harp.

The effect of this strange figure was so weird as it appeared through the gathering twilight that the girls could hardly hold in the screams that were in their throats. They controlled them, however, so that they only came out as faint giggles.

The music of the jew’s-harp can be very eyrie in broad daylight when made by an ordinary human being; but just at dusk in a mountain fastness when four young persons have decided they are lost and may have to spend the night in the woods, this music, coming from such a strange, [240] motley figure, seemed positively grewsome.

“Speak to it!” gasped Lucy.

> “‘Angels and ministers of grace, defend us!
> Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damned,
> Bring with thee airs from heaven, or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked, or charitable,
> Thou com’st in such a questionable shape,
> That I will speak to thee,’”

spouted Skeeter.

The youth stood still in his path but went on with his weird near-tune. Skeeter approached him and the others followed, although poor Lil found herself limping painfully.

“Please, we are lost!”

“Oh, no, not lost, for I have found you uns. We uns is always findin’.” His voice had an indescribable softness and gentleness and his blue eyes a far-away look as though he lived in some other world. “Only t’other day we uns ’most found a great bird floating in the sky, but it flew away. We uns thought at first it was lost but it wasn’t. If it had a been lost, we uns would [241] have found it. A great big bird, bigger’n a bald-headed eagle, bigger’n a buzzard.”

“Now that you have found us, what are you going to do with us?” asked Lil.

“Oh, what we uns finds, we uns hides ag’in. Thar’s a hole in the mounting whar we uns puts things.”

“Uhhh—a brigand, sure enough!” whispered Lucy.

“But you wouldn’t put us there, because we are alive. You have a home somewhere near here, haven’t you?” asked Frank. But the half-witted fellow shook his head sadly.

“We uns ain’t got no mo’ home since they came and found my maw—they came and found her and hid her in the ground. We uns must have lost her and never can find her—but there are lots of other things to find,” and his blue eyes that had looked all clouded at the sad thought of never finding his mother, now began to sparkle. “Only this evening we uns found the prettiest light in the sky—it’s gone now—gone—before we uns could hide it in the hole, but we uns will find [242] another.”

“Where do you live?”

Skeeter asked it gently.

“Oh, we uns lives with the spring-keeper.”

“The spring-keeper! Who is he?”

“Oh, we uns found him when they took my maw! He is a little daffy—that is what folks say, but we uns can’t see but he is as smart as them what laughs at him.”

The young people were quite aghast at the news that the person with whom this strange being lived was considered daffy. The boys had their doubts about the advantage of asking shelter in a house where two crazy people lived, but perhaps the spring-keeper was not crazy, after all. This young man certainly seemed harmless enough, and perhaps he could show them the way to Greendale.

“Does the spring-keeper live far from here?” asked Lil.

“Oh, no, just round the mounting. We uns will show you uns the way.”

He filled his bucket at the crystal spring and then led the way along the narrow path. [243]

“Who taught you to play the jew’s-harp?” asked Lucy.

“Nobody! We uns just makes the music we uns finds in the trees. We uns can make the tune the bee tree makes, too. We uns can do so many things. We uns made these pants and every day we uns sews a pretty new color on this shirt. The spring-keeper fetches pretty cloth from the store and sometimes we uns sews quilts. Look, thar’s the place whar the spring-keeper lives when he ain’t a-tendin’ to his business.”

“What is his business?” asked Frank.

“We uns done told you he’s a spring-keeper. Be you uns daffy, too?”

That made them all laugh, and then the guide laughed too, delightedly.

“Now we uns is found some happiness!” he exclaimed. “The spring-keeper says that is all that’s worth finding. He says he has found it but he never laughs like that. He just smiles but never [244] makes no music when he’s happy. But neither does the sunshine.”

The cabin which they were approaching was different in a way from the usual one found in the mountains. It was made of logs and had the outline of the ordinary abode of the mountaineer, but a long porch went along two sides and this porch was screened. Screening is something almost unheard-of with the natives, although the flies abound in the mountains as well as in the valleys. A little clearing around the cabin was one great tangle of flowers: golden glow, love-in-the-mist, four o’clocks, bachelor’s buttons, zenias, asters, hollyhocks, sunflowers, poppies, cornflowers, scarlet sage, roses and honeysuckles. Some greedy bees were still buzzing around the roses, although the sun was down and it was high time all laborers were knocking off for the night. There was a light in the cabin which sent a very cheering message to the foot-sore travelers—also an odor of cooking that appealed very strongly to all of them but sent Skeeter off into an ecstasy of anticipation.

The guide put down his bucket of water and placing his jew’s-harp to his lips gave a kind of [245] buzzing call. Immediately an old man came out of the door.

“Is that you, Tom Tit?” It was such a kind, sweet voice that the four were made sure they were right in coming to his abode.

“Yes, Spring-keeper, and we uns found something.”

“I’ll be bound you have! What is it this time? Another aeroplane or a rainbow?”

“No, it is four laughs, look!”

The old man did look, and when he saw the wanderers, he hastened out to make them welcome. Never was there a more charming manner than his. No wonder the half-witted youth thought of the sunshine in connection with his smile.

He was tall and stalwart, with a long gray beard that could only be equalled by Santa Claus himself. His hair was silver white and his cheeks as rosy as a girl would like to have hers. His eyes were gray and so kind and twinkling that all fear of his being crazy was immediately [246] dispelled from the minds of our young people.

“They thought they were lost but they were wrong—we uns found ’em.”

“Good work, Tom Tit! And now what are we to do with them?” he asked, although he did not wait to find out what his poor companion had in his befuddled mind but ushered them to the porch, where he made the girls comfortable in steamer chairs and let the boys find seats for themselves.

Their story was soon told and much was their amazement to learn that they were more than ten miles from Greendale.

“You must have been walking all day in the wrong direction. No wonder this poor little girl is limping. Now the first thing for us to do is to have something to eat.”

“Ahem!” from Skeeter.

The spring-keeper smiled.

“Ah, methinks thou hast a lean and hungry look.”

“Hungry’s not the word. Starving Belgium is nothing to me. I feel as though I had had nothing to [247] eat since yesterday.”

“Oh, Skeeter! Think of all that lunch!” exclaimed Lil, lolling back luxuriously in the steamer chair with grass cloth cushions tucked in around her. “Why, Mr.—Mr.—Spring-keeper, he has done nothing but eat all day!”

“We think it is very hard on you for all of us to come piling in on you this way,” said Lucy.

“Hard on us! Why, Tom Tit and I are so happy we hardly know what to do to show it,” said the old man kindly. “But you must excuse me while I go prepare some food for you.”

“But you must let us help!” from the girls, although Lil was rather perfunctory in her offers of assistance. She felt as though nothing short of dynamite could get her out of that chair.

“No, indeed! Tom Tit and I are famous cooks and we can get something ready in short order.”

“Please, sir,” said Frank, who had been very quiet while the others were telling their host of their [248] adventures, “I—I—must not stop one moment to eat or anything else. I want you to tell me how to find my way back to Greendale so I can tell the people at the camp that Lucy and Lil are all right. They were put in our charge, and I must let them know.”

“Of course, I am going, too,” put in Skeeter, “but I thought I might eat first.”

Everyone had to laugh at poor Skeeter’s rueful countenance. The spring-keeper smiled broadly,

but he patted Frank on the back.

“Have you a telephone at camp?”

“Yes, we had to put one in.”

“Well, then, we’ll just ’phone them even before we begin to cook our feast.”

“’Phone! Have you a telephone here?” exclaimed Lucy.

“Yes, my dear young lady. I love the wildwood, but I have to know what’s going on in the world. A man who does not take the good the gods provide him in the way of modern inventions is a fool. I may be a fool, but I’m not that kind of a fool.”

“Lucy, you had better do the ’phoning so they’ll know you girls are safe, first thing,” suggested [249] Frank.

“Yes, and it had better be done immediately,” said their host. “Central in the mountains goes to roost very early, and you might not get connection. I’ll call up Greendale and make them give me the camp.”

Connection was got without much trouble and Lucy took the receiver.

“Hello! Is that Camp Carter? Well, this is me.”

“Lucy! Is it you?” in Helen’s distracted tones from the other end.

“Yes, it’s me, and all of us are all right, but we are going to spend the night out.”

“Out where?”

“About ten miles from Greendale!”

“You mean outdoors?”

“Oh, no; with a spring-keeper!”

“A what? Oh, Lucy, are you crazy? We are so uneasy about all of you, we are nearly wild! It’s dark as can be and we are trying to keep it from mother and father that you have not come home. Tell [250] me where you are. Speak distinctly and loudly and stop giggling.” Of course the usual giggles had rendered Lucy unable to speak.

“Here, Skeeter, come and tell her!” she gasped.

“Hello, Miss Helen! I’m Skeeter. The girls are all right. Yes, Frank and I are, too. We got lost somehow and never did find Jude Hanford’s, but we found a kind gentleman who lives ’way over on another mountain and he is going to feed us right now.”

“Who is the gentleman?”

“Mr. Spring-keeper is his name.”

“You can’t get home somehow tonight?”

“No’m! Lil is mighty tired and will have to rest up some. We’ll be home tomorrow. You mustn’t worry about the girls—they’re all right and the gentleman is bully. We’ll tell you all about it when we see you. Say, Miss Helen, the lunch was out of sight.”

“You bet it was when once Skeeter got his hooks into it,” muttered Frank. “The supper will be, [251] too, in no time.”

“Well, good-bye, Skeeter! We are still trusting you and Frank to take care of our girls and bring them back safely. I knew all the time you were doing your best, although I was uneasy about all of you. I was afraid you had shot each other or snakes had bitten you or something.”

“Not on your life! We shot some squirrels and got you some fox grapes, though. Good-bye! Good-bye!”

“I tell you, Miss Helen is a peach,” he added to Frank, after he hung up the receiver. “She is still trusting us.”

CHAPTER XVI [252]

TOM TIT

“I’m dying to know who he is and what he is,” whispered Lil to Lucy, as they tidied themselves up a bit in the neat little room to which the gray-bearded host had shown them.

“So’m I! Did you ever see such a cute little room? It looks like a stateroom on the steamboat. Do

you reckon we will sleep in here?”

It was a tiny little room with one great window. Two bunks were built in the wall opposite the window, one over the other. A little mirror hung over a shelf whereon the girls found a white celluloid comb and brush, spotlessly clean—indeed, the whole room was so clean that one doubted its ever having been occupied. The floor was scrubbed until Lucy said it reminded her of a well-kept kitchen table. A rag rug was the only decoration the room boasted and that was a beautiful thing of brilliant hue. The walls were whitewashed, also the doors, of which there were [253] two, one opening into the main room and the other one, the girls fancied, into a cupboard.

“Ain’t it grand we got lost?” from Lil, as she made a vain endeavor to see her sunburned nose in the mirror that was hung so high she was sure Mr. Spring-keeper had never had a female visitor before, or if he had, it had been a giantess.

“Hurry up! Your nose is all right.—Maybe we can help him some, and I’m just dying to hear the story of his life. Do you reckon he will tell us all about himself and poor Tom Tit without our pumping him? I believe he is a king or something.”

Whether the old gentleman were a king or not, he could certainly cook a supper to a king’s taste. Skeeter’s nostrils were quivering with anticipatory enjoyment as the lost ones took their seats around the massive table in the comfortable living room.

“It looks like a room I saw at the movies last spring,” Frank had said to Skeeter, as they waited [254] for the girls to finish dolling up. “That one had a stone fireplace and furniture that looked just like this, great big tables and chairs that must have been made out of solid oak or walnut or something. The hero had fashioned them himself with a jack-knife, I believe. The mantelpiece was high just like this one, but there were skins spread on the floor instead of these rag rugs.”

“It is a bully room, and, gee, what a good smell of eats.”

The supper was a simple one, consisting of corn pone and buttermilk, bacon and scrambled eggs.

“I am giving you exactly what Tom Tit and I were to have. I only tripled the quantity,” said their host, as they drew up the chairs to the great table.

“Then we aren’t so very much trouble?” asked Lil.

“Trouble! Why, my dear young lady, Tom Tit and I would not live on this thoroughfare if we did not love visitors.”

“Thoroughfare!” gasped Lucy. Maybe the old gentleman was daffy. [255]

“Why, certainly! You don’t know how many things happen in the mountains. Someone is always turning up. Eh, Tom Tit?”

“Yes, indeed! We uns finds something every day. One time it was a baby fox and one time it was a man in ugly striped pants.”

“He means our convict. It was a poor fellow who had escaped from a road gang and took refuge in the mountains and Tom Tit found him almost starved to death. We fed him up until he could go back to work.”

“You didn’t give him up!” asked Frank, his eyes flashing.

“Oh, no; he gave himself up. I got him to tell me just exactly why he was put in the penitentiary, and since his crime surely warranted some punishment, I made him understand that the best thing for him to do was go back to his road making and expiate his crime. That was much better than being hounded for the rest of his time. What do you think about it?”

“Y-e-s, you are right, but I’m glad you didn’t give him up.” [256]

“Tom Tit and I go see him every now and then. Tom Tit feels sorry for him because his trousers are so ugly. He likes to work and wouldn’t mind road-building a bit.”

“When we uns digs, we uns finds so many things, but we uns couldn’t wear such ugly pants. Sometime we uns is a-goin’ to make the poor sick man some pretty pink ones like these,” and he stood up to show his bright pink trousers. They were strangely fashioned, looking rather like Turkish trousers.

“Was the man sick?” asked Lucy, devoutly praying that a fit of the giggles would not choke her.

“You see, Tom Tit and I think that when persons are what the world and the law calls bad, they are really sick. Sometimes they are too sick to be cured, but not often. It is the fault of the doctors and the system and not theirs when they are not cured.”

“Do you live here all the time?” asked Lil. She was dying of curiosity about the strange pair who [257] were so ill assorted and still so intimate.

“Tom Tit does, but I have to go away for a time every fall and winter and Tom Tit keeps house for me while I am gone. He is a famous housekeeper.”

“Do you get lonesome all by yourself?” asked Lucy.

“We uns ain’t never alone. There’s the baby fox and the cow and the chickens, and every day we

uns tries to find something and then we uns has to write it down for the spring-keeper ’ginst he comes home. Every day we uns has to go to the post office for the letter, too, and that takes time. The days in winter are so short.”

“Oh, do you get a letter every day? How jolly! My mother doesn’t write to me but once a week,” said Lil, “—although of course she ’phones me in the meantime and sends me candy and things.”

“We uns never does git letters from maw,” and poor Tom Tit’s eyes clouded sadly. “Ever since the men came and found her and hid her in that hole she ain’t writ a line to poor Tom Tit.” [258]

“But you write to her every time you write to me, don’t you, Tom Tit?” and the old gentleman put a calming and kindly hand on the shoulder of the trembling youth. It seemed that at every mention of mothers the thought of his own mother came back to him and the agony he went through with at the time of her death seized hold of him. The young people learned later from their host, while Tom Tit was washing the supper dishes, all about the poor boy’s history.

“Tom Tit’s mother was a very fine woman of an intelligence and character that was remarkable even in these mountains where intelligence and character are the rule rather than the exception. She had no education, but the things she could accomplish without education were enough to make the ones who have been educated blush to think how little they do with it. She had evolved a philosophy of her own of such goodness and serenity that to know her and talk with her was a privilege. She seemed to me to be like these mountains, where she was born and where she died. [259] She had had trouble enough to break the spirit of any ordinary mortal, but she said her spirit was eternal and could not be broken.

“Her husband was a very desperate character. Convicted of illicit distilling, he was sentenced to serve a term in the penitentiary, but he managed to escape and for one whole year he evaded the sheriff, hiding in the mountains. Of course his wife had to go through the agony of this long search. She told me she had never slept more than an hour at a time while her husband was in hiding. That was the one thing she was bitter over—that long hounding of her husband. She used to say if the government had spent the money and energy in educating the mountaineers that they had in hunting for them, there would have been no cause for hunting for them. Moonshining is to them a perfectly reasonable and lawful industry, and nothing but education can make them see it differently. His hiding place was finally ferreted out and he was surrounded and captured, but not before he had managed to shoot five men, killing two of them and being fatally wounded [260] himself.

“That was many years ago when Tom Tit was a little chap of three. Melissa, the mother, was wrapped up in the child. His intelligence then was keen and his love of Nature and beautiful things was so pronounced from the beginning that if this cloud had not come over his intellect he would surely have been a great artist of some kind, whether poet, painter or musician, I can’t say.”

“Perhaps all of them, like Leonardo da Vinci!” exclaimed Lil, who always did know things.

The old gentleman smiled at her appreciatively.

“What is an artist but a person who finds things, just like my poor Tom Tit, and then is able to tell to the world what he has found?”

“When he writes to you, does he tell you things in poetical language?” asked Lucy, her gray eyes very teary as she listened to the story of the mountain youth.

“My dear, his writing is not ordinary writing. He can neither read nor write as you think of it. His [261] letters to me are written in another way. He tells me what he has found each day with some kind of rude drawing or with some device of his own.”

“Please show us some of them!” begged all four of the guests.

“I am going to let you guess what he meant.” He took from his desk in the corner a packet of large envelopes. “I leave with my friend enough addressed and stamped envelopes to run him until I return, and all he has to do is put in his letter and seal it and drop it in the box at Bear Hollow, our post office. Sometimes he draws me a picture and sometimes he just sends me something he has found. What do you think he intended to convey by this?”

On a sheet of paper were drawn many stars of various kinds and sizes, and down in the corner was what was certainly meant for an axe.

“Clear night and going coon hunting, I think,” said Skeeter solemnly.

“No!” cried Lucy and Lil in a breath. “Those are meant for snow flakes! It has begun to snow!” [262]

“Right you are! Good girls, go up head! And how about the axe, since it is not meant to signify coon hunting?”

“It is going to be cold,” suggested the practical Frank, “and he must go to work and lay in wood before the snow gets deep.”

“Fine! I am glad to see there are others who can interpret my poor Tom Tit’s letters. Now this is the one I received the next day.”

It was evidently meant for a deep snow. The roof of a house and a few bare branches were shown

but from the chimney a column of smoke ascended and in that smoke was plainly drawn a grin: a mouth with teeth.

“Snowed under!” cried Skeeter.

“But he got his wood cut and is now sitting by the fire quite happy, even grinning,” declared Lucy.

“Right again! Now comes a piece of holly and a pressed violet. That means that he finds a little belated violet in our flower beds in spite of the fact that the holly is king at this season. [263] Sometimes he has so much to tell me that he must make many pictures. Here he found a sunset and it was so beautiful that he had to paint it with his colored crayons. This is where he fed the birds during the deep snow. He has a trough where he puts grain and seeds and crumbs for his winged friends. This is a picture of the trough and see the flocks of birds he has tried to draw to show how many are fed in his trough. This means a stranger has come in on him!” It was a picture of a hat and staff and down one side of the page were many drops of water, at least that was what the interested audience thought they were. At the top was an eye.

“Oh, I know!” exclaimed Lil. “If a hat and staff mean a stranger, those drops of water must mean rain.”

“The eye looks like a Mormon sign,” suggested Skeeter.

“I bet it means this,” said Lil, studying the page intently. “It means the stranger is old, or he would not have a staff, and it means he is unhappy. Those drops are tear drops. See how sad the [264] eye looks!”

“‘Oh, a Daniel come to judgment!’ Young lady, you are right. That was a tired, sick traveler that our Tom Tit found and brought in and looked after for two weeks last winter. He was trying to cross the mountains and got lost and Tom Tit picked him up, almost starved and frozen. In this one, he shows the sick guest is still with him and in bed. He cannot draw faces well and hates to make anything too grotesque, so he usually has a sign or symbol for persons. The staff and hat in bed mean the guest is there. These little saddle-bags and hat mean he had to send for the doctor. Look at the medicine the poor staff and hat must take from the cruel saddle-bags! His own symbol is usually a jew’s-harp, although sometimes he makes himself a kind of butterfly——”

“Just like Whistler!” cried Lil.

“Yes, and in his way he is as great an artist as Whistler,” said the old man sadly. “If he had only had his chance! Well, well! Maybe he is happier as he is. I never saw a happier person, as a rule, [265] than my poor boy. Tom Tit could never have written letters that would have been put in a book and called ‘The Gentle Art of Making Enemies,’ as that other great artist did. He makes friends with every living thing, and inanimate objects are friendly to him, too, I sometimes think. If his wits had been spared him, the world would have called him and the peace of the mountains would no longer have been his.”

The old man fingered the packet of letters tenderly while the young guests sat thoughtfully by. They could hear the cheerful Tom Tit in the kitchen washing dishes and whistling a strange crooning melody.

“Here it is spring and he has found the first hepatica. See, he sends me a pressed one! And this is my love letter. What do you make of it?”

It was six little stamped envelopes, all with wings, and in the corner was a jew’s-harp unmistakably dancing a jig.

“I know! I know!” cried Lucy.

“So do I!” from Lil.

“I can’t see any kind of sense in it!” pondered Frank. [266]

“Nor I,” grumbled Skeeter. “You girls just make up answers.”

“I’m going to whisper my answer to Mr. Spring-keeper,” suggested Lil.

The old man smiled as Lil whispered her answer.

“Good! Splendid! And now what do you think?” turning to Lucy.

“I think that he has only six envelopes left, and that means you will be back in six days. He is so happy he is dancing and he is so busy the days are just flying away.”

“Well, if you girls aren’t clever! No wonder they say women are the most appreciative sex although men are the creative. A few men create while all women appreciate. And now, my dear young people, this is so pleasant for me that I am afraid of being selfish, so I am going to insist on your going to bed. You have had a hard day and must be tired.”

“We have had a wonderful day with a wonderful en——” said Lil, a yawn hitting her midway so [267] she could not get out the “ding.”

“But I hate to go to bed until you tell us something about yourself,” blurted out Skeeter.

The story of the half-witted young mountaineer was very interesting, no doubt, but Skeeter wanted to know why this highly educated gentleman was spending so much time in the mountains, cooking for himself and taking care of lost sheep.

“Oh, my story is such an ordinary one I can tell it while I light a candle for these young ladies,” laughed their host, not at all angry at Skeeter’s curiosity, although Lil and Lucy were half dead of embarrassment when Skeeter came out so flat-footed with the question which was almost bubbling over on their lips, but which they felt they must not put.

“I am a successful manufacturer—— I have made enough money selling clothes pins and ironing boards and butter tubs to stop. In fact, I stopped many years ago and now I do nothing but enjoy myself in my own way.”

“And that way is——?” [268]

“Trying to help a little. In the winter I live in New York and teach the boys’ clubs on the East Side, and in the summer I am spring-keeper in the mountains.”

“But isn’t your name Mr. Spring-keeper?” asked Lil.

“No, my dear, spring-keeping is my occupation. My name is Walter McRae. Here is your candle, and pleasant dreams.”

“Won’t you tell us some more about yourself?” asked Lucy as she took the candle from him.

“Another time! Anything so dry as my story will keep.”

CHAPTER XVII [269]

THE SPRING-KEEPER

“Isn’t this grand?” were the last words both of our girls uttered as they rolled into the bunks that had been made up with fresh, lavender-scented linen. The brigands had captured them certainly and their adventure was complete. The boys were sleeping on the porch in hammocks. Mr. McRae always slept on the porch unless weather drove him in, and Tom Tit had a little room that he loved, where he kept his treasures, all those he did not put in the hole in the mountain.

Dawn found the babes in the wood much refreshed. The boys were up and out early, helping Tom Tit milk the cow and chop wood. Mr. McRae had started the cooking of breakfast when Lucy and Lil appeared.

“We are so ashamed to be late but we almost slept our heads off,” they apologized. “Now let us help!” [270]

“All right, set the table and skim the milk and get the butter out of the dairy.” The dairy was a cave dug in the side of the mountain where all their food was kept cool in summer and warm in winter. “We shall breakfast on the porch.”

The girls made all haste and set the table with great care.

“Let’s get him to tell us all about himself this morning,” whispered Lucy. “I’m dying to hear about him. Isn’t he romantic?”

“I’m crazy about him. Don’t you reckon he’ll go to the camp with us? Nan would be wild over him.”

“Yes, but he’s ours. We certainly found him.”

“You sound like Tom Tit,” laughed Lil.

“I hope the people at the camp won’t laugh at poor Tom Tit,” said Lucy. “If we could only get there a little ahead and prepare them for his pink pants.”

She need not have worried, as the wise Mr. McRae knew how to manage Tom Tit so that he discarded his pink pants when he was to go among strangers. [271]

“Now, Tom Tit, we must hurry with all of our duties so we can make an early start to walk home with our guests; and we must put on our corduroys for such a long tramp, as the brambles might tear your lovely new trousers.”

So poor Tom Tit did the outside chores with the help of the boys, while the girls assisted Mr. McRae in the house.

Having breakfasted a little after dawn, by seven o’clock they were ready for their ten mile tramp back to the camp. The boys shouldered their guns and the sacks of fox grapes and squirrels. Mr. McRae took with him a small spade while Tom Tit carried a hoe.

“I can’t help thinking both of them are a bit loony,” Skeeter whispered to Lucy. “Why on earth do they want to carry garden tools on a ten mile tramp?”

“Loony yourself! I reckon they want to dig something.”

The old gentleman, as though divining Skeeter’s thoughts, remarked: [272]

“Tom Tit and I have a little duty to attend to today, so we are taking our implements. There are several springs I have not been able to visit this summer and I am going to combine duty with pleasure and look after them today.”

“Look after springs! What for?” from Skeeter.

“I thought I told you that I am a spring-keeper. Perhaps you don’t know what a spring-keeper is.”

“N—o! Not exactly!” said Skeeter.

“Well, every country child knows that in every spring there is or should be a spring-keeper to keep the water clear. It is a kind of crawfish. It may be a superstition that he really does purify water. At any rate, it is a pleasing idea that he can. Whether he can or not, I know I can help a great deal by digging out of the springs the old dead roots and vegetable matter that decays there, so my self-appointed job is to keep the springs of Albemarle county in condition. I am sure [273] I have saved many families from typhoid in the last years. That is something.

“I was born in the mountains, born in a cabin that stands just where the one I live in now stands, in fact the chimney is the same one that has always been there, but the house is new. When I was a mere lad, about twelve years old, there was a terrible epidemic of typhoid fever in the mountains. My whole family was wiped out by it, my father, mother and two sisters dying of it. I just did escape with my life and was nursed back to health by Tom Tit’s granny, as good a woman as ever lived. Afterwards, having no home ties, I drifted to the city where I was successful financially. We of the mountains had not known in the old days what caused typhoid, but afterwards, when I learned it was the water we drank, I determined to come back to my county whenever I could and make some endeavor to better the conditions. Would God that I might have been sooner! My poor boy had an attack of the dread disease just the year before I got my affairs in condition to leave New York, and that is what caused his brain trouble.” [274]

Tom Tit was ahead of the party, gazing up into the air as his old friend spoke. He had a rapt expression on his face that made him for the moment look like Guido Reni’s Christ.

“Sometimes,” continued the old man, “in typhoid, the temperature is so high that certain brain tissue seems to be burned out. I am afraid that is what has happened to my boy.”

“All of us have been inoculated against typhoid,” said Lucy. “Dr. Wright insisted on it—every member of the family. Helen kicked like a steer but she had to do it, too.”

“Well named, well named, that young doctor! I try to get the friends in the mountains to submit to it, too, but it is a difficult matter. I keep the virus on hand all the time, a fresh supply. If I can’t persuade them to let me give them the treatment, I can at least keep their springs clean for them. Sometimes they even object to that,” he laughed, “but they can’t help it, as I do it without their leave. They say I take all the taste out of the water.”

Their way lay around the mountain instead of over it, the course they had taken the day before, [275] and much to the amazement of the young people, they went to the left instead of to the right.

“But Greendale is that way!” declared Frank, pointing to the east.

“Greendale is really due north of us, but I thought you wanted to go by Jude Hanford’s cabin to do your errand. We could go either way to the camp from here, but if we go east, we will miss Jude.”

“Well, if that doesn’t beat all!” exclaimed Frank.

Mr. McRae laughed. “What would you have done last night if Tom Tit had not found you and brought you home?”

“I was going to lie right down and let the robins cover me up,” said Lil.

“I was going to climb the highest tree and look out and see if I could spy a light, like the cock in the ‘Musicians of Bremen,’” said Lucy.

“I was going to follow the path from the spring,” said Frank. “I felt sure from the cleanliness of [276] the spring that we were near some house.”

“And I was going to build a fire and skin the squirrels and have supper,” declared Skeeter. “I was just about famished and I knew that food was what Lil and Lucy needed to put heart in them.”

“Yes, it wouldn’t!” laughed Lil. “Much good burnt squirrel without any salt would do a bruised heel. That was all that was the matter with me.”

That ten miles back to the camp seemed much shorter than it had the day before, and in fact it was, as they made no digressions on the homeward trip.

“We must really have walked twenty miles yesterday. Just think how many times we doubled on

our tracks," said Frank when they finally came to a familiar spot.

They found Jude Hanford's yard running over with frying-sized chickens and on his door step a water bucket full of eggs all ready to take to the store. Of course he was pleased to sell them [277] without having to take off the commission for the middleman. He joined their procession, with his eggs and three dozen chickens distributed among the bearers.

CHAPTER XVIII [278]

MORE FINDS

"Look!" exclaimed Lucy as they neared the camp. "Mr. Smith is flying this morning. I wonder who is with him. He hasn't taken me yet but he promised to today. Please don't tell mother. She would be terribly alarmed at the prospect."

"Oh, there's my bird!" and Tom Tit dropped his hoe and the basket of chickens he was carrying and clasped his hands in an ecstasy of delight. "See, see, how it floats! I have found it again! I have found it again!"

"Tom Tit, would you like to fly with that great bird?" asked Lucy gently.

"Fly? Oh, I always dream I can fly! Can I really fly?"

"Yes, Tom Tit, if you want to I will give you my place. The birdman promised to take me today and [279] I will get him to take you instead."

Tom Tit looked wonderingly and trustingly at Lucy. Mr. McRae smiled his approval.

"It will be an experience my boy will remember all his life."

"Spending the night at your home will be one we will remember always, too. It beat flying," and all of the wanderers agreed with her.

Mr. Tom Smith was perfectly willing to take Tom Tit on a flight if he promised to sit still, which of course he did. The aeroplane was a great astonishment to him and the fact that the birdman could leave the bird and talk and walk filled him with awe.

"We uns ain't never seen buzzards and eagles git out'n their wings, but then we uns ain't never been so clost to the big ones, the ones that sails way up in the clouds."

When they landed after a rather longer flight than Tom Smith usually took the would-be flyers, Tom Tit's expression was that of one who has glimpsed the infinite. He said not a word for a [280] moment after he found himself once more on terra firma, and then he turned to his old friend and whispered:

"Oh, Spring-keeper, I have found so many things that I'll never be sad again."

The Carters, of course, gave Mr. McRae a warm welcome. They could not do enough to express their gratitude for his kindness and hospitality to their young people. Mrs. Carter was graciousness itself to the old man, but looked rather askance at the queer figure of his companion. I wonder what she would have thought had she seen his pink calico trousers and his patched shirt that he considered so beautiful. Bobby, however, was drawn to him immediately and treated him just as though he had been another little boy who had come to see him. He took his new friend to see all of his bird houses and water wheels, and Tom Tit followed him about with adoration in his eyes.

"We uns kin talk like you uns when we uns remembers," said Bobby.

"We uns would like to talk like Spring-keeper but always forgits," sighed Tom Tit. "Spring-keeper [281] used to talk just like we uns when he was little but he's got larnin' now."

"We uns don't never want no larnin'," declared Bobby. "'Tain't no use. Josh wants to git larnin', too, but when he does he ain't goin' to be my bes' frien' no mo'. I'm a-goin' to be you bes' frien' then; I mean, we uns is."

"What's a bes' frien'? We uns ain't never found one."

"Oh, a bes' frien' is somebody you likes to be with all the time."

"Oh, then Spring-keeper is a bes' frien'."

"But he is an old man. A bes' frien' must be young."

"Then we uns'll have to take the baby fox. Will that do?"

"Oh, yes, that'll do if'n they ain't no boys around."

“We uns will keep the baby fox for one of them things until Josh gits larnin’ and then you kin be it,” and Tom Tit laughed for joy.

“Is you uns ever flew?” Tom Tit asked Bobby.

“No—my mother is so skittish like, she ain’t never let me. She’s ’bout one of the scaredest ladies they is.” [282]

“We uns’ maw is done flew away herself and she didn’t mind when we uns went a bit. We uns useter think that when the men found maw they took her and hid her in a hole in the ground. Spring-keeper done tole me lots of times that she wasn’t in the ground but had flew up to heaven, but we uns ain’t never seed no one fly, so we uns just thought he was a foolin’. And you see,” he whispered, “Spring-keeper is kinder daffy sometimes, so the folks say, and we uns has to humor him. But now—but now—we uns done flewed away up in the air. If we uns kin fly, why maw kin do it, too. She ain’t in a hole in the ground no mo’. We uns almost saw her flyin’ way up over the mountain tops.”

“I’m—I mean we uns is a-goin’ to come to see you. My father is goin’ to take me there some day. Kin you play on the Victrola?”

“No—we uns ain’t never seed one. What is it?”

“Why, it makes music.” [283]

“Oh, we uns kin play the jew’s-harp.”

“Gee! I wish I could—I mean we uns wishes we uns could. If you show me how to play the jew’s-harp, I’ll show you how to play the Victrola. Come on, I’ll show you first while th’ain’t nobody in the pavilion. You see, my sisters is some bossy an’ they’s always sayin’ I scratch the records an’ won’t never let me play it by myself, but they is about the bossiest ever. I ain’t a-goin’ to hurt the old records.”

Tom Tit looked at the Victrola with wondering eyes while Bobby wound it up. He had seen a small organ once and the postmistress at Bear Hollow had a piano, but this musical instrument was strange indeed.

“I’m a-gonter leave the record on that Helen’s been a-playin’. I don’t know what it is. I can’t read good yet but I reckon it’s something pretty.”

It was Zimbalist playing the “Humoresque.” Fancy the effect of such a wonderful combination of sounds breaking for the first time on the sensitive ears of this mountain youth. He had heard [284] music in the wind and music in the water; the birds had sung to him and the beasts had talked to him; but what was this? He stood like one enchanted, his hands clasped and his lips parted. At one point in the music when the great artist was evidently putting his whole soul in it, Tom Tit began to sob. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Why, what’s the matter? Don’t you like it? I’ll put a ragtime piece on,” cried Bobby, abruptly stopping the machine with a scraping sound that certainly proved he was a great scratcher of records.

“Oh, now it’s lost! It’s lost! We uns thought we uns had found something beautiful. Where has it gone?”

“Did you like it then? What made you bawl?”

“We uns has to cry when we uns finds something beautiful sometimes. We uns cries a little when the sun sets but it is tears of happiness. Can you uns play that again?”

“Sure!” and Bobby started up the “Humoresque” again and this time Tom Tit dried his eyes and [285] stood with a smile on his face.

“Oh, Spring-keeper!” he cried when Mr. McRae came hunting him, “we uns has found something more beautiful than sunsets and flowers—prettier than birds—prettier than pink—prettier than blue or yellow. It shines like dew and tastes like honey—Oh, Spring-keeper, listen!”

“Yes, my boy, it is beautiful. And now I think you have found enough things for today and we must go home.”

“Go home and leave this!” and Tom Tit embraced the Victrola. “We uns can’t leave it.”

“Listen, my boy! I will get one for you. I don’t know why I never thought of it before. Within a week you shall have one all your own and play it as much as you choose.”

Of course Bobby had to be instructed in the rudiments of jew’s-harp playing first, according to agreement, and then with many expressions of mutual regard our young people parted from the spring-keeper and Tom Tit.

CHAPTER XIX

A DISCUSSION

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August was over and our girls were not sorry. The camp had been like an ant hill all during that month of holidays. Not that it had been a month of holidays for the Carters, far from it. There had been times when they did not see how they could accomplish the work they had undertaken. They were two hands short almost all of the month which made the work fall very heavily on the ones who were left. Gwen was taken up with Aunt Mandy, the kind old mountain woman who had been so good to the little English orphan. Now that Aunt Mandy was ill, Gwen felt it her duty to be with her day and night. Susan was so busy waiting on Mrs. Carter that she never had time for her regular duties in the kitchen.

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Lewis and Bill were terribly missed. They had done so many things for the campers, had been so strong and willing and untiring in their service that the girls felt the place could hardly be run without them. Skeeter and Frank did all they could but they were but slips of lads after all and there were many things where a man's strength was necessary.

Mr. Carter was glad to help when he was called on, but he did not seem to see the things that were to be done without having them pointed out. When there was much of a crowd he rather shrank from the noise and the girls felt they must not let him be made nervous by the confusion. Of course there was much confusion when twenty and more boarders would arrive at once, have to be hauled up the mountain and assigned tent room and then as Oscar would say, "have to be filled up." The girls would do much giggling and screaming; the young men would laugh a great deal louder than their jokes warranted, and the boys seemed to think that camp was a place especially designed for practical jokes.

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It was a common thing to hear shrieks from the tents when the crowd was finally made to retire by the chaperone, and then the cry, "Ouch! Chestnut burrs in my bed!" Once it was a lemon meringue pie, brought all the way from Richmond by an inveterate joker who felt that a certain youth was too full of himself and needed taking down a peg! Now there is nothing much better than a lemon meringue pie taken internally, but of all the squashy abominations to find in one's bed and to have applied externally, a lemon meringue pie is the worst.

It was as a censor of practical jokes that Douglas and Helen missed the young soldiers most. They had been wont to stand just so much and no more from the wild Indians who came to Camp Carter for the week-end, and now that there was no one to reach forth a restraining hand, there was no limit to the pranks that were played.

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Mrs. Carter felt that the job of chaperone for such a crowd was certainly no sinecure. She complained quite bitterly of her duties. After all, they consisted of having the new-comers introduced to her and of presiding at supper and of staying in the pavilion until bed time. Miss Elizabeth Somerville had made nothing of it, and one memorable night when there was too much racket going on from the tents the boys occupied, she had arisen from her bed in the cabin and, wrapped in a dressing gown and armed with an umbrella, had marched to the seat of war and very effectively quelled the riot by laying about her with said umbrella.

The girls looked back on her reign, regretting that it was over. It was lovely to have their mother with them again but she was quite different from the mother they had known in Richmond in the luxurious days. That mother had always been gentle while this one had a little sharp note to her voice that was strange to them. It was most noticeable when she had expressed some desire that was not immediately gratified.

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"I am quite tired of chicken," she said to Douglas one day. "I wish you would order some sweetbreads for me. I need building up. This rough life is very hard on me and nothing but my being very unselfish and devoted makes me put up with it."

"Yes, mother! I am sorry, but my order for this week is in the mail and I could not change it now, but I will send a special order for some Texas sweetbreads to Charlottesville. I have no doubt I can get them there."

Either the order or the sweetbreads went astray. Mrs. Carter refused to eat any dinner in consequence and sulked a whole day.

"If she only doesn't complain to father we can stand it," Douglas confided to Nan. "What are we going to do, Nan? I am so afraid she will make father feel he must go back to work, and then all the good of the rest will be done away with. She treats me, somehow, as though it were all my fault."

"Oh no, honey, you mustn't feel that way. Poor little mumsy is just spoiled to death and does not know how to adapt herself to this change of fortune."

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"You see, Nan, now that Mr. Lane has had to go to Texas with the militia the business is at a standstill. He was trying to fill the orders they had on their books without father's help."

"Yes, Mr. Tucker said that father's business was a one man affair and when that one man, father, was out of the running there was nothing to do about it. Thank goodness, father is not worrying about things himself."

"I know we should be thankful, but somehow his not worrying makes it just so much more

dreadful. I feel that he is even more different than mother. It is an awful problem—what to do."

"What's a problem?" asked Helen, coming suddenly into the tent where her sisters were engaged in the above conversation.

"Oh, just—just—nothing much!" faltered Douglas.

"Now that's a nice way to treat a partner. You and Nan are always getting off and whispering together and not letting me in on it. What's worrying you?"

"The situation!"

"Political or climatic?" [292]

"Carteratic!" drawled Nan. "We were talking about mother and father."

"What about them? Is father worse?" Helen was ever on the alert when her father's well-being was in question.

"No, he is better in some ways, but unless he is kept free from worry he will never be well," said Douglas solemnly.

She had not broached the subject of money with Helen since the question of White Sulphur had been discussed by them, feeling that Helen would not or could not understand.

"Who's going to worry him? Not I!"

"Of course not you. Just the lack of money is going to worry him, and he is going to feel the lack of it if mother wants things and can't have them."

"Why don't you let her have them?"

"How can I? I haven't the wherewithal any more than you."

"I thought we were making money."

"So we are, but not any great amount. I think it is wonderful that we have been able to support [293] ourselves and put anything in the bank. I had to draw out almost all of our earnings to pay for the things mother bought in New York, not that I wasn't glad to do it, but that means we have not so much to go on for the winter."

"Oh, for goodness' sake don't be worrying about the winter now! Mother says our credit is so good we need not worry a bit."

Douglas and Nan looked at each other sadly. Douglas turned away with a "what's the use" expression. Helen looked a little defiant as she saw her sister's distress.

"See here, Helen!" and this time Nan did not drawl. Helen realized her little sister was going to say something she must listen to. "You have got a whole lot of sense but you have got a whole lot to learn. I know you are going to laugh at me for saying you have got to learn a lot that I, who am two years younger than you, already know. You have got to learn that our poor little mumsy's judgment is not worth that," and Nan snapped her finger.

"Nan! You ought to be ashamed of yourself." [294]

"Well, I am ashamed of myself, but I am telling the truth. I don't see the use in pretending any more about it. I love her just as much, but anyone with half an eye can see it. I think what we must do is to face it and then tactfully manage her."

Douglas and Helen could not help laughing at Nan.

"You see," she continued, "it is up to us to support the family somehow and make mumsy comfortable and keep her from telling father that she hasn't got all she wants. Of course she can't have all she wants, but she can be warm and fed at least."

"But, Nan, it isn't up to you to support the family," said Douglas. "You must go back to school, you and Lucy."

"Well, it is up to me to spend just as little money as possible and to earn some if I can. I am not going to be a burden on you and Helen. You needn't think it."

"We'll have the one hundred from the rent of the house and then Helen and I shall have to find [295] jobs. What, I don't know."

"Well, I, for one, can't find a job until I get some new clothes," declared Helen. "I haven't a thing that is not hopelessly out of style."

"Can't your last winter's suit be done over? Mine can."

"Now, Douglas, what's the use in going around looking like a frump? I think we should all of us get some new clothes and then waltz in and get good jobs on the strength of them. If I were employing girls I should certainly choose the ones who look the best."

Douglas shook her head sadly. Helen was Helen and there was no making her over. She would have to learn her lesson herself and there was no teaching her.

“Dr. Wright says we must keep father out of the city this winter but we need not be in the dead country. We can get a little house on the edge of town so Nan and Lucy can go in to school. I think we can get along on the rent from the house if you and I can make something besides.” [296]

When the question of where they were to live for the winter was broached to Mrs. Carter, she was taken quite ill and had to stay in bed a whole day.

“No one considers me at all,” she whimpered to Nan, who had brought her a tray with some tea and toast for her luncheon. “Just because you and Douglas like the country you think it is all right. I am sure I shall die in some nasty little frame cottage in the suburbs. It is ridiculous that we cannot turn those wretched people out of my house and let me go back and live in it again.”

“But, mumsy,” soothed Nan, “we are going to make you very comfortable and we will find a pretty house and maybe it will be brick.”

“But to dump me down in the suburbs when I have had to be away from society for all these months as it is! I am sure if I could talk it over with your father he would agree with me—but you girls even coerce me in what I shall and shall not say to my own husband. I do not intend to [297] submit to it any longer.”

“Oh, mother, please—please don’t tell father. Dr. Wright says——”

“Don’t tell me what Dr. Wright says! I am bored to death with what he says. I know he has been kind but I can’t see that our affairs must be indefinitely directed by him. I will sleep a little now if you will let me be quiet.”

CHAPTER XX [298]

DR. WRIGHT TO THE RESCUE

Nan went sadly off. What should she do? Dr. Wright was expected at the camp that afternoon and she determined to speak to him and ask him once more to interfere in the Carters’ affairs. Even if the young physician did bore her mother, it was necessary now for him to step in. If only she would not carry out her threat of speaking to her husband!

Dr. Wright treated the matter quite seriously when Nan told him of the mix-up.

“Certainly your father must not be worried. It is quite necessary that he shall be kept out of the city for many months yet and no one must talk money to him. Can’t your mother see this?”

“She doesn’t seem to.”

“But Helen understands, surely!”

“I—I—think Helen thinks father is so much better that we can—we can—kind of begin to spend [299] again,” faltered Nan, whose heart misgave her, fearing she might be saying something to obstruct the course of true love which her romantic little soul told her was going on between Helen and Dr. Wright. At least she could not help seeing that he was casting sheep’s eyes at Helen, and that while Helen was not casting them back at him she was certainly not averse to his attentions.

“Begin to spend again! Ye gods and little fishes! Why, if bills begin to be showered in again on Robert Carter I will not answer for his reason. He is immensely improved, but it is only because he has had no worries. Where is your mother?” His face looked quite stern and his kind blue eyes were not kind at all but flashed scornfully.

“She is in bed.”

“Is she ill?”

“Well, not exactly—she—she—is kind of depressed.”

“Depressed! Depressed over what?” [300]

“Oh, Dr. Wright, I hate to be telling you these things! It looks as though I did not love my mother to be talking about her, but indeed I do. Douglas and I are so miserable about it, but we—we—somehow we feel that we are a great deal older than mumsy. We know it is hard on her—all of this——”

“All of what?”

“This living such a rough life—and having to give up society and our pretty house and everything.”

“Of course it is hard, but then aren’t all of you giving up things, too?”

“But we don’t mind—at least we don’t mind much. It is harder on Helen and mother because—because they—they are kind of different. And they don’t understand money.”

“And do you understand it?” laughed the young doctor.

“Well, Douglas and I understand it better. We know that when you spend a dollar you haven’t got a dollar, but Helen and mother seem to think if you haven’t got it you can charge it. I think they [301] are suffering with a kind of disease—chargitis.”

George Wright was looking quite solemn as he made his way to the cabin where Mrs. Carter had taken to her bed. He was not relishing the idea of having to speak to the wife of his patient, but speak he must. He knew very well that Nan would never have come to him if matters had not reached a crisis. How would Helen take his interference? He could not fool himself into the belief that what Helen said and thought made no difference to him. It made all the difference in the world. But duty was duty and since he was ministering to a mind diseased, he must guard that mind from all things that were harmful to it, just as much as a doctor who is treating an open wound must see that it is kept aseptic. If Robert Carter’s wife was contemplating upsetting the good that had been done her husband, why, it was his duty as that husband’s physician to warn her of the result.

Mrs. Carter was looking very lovely and pathetic, acting the invalid. An extremely dainty and [302] costly negligee accentuated her beauty. Her cabin room, while certainly not elegant, was perfectly comfortable and kept in spotless condition by the devoted Susan. There were no evidences of rough living in her surroundings and the hand which she extended feebly to welcome the physician could not have been smoother or whiter had it belonged to pampered royalty.

“Ah, Dr. Wright, it is kind of you to come in to see me.” She smiled a wan smile.

“I am sorry you are ill. What is troubling you?” He felt her pulse, and finding it quite regular, he smiled, but did not let her see his amusement.

“I think it is my heart. I can make no exertion without great effort.”

“Any appetite?”

“Oh, very little—I never eat much, and I am so tired of chicken! Fried chicken, broiled chicken, stewed chicken!”

“Yes, spring chicken is a great hardship, no doubt,” he said rather grimly.

“I like broiled chicken very much in the spring, but I never did care very much for chicken in the [303] summer. People seem to have chicken so much in the summer. I never could see why.”

“It might be because it is cheaper when they are plentiful,” he suggested, finding it difficult to keep the scorn he felt for this foolish little butterfly out of his voice.

“Perhaps it is, I never thought of that.”

Helen came in just then, bringing a bouquet of garden flowers that Mr. McRae had sent to the ladies of the camp.

“I might as well tackle them together,” he thought, taking a long breath.

“Ahem—are your plans for the winter made yet?” he asked Mrs. Carter.

“Why, the girls—at least Douglas and Nan, have some ridiculous scheme about taking a cottage in the suburbs and letting those people keep my house. I don’t see why I need call it my house, however, as I seem to have no say-so in the matter,” she answered complainingly. “Helen and I both think it would be much more sensible to go into our own house and be comfortable. Douglas [304] is very unreasonable and headstrong. The paltry sum that these tenants pay is the only argument she has against our occupying the house ourselves.”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Carter, but as your husband’s physician, I may perhaps be able to point out the relation of the steady, if small, income from the house and his very serious condition.”

“I—I thought he was almost well.”

“No, madam, much better but not almost well! Do you think that if he were almost well he would sit passively down and let his daughters decide for him as he is doing now? Has he not always been a man of action, one to take the initiative? Look at him now, not even asking what the plans are when you leave the camp, which you will have to do in the course of a few weeks. Can’t you see that he is still in a very nervous state and the least little worry might upset his reason? No troubles must be taken to him. He must not be consulted about arrangements any more than Bobby would be. His tired brain is beginning to recover and a few more months may make him [305] almost himself again, but,” and Dr. Wright looked so stern and uncompromising that Helen and her mother felt that the accusing angel had them on the last day, the day of judgment, “if he is worried by all kinds of foolish little things, there will be nothing for him but a sanitarium. I am hoping that he will be spared this, and it rests entirely with his family whether he is spared it or not.”

“Oh, Doctor, I shall try!” and poor little Mrs. Carter looked very like Bobby and not much older. “I

have been very remiss. I did not know."

"Another thing," and the accusing angel went on in a stern voice. He had heard all of this before from this little butterfly woman and he felt that he must impress upon her even more the importance of guarding her husband from all financial worries. "If when he's well he finds bills to be paid and obligations to be met, he will drop right back into the condition in which I found him last May when I was called to the case. You remember," and he turned to Helen, "his troubled [306] talk about lamb chops and silk stockings, do you not?"

Helen dropped the gay bouquet and covered her face with her hands. Great sobs shook her frame. Remember! Could she ever forget it? And yet she had been behaving as though she had forgotten it, only that morning insisting she must have a new suit before she could get a job. What was Dr. Wright thinking of her? He had spoken so sternly and looked so scornful.

His scorn was all turned to concern now. He had not meant to distress Helen so much, only to impress upon her the importance of not letting financial worries reach her father. He looked at the poor stricken little woman who seemed to have shrivelled up into a wizened little child who had just been punished. Had he been too severe in his harangue? Well, nothing short of severity would reach the selfish heart of Mrs. Carter. But Helen—Helen was not selfish, only thoughtless and young. He had not meant to grieve her like this.

"I'm sorry," was all he could say.

"It seems awful that we should be so blind that you should have to say such things to us," said [307] Helen, trying to control her voice.

"I know I am a worthless woman," said the poor little mother plaintively. "Nobody ever expected me to be anything else and I have never been anything else. I don't understand finance—I don't understand life. Please call Douglas and Nan here, Helen. I want to speak to them."

"Let me do it," said the young doctor eagerly. He felt that running away from the scene of disaster would be about the most graceful thing he could do just then.

"I believe I should like you to be here if you don't mind."

Nan and Douglas were quickly summoned, indeed they were near the cabin, eagerly waiting to hear the outcome of the interview that they well knew Dr. Wright was having with their mother.

"My daughters," began the little lady solemnly, "I have just come to the realization of my worthlessness. I want all of you to know that I do realize it, and with Dr. Wright as witness I want [308] to resign in a way as—as—as a guardian to you. Your judgment is better than mine and after this I am going to trust to it rather than to my own. I know nothing about money, nothing about economy. Douglas, you will have to be head of the family until your poor father can take up his burdens again. Whatever you think best to do, I will do. Treat me about as you treat Bobby and Lucy—no, not Lucy—even Lucy's judgment is better than mine."

Douglas was on her knees by the bedside, holding her mother in her arms.

"Oh, mumsy! Mumsy! Don't talk that way about yourself. It 'most kills me."

Nan buried her face in her hands. She was sure she felt worse than any of them because she had given voice to exactly the same truth concerning her mother in her conversation with Douglas and Helen.

Dr. Wright would have been glad if he had never been born, but since he had been he would have welcomed with joy an earthquake if it had only come at that moment and swallowed him up. [309] Would Helen ever forgive him? He had no idea he was having such an effect on Mrs. Carter. She had seemed to him heartless and selfish and stubborn. She was in reality nothing but a child. She was no more responsible than Bobby himself.

Mrs. Carter, childlike, was in a way enjoying herself very much. Had she not been punished and now were not all the grownups sorry for her and petting her? She had announced her policy for ever after and now nothing more was ever to be expected of her. Life was not to be so hard after all. Her Robert was still in a way ill, but he would get well finally, and now Douglas would take hold and think for her. Her girls would look after her and take care of her. She regretted not having a debutante daughter, as she well knew that society was one thing she could do, but since that was to be denied her, she would be the last person in the world to make herself disagreeable over her disappointment. A saccharine policy was to be hers on and after this date. Unselfishness [310] and sweetness were to be synonymous with her name.

All of the daughters kissed her tenderly and Dr. Wright bent over her fair hand with knightly contrition.

How pleasant life was!

A tray, more daintily arranged than usual, was brought in at supper time, and under a covered dish there reposed the coveted sweetbreads.

CHAPTER XXI

[311]

LETTERS

Miss Nan Carter from Mr. Thomas Smith

By Wireless from the Clouds,

September .., 19..

My dear Wood Nymph:

I have made many flights and many landings but no landing has been so delightful as the one I made on Helicon and no flight so beautiful as when a certain little wood nymph deigned to accompany me.

I think very often of the few happy days I spent at Week-End Camp and of the hospitable Carters. The picnic on the fallen tree was the very best picnic I ever attended and the game of teakettle the best game I ever played.

Some day, and not so many years hence I hope it will be, I intend to make a flight and take my [312] teakettle with me. Guess what that word is!

Bellerophon.

Miss Douglas Carter from Mr. Lewis Somerville

Brownsville, Texas, September .., 19..

My dear Douglas:

Your letter telling of the doings of the camp made Bill and me mighty blue. We think maybe we should not have left you when we did, but we felt we were getting too soft hanging round you girls all the time, and then, too, we wanted to let Uncle Sam know that we were willing to do any kind of old work that came up to do. If he wanted to ship us from West Point, all well and good—that was his own affair, but we feel that since he has given us three years' education we must pay him back somehow, and enlisting is about the only way we can do it. At first we thought perhaps it had better be with the volunteers, and then we thought maybe the regulars could do better [313] service, so regulars it is. It does seem funny to be in the ranks when we had always expected to be officers, but that is all right—we are not grouching. No doubt it is good for us. At least we can get the outlook of the private, and if because of bravery or luck we ever rise from the ranks, we can better understand the men under us.

It is awfully hot down here but just when it is so hot that you feel you must turn over on the other side to keep from burning and to brown evenly, why a wind comes up they call "a norther" and you sizzle like a red hot poker stuck into cold water. A norther is about the coldest and most penetrating thing I have ever struck. We never seem to catch cold, however. The norther blows all the germs off of one, I fancy.

Bill is fine. Already he is known by his guffaw. He let out a laugh the other day that made General Funston jump, and I can tell you that is going some. Not many people can lay claim to the distinction of having made that great man jump. I think they ought to send Bill out to hunt Villa. [314] If that bandit is hiding in the mountains, I bet Bill could laugh loud enough to make him peep out to see what's up. He's mighty soft on Tillie Wingo and carries her tin-type around his neck.

I want to tell you, dear Douglas, that I think you were just exactly right to turn me down the way you did. I am ashamed of myself to have asked you to think of me when I realize how far I am from success. I may be a private for the rest of my life and what could I offer a girl like you? I know it wasn't that that kept you from being engaged to me, but it would have been very ridiculous for me to have bound you by a promise when I may be old and gray-headed before I even get a sergeant's stripes.

Please write to me when you find time and tell me what the plans are for the winter. I wish I could help you some, but about all I am good for is to keep the Mexicans from getting into Texas and maybe finding their way up to Virginia, where you are. I feel about as big as a grain of sand [315] on a Texan prairie. My love to all the Carters.

Your very affectionate cousin,
Lewis Somerville.

Miss Helen Carter from Dr. George Wright

Richmond, Va., September .., 19..

My dear Miss Helen:

The thought of having wounded you is very bitter to me. I did not mean to be unkind either to you or your mother. I know you must wish you had never seen me. I seem to have spent my time since I first met you making myself unpleasant. If you can forgive me, please write and say so. I hope

your mother is better and that her appetite has returned. If I can be of any service to you at any time and in any way, you must call on me.

Very sincerely,
GEORGE WRIGHT.

Miss Lucy Carter from Frank Maury

RICHMOND, VA., SEPTEMBER .., 19..

DEAR LUCY:

Not much on writing but here goes. Skeeter and I took Lil to the movies last night and we wished [316]
for you some. Movies don't touch the tramps in the mountains but they are better than nothing. When are you going to leave those diggings and come back to the good old burg? Skeeter ate three cream puffs and two ice cream cones after the show and washed them down with a couple of chocolate milk shakes. Mrs. Halsey says she may have to go to boarding to fill her hopeful up. I pity the boardinghouse keeper. The worst thing about Skeeter is that he never shows his keep. After all those weeks in the mountains and all those good eats he is as skinny as ever. Do you ever see Mr. Spring-keeper and Tom Tit? I sent Tom Tit a rag time record for his new Victrola. It is a peach and I bet it will set him to dancing to beat a jew's-harp. Lil, who is mighty missish, says Tom Tit has too good taste to like such common music but I just know he will like it. Skeeter sends his regards. He and I are both to have military training at the high school so you will see us
in skimpy blue gray uniforms when you come back to Richmond. Skeeter looks powerful skinny in [317]
his. I don't know what I look like in mine.

Yours truly,
FRANK MAURY.

The silence of September settled down upon Camp Carter. The mountains had never been more glorious nor a period of rest and recreation more welcome. Noise, numbers, confusion—all were conspicuously absent. To look back was gratifying and to feel an inward sense of "well done!" was satisfying.

The summer was over for the Carter girls but their work was by no means finished. Unforeseen obstacles were no doubt to be met and overcome; many problems were to puzzle them and hard lessons were to be learned. But at the same time happy days were to be in store for them, their lives, like all of ours, a mixture of sunshine and shadow, work and play. They looked toward the future with eager hope. In "The Carter Girls' Mysterious Neighbors" we will hear how they came in touch with some of the wide-reaching events of the world war.

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THE GIRL SCOUTS' CAPTAIN
THE GIRL SCOUTS' DIRECTOR

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