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Snows, by Margaret Vandercook**

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Title: The Camp Fire Girls Amid the Snows

Author: Margaret Vandercook

Release date: May 18, 2014 [EBook #45657]

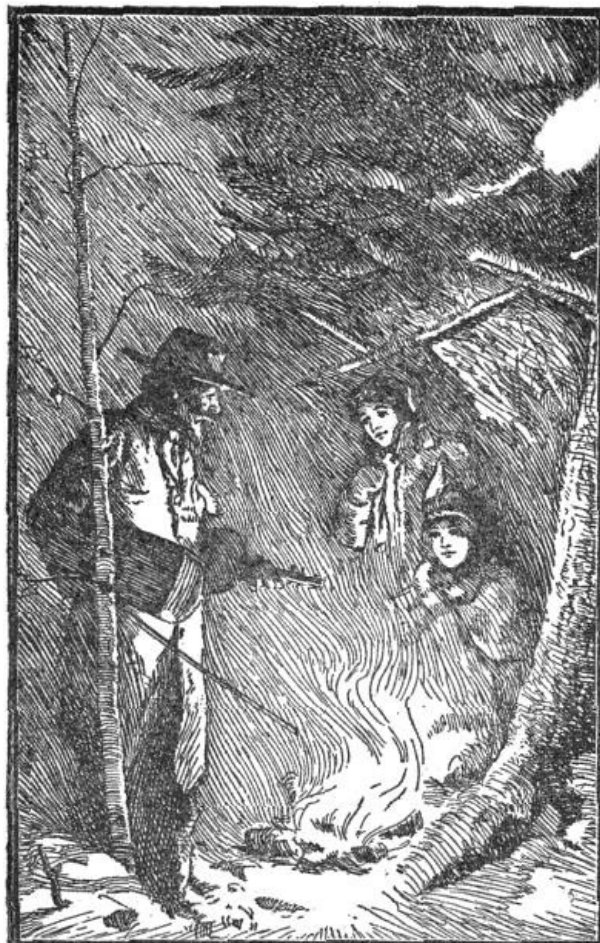
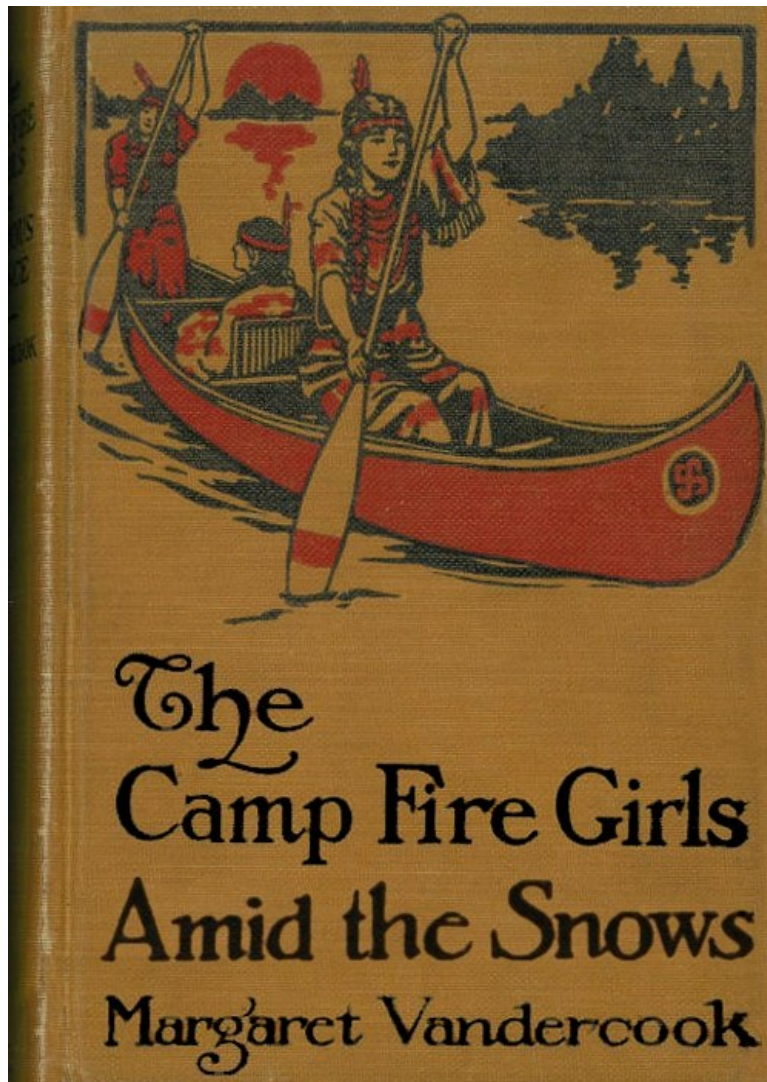
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"ACH GNÄDIGES FRÄULEINS, IT IST NOT POSSIBLE"

# THE CAMP FIRE GIRLS AMID THE SNOWS

BY  
MARGARET VANDERCOOK  
Author of "The Ranch Girls" Series, "The Red Cross Girls"  
Series, etc.

ILLUSTRATED

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# The Camp Fire Girls Amid the Snows

## CHAPTER I THE WINTER MANITOU

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A little smothered sound and a slight disturbance under an immense fur rug interrupted her: "I can't speak, Esther, until I get some of this snow out of my mouth and I can't move until this grocery store is lifted off me. I'm—I'm the under side of things; there are ten pounds of sugar and a sack of flour and all the week's camping supplies between me and

the gay world." A break in the cheerful tones ended these words and there was no further stirring, but Esther Clark failed to notice this, as she first lifted the rug which had almost covered up Betty Ashton and then helped her to sit upright, looking more of a Snow Princess than even the weather justified. For all about her there were small mounds of sugar and flour white as the snow itself and dissolving like dew. While Betty's seal cap and coat were encrusted in ice and the snow hung from her brows and lashes, indeed her face, usually so brilliantly colored, was now almost as pale.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Betty Ashton was so plainly talking at the present instant to gain time that the older girl did not pay the slightest attention to her; instead, she was thinking herself. Of course she

or Betty could mount their pony and ride off somewhere to look for help, but then Esther had no fancy for being left alone in a snow-storm in a part of the country which she did not know in its present aspect and certainly under the circumstances she had no intention of leaving Betty to the same fate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

However, Betty promptly gave her a pinch that was realistic enough to be felt in spite of all her frozenness. "Wake up, Esther, dear, and if you are really so cold, child, just warm yourself by your nose, it certainly is red enough. Now as you girls have always said I dearly loved to boss, please, won't you let me be general of this expedition and you do what I say since I am too lame to help?"

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

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swinging her arms to get the warmth and vigor back into her body.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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“No one knows where we are to-night, Esther, so no one will worry. The girls will think we stayed in town on account of the storm and our friends in the village that we are now safe back in Sunrise cabin. So do let us make the best of things,” she whispered. “To-night, at least, we are real Camp Fire girls from necessity and not choice, and I believe I can better understand why our ancestors once used to worship the fire as the symbol of home. Then, too, I am glad we chose the pine trees for our refuge. I wonder if you know this legend? When Mary was in flight to Egypt to save our Lord from Herod, she stopped beneath a pine tree and rested there safe from her enemies in a green chamber filled with its balsamy fragrance, the tree proving its

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love for the Christ Child by lowering its limbs when Herod's soldiers passed by. And then when the Baby raised its hand to bless the tree, it so marked it that when the pine cone is cut lengthwise it shows the form of a hand—the hand of Christ."

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

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

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

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

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

"You didn't dream it; I wasn't asleep and I heard it also. There, listen!"

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

Transfixed with surprise and pleasure Esther kept still but Betty, who in spite of her whims was a really practical person, shook her head in a somewhat annoyed fashion. "It is perfectly absurd you know, Esther, for any human being to be strolling through the New Hampshire woods on a winter's night playing the violin. We



are not in Germany or the Alps or in a story book. But if it really is a person and not the Spirit of Winter, as I still believe, why he might as well help us out of our difficulty. I don't feel so romantic as I did an hour or so ago."

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

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## CHAPTER II "SUNRISE CABIN"

"Ach, gnädige Fräuleins, it ist not possible."

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

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

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

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

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

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home.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On either side the high mantel there were low book shelves and a music rack stood by the piano filled with the songs of the Camp Fire. Polly, Nan and Sylvia had manufactured a dining room table which was considered an extraordinary achievement although the design

was really very simple. Four wide pine boards about ten feet in length formed the top and the legs were of heavy beams crossed under it at the center and at either end. The furniture of the living room was stained a Flemish brown to match the walls and floor done in the same color. On the floor were rag rugs of almost oriental beauty made by the girls and dyed into seven craft colors. On the walls hung pieces of homemade tapestry, leather skins embossed with Camp Fire emblems, and flowers so pressed and mounted as to give the effect of nature. Then on the mantelpiece were two hammered brass candlesticks and a great brass bowl filled with holly and cedar from the surrounding wood. On odd tables and shelves were Indian baskets woven by the girls and used for every convenient purpose from holding stockings waiting to be darned to treasuring the Sunrise Camp Record Book which now had twenty-five written and illustrated pages setting forth the history of Sunrise Camp since its infancy.

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

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

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

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Slipping on her dressing gown Polly touched the figure in the bed near hers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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expression of their gratitude.

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

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

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

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

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

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### **CHAPTER III**

#### **“A ROSE OF THE WORLD”**

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

For in the first place “The Lady of the Hills,” Miss McMurtry, on that very afternoon when coming across the fields to the Camp Fire she had there been told of the plan for keeping the Sunrise Camp Fire club together for the winter, had not approved the idea. The country would

certainly be too cold and too lonely for the girls and the getting back and forth from the cabin to school too difficult. Fathers and mothers could never be persuaded to approve and, moreover, there would be no guardian, since Miss McMurtry could not attend to her work at the High School and also look after a permanent winter camp fire.

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

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

Of course all the summer club members could not share the winter housekeeping scheme, but that did not affect their interest nor desire to help. Meg and "Little Brother" to everybody's despair had to return home, since with John leaving for college, that same fall, their professor father could not live or keep house without them. But then they were to be allowed

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to come out to the cabin each Friday for week ends, and Edith Norton, whose work in the millinery store made living in town imperative, was to take her Sunday rests in camp. Of the summer Sunrise Camp Fire girls, only Juliet and Beatrice Field had really to say serious farewells when returning to their school in Philadelphia, but they departed with at least the consoling thought that they were to come back to the cabin for their Christmas holidays. So that there remained only seven of the original girls pledged to give this experiment of winter housekeeping as a Camp Fire club a real test. And as they worked, pleaded and waited, one by one each difficulty had been overcome until now there remained but one—the necessity for finding a new guardian able to give all of her time to living at Sunrise cabin and to working with the girls.

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

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

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

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From her place on the sofa Nan Graham lifted her head. She alone of the little company did not know their visitor's name. She saw a young woman of about twenty-six or seven with light golden brown hair and eyes with the same yellow lights in them, dressed in a lovely crepe evening gown with a bunch of roses at her belt and a scarf thrown over her shoulders. Nan's eyes glowed with a momentary forgetfulness, having long cherished just such an ideal and



never before seen it realized.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But Betty Ashton dropped her chin into her hands in her familiar fashion and stared directly at their visitor. "My dear Rose, whatever has

happened to you?" she demanded. "Why it's too absurd! You know you don't care for anything but parties and dancing and having a good time. You simply haven't any idea of what it means to be a Camp Fire guardian; why it is difficult enough when you have only to preside at weekly Camp Fire meetings and to watch over the girls in between, but when it comes to living with us and teaching us as Miss McMurry did last summer——" Betty bit her lips. She did not wish to be discourteous and yet the vision of the fashionably dressed girl before her fulfilling the requirements of their life together in the woods was too much for her sense of humor.

Then suddenly, to Betty's embarrassment and the surprise of everyone else, Miss Dyer's eyes filled with tears. [48]

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

At this moment Nan Graham, whom Rose had not seen before, tumbled unexpectedly off her sofa. It was because of her eagerness to reach the other girls. They, at a quick signal from one to the other, had arisen, and now, forming a circle, danced slowly about their new guardian chanting the sacred law of the Camp Fire. [49]

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## CHAPTER IV "THE REASON O' IT"

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

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

"What is it, dear?" she inquired anxiously. "Does your foot hurt worse than it did? I ought to have come in to you right away, but Mammy and I have been making enough loaves of bread to [51]

feed a regiment and I have been turning some odds and ends of the dough into Camp Fire emblems to have for tea—rings and bracelets and crossed logs. I am afraid I am still dreadfully frivolous!" And Rose flushed, for in spite of Betty's own problem she was smiling at her. This the Rose who had come to her first Camp Fire Council only a month before in a Paris frock, probably never having cooked a meal for any one in her life!

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

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

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

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

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

entirely changed.

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

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

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

"I wonder if I couldn't lend you the money. I am not rich as you are, but perhaps I have——"

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

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

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

"You must not try to walk until you are sure things are all right with you," a strange voice

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said severely. Then, in answer to Betty's look of amazement, he took off his hat and bowed gravely. She found herself staring at a tall, slender man of about thirty, in carefully brushed clothes, which nevertheless had an old-fashioned, country appearance, and with a face at once so handsome and so stern that he looked as if he might have stepped out of an old frame which had held the portrait of one of the early Puritan fathers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

If Betty had thought young Dr. Barton's face stern on first seeing him it was as nothing to his expression now. He bowed formally, but as his manner showed he had known Rose before, Betty closed her eyes. The pain in her foot was increasing each instant now that Sylvia's dressing had been removed. When she opened them again she found Rose kneeling on the floor by Dr. Barton, entirely forgetful of her gown and listening quietly to his curt orders. Then during the next fifteen minutes Rose Dyer had her first experience as a trained nurse, wondering all the time she was at work how she could possibly be so stupid and so awkward. For she splashed hot water on her gown and hand, tripped over her long skirt, and was so nervous when Betty

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showed any signs of pain that the tears blinded her brown eyes and her hands trembled. She might have broken down except that Dr. Barton so plainly expected her to do what she was told, and because of a wrathful figure that stood immovable in the doorway. It was "Mammy," dressed in a stiff purple calico gown with a white handkerchief tied about her head. Mammy was past seventy and no longer able to do much work, but she had never left her "little Rose" in the twenty-seven year of her life and never would so long as she lived. Not able to help a great deal, she was still able to give the Sunrise Camp Fire club a great deal of advice, and then she was also a kind of additional guardian since Rose could not have been left alone at the cabin all morning with the girls in town at school.

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

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## CHAPTER V

### MOLLIE'S SUGGESTION

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

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

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and breeding Betty considered so essential, but then she was fond of her and did want Esther to have her chance—this chance she felt must lie in the cultivation of her beautiful voice.

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

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

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

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

Betty's expression, however, was not half so serious as that of her two friends as she made this confession. For the girls had also heard the rumor which had troubled Rose Dyer in regard to Mr. Ashton's possible change of fortune, and knew that Betty did not in the least understand the gravity of her mother's refusal.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## CHAPTER VI

### A BLACK SHEEP



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

However, as the days went by Nan was growing to be more like the other Camp Fire girls in her manner and behavior, and was probably learning more than any one of them, since she had had fewer opportunities before.

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Miss Dyer could hardly help suspecting Nan's devotion, for although she was still faithful to Polly as her first friend in the club, always she was at Rose's side ready to do anything she wished, and always accepting her suggestions in the best spirit. It was therefore the new Camp Fire guardian who was responsible for Nan's not separating herself from her family as the young girl would like to have done during this time of her effort at self-improvement. For Rose knew that the whole effort of the Camp Fire organization was to make the girls more useful, to give better and happier service to the people they loved. Therefore, because of Rose's advice and after a long talk with her in which Nan explained the conditions of her own home, it was decided that the young girl should spend every Saturday with her mother helping her with the work of the home and the care of the children, and trying to make practical the lessons she was learning in the Camp Fire.

These days at home were not easy ones, and the girls were accustomed to seeing Nan come back at night tired and cross or at least dispirited. Her mother had no interest in her efforts. She was opposed to her oldest daughter's living away from home if she were earning no money, and had no desire to have her house disturbed by Nan's vigorous weekly efforts at cleaning. Indeed, except for Nan's father, she would never have been permitted to live at the cabin, where her share of the expenses were now being paid by Rose Dyer. He, however, had a kind of sympathy with the girl's efforts, and a slowly

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awakening sense that his daughter had the right to wish to be a lady. Though he might not actually help her, at least no one should stand in her way. So at his command Nan had been allowed this winter with the girls at the cabin and was also to do what she liked without interference when she returned home on Saturdays. Personally he liked the smell of soap and water which her visits left about his shack and greatly enjoyed the homemade bread and the weekly pumpkin pie which was always cooked especially for him.

But Nan's most serious opposition came not from her idle but fairly good-natured mother but from her older brother Antonio, or Anthony as he preferred to be called. Having been given the Italian name he was less Italian than any other member of the family. Indeed, he was a good-looking American boy with hazel eyes and a fair skin and, except for his curly dark hair and a certain unconscious grace, not different in appearance from other American boys. Yet he shared the family weaknesses and had refused to go to school for the past two years. Indeed, he would not work at anything for a sufficiently long enough time to make it count, so that probably because he was a boy, and a fairly capable one if he had been more ambitious, his present reputation was now the worst in the family. He appeared also to resent Nan's new friendships and new efforts with the greatest possible bitterness.

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On the Saturday morning when Polly and Betty started driving toward town on their errand, about a quarter of a mile from the cabin they came unexpectedly upon Nan. She was trudging steadfastly along with a bundle of clothing which Rose had given her for the younger children under her arm, looking resolute and yet none too cheerful.

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Before catching up with her the two girls sighed and then smiled at one another. They had wanted this drive together without any one else and had waited until Saturday morning so that Betty's pony, Fire Star, would be free for her use and they could have the small sleigh, which had been well mended since the accident. Fire Star and a pony belonging to Sylvia Wharton had made the trips back and forth to school each day and a return journey was too much for them except for some special emergency. Both the girls had particularly wanted to discuss certain features of their Camp Fire play without interruption, but now the sight of Nan's faithful figure awoke their sympathy.

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"For goodness' sake, squeeze into the middle along with us, Nan," Betty invited. "How selfish you must have thought Polly and me this morning when we were planning right before you to drive into town and never said a word about taking you as far as your home. The fact is we both had something so important on our minds, or at least the thing seems important to me, so that really we forgot about you."

The girls then said nothing of their errand while they were driving along the road, where the snow was now beaten down into a hard, firm crust. But when they had set Nan down in front of the ram-shackle hut at the edge of the village which served as her home, Betty leaned out

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remarking confidentially: "I am sorry we can't come back for you, Nan, but I am to get my box of jewelry from the bank and take it to our cabin so that I feel we ought to get back as soon as we can."

There was no point in Betty's making this confession at this special time and Polly disapproved of it. They had taken no one into their confidence except Mollie, and, of course, their guardian. However, since Nan had been falsely suspected of stealing her money, Betty had never failed of showing her faith in her.

And Nan understood this as she stood for several moments watching the pony and sleigh out of sight and hearing. Polly was wearing a crimson felt hat with a small black quill in it and a long red coat, and Betty, a seal-skin cap with a knot of her favorite blue velvet on one side and a fur coat. Nan could not help feeling the contrast between their lives and hers as she stepped later into their crowded and untidy kitchen. Nevertheless their friendship helped her to bear the fact that her brother Anthony, whom she loved best in her family, would not even speak to her. Indeed the thought of the Camp Fire club sustained her through the long and specially trying day.

A slight flurry of snow fell during the morning, so that the four younger children would not go out of doors but kept getting under Nan's feet while she tried to clean. Her mother objected to each thing she did and Anthony loafing in a corner smoking cigarettes tried his best to make her lose her temper.

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At lunch Mr. Graham, who usually came home then and made things easier for Nan, did not return, so that by the time the dishes were washed the girl had given up the attempt to do any further cleaning and turned to her usual Saturday baking. This was usually more appreciated by her family. Because of a possible failure if she were too much interrupted, Mrs. Graham then removed the younger children to another room, leaving Nan alone with her brother.

He did not torment her any further at first, but seeing that he was unusually moody and out of sorts his sister turned to him.

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"What is it, Tony?" she inquired good-naturedly, ignoring what had passed between them.

The boy shrugged his shoulders. "Wasn't good enough to be elected a Boy Scout," he sneered, "seems like the fellows around here said they didn't like my record and wanted their camps kept up to the mark. Course I don't care anything about joining but they might have given a fellow a chance. Give a man a black name—I say, Nan," he broke off suddenly, "couldn't you lend me some money, say five dollars or so?"

Nan stared at him in surprise. Anthony must know that she hadn't a cent in the world to call her own and that she was having her expenses paid by Miss Dyer at the cabin. Of course she meant some day to repay Rose, Betty and Polly for all they had done for her but it might take a number of years.

"Couldn't you borrow the money from some of your rich friends?" he demanded, irritated and ashamed at his sister's silence. And then, unexpectedly, seeming to feel a better impulse, he came closer to the table where Nan was now mixing her pie crust and watched her quietly for a few moments. In a measure he realized his own right to be a gentleman, and resented the fact that they were everywhere looked down upon, and that Nan's efforts to better herself had to be made outside her own family.

"There ain't no use your trying to make something of yourself, Nan," he said more kindly than he had spoken before during the day. "This Camp Fire business don't mean anything *real*. These girls maybe are letting you live with them and treating you fairly well but once you're grown up, maybe they'll say 'Howdy do' to you on the street, but they won't ever ask you into their houses or be your friends. I bet they didn't want you driving into town and being seen on the street with them to-day. I was watching and saw them set you down at your own door pretty prompt."

"It wasn't because they were ashamed of me," Nan defended promptly, and yet although she knew that what she had said was true she could not help feeling both sore and ashamed. For the other Camp Fire girls really had the right to feel differently toward her when her own family would do nothing to make themselves respected and when she found it so hard to struggle with so much against her. For an instant Nan felt as if she might have to give up. But only for an instant, for she raised her flushed face and her brother saw the tears standing in her large dark eyes.

"The girls would have been perfectly willing to take me into the village," she explained more quietly, "only they knew I had to work at home and they were going in on an important errand to get some money or jewelry of Betty's from the bank before it closed. They wanted to get back to the cabin before dark or else Betty said they would have stopped by and taken me home with them."

The moment after these words passed Nan's lips she regretted them, not because she believed any possible harm could come of them but because she remembered that Betty and Polly had both told her no one else had been told of their intention and she did not wish to be the one to betray their confidence.

"Please don't tell anybody what I have just said?" she begged beseechingly, but already her brother was lounging away as though he had grown tired of the confinement of the kitchen and apparently had not even heard her. But when Nan repeated her request he returned. "Oh, certainly I won't tell, Nan. Who on earth would I mention such a silly thing to anyway? It seems to me you Sunrise Camp Fire girls think every little thing you do and say of importance to all the world."

## TURNING THE TABLES

When Anthony Graham left his home and started walking slowly through the woods he had absolutely no definite intention of any kind in his mind. He was bored and a little ashamed of harassing his sister. For if Anthony had confessed the truth to himself down in his heart he was really both glad and proud of what Nan was trying to do and had felt secretly more ashamed of himself since she began her efforts. For the boy had a better mind than his sister and had more inheritances from his father's family. His idleness and weakness came more from his unfortunate environment and from the fact that nothing had as yet awakened any ambition or better feeling in him. He had not told Nan what he wanted with the money asked of her, but for the past ten days had been thinking that if only he could get away somewhere out of Woodford, where no one knew anything of him or his family, and have a fair start, why he too might amount to something in the future so that Nan need not be shamed by him.

He walked for half a mile or so and then sitting down on a log began to whittle. There wasn't any use trying to clear out without money to buy food and he did not wish to remain anywhere in the immediate neighborhood. It had occurred to Anthony in the past week that he might work and earn sufficient money for his escape, but having applied at three or four places and been refused, his old shiftlessness and lack of will power laid fresh hold on him so that he gave up the effort. Now, as he sat at his usual occupation of killing time, he tried to banish all thought and all desire.

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He intended waiting until it was time to walk back to the Sunrise cabin with Nan and then go into the village and find his equally idle friends.

Suddenly Polly's laugh sounded and then Betty's, as though in response to something her companion had said. The girls were driving along the road toward home and a little farther on would come within a dozen yards of the spot where Anthony was seated, concealed from view of the road by the grouping of trees.

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The boy started, at first with surprise. The winter woods had seemed so quiet and so lonely, not even a teamster had passed in all the time of his musing. And then a curiosity seized hold on him to see his sister's much talked of friends without being seen by them. Of course he had probably passed both Betty and Polly on the streets of Woodford a good many times and that morning had caught a distant glimpse of them from the window, but he did not know one girl from the other, and from his sister's description he might now be able to tell. Betty was the beautiful one, and Polly, well Nan no more than other people had ever been able to decide whether Polly was beautiful or whether she was so fascinating that you had to think so while she was talking to you. When she was quiet her face was apt to be pale and a little too thin.

Anthony found a hiding place behind a tree bordering the road, until the sound of the sleigh bells came nearer and nearer, and Fire Star

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made her appearance. Then an impulse stronger and more dangerous than curiosity swept over him. For the first time since leaving his sister in the kitchen he remembered Nan's information. The two girls would be carrying back to their cabin a box containing Betty's jewelry. How easy to frighten them and make them surrender the box. Then he could get away from this neighborhood he hated and have a chance at a new life. He would do the girls no harm and only take enough money to cover his actual needs. The rest Betty could have back again. Anthony did not believe that either Betty or Polly knew him on sight. Nevertheless, though he had little time for reflection, with a quick movement he pulled his ragged cap down well over his forehead and eyes, turned up his coat collar and stooping picked up from the ground a heavy stick which was almost a log in size.

An instant later Fire Star's bridle was seized with an ugly jerk and the pony brought to a standstill.

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"TURN THAT BOX OVER TO ME"

As Betty was driving, the tin box was being held in Polly's lap so that the highwayman's first words were addressed to her.

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"Turn over that box to me," he demanded, trying to make his voice sound older and more threatening than usual.

However, both girls were so entirely overcome by amazement at the unexpected appearance of a robber in their peaceful New Hampshire woods, that for a moment they could only stare. The next instant Polly with a quick flare of her Irish temper, leaned over and seizing hold of

Betty's almost toy whip, slashed it in the face of the intruder. "Get out of the way," she cried angrily. "I am sure you can't know what you are doing."

But almost in the same instant the whip was torn out of her hand and dropped on the ground. When Betty attempted to rush Fire Star forward the pony's bridle was caught the second time.

"If you don't do what I say I'll break your pony's back with this stick," the boy muttered, and at this Betty winced, making no further effort to drive on. Fire Star had been her pony since she was a small girl and the stick the young fellow held was large enough to do her serious hurt, also his manner was sufficiently ugly to indicate that he meant what he said.

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Polly was by this time so angry that she could scarcely think, but, fortunately, Betty, after the first moment of surprise and natural fear, had held herself well in hand.

Now she looked so steadfastly at the figure at her pony's head that the young man turned his face away.

"You are Nan Graham's brother," Betty remarked quietly, "and I hope poor Nan may never hear what you are trying to do. You may not believe I have ever seen you before, but I have. Then as we have told only Nan the reason for our errand to town only she could have told you. I am quite sure though that she did not mean to betray us."

Betty said this so loyally and in such an unafraid, yet accusing voice, that Anthony Graham wished himself ten thousand miles from the place where he stood and as many leagues from the deed he was doing. However, since he had already disgraced both his sister and himself there was all the more reason why he should go through with this cowardly business and get himself away if he possibly could.

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"No matter who I am, you will hand that box over just the same and be quick about it," he commanded with another threatening wave of his stick.

"We will do no such thing but will have you arrested as a thief," Polly announced defiantly, wishing with all her heart, in spite of her Camp Fire training, that the despised Billy Webster might appear at this moment driving one of his father's wagons either to or away from town. At other times she might look down upon Billy for having only a farmer's ideals, just now, however, the splendid strength that his outdoor life must have given him would have been peculiarly desirable.

However, to Polly's surprise and chagrin, Betty, whom she had always considered braver than herself, showed signs of weakening.

"I will give you the key to my box if you will let me have some papers that are inside it which can be of no value to you."

Betty said this with a nervous laugh, her face suddenly turning pale when it had formerly been flushed. Then she set her lips to keep them from trembling. Without waiting for an answer she

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afterwards leaned forward and began searching under the carriage rug on the bottom of her sleigh for the purse bag in which Polly remembered the key to have been concealed.

Anthony might at this instant have seized the tin box from Polly and been off with it before Betty could have driven Fire Star on. But he was willing enough to have the key to Betty's box and even to leave her papers behind some tree if she so much desired them. He had never meant to take all her foolish trinkets which were of no value to any one except a girl. So for a brief moment Anthony did not look toward either Betty or Polly but kept his eyes fastened on the pony's head. In that same moment, hearing a sudden whirr through the air, before he was able to move the boy found himself securely caught by a rope and his arms drawn tight to his sides so that his stick dropped with a clatter on the frozen ground. While Betty Ashton with another rapid movement wound the other end of her rope about the cross bar of her sleigh catching it with a clove hitch and then, with a little gasp of astonishment at her own prowess, dropped back into her seat, only faintly hearing Polly's cry of delighted amazement.

Not for nothing had Betty Ashton been learning to acquire honors in camp craft for the past six months, practicing different kinds of knot tying with the other girls in friendly rivalry hour after hour. In the bottom of her sleigh along with the purse bag which really did contain her key, Betty had remembered that they had fifty feet of new clothes line being taken back to the cabin. In the moment of fumbling under the rug she had quickly tied the much practiced slip noose and then had thrown it with better skill than she could ever repeat.

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Polly gave a characteristic laugh to relieve the tension of the situation. "We have caught the enemy and he is ours now, Betty, dear, but whatever are we going to do with him?"

But Betty had gathered up her reins and was quietly urging Fire Star ahead.

So there was nothing for their prisoner to do but to run along by the side of the sleigh. By superior strength the young man could have jerked away from Betty's and Polly's hold, but not from the sleigh itself. Now the more he pulled on the clothes line the tighter it bound him. Besides it was difficult to do even this when all his strength was required keeping up with the pony's rapid gait.

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"I have often wondered how it would feel to be a conqueror driving through the streets of Rome with one's prisoners lashed to their chariot wheels and this is deliciously like it," Polly sighed before her companion had once spoken, enjoying with all her vivid imagination the retribution that had overtaken the evildoer.

But Betty's expression was strangely grave and every now and then she kept glancing aside at the figure running along beside them. For, except for a first oath and a few violent threats, the young man seemed to own himself beaten and had since said nothing. There was a horrible droop instead to his head and shoulders, and indeed to his whole figure, and he looked so ashamed that it made Betty sick to look at him,



Polly did not seem to have noticed but Betty felt that she had never seen just such an expression before.

"Polly," she whispered softly, "do you think we ought to drive up to the cabin taking this fellow with us like this? Of course we can turn around and go back to town and even drive up to the jail with him but that is just as bad. After all, he is poor little Nan's brother, and if we do the child can never hold up her head again! I keep imagining how I should feel if I were to be taken prisoner and carried before a lot of strange boys to act as my judges." Then Betty shuddered as though her vision were real, but Polly only laughed so scornfully that the boy, overhearing her, cringed.

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"It is an absurd supposition, Betty, and I can't well imagine your putting yourself in this dreadful fellow's place. You can hardly expect me to conceive of you, even in these advanced female days, suddenly stopping a number of young men and demanding their pocketbooks."

Notwithstanding Betty appeared deaf to her beloved Polly's teasing, for instead of answering she slowed her pony down.

"Don't you think we owe anything to Nan as a member of our Camp Fire circle?" she asked. "It seems to me that allegiance is one of the first things boys learn and it is because we girls don't feel it toward one another that women have the harder time."

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Instantly Polly sobered. "That is true, Princess," she agreed, "and I am desperately sorry for Nan and would spare her if we could, but do you think it right to let an intended thief go free? Besides, if we do cut him loose how do we know he will not seize your box away from us?"

"Because I should drive up almost to the Webster farm, where we could be heard if we called for help before letting him go. And anyhow even if we don't let him go free I should like to talk to him."

Polly shook her head. "Don't try reformation at the eleventh hour, I don't believe in it," she declared.

Notwithstanding this Betty drove on until within hailing distance of the Webster farm house and then, without asking further advice from Polly, calmly brought her pony to a standstill.

The young fellow made no effort to come nearer the sleigh or even to tear himself away, but kept gazing in astonishment at Betty as she dismounted and walked fearlessly up to him.

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"What made you want to take my jewelry, Anthony?" she inquired. "I know your name because I have heard Nan speak so often of you. I wonder if you have ever tried to steal anything before?" She said this apparently to herself since the boy did not seem inclined to answer. And then Betty shook her lovely head softly. "I wonder what it feels like to want to steal?" she questioned. "It must be some very dreadful reason that tempts one. You see I have never been poor myself or known what it was to want terribly anything I could not have." And then very swiftly and without allowing time for Polly

to stop her, Betty drew out her Camp Fire knife and cut the rope that bound the young fellow's arms to his sides. "I don't know whether it is right or wrong for me to do this," she confessed, "but for Nan's sake I cannot bear to hold you a prisoner."

Then both to her surprise and Polly's, Anthony made no movement and at the same instant the girls to their embarrassment saw that he was crying. Not weeping like some girls to whom tears come easily, but shaken by dry painful sobs, as though his shame and self-abasement were too great to be borne.

"It was for Nan's sake that I wanted to get away," he confessed finally, pulling himself together by a tremendous effort. "I thought maybe if I could get a chance like she is having, somewhere away from here where no one knew me, that I might be able to do something for myself. It was nearly killing me thinking I had ruined everything for her."

"So you were intending to steal in order to begin leading a better life," Betty repeated thoughtfully, and the young man flashed an angry look at her. But she was not trying to be sarcastic and the expression on her face at that moment he never afterwards forgot.

"I should hate you to stop trying to make things right for yourself and Nan because you began the wrong way," she continued after a little thoughtful pause. Then with a blush and an humble look very characteristic of Betty when wishing to be allowed to do another person a favor, she picked up her purse bag from the bottom of the sleigh and slipping her hand in it drew out a crumpled bill.

"Won't you let me lend you the money for your chance?" she asked, as though speaking to a friend and utterly ignoring the ugly scene that had just passed. "I haven't much money with me, so you must not mind. You can pay it back to me when you get to the new place and have good luck."

And then, before the dazed boy had time to understand what she was trying to do, Betty had thrust ten dollars into his partially clenched hand and jumping back into her sleigh had driven rapidly away. Fire Star was rather bored with so much unnecessary delay on his journey home and wanted to get back to shelter.

A little later Billy Webster, who had been cutting down trees in a portion of his father's woods, took off his fur cap to wave to the girls just as Polly in her dramatic fashion dropped down on one knee in their sleigh attempting to kiss Betty's hand.

"Betty dear, if ever I saw you do a Princess-like act in a Princess-like fashion it was when you gave that abominable boy that money," she said admiringly. "It is my opinion that either he is absolutely no good or else he will reform from this moment and be your faithful knight to the end of the chapter."

But Betty only smiled a little uncertainly. "Perhaps it wasn't honest of me, Polly, to be giving away money when I owe so much to other people." And then, touching the tin box in her

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friend's lap, she said half joking and half serious, "but since I am having to give up my kingdom I am glad to be able to help some one else to come into theirs."

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## CHAPTER VIII

### POSSIBILITIES

"'Rose of the World,' my fate is to be decided on this coming Christmas night." Polly O'Neill made this surprising statement on the same evening following the adventure that had befallen her and Betty earlier in the afternoon. The seven girls were sitting in a crescent upon sofa pillows before their living-room fire with Rose on a low stool in the center. Although it was now nearly bedtime no mention had been made of the cause of the two girls' trip into town nor of their unusual experience. Nan had come home uncommonly tired and silent, and ever since supper time had been curled up on the floor using her pillow as a kind of bed and almost half asleep.

But at Polly's extravagant words she sat up and looked at her curiously and so did all the other girls except Betty, who only smiled sympathetically, nodding her head reassuringly at Mollie, who seemed a little puzzled and a little annoyed.

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"I don't see why it is going to be your fate that is to be decided any more than Betty's or any of the rest of us, Polly." Mollie answered before their guardian could speak. "Just because you are going to have the chief part in our play when the rest of us just have less important parts."

But Polly, who was in one of her wildest moods to-night, flung her arms unexpectedly about her sister, almost overturning her by her ardor.

"You don't know what you are talking about, Mollie Mavourneen, because you haven't heard my news, since I only learned it to-day in town. It can't affect Betty or you or any of the other girls as it does me, because you haven't been yearning ever since you were born to go on the stage as I have until the very thought of the footlights and the smell of the theater makes me hungry and dizzy and frightened and so happy!"

"You haven't been in the theater a dozen times in your life, Polly O'Neill," Mollie returned, looking even more serious than before remembering her mother's opposition and her own to Polly's theatrical ambition, "and you know nothing in the world about what the life means."

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"Well, I will know pretty soon, Mollie. You see I am sixteen now, almost seventeen. I will be through school in another year—and then—why if I have any talent mother must be persuaded to let me study and see what I can do. And thereby hangs my tale!"

Two vivid spots of color were burning on Polly's high cheek bones, her eyes were shining as

though she saw only the joys of the career she hoped to choose for herself and none of its hardships, and she had to hold her thin nervous hands tight together to try to control her excitement.

“Don’t tell, please, Betty, I am waiting to get more breath,” Polly pleaded, and Betty nodded reassuringly. Not for worlds would she have stolen this particular clap of thunder from her friend, and it was rather a habit with Polly not to be able to breathe very deeply when she was much agitated.

“When Betty and I drove into town this morning,” she said in the next instant, “you know we stopped by Miss Adams’ to go over our Christmas rehearsals with her.” (Miss Adams was the teacher of elocution at the Woodford High School and greatly interested in Polly.) “Well, when we had finished and she had told Betty of half a dozen mistakes she was making and me of something less than a hundred, she said slowly but with a kind of peculiar expression all the time, ‘Girls, I wonder if you will be willing for me to bring a guest to your Christmas Camp Fire play?’ Betty answered, ‘Yes’ very politely, though you know we have asked more people already than we will ever have room for, but as I was mumbling over some lines of a speech I didn’t say anything. Then Miss Adams looked straight at me and said slowly just like this: ‘I am very glad indeed, Polly, for your sake, You remember that I have often spoken to you of a cousin of mine (we were like sisters when we were little girls) who is now one of the most famous, if not the very most famous, actress in this country. We write each other constantly and several times I have spoken to her about you. This very morning I had a letter from her saying she was tired and as she was to have a week’s holiday at Christmas might she come down and spend it with me if I would promise not to let anybody know who she was nor make her see any company.’ My heart had been pounding just like this,” Polly continued, making an uneven, quick movement with her hand, “but when Miss Adams ended in this cruel fashion it must have stopped, because I remember I couldn’t speak and felt myself turn pale. And then my beloved Betty saved me! She answered in just a little bit frightened voice. ‘But you think, Miss Adams, that you may be able to persuade your cousin to come to our play, if we don’t talk about it or let other people worry her, and then she can tell whether Polly has any real talent for the stage or whether we think so just because she wishes us to.’”

At the end of this long speech Polly may have lost her breath. Anyhow, she became frightened and stopped talking, staring instead into the open fire.

“It will be a great trial for the rest of us to have the great Miss Margaret Adams watching us act our poor little Camp Fire play,” Betty continued, “but I am sure we must all be glad to have her for Polly’s sake.”

After this there was silence for a moment, so that the noise of the old clock ticking above the mantel could be distinctly heard.

Then the new guardian shook her head. “I am sorry, Polly, but I am afraid that having Miss

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Adams talk to you about your future, whether she encourages you or not, will not be right without your mother's consent." Rose knew Mrs. O'Neill very well and understood how she dreaded the life of the stage for Polly's emotional and none too well-balanced temperament. Polly's fashion of living on her nerves rather than on any reserve of physical strength would be a serious drawback. For a moment the older woman wished that she might be able to accede to this Christmas experiment and that the great actress might be wise enough to recognize Polly's unfitness for acting and persuade her to dismiss the entire idea from her mind.

"Of course I will have to get mother's consent," Polly agreed more quietly than any one had expected, "but I think when I write and tell her exactly how I feel she will do as I ask."

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It was now ten o'clock and Nan Graham rose first to make ready for bed. She was followed by Eleanor and Sylvia, as it was already an hour past their usual week-day bedtime, but Betty laid her hand quietly on Rose's arm. "Please don't go to your room yet," she whispered, "I have something I want to talk to you about. It won't matter if only Polly and Mollie stay with us." She glanced expectantly at Esther, supposing of course that she would retire with the other girls, but instead Esther was sitting with her big, awkward hands clasped before her and such an utterly miserable expression on her plain face that Betty forgot her own problem and intended sacrifice.

"What on earth is the matter with you, Esther Clark?" she demanded a little indignantly. "Half an hour ago you looked as you usually do, and I am sure I have heard no one since say anything to hurt your feelings. Why, please, should you now look as if you had lost your last friend on earth?"

Esther laughed nervously. "Please don't be angry, Betty, or Miss Dyer, or Polly, and don't think I mean to be hateful or unaccommodating, but really I don't think I can sing on the evening of our Christmas entertainment. I have been trying to make up my mind to tell you for days and days, that I know I shall simply break down and disgrace us all."

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"And since you heard that we were to have a famous woman as a member of our audience you are more sure than ever that you won't be able to sing?" Polly questioned. Esther nodded silently, while Polly's eyes gazed past her as though they were trying to solve some puzzle.

"It is odd, isn't it," she continued, speaking to all or to none of the little company. "Here I am with just a slight talent for acting, and perhaps not even that, dreaming and longing to have this Miss Adams' criticism, even though I may break down when the time comes, and here is Esther with a really great gift liking to hide her light under a bushel. Oh me, oh my, and it's a queer world, isn't it?"

"Yes, but Esther isn't going to hide her light this time, it's too silly of her," Betty rejoined. "She has that perfectly wonderful song that Dick got for her last summer and has been practicing it for months. Besides we have asked our funny old

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German, who rescued us in the storm, to play Esther's accompaniment on his violin. He has practiced with her in town and is enraptured. Says Esther sings like a 'liebe angel.'"

Esther rose slowly to her feet. "Of course if you really wish me to, Betty, with all you have done for me——"

But Betty gave her an affectionate push toward the bedroom door.

"Oh, go to bed, Esther, what I have done for you has nothing to do with your singing and certainly gives me no right to try to run you. It is only that I don't mean you to take a back seat all your life if I can possibly shove you forward."

At any other time Esther might have felt wounded at Betty's so evidently wishing to get rid of her and have her older friends stay behind (for Esther had that rather trying sensitiveness that belongs to some shy people and makes them difficult), but with Christmas near at hand secrets were too much a part of Camp Fire life to be regarded seriously, so that Esther straightway left the O'Neill girls, Betty and Rose, to themselves.

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Then Betty went immediately over to a closet and brought out the locked tin box. As she opened it she explained her plan to Rose, who said nothing at first, merely leaning a little curiously over one of Betty's shoulders watching her take out her pretty ornaments, while Mollie and Polly stood guard on the other side.

Betty of course had the usual discarded childish trinkets—a string of amber beads, pins and a small ring—but these she put hastily aside as of no value, and then with a little sigh of admiration and regret drew forth a really beautiful possession, a sapphire necklace with tiny diamonds set between the blue stones, which Betty loved and had chosen for her special jewel.

"I expect this is worth the amount of my debt," Betty suggested huskily. Her father had given her the necklace the last summer they were in Europe together.

But Rose Dyer shook her head decisively. "Not that, Betty; indeed I have not yet made up my mind whether you ought to be allowed to part with any of your jewelry, at least before you ask your brother Dick."

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Next the girls considered Betty's blue enamel watch which her brother had given her on her last birthday and a small diamond ring. She had just about decided that she preferred to part with the ring when Polly exclaimed thoughtlessly, "Are those the papers you were so unwilling to give up this afternoon, Princess?"

At this Betty nodded, frowning slightly. They had decided not to make any mention of the afternoon's experience in order that Nan should never hear about it.

"There is some mystery or other about these papers," she explained, picking up a large envelope with an official seal on the outside. "Father asked me to take good care of this envelope all my life and never to open it unless

there was some very special cause. As he never told me what the reason should be I suppose I will keep it sealed forever." Then Betty with a little cry of delight dropped the envelope inside the box picking up another paper instead, which had a gold seal and two strings of blue ribbon pasted upon it.

"What a forgetful person I am!" she exclaimed in a relieved voice. "Why here is a two hundred dollar bond which honestly belongs to me, since once upon a time I actually saved the money for a whole year to buy it. It will pay all I owe without any bother."

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And Betty tucking her precious box under her arm, straightway the little company made ready for bed.

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## CHAPTER IX

### CHRISTMAS EVE AT THE CABIN

"I am so sorry, I never dreamed things would turn out like this," said Sylvia Wharton awkwardly, trying to control a suggestion of tears. She was standing in the center of the Sunrise cabin living room with one hand clasping Rose Dyer's skirt and the other holding on to Polly. However, if she had had half a dozen hands she would like to have grasped as many girls, for her hour of reckoning had come. Instead, her eyes mutely implored Mollie and Betty who happened to be hurrying by at the same moment and had been arrested by the apologetic and frightened note so unusual in Sylvia's voice. And this note had to be very much emphasized at the present time to have any one pay the least attention to it, since there were enough Christmas preparations now going on in the Camp Fire living room to have sufficed a small village.

On a raised platform, which occupied about a third of their entire floor space, Miss Martha McMurtry was rehearsing the two Field girls, Juliet and Beatrice, who had only arrived the night before, in the parts they were to play in the Christmas entertainment the following night. While Meg, holding "Little Brother" tight by the belt, was trying to persuade him to await more patiently his time for instruction. Toward the front of this stage, John, Billy Webster and Dick Ashton were struggling to adjust a curtain made of heavy khaki. It had a central design, the crossed logs and a splendid aspiring fire, the well-known Camp Fire emblem, painted by Eleanor Meade, who was at this moment making suggestions to the curtain raisers from the top of a step-ladder. Nan Graham and Edith Norton ran about the room meanwhile, carrying holly wreaths, bunches of mistletoe and garlands of cedar, that several of their Boy Scout friends were helping festoon along the walls. Indeed, every girl in the Sunrise Camp Fire was represented except Esther. She had gone over to the old orphan asylum where she had lived as a child, for a final rehearsal of her song with the German Herr Professor, who was staying with

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the superintendent of the asylum. For what reason he was there no one knew except that he must have intended getting music pupils in the village later on.

However, in the midst of the prevailing noise the little group about Sylvia had remained silent, for their guardian's face was flushing strangely, her yellow-brown eyes darkening and for the first time since she came into the Sunrise Club it was possible to see how Rose Dyer felt when she was truly angry. Although her voice never lost its softness there was a severity in it that the girls felt to be rather worse than Miss McMurtry's in her moods of disapproval.

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"Do you mean, Sylvia," Rose asked, "that you and Dr. Barton have arranged to have a young girl whom none of us know brought to our cabin to be taken care of all winter, without consulting me or even mentioning the subject to a single one of the girls? And that this child, who has been so ill she will require a great deal of care, is actually to arrive this afternoon? It seems to me that not only have you broken every principle of our Camp Fire life but you have been lacking in the very simplest courtesy."

Never in her life would Sylvia Wharton be able to explain herself or her motives properly in words. She was one of the often misunderstood people to whom expression comes with difficulty. Now her plain face was nearly purple with embarrassment. "I didn't mean to be rude; yes, I know it looks horrid and impossible of me, but you see I meant to explain and to ask permission, only I didn't dream that she would arrive for another week, and I was just waiting until our festivities would be over and you would be better able to be interested." She looked rather desperately at Betty, Polly and Mollie before going on, but they appeared almost as overwhelmed as their guardian.

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"You see, Betty, it was something you said a while ago that made me think of it first," she continued. "You said to Miss Dyer one evening that you thought we Sunrise Camp Fire girls were getting rather selfish, that we were not letting strangers into our club or doing anything for outside people. So I thought as Christmas was coming I would like to help somebody. Perhaps we all would! So when Dr. Barton told me about a poor little girl (she is only thirteen, I think) who was ill, probably dying, and if only she could have an outdoor life such as we girls are living she might get well, why, I told him I thought we would like to have her in our camp."

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Sylvia stopped because her words had given out, but she could hardly have chosen a wiser moment, for Mollie, whose gentleness and good judgment everybody respected, was beginning to understand.

"I think Sylvia is trying to show the Christmas spirit of doing good to the people who need it and letting us help," she whispered, coming closer to their guardian and slipping an arm about her waist. "Perhaps our Christmas preparations have been a little bit too much for ourselves. Of course Sylvia ought to have asked permission, Rose, and of course the little girl is not to stay if you don't want her, but she didn't expect her for another week and—and please don't be angry on Christmas eve."



This was exactly what poor Sylvia would like to have said without knowing how; however it did not matter who spoke, as Rose was plainly softening.

"But it is Dr. Barton's part I don't understand, Sylvia; he is older, a great deal older, than you, he must have understood that you had not the right to make such a proposition without consulting me or any one," Rose declared thoughtfully.

"He did," Sylvia now answered more confidently, feeling the atmosphere a bit more friendly. "He said at the beginning that the idea was quite impossible, that Miss Dyer would never be willing to undertake a responsibility of such a character, that he was surprised she had stayed with our Camp Fire club so long. It was only when I promised to try and save you all the trouble possible that he consented, Miss Dyer. You see Abbie is the daughter of a landlady Dr. Barton once had when he was a student in Boston, and so he is much interested in her, only he is too poor to pay her board and hasn't anybody to look after her at his little place; and you mustn't think it is just goodness on my part, wanting this girl at our cabin. You see I do care about learning to look after sick people more than anything else and I do want to know if our way of living really helps."

"So Dr. Barton thought I would not wish to help in the care of a sick child, that I was only playing at being a real Camp Fire guardian," Rose Dyer repeated slowly and then, without adding another word, somehow she seemed to drift away. However, there were a dozen voices calling for her advice and aid at this same instant, which may have explained her failure to let Sylvia and the other girls know her possible decision.

The three older friends exchanged looks and then Polly patted the crestfallen Sylvia on the shoulder. "Never mind, dear, some of us possess all the virtues except the trifling one of tact. If your little girl comes we can't very well turn her out on Christmas eve, so you had better say nothing more until Rose has thought things over and we have had a meeting of our Council Fire."

Then the girls hurried off to what was about the busiest day in their careers, with little further thought of Sylvia's protégé; Polly to a quiet rehearsal with her elocution teacher of her part in the Christmas play, Mollie and Betty to assist with the final details of certain costumes, and Sylvia, who was never of a great deal of service in frivolities, to apply her scientific interest toward helping with the cooking.

However, by six o'clock all the Sunrise Camp Fire friends and assistants had gone back to the village and by seven supper was over and cleared away so that the girls might have a quiet evening and go early to bed in order to be rested for the next day. Esther had only gotten home a few minutes before tea time, but in the excitement no one had missed her, nor did she seem much more tired than the rest of the girls from the strain of her last rehearsal. Nevertheless, Miss McMurtry, who had always a special affection for Esther, did see that she was even paler than usual and persuaded her to sit

close to her when the girls grouped themselves about their great Christmas eve fire for an hour of Christmas story telling before separating for the night.

And it was while their old guardian held everybody's attention that Rose managed to slip quietly away. She was not a child, she was not even a young girl any longer, and yet she went straight to the refuge of her babyhood—to Mammy—who had a tiny room of her own just off the kitchen. To-night there was a younger colored girl in the kitchen who had come out from Woodford to help over Christmas day, but as Rose passed their pantry she saw that Mammy had forgotten her seventy years and intended giving the New England girls a taste of an old-fashioned Southern Christmas. For along with the beautiful pies and doughnuts, which the Camp Fire girls had made, there were great dishes of sugar-powdered crullers, a black cake as big as a cart wheel and half a dozen deliciously fried chickens to vie with the turkey which had not yet been cooked.

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Down on a stool at the old colored woman's feet Rose let Mammy brush out her yellow-brown hair as she had done ever since she could remember. She was tired to-night; she had done more work in the past month than in all the years of her life and she loved it and was very happy and was only hoping to grow more capable and more worthy every day. Yet it was hard to have a narrow-minded New England doctor who had been a friend of her uncle's criticizing her to one of her own girls and failing to show faith in her or her work. Just because he was a recluse and spent his time in looking after the sick poor was no reason for being so severe and puritanical in his judgments.

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Rose was not listening to Mammy's low crooning else her ears would not have been the first to catch the sound of a horse and buggy approaching their cabin door. If the girls had forgotten the prospect of a newcomer to their Camp Fire circle their guardian had not, so now, hastily tucking up her hair without waiting for a wrap, Rose hurried out into the darkness. It was a cold clear night with many stars, but it was hardly necessary for her actually to behold the shabby buggy before recognizing it.

However, the young doctor did not at first see her, for he stopped and hitched his horse and then lifted out what appeared to be a soft bundle of rugs. "Don't be frightened, dear," he whispered in a voice of unusual gentleness. "She—they will be very kind to you, I am sure, even if they can't keep you very long. I am sorry I didn't understand that things weren't exactly settled and that we made such a mistake about the time, but—why, Rose, Miss Dyer," he corrected himself hastily, "it is good of you to come out to meet us, I am sorry to be putting this additional burden upon you." And then his manner changed to a doctor's severity. "Please go into the house at once, you haven't any wrap and on such a cold night as this! Really I don't see how you are able to look after girls when you don't look after yourself."

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But Mammy appeared at this moment wrapping her charge in a long rose-colored broadcloth cape, and Rose's manner was unexpectedly

humble. "I wouldn't have forgotten if it had been one of my girls," she apologized, and then more coldly, "Won't you come into the house?"

She had so far caught but an indefinite glimpse of the young girl in Dr. Barton's charge and was steeling her heart against her until she had had time to think of whether it was best for the other Camp Fire girls to bring this sick child into their midst. For she did look such a baby standing there in the snow with an old-fashioned knitted blue woolen hood on her head, such as little girls had not worn for almost twenty years. And then, suddenly, the girl began to cry quite helplessly and pitifully, so that Rose forgot every other consideration and put her arms about her as you would comfort a baby, drawing her toward the cabin and into the kitchen that she might be warmed and comforted by Mammy before being presented to a dozen strange older girls all at once.

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The young doctor did not follow them, indeed Rose had not invited him in again. But a few moments later she must have remembered his existence, for she came out for the second time into the cold.

Dr. Barton extended his hand, but apparently Rose did not see it, for she kept her own arms by her sides, saying in somewhat the same manner she had used earlier in the day to Sylvia: "I am sorry, Dr. Barton, you do not think I can be interested in the care of a sick little girl, and that you feel me unworthy to be a Camp Fire guardian. I know that I haven't all the knowledge and character that is necessary, but I am learning, and——"

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Rose would not listen to the young man's explanation or apology, for with a quick good-night she turned and left him endeavoring to say something to her which evidently she did not care to hear.

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## CHAPTER X ESTHER'S OLD HOME

However, of all the Sunrise Camp Fire club it was Esther Clark who actually had the strangest Christmas eve experience. Betty had rather opposed her going over to the orphan asylum for a last rehearsal of her song with Herr Crippen. It was not really necessary, for Esther knew her song as well as she ever would be able to learn it and could only fail in her singing of it on Christmas night should her audience happen to frighten her voice away. Nevertheless, Esther had a kind of sentiment in seeing her old friends at the asylum on Christmas eve, since this was the first year that she could remember when her Christmas had not been spent with them, and there would be no opportunity for visiting the next day.

For some reason or other, which Esther had never had satisfactorily explained to her, she had been kept longer at the orphan asylum than

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any of the other children. Indeed she was sixteen, almost seventeen, in the spring before when Mrs. Ashton had persuaded the superintendent to let her try the experiment of having Esther as her daughter Betty's companion. Ordinarily the children were sent away to live and work in other people's homes when they were thirteen or fourteen; many of them were adopted by the farmers in the surrounding neighborhood when they were almost babies, so that Esther naturally felt her obligation to be the deeper. Notwithstanding she was not thinking a great deal about her former lonely life at the asylum, nor even of the queer German violinist's interest in her voice, as she drove Fire Star over the now familiar road. Both her mind and heart were heavy with the news Dick Ashton had been able to whisper to her in a few hurried moments when they had been alone in the cabin that morning soon after Dick's arrival. Mr. Ashton had lost not merely a small sum of money which might cause him temporary inconvenience, as Betty imagined. He had had such serious losses that Dick's mother had written begging him and Betty to cut down their living expenses as closely as possible. And some one had to tell Betty. Dick was not a coward; in making his confidence he simply wondered if Esther would not be able to console his sister afterwards and to explain conditions to her better than he could, because Betty never had seemed able to understand any question of money matters however much she seemed to try. The actual facts he himself would tell her as soon as the holiday season had passed.

There was one way in which Betty could save money, Esther decided. She should no longer pay for her singing lessons. Indeed she would ask the German violinist that morning if there were not some way by which she could help him, by playing his accompaniments, perhaps, if he succeeded in getting up a violin class in Woodford. Anyhow she would earn the money for her own lessons in some way, for, unselfish as Esther was, her music lessons meant too much to her, were too important to her future, even to think of giving them up altogether.

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The professor was waiting for her in the big, bare, ugly parlor of the asylum which, however, possessed the glory of a not utterly impossible piano. Nevertheless, Esther only waved her hand to him as she passed the door on the way to her older friends. She was thinking that he looked older, poorer and homelier than ever with his red hair, his spectacled, pale blue eyes and his worn clothes. He had a little sprig of holly in his buttonhole, in a determined German effort to be a part of the prevailing Christmas cheerfulness.

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Then, half an hour later, Esther sang her song straight through without hesitation or a single mistake to the elderly German's way of thinking. For when she had finished he looked at her speechless for a moment, and then taking off his spectacles wiped away a kind of mist from his glasses. "Ach, my dear young Fräulein, you haf the great thing I hoped for through all my youth and then gave up when the years found me—an almost big violinist—das Talent! Was ist es in English, genius, nicht wahr?" And then, with Esther blushing until the burning in her throat and cheeks was almost painful, and twisting her big hands together in the ungainly fashion Betty

had almost broken her of, he went on, seemingly unconscious of her presence. "I am that thing you call a failure, but I used to dream I might haf a child who some day would go farther than I was able and then when I had to gif up this also —Ach, Himmel!"

To Esther's great embarrassment Herr Crippen then began sobbing in a most un-American fashion. "It was my own fault. I should never haf gone away, I——"

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But whatever else he may have poured forth in his present state of emotion was heard only by the four walls of the room, for Esther, in utter consternation, slipped out, hurrying toward the small study in the rear of the house where she knew she would find her old friend, the superintendent, at work. She told him rather shyly of her unceremonious leave taking, asking him to make her apologies to Herr Crippen and to beg him to come early to their Christmas entertainment the next night. Then, when she had put out her hand for farewell, quite unexpectedly the superintendent asked her to sit down again, saying that he would like to tell her Herr Crippen's story and the reason he had come into their neighborhood, since possibly she might be able to assist him.

Afterwards for more than an hour Esther listened to a most surprising narrative and later on drove back to Sunrise cabin puzzled, thoughtful and just the least shade frightened and unhappy. However, she made up her mind not to let anything trouble her until after their wonderful Christmas had passed.

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## CHAPTER XI

### GIFTS

"Oh come, all ye faithful, joyful and  
triumphant;  
Oh come ye, oh come ye to Bethlehem;  
Come and behold Him born the King of angels;  
Oh come, let us adore Him,  
Oh come, let us adore Him,  
Oh come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord."

Esther sang the first few lines of the beautiful Christmas hymn in a low voice but with gathering strength until when she had reached the refrain Sunrise cabin was filled with melody.

She had awakened before any one else on this Christmas morning and after thinking over more quietly the events of yesterday, had slipped into her clothes and then stolen into the living room hoping that her hymn might be the first sound that her friends should hear.

It was a perfect winter day. From the window Esther could see the snow-crowned peak of Sunrise Hill from which the dawn colors were now slowly fading and beyond a long line of the crystal hills. Wherever the Sunrise Camp Fire girls should go in after years, to whatever places their destinies should call them, the scene surrounding their camp could never be

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forgotten, nor could there be found many places in the world more beautiful.

Of course Esther had until now seen nothing beyond the New Hampshire hills and so this morning, with a little only half-defined fear tugging at her heart, she gazed at the landscape until the eternal peace of the mountains rested and soothed her. Then, turning away, she went first to building up their great log fire until its flames roared up the chimney and then to the singing of her song.

By and by, with a blue dressing gown wrapped about her, Betty came into the room, and stood resting an elbow on the piano. Polly and Mollie followed, and soon after Meg and Eleanor with Miss McMurtry between them, until finally every member of the Sunrise club had gathered in the room, including the little probation girl who entered last holding tight to Rose's hand. She looked like a pale little Christmas angel with her big blue eyes set in a colorless face and her soft rings of light yellow hair, which had been cut close on account of recent fever, curling like a fringe about her high forehead. When Esther came to the last verse of her hymn, there were many other voices to join in with hers, and somehow all their eyes turned instinctively toward the great pine tree which stood undecorated upon the farthest corner of their stage with the great silver star overhead.

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“Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning;  
Jesu, to Thee be glory given;  
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing;  
Oh come, let us adore Him,  
Oh come, let us adore Him,  
Oh come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.”

There was an instant's hush after this and then a surprising amount of noise. Surely Esther's idea had been a very lovely one, for there was little Christmas peace and quiet at the cabin for the rest of the wonderful and eventful day.

Some weeks before the girls had decided that there would be no present giving among themselves except the merest trifles, since all their money and energy must be spent in making a success of their Camp Fire play, but this did not forbid the receiving of gifts from the outside. So before breakfast was over offerings began to arrive, some of them for individual girls but more for the camp. Mr. and Mrs. Webster sent from the farm a great roasted goose stuffed with chestnuts, a baked ham and two immense mince pies, while Billy Webster, who drove over to bring the gifts, shyly tucked into Mollie's hands a bouquet of pink geraniums and lemon verbena from his mother's little indoor garden. To Polly, with a perfectly serious expression, he presented a bunch of thistles grown on the mountains that fall and made very brilliant and effective by having their centers dyed scarlet and being tied with a bright red ribbon. They were beautiful enough to have been bestowed on any one and would be an ornament for the cabin living room all winter, and yet Polly, though she was far too clever to betray herself, could not but wonder if there were not a double meaning attached to Billy's gift.

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Dick Ashton gave no individual presents, not even one to Betty, but to the club he gave a

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reading lamp so brilliant that half a dozen girls might do their studying around it at night. If it were placed on the piano Esther might be able to read her most intricate music without difficulty.

Then there were other more valuable gifts, Mr. Wharton, Sylvia's father, who had unexpectedly gone to Europe for a few weeks, left a check to supply the winter's coal bill, while Mrs. O'Neill from over in Ireland sent a set of kitchen aprons, which she had made during that winter, for each member of the Sunrise club including Mammy.

There was a mysterious communication received by Betty Ashton, however, of which she did not speak to any one, not even to Polly. She was not at all sure from whom it came, but naturally there was but one person whom she could suspect. The post-mark was a near-by town, and it was a common looking gift—just a card with the picture of a ladder rising in the air, apparently by its own volition, and very slowly ascending it the figure of a young man. Yet the words written below were of far finer significance than the picture and Betty really wondered how they had ever made their appeal.

“And men may rise on stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things.”

At four o'clock, when the girls were resting for an hour before getting ready for the evening's entertainment, convinced that there was nothing more to come for any one of them, there appeared at the cabin door certainly the most unlooked-for gift.

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Rose happened for the moment to be alone in the living room, having firmly ordered the girls off to their bedrooms to lie down while she attended to some final arrangements, such as finding space for a few more chairs for their audience than had been sent out from town an hour before.

So the sounds outside did not at first attract her attention, though they were most unusual. But suddenly, when a large form apparently flung itself against the door and there followed a low muffled cry, Rose, without a thought of Christmas, ran hastily to the rescue. Fortunately she was not nervous, else she might have been frightened when an unexpected object leapt up to her shoulders and a warm wet tongue caressed her cheek. Straightway her cry of surprise and admiration brought half a dozen girls to her side, who had found sleep at so critical a time quite out of the question. Imagine their surprise at finding their new guardian being embraced by a cream and brown and gold St. Bernard dog, already a tremendous fellow and yet still in his puppyhood.

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Polly, who was ever a lover of dogs, got down on her knees before him.

“Whose ever can he be and how has he found his way to our cabin?” she cried, but before her question was ended Polly herself discovered a small envelope attached to the dog's collar and tearing it off hastily presented it to Rose with an eastern salaam, as she happened to be already seated on the floor.

"From an unknown admirer, Rose? Isn't this like a story book?" Betty commented with an unnecessary expression of demureness, for she had noticed an evident though faint blush touching their guardian's cheeks. But Rose answered with a dignity that somehow made Betty feel ashamed of herself.

"No, Betty, the dog is for our club if you girls wish to keep him. Dr. Barton writes that he feels we are too much alone in these woods in the winter and that if we will forgive his solicitude he has sent us a third Camp Fire guardian." And Rose slipped the stiff little note she had just received inside her pocket, realizing that it was as near an apology as the severe young doctor could bring himself to make.

## CHAPTER XII THE CAMP FIRE PLAY

By eight o'clock on Christmas evening every seat in the Sunrise cabin living room was filled except two, and toward these the eyes of every girl hidden behind the khaki curtain turned questioningly for the last fifteen minutes before their Camp Fire play was to commence. However then, to Polly's despair, their last hope died away—the great lady and the great actress in one—would not form a part of their Woodford audience, even her own Miss Adams had likewise failed her.

Nevertheless their entertainment was to begin promptly (on this Miss McMurtry and Miss Dyer had both insisted), since punctuality was so seldom a feature of amateur plays they wished thus to show one of the superior results of the Camp Fire training.

A Camp Fire Morality Play: These words were printed on the Christmas programs and it was an old time morality play such as we have seen and read in "Everyman" that Polly and Betty had attempted to write, assisted of course by both their guardians and with suggestions from every girl in the Sunrise club. Whether they were successful in keeping close to the old model was not so much their ideal as the desire to show both by words and tableaux the aims and the influence of the Camp Fire organization, and what women have given to the world since the primitive time when human life centered about the camp-fire.

At a quarter past eight the curtain arose slowly, showing the stage in semi-darkness and representing a scene in a primeval forest. In the corner is the bare pine tree, the ground is strewn with twigs, fir cones and needles, and there within the instant the figure of a woman enters. It is Polly! And because of her great disappointment there is a tragic droop to her shoulders, a pathetic expression in her great wide-open Irish blue eyes. She had hoped so much from Miss Adams' promise and now—well, she must not forget her part, she must try to do her best for her friends' sakes.



Polly is dressed in a short skirt with a fox's skin fastened from one shoulder to her belt, there are sandals on her feet and her straight black hair is hanging about her shoulders. Unhappy, she gropes her way about the stage shivering and finding nothing to do, no place in which to rest herself. It is December, the month of the long moon, and the night promises to be bitterly cold. In another moment there is heard from the outside the crying of a child and next "Little Brother," very proud of his rabbit coat and cap, runs forward throwing his arms about the woman's knees and evidently begging for warmth and shelter. Still in pantomime the mother mournfully shakes her head, and with this Eleanor Meade appears representing a primitive man and carrying a brace of freshly killed game over her shoulder. This he presents to the child and the woman, but both of them shake their heads and a moment later the man drops despairingly down on the frozen ground burying his face in his hands, the child hiding between his parents for warmth. However the woman does not cover her face and by and by, picking up two dry twigs from the ground, she begins in an idle fashion to rub them together. Suddenly there is a tiny spark of light and then darkness.

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It was a wise selection on the part of the Sunrise club girls to have chosen Polly O'Neill to represent the mother of all the Camp Fire women, for though she had when needful the Irish gift of expression, she had also a face so vivid and so emotional that to Polly's own chagrin it was seldom possible for her to hide from other people what was going on in her mind. Now, however, this characteristic was of excellent service, for there was not a member of her little audience who did not in this instant guess the inspiration that had just been born in the woman.

In a seat toward the back of the living room, in as inconspicuous a spot as possible, a fragile looking woman, an unknown member of the small Woodford audience, turned suddenly to the companion beside her, nodding her head quickly. She had a plain, yet remarkably youthful looking face illumined by a pair of wonderful gray eyes with an indescribably wistful and yet understanding expression. And from now on she watched the girl on the stage more attentively.

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Rising quietly, Polly seemed almost to be holding her breath. Then with eager fingers she can be seen searching along the ground until by and by she has gathered together a few twigs, and now kneeling before them appears to be uttering a silent prayer. A moment later and she picks up her former sticks, again repeating the rubbing of them together. For a while Polly seemed to be unsuccessful in making them ignite, so that in the background and well out of sight the other Camp Fire girls hold their breath with a kind of sick horror, fearing that she is going to fail here and so make a fiasco of the entire scene. But the little waiting has only made the final result more dramatic. There is a tiny flare of light, and then bending over her pile of twigs the woman lights the first Camp Fire. She guards it with her hands until there is a crackle and many spurts of yellow flame and the instant after is across the stage shaking the man by the shoulder and drawing the child toward the blaze. Together

then they heap on more fuel until a really splendid fire is a-light. (And for fear any one may think that this fire in the middle of the wooden platform would probably have put an end to Sunrise cabin it must be explained that a sheet of iron had been fastened on the floor that the fire might be built with entire safety.)

Like a flame herself the woman then flies from one home duty to the other, making a bed of pine branches for the child near the fire, appearing to roast the game for her husband. Far better by her actions than by any possible words Polly told her story, until the curtain at last goes down on the beginning of the first home with the woman as its genius and inspiration.

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But before the curtain has finally descended, for a moment Polly's attention, as though drawn by an invisible magnet, centered upon the face of a stranger in the back of the living room beyond the more familiar ranks of her friends; and with a quick intake of her breath and a feeling of thankfulness that her first trial is over and that she is not obliged to speak, the young girl recognizes the famous actress. She is glad then that she had not known of her presence sooner and also that her first appearance before her has been made in pantomime, for she guesses it to be a surer test of dramatic ability than any recitation an untrained girl might be able to repeat. If she had the necessary temperament somehow in the scene just past it must have revealed itself.

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But now an intermission of twenty minutes passes and the second act represents a scene wholly different from the first, for now the stage is intended to present as nearly as possible the picture of an ideal home. It was difficult to portray, of course, but then the bigger things must always be trusted to the imagination, for this home was not intended to suggest merely a single home but a kind of universal and representative one. There were beautiful pictures in it and soft rugs and many books and windows everywhere, supposedly letting in all the possible sunlight, while over in the corner the solitary pine tree still stood, but now covered with many white candles, although none of them were yet a-light.

Then the door opens and the first spirit of the home enters. This is Esther Clark wearing a kind of blue tunic with a silver band about her unloosened red hair. With swift steps and busy fingers she moves about, bringing a bunch of winter roses to a table, putting fresh logs on the fire, drawing chairs nearer to the inspiring blaze, which is now no longer a primitive camp fire but a great, hospitable open hearth.

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Then Esther goes to the front of the stage and waits there for a moment in silence before beginning her speech, and there are but few persons watching her who have yet guessed what spirit she is illustrating.

Esther is awkward and not handsome; nevertheless, because she has a clear and beautiful speaking as well as singing voice she had been chosen for this particular part. Now she is plainly heard throughout the room.

"I am Work, the great Mother Spirit of the

earth.  
I have borne many children with a fairer fame,  
Service, who is my daughter with a gentler  
name."

And here Nan Graham in a yellow costume with her black hair flowing over her shoulders and her dark eyes shining walks forward and takes her place at one end of the stage just a little back of the speaker, followed by Eleanor Meade in a white robe with a wreath of laurel on her head and a scroll in her hand, who is seen by the audience as Esther continues:

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"Knowledge, who needs no word of mine to  
prove her worth,  
Beauty that shall not fade, surely it lives  
through me  
In music, books and art, a noble trinity."

Then Betty Ashton, whom there is no difficulty in recognizing as the spirit of Beauty, approaches the front of the stage in a dress of some soft silvery material with three stars in her hair and stands beside Eleanor.

"And Health and Happiness, would they deny  
their birth?  
Then let them seek it in some nobler form than  
mine,  
The quest is everlasting but the choice is  
thine."

Sylvia and Beatrice Field then advance together and take their places in the center of the group, Sylvia as Health dressed in the green of the open fields and Beatrice in deep rose color.

"Trustworthiness and Sympathy dwell by my  
hearth  
With Purity; we are the graces of the home.  
And yet there is one other fairer still to come  
Whose handmaids are these spirits named  
above;  
To her alone I yield my gracious place,  
The inspiration of the home—the world—is  
Love!"

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While Esther has been finishing her verse, Juliet Field has come forth to portray the spirit of Trustworthiness in a dress of deep violet, carrying a sheath of purple lilies. Meg, with her charming face so full of humor and tenderness, is the embodiment of Sympathy, and Edith Norton as Purity has her long fair hair falling almost down to her knees and wears a dress of the palest green—like Undine when she first comes forth from the sea.

And now a crescent has slowly formed about the figure of Esther who is a little in advance of the other girls, but now as she speaks the final word—Love—she steps quietly backward and Mollie O'Neill as the spirit of Love occupies the center of the stage. She has never looked half so lovely in her life as she does to-night. Her gown is of pale pink, she has a wreath of roses in her black hair, her usually too grave expression is illumined by a smile born partly of fear and the rest of pride, which has nothing to do with her own appearance, but is a kind of shadowy pleasure in the beauty and the significance of the tableau surrounding her.

From his place behind the curtain Billy Webster wonders how he was ever able even at the

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beginning of their acquaintance to confuse the twin sisters. Polly in all her existence has never looked so pretty as this and probably never will, and then Billy comes to his senses in a hurry, realizing that it is now his duty to assist in letting the curtain drop on this second scene in the Camp Fire allegory.

In the last act the Christmas tree is all a-blaze with pure white candles and silver tinsel and above it is suspended a great silver star, while the girls in their many colored costumes are seen dancing before it. Then at the close of the dance Polly again enters. She is to recite the epilogue, to make plainer the ideals of the Camp Fire. But some change has come over her since the first scene, her color is entirely gone, her eyes are rimmed and, worst of all, she feels that a deadly weight is settling on her chest and that her voice is nowhere to be found. She is having an attack of stage fright, but Polly does not yet know it by that name. The truth is that she has grown desperately tired, the strain and excitement of waiting after the long day's pleasure with the very foolish thought that her fate is probably to be decided by one person's judgment of her abilities has proved too much for her. She tries pulling herself together, she sees many eyes turned up toward her, with one face shining a little farther off like a star. Polly opens her mouth to speak, but there is a great darkness about her, the world is slowly slipping away. She puts out both arms with a pathetic appeal for silence and patience and then suddenly some one is holding her up and the other girls are forming a rainbow circle about her so that she is safely hidden from view.

For in a flash Betty Ashton has guessed at Polly's faintness, has signaled her companions and then reached her first, so that the curtain finally fell on perhaps the prettiest scene of all.

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### **CHAPTER XIII**

#### **AN INDIAN LOVE SONG**

Although Polly O'Neill could never afterwards be persuaded that her failure had not marred the Camp Fire play, nevertheless there were many members of the audience who never realized that anything had gone wrong, so promptly had the other girls acted and so swiftly had the curtain been rung down.

And then, within a remarkably short space of time, Esther had reappeared to close the entertainment with her song. The stage had been left as it was in the final act, the piano was already there, and almost immediately the accompanist, Esther's music teacher in the village, seated herself before it.

The only delay was of a few minutes, caused by the fact that Esther had insisted on wearing her ordinary clothes. A week before, therefore, Betty had had made for her a simple white dress and this Miss McMurtry very quickly helped her into, braiding her red hair into a kind of crown about

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her head. Her toilet was of course made in a great hurry, but then Esther was so convinced of her own homeliness that she cared very little except to look neatly and appropriately dressed.

Herr Crippen and Esther then walked out on the platform together, the man leading the girl with one hand and carrying his violin with the other, and it was curious the similarity in their coloring.

Very little of the Indian idea had the girls thus far brought into their Christmas Camp Fire entertainment, but now Esther's song was to bring with it this suggestion, although it had been chosen chiefly because of its beauty and suitability to Esther's voice. It was, however, a wonderful Indian love song, which Dick had found quite by accident the summer before for his sister's friend.

Esther was also dreadfully nervous and frightened at the beginning of her song, but fortunately for her she was thinking more of the music itself than of the effect she was to produce. Nevertheless, it was with sensations of disappointment that the friends, who cared most for her singing, listened to the first verse of her song. Dick Ashton, who had found himself a seat in the back of the room, when he was no longer needed to assist with the management of the curtain, moved impatiently several times, thinking that Betty had probably been making unnecessary sacrifices to cultivate her friend's voice and that they had all probably been mistaken in the degree of Esther's talent.

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However, Dick changed his mind so soon that he never afterwards remembered this first thought, but sat spellbound with delight, feeling every nerve in his body thrill and quiver with the pathos and loveliness of a voice that was so clear, so true and so sympathetic that not a single member of Esther's audience failed to respond to its beauty. The song had a kind of plaintive cadence and had been arranged either for a tenor or soprano.

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THE SONG HAD A PLAINITIVE CADENCE

"Fades the star of morning, west winds gently  
blow,  
Soft the pine trees murmur, soft the waters  
flow.  
Lift thine eyes, my maiden, to the hill-tops  
nigh,  
Night and gloom will vanish when the pale  
stars die.  
Lift thine eyes, my maiden, hear thy lover's  
cry.

"From my tent I wander seeking only thee,  
As the day from darkness comes for stream  
and tree.  
Lift thine eyes, my maiden, to the hill-top nigh;  
Lo! the dawn is breaking, rosy beams the sky.  
Lift thine eyes, my maiden, hear thy lover's  
cry.

"Lonely is our valley, though the month is  
May,  
Come and be my moonlight, I will be thy day.  
Lift thine eyes, my maiden, oh, behold me  
nigh;  
Now the sun is rising, now the shadows fly.  
Lift thine eyes, my maiden, hear thy lover's  
cry."

Hearing the applause which broke out like a storm at the close of Esther's singing, Betty managed to get away from Polly and to find Esther shivering in the kitchen which opened just off their stage and had been used for the entrance way that evening. But no power or persuasion could have induced Esther to go back upon the stage, not even when Herr Crippen added his entreaties, nor when Dick slipped out into the cold and came around through the back door to congratulate her. If Esther had pleased

Betty and Dick and Miss McMurry, really she cared very little for any one else's criticism.

Nevertheless, later that evening, when the company was enjoying a kind of informal reception, she could not refuse to be introduced to the celebrated Miss Margaret Adams, who sent one of the girls especially for her. Esther was awkward and tongue-tied and nervous as usual when the great lady congratulated her, very different from Polly, who when she had recovered from her faintness had come immediately out into the living room and gone straight up to Miss Adams and taken her hand.

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"If I wasn't so used to failing at most of the important moments of my life, I think I couldn't bear to live after to-night," she said with characteristic Polly exaggeration. Then, with one of the sudden smiles that so transformed her face and made her fascinating both to strangers and friends she added: "But, after all, I have seen *you* and I am talking to you now, and as that is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me, I am going to try and not care about anything else."

Then the older woman pressed Polly's hot hand in both of hers, looking keenly into the girl's expressive face. Only she knew how much Polly did care about her failure and also that her suffering had not yet fully begun, because until the excitement of the evening was well over the girl would not fully realize all that she at least believed this failure meant.

"Come and see me for half an hour to-morrow, I can judge nothing by to-night. And do please remember, child, that one person's judgment in this world fortunately does not count for much at best. I want to have a little talk with you just because my cousin, whom I love very dearly, has told me so much about you."

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"And because," Polly added with her lips trembling, "because you are sorry for me. But I don't care so much why you want me, I only know I want to come more than anything in the world."

Of course at the close of the Camp Fire play it was then impossible for Miss Adams to escape recognition, so she was evidently tired on her way back home from the cabin and therefore did little talking. However, after the cousins had undressed for the night she called softly into the next room:

"My dear Mary, I think your Polly is charming, but I am afraid your little girl has the dream and the temperament and that the other plainer girl has the talent. But, then, who can tell when they are both so young?"

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## CHAPTER XIV

### MOLLIE'S CONFIDANT

Of her visit to Miss Adams, Polly never afterwards spoke, except to Betty and her sister

Mollie, asking that they tell Rose Dyer that it was right that she as their guardian should know and promising to write her mother; however, several of the other Camp Fire girls believed that they saw a slight change in Polly dating from her visit. Afterwards she never seemed to give up, at least without some struggle, to her old, utterly unreasonable changes of mood.

To Betty and Mollie, however, Polly confessed that, although Miss Adams had been kind beyond her wildest dreams, she had not said that she had seen any evidences of genius or even of marked ability in her interrupted dramatic efforts; although she had suggested that only the most remarkable people the world has ever known have betrayed exceptional gifts at the age of sixteen, that most people only achieve success by endless patience, faith and work and by what sometimes looks at first like failure. She had then told Polly something of her own early struggle, but this Polly of course did not reveal even to her sister and dearest friend. However, to Mollie's relief, she did announce that she meant to spend the next two years in doing everything she could for her health by obeying every single Camp Fire rule, that she meant to learn more self-control, to study harder and also to memorize all the plays and poems that she possibly could. For at the close of her graduation at the High School the wonderful Miss Adams had asked that Polly write her and then if her mother was willing, if Polly was well and of the same desire, she would see that she had an opportunity for the kind of study she would then need should she adopt the stage for her profession. For the truth is that though the great actress had not been particularly impressed by Polly's acting she had discovered two things about her, one that she had the expressive face with quick mobile features and the graceful carriage more to be desired on the stage than either beauty or stateliness and, moreover, like most other people, she had taken a decided fancy to the girl herself.

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For a few weeks following Polly's famous interview her sister Mollie found herself and Polly farther apart in sympathy than they had ever been before in their lives. Under nearly all other circumstances Mollie had always allowed herself to be influenced by her twin sister's wishes; Polly had always seemed to want things so much harder than other people that she and her mother had usually been willing enough to give in, but now on this question of Polly's going upon the stage after she had finished her education Mollie made up her mind to stand firm in her opposition at every possible opportunity, even if her mother should give in to Polly's persuasion. It was utterly impossible for Mollie O'Neill to understand her twin sister's restlessness and ambition. How could she ever wish to leave her home and mother, to leave *her*, to follow after such a will-o'-the-wisp?

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It was in vain that Polly explained that it was no lack of affection on her part, that she surely loved her own people as much as they could love her, but that she felt she must see more of the world, live a wider life than Woodford could give her. Mollie was always obdurate. There was only one way by which Polly could silence her twin and that was to inquire if Mollie meant always to stay at home, to remain an old maid? And when

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Mollie most indignantly denied any such suggestion, Polly would then ask how if she loved them could she make up her mind to go away from home on account of a strange man, and if a career wasn't as good as a husband, until Mollie became too indignant and unhappy for argument and usually by making no further replies carried off the honors of war.

If only Mollie could have had another girl to unbosom herself to, but there was no one; Polly had asked her not to discuss her affairs with any one of the Camp Fire girls except Betty Ashton, and Betty openly sympathized with Polly. Having no gifts herself she used to say that all she could do would be to live in the successes of Polly and Esther; although Polly used always to assure her in return that a Princess was above the possession of small abilities like ordinary mortals, and Esther that she never expected to have any success beyond learning to sing well enough to make her own living and perhaps some day to have a position in a Woodford church choir.

So Mollie for the month succeeding Christmas kept most of her worry to herself, and to the entire Sunrise Camp Fire club's surprise and consternation grew quite unlike her usually sweet-tempered, happy self. Sometimes she used to insist upon taking the daily exercise prescribed by the Camp Fire rules entirely alone, if she were allowed, in order that she might think up some possible way of influencing Polly to give up her wholly foolish ambition. Since Polly felt that she must do something toward supporting her mother and herself, she should try to learn to be a teacher like Miss McMurtry or Miss Mary Adams.

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One Saturday afternoon, being particularly low in her mind because Rose Dyer had thought Polly not very well and had suggested that she stay at home and take her walk outside the cabin with the newest Camp Fire girl, Mollie had deliberately stolen off while her friends were getting ready for a hard tramp through the woods. She did not care at the time that their guardian might object to her going off alone. She almost hoped that something might happen to her to make Polly feel uneasy. Since Polly was always making her perfectly miserable why she might as well experience the sensation occasionally herself. So, knowing that the other girls were to strike out through the pine woods, find the road and walk over toward the asylum to escort Esther home (who was now having a weekly music lesson with Herr Crippen), Mollie first walked back of the cabin and then found the road through the Webster farm. She didn't walk very far however. It was perfectly ridiculous of her of course to anticipate trouble, and yet somehow she felt that she and Polly were never going to be just the same that they had been in the past to one another, in some way they would be separated. Suddenly Mollie felt a wave of homesickness, of longing for her mother such as she had not felt since the first few weeks after Mrs. O'Neill's sailing for Ireland the spring before. So quite unmindful of consequences Mollie dropped down on the stump of a tree, deliberately giving herself up to the enjoyment of tears. It was so utterly impossible ever to cry at the cabin. Some one was always about seeing you and besides all the

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other Camp Fire girls Mollie solemnly believed to have outgrown the foolish weakness of crying, it was so utterly in contradiction to all their training.

The tears, however, must have been extremely near the surface, since they dried so instantly, and Mollie jumped to her feet indignantly when a hard ball of snow went whizzing past her ear, almost striking her. A moment later she heard footsteps coming up behind her.

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"Hope you won't mind my appearing to pay off old scores in this way; I really had no idea of hitting you, but I had to attract your attention in some fashion, so you wouldn't run away from me," said a voice Mollie immediately recognized and a moment later Billy Webster appeared by her side. "Would any one in the world except Miss Polly O'Neill seat herself calmly on a stump in the midst of the winter woods with nothing but snow and ice all about her as if she were in the lap of spring?" he asked. And then, when Mollie made no answer and catching just a side glance at her downcast face, he puckered his lips as though intending to whistle, but better manners prevailing said as sympathetically as he could: "Dear me, Miss Polly, you look as though you were desperately unhappy over something or other. What is it that is troubling you this time?"

Mollie was wearing a long brown coat exactly like Polly's red one and her brown tam-o'-shanter she had pulled down as low as possible over her face because of the cold January wind, but now she turned with some indignation toward her companion. "I am not Polly," she announced with a good deal of vexation (the twin sisters never liked being taken for one another). "I am sorry, but I suppose Polly hasn't a monopoly of all the trouble in this world. Or at least she very often passes it on to other people."

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Instantly Billy's fur cap was off, showing his heavy hair, which was browner than during the months of exposure to the summer sun, but although his face was also less tanned, his eyes were as blue and as full of humor as ever.

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"It is I who am sorry and glad too, Miss Mollie," he answered as gallantly as possible. "It seems to be my fate everlastingly to put my foot in it with both you and your sister. I could have sworn not long ago that I would never again mistake you for one another and here I am at it again. But you will forgive me this time. You see you don't look quite like yourself to-day; you are so much paler and kind of uncertain looking—and cross. But now I beg the other Miss O'Neill's pardon," and Billy laughed, not so much as though he cared a great deal about having made fun of Polly, but more in order to cheer up Mollie.

"Better not let Polly hear you say that," she returned, smiling a little. "You know, like the tiger in 'Little Black Sambo,' she would have to eat you up. But Polly is really a great deal better tempered than I am and sweeter than anything nowadays; ask anybody in camp. It is I who am the cross one. And it is all because I am so unhappy."

And then, to Mollie's own surprise and Billy's

decided embarrassment, she began crying a great deal harder than before.

There was nothing a fellow could do but just to stand there and watch her for a moment and then Billy had a feeble inspiration. He tucked her arm through his comfortingly. "Come, it is getting dark, these days are so dreadfully short. Let me walk on back to the cabin with you."

And on the way Mollie discovered herself unexpectedly confiding everything that troubled her about her sister to this comparatively unknown boy friend. Although the Camp Fire girls had seen more of Billy Webster than any one else because of their living so near his father's farm. For the first few minutes Mollie felt she might regret her outburst, but not for long, for to her satisfaction and indeed to her very real consolation, Billy felt exactly as she did about Polly. It was utterly absurd for Polly to talk about going away from Woodford even to study for the stage; she was not strong enough; the life was a perfectly abominable one for a lady, but for a delicate high-strung girl like Polly O'Neill it was worse than absurd; it was wicked! Mollie should write for her mother to come home to prevent Polly's getting the idea more firmly fixed in her mind. Later on it might be more difficult to influence her. Billy Webster fairly spluttered with indignation. His mother was a perfect farmer's wife, devoted to her husband, to her son and a younger daughter, and to the life and work of her farm and very naturally Billy's mother was his ideal. He liked the two O'Neill girls very much, had known of their struggle to get along and of their mother's efforts to give them an education, and believed, like Mollie, that it was ungrateful of Polly to wish to leave her home so soon as she was grown up. Besides he did not like to see Mollie so worried! What a strangely difficult person Polly was! There were times when he felt that he almost hated her and then again she was rather fascinating.

"I have got about half as much influence with your sister as that totem pole," he announced, when he had brought Mollie almost back to the Sunrise cabin, "but if there is anything I can ever do to help you make her change her mind, why count on me up to the limit. Don't you think the best thing would be somehow to joke the whole idea out of her? She is just the kind of a person to be more influenced by joking than any real opposition."

Mollie bowed her head in entire agreement. "Yes, but what kind of a joke could we ever think up that could have anything to do with Polly's wishing to be an actress and meaning to study several years from now?" she inquired doubtfully.

And to do Billy Webster credit he did look considerably confused.

"Well, I can't say right off," he confessed, laughing a little at himself, "but if you and I think things over for a week or so, perhaps an inspiration may come to one or the other of us. And in the meantime," he added this rather hastily, "I wouldn't mention to your sister that you have spoken of her plans to me. It is all right though, for I shall never breathe what you have told me to any one."

## CHAPTER XV

### A BOOMERANG

Two weeks later Polly received a note at the cabin asking that she come into Woodford on the following Friday afternoon for an interview with a friend of Miss Margaret Adams, who happened by chance to be in Woodford for a few days and wanted an opportunity for talking with her about her future. For whatever resulted from this interview Polly had herself chiefly to blame. She most certainly should never have replied to a note signed by a name which was unfamiliar without consulting the guardian of the Sunrise club. But Polly knew perfectly well that Rose would never have permitted her to have any such conference. She knew also that their guardian and her mother's friend was almost as much opposed as her sister Mollie to her ambition and considered that she was behaving most unwisely in letting her mind dwell on a possibility which in any case was very indefinite and far away. Indeed, Rose had had a quiet talk with Polly asking her not to discuss the subject of the stage with the other girls and to try and give her own energy and attention solely to their Camp Fire work. Polly had agreed and was apparently keeping her promise, since she felt so assured that the Camp Fire ideals must help every woman in whatever work she undertook later in life.

Nevertheless, when the first temptation came Polly fell. One night she spent in indecision, wondering why Miss Margaret Adams had not written to her about her friend or why Miss Adams, their elocution teacher, had said nothing. These questions, however, Polly finally answered satisfactorily to herself, since it is usually easy to find answers that accord with one's own desires. By morning she had made up her mind that she would go and see the stranger and have a talk with him, since no harm could come of one small visit.

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The appointment was to take place at the home of Meg, whose Professor father was one of the most prominent men in the village and Polly was told to bring a chaperon, so from the standpoint of propriety she was committing no offence. She had not seen Meg for a week and so could ask her no questions, and as Betty was the only person who could be relied upon in the emergency, to Betty she confided the whole situation, not in the least asking her advice, since this was not the way with Mistress Polly, but begging Betty to be present with her during the call. If Betty demurred at first, suggesting Miss Dyer, Miss McMurtry, Miss Mary Adams, as more suitable chaperons, she did finally agree. So early on Friday afternoon the two girls started into town in their best clothes, saying that they were going in on an errand. Betty was driving Fire Star and Polly carrying a volume of "Romeo and Juliet" and "Palgrave's Golden Treasury." The note had suggested that since Miss Margaret Adams had had no opportunity to

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hear Miss O'Neill recite, the writer would be interested to know what she could do.

Polly was cold with nervous excitement all the way into town. She was not in the least sure whether she did not dread the coming interview more than anything that had ever happened to her in her life and she also had very uncomfortable twinges of conscience, since this venture of hers had no grown-up sanction. There had been no time as yet to write her mother about it and she had not confided in Mollie, who once had known all her secrets. Indeed, had she not even felt glad that Mollie had decided not to return to the cabin after school that day but to remain in town with a friend, so that no uncomfortable family questions could be raised.

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By special request Betty was invited not to talk on the journey in, so that Polly could have the opportunity for repeating to herself the poems she had made up her mind to recite and go once more over Juliet's famous lament.

The hall at the Professor's was unusually dark when Meg herself, to the girls' delight, opened the front door. Polly was by this time in too agitated a condition to stop for asking questions, but although Betty was not, Meg did not seem willing to answer them. Instead she kept shaking her head and pointing mysteriously toward their drawing room door. "The stranger was already in there, yes, her father knew him, Polly must not mind that the visitor had his wife with him, she was also an actress upon whose judgment he placed the greatest reliance, but the girls were not to do more than bow to her, as it bored her to meet people."

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If the hall was dark the drawing room was even darker, but then before joining the Camp Fire club Meg had been a proverbially poor housekeeper, so she probably had neglected to open the drawing room shutters and, as it was a dark February afternoon, the light that came through the slats was not sufficient. Betty felt most distinctly that she was not going to enjoy the approaching interview, that there was already something odd and uncomfortable about it, but she had no opportunity for confiding her views and Polly was not in a critical humor. As for the darkness Polly was decidedly grateful for it. If she had to get up and recite before Meg and Betty and the two strangers it would be far easier to be in the half shadow than to have their critical glances full upon her. This drawing room recitation before so small an audience did not appeal to Polly anyhow, certainly it held none of the glamour of the stage, the music, the footlights, the feeling that you were no longer your real self but a performer in some other drama in some different world.

Betty sat down at once in a far corner, as she saw no notice was to be taken of her, but Polly felt herself having her hand shaken coldly by a tall, broad-shouldered, middle-aged man wearing glasses, with an iron gray, pointed beard and iron gray hair pulled low down over his forehead. He seemed, however, not to have the least desire for conversation, for waving Polly toward the center of the room, he at once asked her to show what she could do, without introducing his wife nor making the least satisfactory explanation of his own presence in

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Woodford, his acquaintance with Miss Margaret Adams, nor his right to have solicited this meeting with Polly.

However, none of these points weighed upon the girl's mind at the time. The man looked just as she expected an actor-manager might look, and as for his wife, she could see nothing of her but a figure dressed in a long traveling coat and wearing a hat and heavy veil, who had not even deigned to glance in her direction.

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"What—what shall I begin with?" Polly inquired anxiously. "Miss Adams, our teacher of elocution at the High School, says that young girls should try simple recitations, that it is absurd for us to attempt to reveal the great emotions such as one finds in Shakespeare's plays, or Ibsen's or Maeterlinck's, that we must wait until we know something more of life for them. I did not feel sure what you would think about it, but I know some English poems, very famous and very beautiful, perhaps you would like me to begin with one of them?"

There was a slight hesitation in Polly's voice because personally she found the simple poems much more difficult than the big ones and her taste did not incline toward Whitcomb Riley, or Eugene Field, toward any of the simple character work, which would have been the best possible training for her at the present time.

But the critic fortunately agreeing with Polly's point of view shook his head gravely over her suggestion of English verses.

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"No," he said a little pompously, it must be confessed, "try the most difficult thing you know and even if you do not make an entire success of it I will be better able to judge what you can do." The man spoke in a hoarse, strained voice which to Betty's ears sounded forced and peculiar.

"Would you—would you think it very foolish if I tried Juliet's speech before she takes the poison?" Polly then asked timidly. "I know I can't do it very well, it is one of the greatest speeches in the whole world of acting, but perhaps for that very reason I like to attempt it."

Polly had thrown off her red coat and hat in the hall, but she was wearing her best frock, a simple cashmere made in a single piece, with a crushed velvet belt of a darker shade and a collar and cuffs of real Irish lace which her mother had sent as a Christmas gift from Ireland. Her hair was very dark and her coloring vivid, so perhaps she did not look so utterly unlike the Italian Juliet, whom it is difficult for us to believe was only fourteen at the time of her tragic love story.

"Farewell,—and God knows when we shall meet again," Polly began in a far less melodramatic fashion than one might have expected; indeed, Betty thought her voice exquisitely pathetic and appealing and even Meg, who had not the slightest sympathy with Polly's dramatic aspirations, was subtly impressed.

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"I have a faint cold fear thrills through my  
veins,  
That almost freezes up the heat of life.  
I'll call them back again to comfort me.—  
Nurse!—What should she do here?"

My dismal scene I needs must act alone.  
Come, phial.  
What if this mixture do not work at all,  
Shall I be married, then, to-morrow morning?  
No, no;—this shall forbid it:—lie thou there—”

And here Polly is being carried away by the thrill of her own performance. Almost she believes she beholds a slight suggestion of admiration in the blue eyes of the critic who most assuredly is watching her efforts with a great deal of interest. Unhappily, however, in her preparation for this great occasion, Polly has forgotten the necessary stage equipment and now at this instant remembers that Juliet requires a dagger to make this moment properly realistic. The girl is in a delicious state of excitement. For the time being actually she is feeling herself the terrified and yet superbly courageous Juliet, and there on the parlor table, as though by direct inspiration, is reposing a steel paper cutter of the Professor's.

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With a quick movement of her hand Polly seizes the desired dagger, but also she seizes something else along with it, for the table cover comes off at the same instant, almost overwhelming Juliet in a rain of papers, ornaments and books.

Polly feels as though she would faint with chagrin and mortification, so suddenly and so uncomfortably is she brought back to the hard realities. "I am so dreadfully sorry," she starts to say, but before she has finished, her attention is arrested by the behavior of the mysterious veiled lady.

She had given a hysterical giggle, first one, then another, as though she were never going to be able to stop. Meg's face is also crimson with the effort to control her laughter, although she is looking nervously, almost imploringly, toward her strange visitor.

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The solitary man in the room has simply turned his back upon the whole situation and is gazing steadfastly at the closed windows.

Polly thinks perhaps she is losing her senses, for there had been something familiar in that excited laughter which is now turning almost into a sob, and yet of course the idea was ridiculous. Polly then turned entreatingly toward Betty Ashton as her one sure rock of salvation in a vanishing world, and Betty never forgot the expression in her friend's eyes, the look of wounded dignity, of disappointed affection, of almost resentful disbelief. For in Betty's returning glance she found a confirmation of her worst fears.

The truth of the matter was that Betty had been suspicious of the little group of spectators of her friend's recitation almost as soon as Polly began her speech. She was not under the pressure of so much excitement and had time and opportunity to look about and examine people and things more closely.

The woman in the long cloak—evidently her clothes were of the ready-made variety, for they certainly did not fit. Also she seemed very slender for a full grown woman, and in spite of her intention to remain unobserved was curiously nervous.

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And the man? He was trying to keep his face in the shadow, but from Betty's point of observation a ray of afternoon sunlight fell directly across his face. The line where his beard began was extremely distinct and his cheeks above it brown and boyish. Besides, though he did wear glasses, his eyes showed fear, amusement and Polly was right in a way, for they did show a certain amount of admiration, although they were certainly never the eyes of a censorious dramatic critic. For several moments Betty had been longing to interrupt Polly's speech-making but had not known exactly how, and indeed had hardly dared. Perhaps if she could get Polly away before she ever found things out it would be best. Polly's temper was never very good, and this would hurt her in all the ways in which she was most sensitive.

The girl's face was white as chalk as she now ceased gazing at Betty and walked quietly across the room toward the supposedly strange woman who had risen at her approach and was trembling violently.

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"It is a joke, Polly, don't be angry; we thought if you could just see how silly play acting seemed to other people you would give it up," the voice shook a little.

For Polly was ominously pale and quiet as she gently untied the veil and lifted off the stranger's hat.

"So you wanted to see how much of a fool you could make of me, didn't you, Mollie? Well, you have succeeded splendidly, dear; I can't imagine how you could have had any greater success!" And Polly shut her lips tight together and clenched her hands. If only Betty and Meg and Mollie knew how furiously, suffocatingly angry she was they would probably be afraid to have anything to do with her.

But Meg was approaching her with her usually happy face somewhat clouded. "I am afraid you must think pretty poorly of us all, Polly, really it just looked funny to us at first, we only meant to tease you. But now, while I am willing to confess, it does seem rather hateful of us and I want to apologize to you for my part in this whole proceeding."

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Still Polly made no answer, only when Mollie rather timidly put her arms about her saying: "Please do, Polly dear, forgive us and don't take the whole thing so seriously, you are fond enough of a joke yourself," she quietly pushed Mollie aside and turned toward Betty.

"Please take me home then, Betty, for I am afraid I have furnished all the amusement this afternoon that I feel equal to." But when Betty's arms went about her, Polly trembled so violently that she had to hide her head on her friend's shoulder and just for an instant a choked sob shook her. Both girls, however, were moving toward the closed drawing room door, but before they could leave the room a tall form barred their way.

"You can't go until I have spoken to you," Billy Webster said almost rudely in his determination to be obeyed. He had taken off his beard, wig and glasses and his face showed almost as white as Polly's.



But Polly looked directly at him with eyes that apparently did not see him.

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"I never wish to have to speak to you again so long as I live, Mr. Webster," she said quietly, "And you can be quite happy, because whatever old scores you may think you owe me, you have paid me back this afternoon with interest."

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## CHAPTER XVI

### THE APOLOGY

"But—but I didn't do it in that spirit in the least, Miss Polly," the young man pleaded, still refusing to let the girls pass him unless they actually forced their way. "It was all a joke, a horribly poor one, I agree with Miss Meg. But it began by accident and then grew until none of us realized how foolish and worse than that it was. Oh, if you only knew what it is like to feel like a cad and to hate yourself through and through and yet to know that whatever you do you can never change things! We never dreamed you would take it all so seriously or be so completely deceived. We thought you would see through us pretty soon and then scold for a while and afterwards laugh along with the rest of us."

"But Polly's ambition is not a joke to her," Betty returned, seeing that Polly either couldn't or wouldn't speak. "She takes it as seriously as you can take the most serious ambition of your life. And to come here and do her best in order that all of you might make fun of her, really it is so cruel and in such bad taste I don't feel I can like any of you for a long time, not even Meg and Mollie." Betty's gray eyes were so full of high-bred reproach, her face betrayed such a spiritual distaste that, if Billy Webster could have felt more humbled, which was quite impossible, he would have at this moment.

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"But I was not making fun, at least not after Miss Polly began her recitation," he returned. "I thought it quite remarkable and I would have given a very great deal if that accident had not happened so that I might have heard her straight through. I confess I don't approve of well-bred girls even thinking of going on the stage, and I do sincerely hope Miss Polly will give up the idea before she is much older, but if it's a question of talent, well, I don't think there can be much doubt of her having talent enough."

Billy said this so earnestly and with such evident sincerity that at any other time it might have slightly appeased Polly. Now, however, her feelings were too badly wounded for any outside balm.

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Mollie was crying, so that she could hardly do or say anything, but Meg walked quietly up to Billy Webster, taking him by the sleeve. "Let the girls go now, Billy, please. It is not the time to detain them. Perhaps when Polly has thought things over a little she will realize we did not intend to wound her so deeply and will remember that she

has probably made mistakes with people sometimes herself. I expect Mollie had better stay all night with me so that she won't have to discuss this question any more to-night."

And at this Polly and Betty both looking a little relieved retired into the hall, where they found their coats and hats and put them on with Meg's assistance, saying good-bye to her politely enough as they started toward home.

It was not necessary, however, for Polly to have to ask Betty not to talk to her on their way to the cabin, for Betty's gift of sympathy and understanding was one of her surest charms. She even explained to Rose and the other girls on their arrival that Polly had developed a headache on the trip back from town and asked to be left alone for the rest of the evening to sleep it off. However, when supper was over, by Polly's request, she asked that Rose would give her a few quiet moments and in those moments she made her friend's and her own confessions. Rose was not quite so angry, or so wholly on Polly's side, as Betty believed she should be. For in the first place Miss Dyer was vexed with the two girls for not having told her of their intentions and suggested that their interview having developed into a joke was perhaps the best way out of it. It was rather an unkind joke, but then Polly took herself far too seriously and in her heart of hearts Rose hoped the young lady might learn a useful lesson through her uncomfortable experience.

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And in a measure Rose's wish was gratified, for Polly did not soon recover from her hurt and shame and did not refer again either to Miss Adams or her own future ambition. Apparently, so far as any one knew, she had given up all thought of it, for she settled down more seriously to the work of the Camp Fire, gaining each month additional honors, and was also working to acquire a prize at school. Of course she had to forgive Mollie her part in her discomfiture; Mollie was so truly repentant once she discovered how deep was her sister's hurt and Polly with all her faults was not one to cherish anger. Then by and by she also made up with Meg, though it was a good many years before she had exactly the same intimate feeling with her as she had with the other Camp Fire girls. In future years it was always Mollie and Meg who were particularly intimate. But there was one person whom Polly could not bring herself to pardon. For the rest of that winter she never again spoke to Billy Webster. He and Mollie remained good friends and sometimes with another girl used to take walks together, so that Polly saw him now and then at the cabin and oftentimes when she was walking or driving through his father's woods. However, though he never failed to raise his hat to her, she always behaved as though he were made of thin air and so impossible for her to behold.

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However, Polly had not given up her ambition in spite of her altered behavior. Nevertheless, the shock to her pride had, though she did not herself realize it, been extremely good for her, making her realize how silly her pretensions must seem to other people. And so through this, and by watching Esther Clark go quietly ahead with her music, working steadily without asking either for reward or admiration, she learned

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several valuable lessons. Besides, Polly was so truly happy in the thought that her beloved mother was to return home early in the spring.

Mrs. O'Neill had written her daughters that she was coming home in April and that she had a wonderful secret to tell them which she hoped they would rejoice in for her sake. She also said that an old Irish uncle had died during her stay abroad and had left to Mollie and Polly a legacy of two thousand dollars each, so that they need have no worry about their education. If it were possible Mrs. O'Neill hoped to see Mrs. Ashton before coming back to America, so that she could bring Betty and Dick a better report of their father's exact condition than letters had yet been able to give them.

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## CHAPTER XVII

### GENERAL NEWS

The final winter months passed peacefully and fairly uneventfully at the Sunrise cabin, with the girls following a regular routine of school and Camp Fire work and receiving new honors at each monthly meeting of their Council Fire. So far Esther Clark, Mollie O'Neill and, strangely enough, Nan Graham, had earned the greatest number of honor beads, for since Nan's unpleasant day at home a new incentive seemed to have been added to her first ambition to make herself an attractive and capable woman. What this incentive was she confided only to her two most admired friends, Rose Dyer and Polly, but by a Polly channel the news also reached Betty Ashton's ears. Nan's former good-for-nothing brother, Anthony, had disappeared, but had written his sister two letters declaring that he was hard at work, keeping straight, and, though he did not wish anyone to know where he was, some day when he could feel that Nan might be proud instead of ashamed of him, meant to come home. In the meantime he urged Nan to stick close to her Camp Fire friends and to work.

Therefore there was only one Wood Gatherer now within the Sunrise club circle and this the small Abbie, whom Dr. Barton and Sylvia had introduced with such an amazing lack of tact on Christmas eve. For several weeks after her arrival the girls had simply permitted her to live on at the cabin enjoying their outdoor life, their healthy diet and watching the faint roses bloom in her cheeks but without the faintest idea of ever asking her to become a member of the Sunrise club. In the first place the child was too impossibly young, a bare thirteen, when most of the other girls were now approaching seventeen and grown-up-ness, and it was an unwritten Camp Fire law that the girls in a single group should be as nearly as possible of the same age. If Abbie had only been as old as her years, but she was not even that, and yet somehow this very babyishness and oddity finally won her admittance to the magic circle paradoxical as it may seem.

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Perchance the club may have needed a baby

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now that "Little Brother" had returned, to live in his own home, anyhow, Abbie, almost before any one was aware of it, was occupying this position. Before her arrival Sylvia Wharton had been the youngest member of the Sunrise club, but there had never been anything particularly youthful or clinging about Sylvia; indeed, she had been about the most independent and self-reliant of the girls and therefore she found it very difficult to understand her own special protégé.

Abbie's name wasn't Abbie at all, but Abigail Faith Abbott, and once the romantic Polly made this discovery, Faith the little girl became to the entire club. Faith had lived a curiously solitary life apart from all other children. It was true her mother kept boarders in a downtown house in old Boston that had once belonged to her great-grandfather, but Faith had been kept away from them as much as possible and because of her ill health had never been allowed to go to school. It was because of her many illnesses that young Dr. Barton took an interest in the child. Her father was dead and her mother too busy with many cares to see much of her, so most of the young girl's life had been spent in a small room at the top of an old house, which had an ever-closed window through which she could look out upon miles of chimney tops with every now and then a more aspiring steeple. So was it much of a wonder that the little lonely girl lived with fancies instead of realities and that as a result of all these things she now looked as though a harsh New Hampshire wind might easily blow her away? The children Faith had played with had never been real children at all, but two little spirit sisters whom she had imaged in her own mind for so long now that she could not remember when first she had thought of them. Nevertheless, it was with them that she constantly played and, if left alone, occasionally she spoke to them aloud. Of course Faith was old enough now to understand the absurdity of this and had made up her mind never to betray herself at the cabin. Yet within a short time after her arrival and because of her dreadful homesickness, Miss Dyer made the discovery. Unfortunately Sylvia, who had taken the little visitor's physical training sternly in hand, also found out the fancy.

Faith did not go into town to school with the other girls, for by the doctor's and Sylvia's advice she was to spend all her time outdoors on the cabin front porch wrapped up in rugs. It was rather cold and dull with only the Sunrise Hill before her, the now frozen lake, where the girls skated in the late afternoons, and the long, dark avenue of pines. However, in the beginning of her experience Faith confessed to herself that she liked the loneliness far better than so many and such amazingly enterprising girls. With an almost desperate shyness she clung to Rose Dyer as the one grown-up person who faintly suggested her own mother and to Sylvia's ministrations she yielded herself without protesting, but for some weeks she never spoke one word to any of the older girls except in answering a question addressed to her. Indeed, when evening came and the others gathered about their log fire to talk, the little stranger used to slip away to be cuddled like a baby in old Mammy's arms until Sylvia, who wished her to retire an hour before any one else and have a special late supper of milk and eggs, would come

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and bear her off to be put to bed.

One morning Rose had been feeling worried at having been compelled to leave Faith so long outdoors alone without even going to the door to speak to her. The guardian's hands had been unusually full that morning with Mammy, who ordinarily helped a little with the work while the girls were away, laid up with rheumatism. Also Rose knew that Max, the big St. Bernard dog who had arrived almost at the same time with Faith, spent most of his time with the little girl, and so she let the whole matter slip her mind until it was time to carry out her midday lunch. Then she smiled a little ruefully as she paused for a moment before opening the front door, wondering if Dr. Barton could guess just how much this child had added to her responsibilities and whether he would care seriously if he did. With his own devotion to looking after the sick (really he seemed totally indifferent to people who were well) doubtless he would take everything as a matter of course. In his visits to the cabin since Christmas certainly nothing more had been said on the subject. Rose laughed and then sighed, pausing with the door to the porch half open and listening. Faith was evidently not alone, for she could distinctly hear her talking to some one although unable to catch any answers.

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"I think perhaps I can keep on bearing it, Anastasia," Faith said in a voice that was only fairly brave, "if only you will stay with me and not let all those strange girls drive you and Gloria away. When they talk so much it seems as though I can't remember you and it makes me want to go *home*."

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Her voice broke and Rose peering out was deeply mystified. The little half-sick girl was plainly alone and plainly dreadfully homesick, but with whom could she be talking?

"I don't mind the Rose one so much, Gloria," she continued, "but Dr. Ned said she was as nice as my mother, even nicer I believe he thought her. Yet he does not even look at her and hardly speaks to her when he comes to visit me." And here Faith dropped her pale face into her small gloved hands and began to cry just as Rose appeared with her lunch.

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Nevertheless, by the exercise of as much tact and patience as Miss Dyer had ever used in her society days to charm the coldest and most obdurate of her critics, finally she managed to persuade Faith to explain to her with whom she had been talking and just who were the mysterious persons Gloria and Anastasia. Of course, with many blushes Faith made her confession, understanding that she was now far too old for any such fanciful nonsense. Yet she did tell Rose with a good deal of pleasure toward the last that the two names represented two older sisters with whom she had been pretending to play ever since she was a baby and who were really dearer to her and more actual than real people. Naturally the new Camp Fire guardian was puzzled over this wholly new problem, with a so much younger girl, and after thinking it over for a long time made up her mind to consult with Dr. Barton. For if ever the little girl were to recover her normal health under their Camp Fire rules she must certainly

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put away her morbid fancies. But the consultation gave the new guardian no satisfaction, appearing to estrange her more than ever from the young physician. For he and Rose disagreed about the method of Faith's cure completely and it was ever the young man's obstinacy that Rose had found it hardest to forgive. Actually Dr. Barton had the stupidity to lecture Faith about her cherished secret and even to betray her to Sylvia, who tried reasoning with her every night while putting her to bed. Fortunately, however, Rose Dyer had not had a colored Mammy for nothing, having grown up on splendid fairy and folk-lore stories, so that by degrees she managed to interest little Faith in the things outside her own mind, in real Camp Fire games and work, and finally in the girls themselves, until, growing less afraid, Faith found Mollie, Polly and Betty better substitutes than the sisters of her dreams. And by and by through their guardian's advice the little girl was permitted to enter the Sunrise club as a Wood Gatherer. There she grew to be more and more faithful to its rules and ideals, until after a while her too vivid imagination seemed to be fairly well under her control. If later in life, however, her fancy was to lead her into strange experiences, soon no one would have guessed it, for March found Faith stronger than ever before in her life and utterly attached to Rose Dyer. Still looking like our little golden haired Christmas angel, Polly once remarked, but like the angel after she had eaten the Christmas dinner.

Nevertheless, though Sylvia fully understood that all Faith's devotion was now bestowed on their Camp Fire guardian, now and then she used to wonder why Faith did not show any liking for her. Certainly she had given her the tenderest physical care, making her follow faithfully every Camp Fire health rule, live outdoors, sleep and eat all she should.

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It was also puzzling to Sylvia, just as it has often been to older persons, why after a few weeks every girl in the Sunrise camp seemed to feel a special affection for little Faith. She never appeared to do anything to try to deserve it, except to be pretty and have curly light hair, big gentle, blue eyes and a timid and appealing manner, while Sylvia, who spent most of her time making herself as useful as possible to her friends, was not particularly loved, not even by Polly. And for Polly O'Neill, Sylvia Wharton's devotion has never for a single instant wavered and never will, even when the future puts it to many difficult tests. For faithfulness to an idea, a conviction or a person will ever be Sylvia's predominant trait of character, and while it may not make her appear on the surface as loving or lovable as some of her companions, it would be well if she could now know that it will be to her the other girls will always turn in after years when they stand in need of sensible advice or even of real practical assistance. And this was to be particularly true of Polly O'Neill in her not very peaceful life, so it was unfortunate that poor Sylvia had now to fight down many pangs of foolish jealousy through seeing that Polly as well as the other girls made a special pet and plaything of the newest comer.

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But if Faith had unconsciously made Sylvia suffer now and then, she also accomplished

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another result. Just at first Betty Ashton had imagined that there might be some unknown bond of interest between Rose Dyer and young Dr. Barton, cemented before Rose's entrance into their club as guardian. But now she gave up the impression, believing thoroughly that Rose found the cold, puritanical young man actually distasteful in spite of his many acts of kindness to the Sunrise Camp Fire girls.

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## CHAPTER XVIII

### DONNA AND HER DON

However, if none of the Camp Fire girls thought of a possible romance between their new guardian and the young physician, now established as the regular visiting doctor at the Sunrise cabin, when the month of March was passing and the New Hampshire snows beginning to show every now and then a tendency toward melting, indicating the return of the ever romantic spring, there was a good deal of carefully whispered discussion about the chief Camp Fire guardian, Miss Martha McMurtry. Their guardian of the preceding summer liked best that the girls should call her by her Camp Fire title, "The Madonna of the Hill," shortened for use into the Italian "Donna." In the first weeks at camp the summer before, Miss McMurtry had seemed to some of the Camp Fire girls a sort of heaven-appointed old maid, a regular born and bred one. As she had lived and worked through the outdoor months with such a variety of girls, gradually this old-maidish appearance had worn off, until now there were actually self-evident reasons for believing that Donna had a real *bona fide* admirer in the person of the poor German gentleman who had rescued Betty and Esther on that memorable December evening in the snow and, through their acquaintance, had since come to know every member of the club.

It is but natural to suppose that the first breath of this suggestion may have been introduced by Esther Clark, since she had best opportunities for making observations. Yet actually it was Betty Ashton who first whispered it to Esther, next to Polly, and afterward it traveled very naturally about the select Camp Fire circle.

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Esther had been continuing her lessons with the German professor once every week since before Christmas. Not that he was a singing master, but he proved to be a thoroughly trained musician who understood the piano almost as well as the violin, so that he was able to give Esther splendid assistance with her piano training so necessary to the singing later on.

And this he insisted on doing without payment in spite of his poverty, showing a very decided interest in Esther's possible future. In spite of her own seriously reduced income, however, Betty had at first suggested that she be allowed to contribute a small sum for the lessons, but Esther had positively refused to accept anything more than her singing lessons from her friend.

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She explained that Herr Crippen said she rendered him sufficient aid in his other work to pay for what he was doing for her, and closing with the more truthful statement that, for a reason which he could not now set forth, he felt particularly hopeful for *das gnädige Fräulein*.

And yet notwithstanding the fact that Betty was extremely grateful to him for his kindness to Esther, from their first acquaintance she had never been able to resist the inclination to make fun of the poor gentleman on every possible occasion, in the face of Esther's open protests, that is, when it could be done without hurting his feelings. Under most circumstances Esther felt that Betty could do no wrong, but her jokes at the Herr Professor's expense made Esther suffer a variety of emotions which she could not exactly explain even to herself. The poor man was so shabby and shy, such an apparent failure in life, without money, position, friends or family, none of the things which Betty still considered absolutely essential. Though she never thought she had betrayed herself, in a way it is just possible that Herr Crippen was all that winter guessing what was going on in regard to him in the back of Betty Ashton's mind. He had a pleading, almost apologetic expression as he gazed into her lovely face as though vaguely asking her not to be too hard in her judgment and to be kind to him if she could.

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Once or twice it is just possible that he asked Miss McMurtry questions about her in his semi-weekly visits to the older Camp Fire guardian, but of this Betty of course had no knowledge.

It was on one Saturday night, when Miss McMurtry happened to be staying at the cabin to afford Rose Dyer a holiday in town, that Betty's suspicions of a possible romance were first aroused. Promptly at eight o'clock that evening the Herr Professor, dressed in his best clothes, made his appearance at the front door, wearing a large clean collar considerably frayed at the ends and a flowing black silk necktie.

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By chance there happened to be but a few of the Sunrise girls at home that evening, for Mollie O'Neill was staying all night with Meg, Eleanor Meade was to remain over Sunday with her mother and Nan had gone home to take her father to church the next day as he had solemnly promised to be her companion. So as Edith had not come out for her regular week-end visit there were only the five girls in camp. However, Sylvia was so busily engaged in seeing Faith to bed that when the Professor arrived there were only Betty, Polly and Esther about to be in the way. Yet half an hour or so after his arrival and in the midst of quite an interesting general conversation Herr Crippen, seeming to be overwhelmed with emotion, suddenly asked Miss McMurtry to take a walk outside with him and this when it was not even a particularly warm or agreeable late March evening.

Betty was a little vexed, for they had just been talking of the old-time history of Woodford, of the names of some of the old families in the town and the immediate neighborhood. This was always a subject of keen interest to Betty, as her own family, the Ashtons, had been among the first settlers in the village and through each generation had furnished some of its most

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distinguished men and women. Indeed, it was Betty's grandfather who had built the orphan asylum where Esther had lived as a child. Consequently, she felt an interest in it for her own as well as Esther's sake when Herr Crippen asked Miss McMurtry if she had not once taught some of the children at the asylum as a kind of practice work before graduating at the Normal School. And directly after this question when Miss McMurtry had quietly answered, "yes," she and her Professor had disappeared out into the moonlight.

Then immediately after this, Esther had slipped over to the piano and presently begun playing over a new Camp Fire song, which Frank Wharton had just sent his sister from headquarters in New York, hearing that the girls were particularly anxious for the latest Camp Fire music. Polly, who had been rather annoyed at the interruption of a visitor, returned once more to the reading of her book, so that it was left to Betty, who was in an idle mood, to wander over casually to the window and there, without the least intention of spying, behold what certainly looked like a very interesting scene.

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Instead of walking up and down outside as the Professor had suggested, Herr Crippen's hands were clasped imploringly together and his face wore a strangely beseeching expression. Indeed, if Betty had been near enough she might have seen actual tears in his eyes as there had been on the Christmas eve when he had his conversation with Esther. The very next instant Betty had of course turned hurriedly away, feeling ashamed of herself for having even innocently seen what was so plainly not intended for her eyes. And yet at the same moment she could not restrain a giggle, a giggle which grew later on into a confession of what she had witnessed. Still as she explained it was merely a suspicion, nothing more, for Betty had not seen how Donna had received the Professor's suit nor did she really know what kind of a question he had asked.

However, when a few days later Miss McMurtry actually asked for a leave of absence from school in order to have a quiet talk alone with Rose Dyer at the cabin, what had been an idle suspicion now looked as though it might be a reality.

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Notwithstanding, the girls had to suffer for some time with ungratified curiosity, since Rose made no mention even of having had an unexpected visit from the older woman. Indeed, she tried to go about her regular Camp Fire work from day to day as though nothing had happened, as though there were nothing of special interest or importance on her mind, but this she did not quite succeed in doing, at least not to the watchful eyes of Betty, Esther and Polly, who were the most interested of the girls. For Rose's face, when she supposed that no one was looking, wore an expression of surprise, of uncertainty and even of worry and uneasiness.

It was odd, Betty thought, why Rose should take Miss McMurtry's love affair so seriously and what could there be in it to trouble over, anyhow? Either Miss Martha did or did not care for the funny old German who must have been fifteen years her senior, and who certainly was

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not a desirable catch from a worldly point of view. It never occurred to Betty that there could be any possibility of love not running smoothly with two such elderly persons.

However, as Rose made no confidences, after a week had passed the whole subject vanished into the background of everybody's minds and most of the girls believed that the whole idea had been a mistaken one from the beginning.

And then one afternoon in the early part of April, Rose called Betty aside and asked her if on the following afternoon she and Esther could meet Miss McMurtry, Herr Crippen and herself in the drawing room at the Ashton house in Woodford. There was a question which had to be discussed and it was not possible to have any privacy at the cabin. Miss Dyer's own house was closed, but a caretaker had been left in charge of the Ashton home, as it was too beautiful a place to remain for so many months unguarded.

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## CHAPTER XIX

### MEMORIES

Betty arrived at her home before her visitors. Esther was engaged for another half hour with a music lesson and besides Betty wished to see that the house was in order for her visitors.

It was a curious sensation to come home alone and to wander from one end of the big house to the other, hearing only the sound of her own footsteps, for Mrs. Mitchell, the caretaker, was in the kitchen preparing afternoon tea to be served the guests a little later, while her husband was working in the yard. Betty had an uncomfortable feeling of desolation, as though she were a kind of a ghost. First she went straight to her mother's room, but there the pictures were covered with sheets, the mattress rolled up, the curtains down, and the tables and mantel so bare of ornament that Betty hurried away to her own blue sitting room across the hall. Would her father and mother never be back? Surely they would both be returning in the early summer when the weather would be less severe upon her father's health and the great house would be reopened as it had always been.

At the cabin with the other girls the time had not seemed so long to Betty, nearly ten months now since their sailing, but here at home why it seemed that years might have passed. A sudden fear clutched the girl's heart—would things ever be quite the same again; did life ever repeat itself in exactly the same old way? And yet Betty had no regrets, only pleasure, that she had been the moving spirit in the first organization of the Sunrise Camp Fire club. How much they had learned in their summer and winter together! And though she might count herself as having learned least of all, yet surely she would never be quite so spoiled and selfish as on that May day when she had accidentally discovered Esther Clark singing the Camp Fire hymn in their formerly deserted back room.

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When her mother returned she would relieve her by taking the care of the housekeeping upon her own shoulders and certainly she would be able to cut down expenses. Now that her father's income was so reduced, this would be a great assistance to him, as Mrs. Ashton had no idea of possible household economies. Betty smiled, not in the least mournfully. There was no thought of any real poverty to be grappled with in her mind. She was only considering in what an unexpected fashion she was going to be able to show to her mother and father the benefits of her Camp Fire training, for which she had plead so earnestly not quite a year before.

The young girl was in her own room at the time of these reflections, seated in her own blue rocking chair with her feet tucked up under her and her chin resting in her hand, looking out her open window at the desolate garden, for this April afternoon was just as cold and uninspiring as that other May afternoon, and there was also no fire in her grate, although downstairs a big blaze had been lighted for the expected company.

That Betty had changed in the past year, her parents would be able to see readily. Really she was prettier than ever; from her outdoor life the color in her cheeks was deeper, her lips a more vivid scarlet and the selfish, sometimes discontented lines about her mouth and forehead had wholly disappeared. Now thinking of her parents return, of how she would be able to prove her love for them by greater devotion to her father in his ill-health; that perhaps he would even teach her something of his business cares and responsibilities since Dick would be so long away completing his medical studies, her expression was very thoughtful and charming and her gray eyes unusually serious. Yet the next instant with a gay laugh Betty jumped to her feet.

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"My goodness, I must hurry downstairs and see how the drawing room looks!" she exclaimed aloud. "I have been forgetting what an interesting interview we are going to have this afternoon! Dear me, I wonder what the trouble is and why Esther and I should be privileged to attend this romantic meeting? Perhaps there is going to be some kind of marriage contract, arranged in German fashion, and Esther, Rose and I are wanted as witnesses. It matters not just so I am allowed in the secret." And Betty started running down the hall.

However, before arriving at the front steps a moment's hesitation overtook her and she paused. The next second she had gone to the end of the passage and stood with her hand on the door-knob of the very room where she had once surprised Esther. But to-day she could hear no sounds of singing on the inside.

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"I am going to peep into Esther's old room; I wonder if she will wish this same one when she comes back to live with us again. Somehow it must affect me like the locked chamber did Bluebeard's wife; there isn't the least reason why I should be peering into this empty place to-day."

The door opened quickly and Betty gave a sudden scream of terror. The room was not unoccupied, some one was kneeling over in a

corner by a closed window.

The figure rose slowly to its feet. "I am sorry, Betty, I didn't mean to frighten you. Really, dear, I didn't dream of your coming in here."

It was Esther Clark. In the half light Betty was now able to distinguish her perfectly. Esther's face was extremely white, there were tears in her large pale blue eyes and her lids were red and swollen. Her big hands worked nervously as they had on that former occasion when Betty had thought her so plain and unattractive looking.

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"Oh, it's you, Esther," Betty exclaimed in relieved tones. "Gracious, how you startled me! But I thought you were taking your music lesson. What in the world is troubling you, child, and how did you get into this house and upstairs without my knowing?"

"I came in through the kitchen and crept upstairs as quietly as possible, since I wanted to be alone here for a few minutes," Esther explained. "Will you please leave me for a little while?"

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"DO AS I TELL YOU, PRINCESS, PLEASE"

"Most certainly not," returned Betty in her most autocratic tones. "If you have anything on your mind that is worrying you, come on downstairs and tell me what it is. You have a dreadful tiresome fashion, Esther, of just hugging your grievances to yourself, when if you just told outright what they were, there would probably be nothing for you to fret about." Betty was annoyed and her tone was far more irritable than usual. Nevertheless, Esther crossed the

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short space between them and taking Betty's lovely face between her hands kissed her two or three times in succession.

"Do as I tell you, Princess, please," she spoke in unusual tones of authority. "I will join you downstairs in a very little while, but I must get back my self-control first."

So there seemed to be nothing left for Betty but obedience, so plainly did Esther appear to know what she wanted. Very slowly the younger girl walked down to the drawing room. "Esther did find it difficult to confide things to people, but usually she was willing to tell them to her," Betty thought. "Well, perhaps her shyness and reticence came from having been raised in an orphan asylum where no one was really deeply interested in her or her personal affairs. Nothing very serious could have happened, however, since Esther had left school only about an hour before."

In the drawing room everything was far more cheerful, the fire was burning, the window blinds were drawn up, the grand piano was open and on it rested a vase of white roses. It was perfectly impossible for Betty Ashton to learn to be economical all at once, and with the thought of a possible betrothal in the house that afternoon she had stopped at a florist's and brought the flowers in with her. Now she could not help feeling a little glow of pride over the beauty of their old drawing room, especially noticeable after the simplicity of the living room at the cabin.

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Feeling rather nervous over the idea that Esther might probably be continuing with her crying upstairs and so unable to take part in the coming interview, Betty walked slowly around the great room studying the portraits of her ancestors,—a favorite amusement with her so long as she could remember. They were stern persons most of them. Betty did not believe that she could ever have such strict views of the difference between right and wrong, be so harsh in her judgments as they had been, but then the world had moved on to a wider vision since those days. One of her great, great uncles had assisted in the burning of witches. Betty turned from this self-righteous looking portrait to the picture of the aunt whom she had always believed herself to resemble, the young woman in the white dress with the big picture hat, then the girl smiled at her own vanity. How absurd to think that she could look like any one so lovely! And yet here was the auburn hair, only a shade more golden than her own, big eyes that were blue instead of gray and a kind of proud fashion of tilting her chin. Very probably Betty had always held her own head in this fashion because she had always so wished to be thought like this special great aunt.

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"Well, it was a good thing to feel a certain pride of ancestry," the young girl thought, "in spite of all of Polly's teasing. Surely the possession of a great name ought to keep one away from littleness or meanness, make one strive to fill an honorable position in the world. If she had not the ability to be a great woman certainly she intended to be a good one. And then the recollection of Esther came to her again. Poor Esther, who had not even a name of her own!

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For this very reason had she not always been more ambitious for her friend than Esther had seemed for herself? If she had no position, no money and no family, Esther did have a real talent and must make a place for herself some day."

But there sounded the first ring at the door bell! Let one hope it was not Herr Crippen arriving first, since, with Esther still upstairs, how could she ever hope to keep him entertained until the arrival of the others? But probably the elderly violinist had never seen anything quite so handsome as their drawing room. Betty had the grace to laugh and then blush over her own foolishness, snobbishness Polly might call it. What did she know of Herr Crippen, his past, what he had seen, where he had traveled in the forty-five years or more of his life?

With a smile of welcome and her hand extended Betty then moved forward toward the door to receive her first guest.

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## CHAPTER XX THE EXPLANATION

However, it only turned out to be Rose Dyer, looking unusually flushed and excited, who kissed Betty rather tremulously and then sat down as though she were out of breath. "I was afraid I would be late," was her explanation.

An instant later there was another ring at the bell and on this second occasion Miss McMurtry and Herr Crippen entered together.

Betty considered that Miss McMurtry looked a little bit agitated, but not remarkably so, just enough if she were really about to announce her engagement. But Herr Crippen, unhappy man, was this the way that love affected the emotional German temperament? His face, which was ordinarily pale enough, was to-day like chalk, his red hair was moist upon his high forehead and his big hands cold as he shook hands with his hostess.

Then the little company arranged themselves in chairs before the glowing fire and remained perfectly silent. Why on earth didn't some one speak? It was her own home, and Betty felt that upon herself devolved the duties of a hostess and yet so plainly in the present instance did it seem to be her place to say nothing until her older guests offered some explanation for their presence.

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"Where is Esther?" Miss McMurtry finally asked, and feeling grateful at having something to do which permitted even an instant's escape from the frozen stillness of the room, Betty jumped up, announcing hurriedly:

"I will get her myself; Esther isn't feeling very well or she would have been down before. She is upstairs in her own room."

Then before she could get away there was an

unmistakable sound of some one approaching and the next moment Esther Clark joined her friends.

She had washed her face and smoothed her hair, but there were still plain traces of recent tears about her and yet no one of the company appeared surprised.

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When Betty had taken her place before the fire again Esther sat down on a stool near her and, not seeming to care in the least about the near presence of other people, took one of Betty's hands in hers as though she were clinging to it for encouragement and support.

"Will you please tell the whole story as slowly and as clearly as you can, Herr Crippen?" Esther then asked. "Miss McMurtry and Miss Dyer both understand about it in a measure, but it will be an entire surprise to Miss Ashton."

In utter amazement Betty, entirely forgetting her manners, now proceeded to stare from one face to the other of her guests. Was this the way to announce a betrothal, and besides what could Esther know of the relation between her music teacher and their first Camp Fire guardian; had she not been as much mystified as the rest of them?

Herr Crippen, clearing his throat, jumped up from his chair and began striding rapidly up and down the length of the great room, talking so rapidly and under the pressure of such great excitement that Betty had almost to strain her ears to catch the real drift of what he was saying.

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"I haf told you before, I haf lived one oder time in Woodford, fourteen, fifteen year ago, but I haf not said for how long I am here nor why I went away," he began hastily. "I haf a very beautiful wife, an American woman. She was not well and we came here to your Crystal Hill country with our babies that she might recover. But she recovered not; instead she was ill so long a time until at last she was *to dt*, dead," he corrected himself, wiping the moisture from his brow with a big pocket handkerchief. "Then I am poor, very poor; I haf spent so much time nursing her and I haf two babies left who must be looked after. I try then to get music pupils, but I haf not much heart, besides are not the babies always there to be kept out of mischief, so where is the time I can work? I must go away, there is noding else and how can I carry the little ones, one under each arm? No, I must leave my children behind."

Esther's blue eyes were gazing steadfastly down at the oriental rug at her feet, but Betty's cheeks were burning with interest and her gray eyes followed the speaker as eagerly as her ears heard him.

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"There is a great house here for little ones I am told, an orphans' home, they call it. Are not my babies orphans, with no mother and a father that has not even food to give them?"

In a flash Betty's arms were about Esther's neck and she was drawing her toward her with an affectionate understanding she had rarely ever before shown her.

"You need not explain any more, Herr Crippen, if

the others already know," Betty Ashton interrupted, "for I think I understand what you are intending to tell me. You left your children at our Woodford orphan asylum and Esther is your daughter, so after all these years have passed you come back to find her. It is very, very strange, I can't quite realize it all yet and here is Esther not looking in the least like a German but inheriting your musical talent, although with her it has taken the form of a wonderful voice." And Betty stopped talking at last to gaze into the fire, too overcome with the surprising mysteries of life to say anything more for the present.

An apparent relief showed itself in the faces of everybody present. Herr Crippen sat down again and Esther left her place for a chair next his.

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"Aren't we going to have some tea, Betty dear, now our surprise party is over?" Rose Dyer inquired, so that Betty came back to herself with a start and crossing the room rang the bell.

The next instant she paused in front of Esther and her father. It was odd that no one had ever thought of it, but there was a kind of likeness between the man and girl, the same red hair and paleness, the same nervous manner, although Esther was far more attractive looking and had learned a great deal more self-control. This afternoon there was an added dignity about Esther, even a nobility, which showed itself in the quiet poise of her head, in the firm lines about her always handsome mouth.

Looking at her friend, Betty Ashton's eyes filled suddenly with tears, for in this moment she was feeling a deeper, a sincerer affection for her than at any time since their acquaintance.

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"But you won't be taking Esther away from me, Herr Crippen?" Betty suddenly pleaded. "She has been a kind of foster sister to me for almost a year and I should be so dreadfully lonely here in this big house without her after the closing of our camp. She has already taught me such a number of things, I don't suppose she can even dream how many! Can't you just let her live on with me and come and see her whenever you like?" Which question showed that Betty Ashton did not realize that circumstances ever could seriously interfere with her dearest wishes.

But the German violinist, while he held his daughter's hand clasped tight in his, slowly shook his head. "For a little while, yes," he agreed, "but after that my Esther she must go away from Woodford. She has *ein grosser* talent than you her friends who do not understand music can know. She must study much, she must do all that I have failed to do. I have a little money, it is enough for the start, after that——"

"But I shall not wish ever to leave Betty or you," Esther here interrupted quietly. "I am not ambitious; I can learn all I shall need to know to earn my living here in Woodford."

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It was hardly the time for argument, as each member of the little company realized, and fortunately at this moment the tea tray made its arrival so that Betty and Esther were both busy in supplying the wants of their few guests. However, when Betty had secured her own cup of tea she brought up a tiny table and placed it between the German professor and herself.



There had not been much time for thought, but in a vague way Betty felt that she wanted to make reparation both to her friend and Herr Crippen for any foolish joking which she had done at the man's expense. Really he was not so bad, now one realized how many misfortunes he had passed through, although he could not have had much strength of character or he would never have let anything persuade him to desert his children.

"You will go with Esther when she has to leave Woodford?" Betty inquired softly, not wishing that any one else should overhear. "Of course when the time comes it wouldn't be fair for me to stand in her way no matter how much we care for one another, but Esther would be far too timid to go alone."

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Herr Crippen shook his head violently. "I cannot leave this neighborhood, nothing can make me until I have accomplished all my purpose, no objections, no arguments." He spoke with such anger that Betty stared in a complete state of mystification. Herr Crippen's voice was not lowered; he gazed with apparent fierceness at Miss McMurtry, whom Betty had supposed until very recently to be the object of his ardent affections.

"I tell you I leave behind two children," he went on, "the one I have found, the other the superintendent at the asylum, my friends, no one will tell me where mine other child is. Adopted they tell me, taken away from here, I have no more a legal right, I should only make unhappiness should I demand my little baby back again."

"You promised me you would not talk of this, father," Esther began in a pleading tone, "you promised me that if I would forget all your past neglect you would find your happiness in me."

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But Betty had risen to her feet and stood frowning with unconscious earnestness at the tall man.

"If your son has been adopted by people who love him and whom he loves and thinks are his parents, then I don't think you have the least right to interfere, Herr Crippen. You went away and left him when he was a little baby to almost any kind of fate. Now you expect him to give up everything and everybody and come back to you, a perfect stranger. I am sure if I were in his place, I should love my adopted parents whom I had always believed to be my own far better than I could ever care for you."

The big German dropped his head on his chest. Rose and Miss McMurtry got up quickly,

"Come, girls, we must be getting back home to the cabin or the other girls will believe we are lost. Run away, Betty, you and Esther, and get your coats and hats."

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But when the five people were leaving the big house together, Betty waited behind for a moment. "I hope I didn't hurt your feelings about your son, Herr Professor," she apologized. "I—I didn't intend to be rude, and I should think just finding a wonderful daughter like Esther might make one happy enough."

Herr Crippen opened his mouth intending to say something but evidently changed his mind as to what it should be. "You are very good, little lady, whom I haf heard your friends call Princess, and I haf no doubt that what you before said to me is most true."

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## CHAPTER XXI

### MISFORTUNE

Several days later Dick Ashton, walking out to the Sunrise cabin from Woodford, unexpectedly caught up with Esther making the same journey. He came up to her side very quickly and with one look in his face the girl gave a cry of dismay. Dick was always serious and yet in spite of his seriousness there was no one with a keener appreciation of humorous situations and people, but to-day his face was drawn and there was a set look about his lips.

"I didn't mean to startle you, Esther," Dick said quietly, "but I am very glad it is you I have met rather than any one of the other girls. I have bad news for Betty."

Did Esther's face for a fleeting instant show surprise and almost alarm?

"It has nothing to do with me, has it?" she asked, but Dick, shaking his head and hardly heeding her question, went on:

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"I have just received news of my father's death and must break it to Betty. It is going to be very hard; Betty has never known anything but happiness and in spite of—in spite of everything, I believe my father loved her almost better than either my mother or me."

After her first exclamation of sympathy Esther continued silent, feeling it wiser to let Dick talk himself out to a sympathetic listener than to pour forth her own regrets.

"It isn't only the loss of my father that Betty and mother will have to endure," he continued, "but the entire loss of my father's fortune. The trouble has been brewing for some time, but a few weeks ago the crash came and it must have hastened the end."

"You don't mean to say they will have nothing?" Esther inquired in a frightened voice. The thought of Betty, whom her friends had always called "Princess" because of her careless generosity, her indifference, her absolute ignorance of the whole money question, now to face poverty without any training or preparation for it,—the thought fairly made Esther gasp, and Dick who had some idea of what was passing in her mind added:

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"Yes, it is pretty rough to bring a girl up to live like a Princess and then suddenly to leave her a pauper. I have always been afraid we have not been quite fair with Betty, maybe it would have been easier for her to have known the truth about things from the beginning. Still it can't be

helped now. But the worst of it is that I know nothing about business either; I have never cared for anything but my profession and it takes a long time for a man to be able to support even himself in medicine until he has had several years of experience at least. I must give it up."

Dick's face went whiter than ever at this and Esther, who in spite of a certain shyness and nervousness when she found herself the center of observation, had a really good judgment and self-control, now replied quietly: "I wouldn't think too much of this now, Mr. Ashton, things are pretty sure to turn out a little better than you feel they can at present and in any case I am sure something will be arranged so that you can go on with your profession. It would be too great a pity, when you have studied so long and are now so near your graduation, to have to give it up."

Dick Ashton looked at Esther gratefully, thinking of how their positions had been reversed in a little less than a year. Had he not, when first he came upon the shy, homely girl among his sister's group of friends, done his best to make her more comfortable, less of a stranger and an outsider, and now he felt strangely strengthened and calmed by her presence and advice. He too saw that there were times when Esther's self-forgetfulness gave her a kind of beauty which was more important than mere lines and color, since it was a beauty that would last far longer.

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So the young people walked on for a little time in silence, until Dick Ashton colored and then hesitated.

"I hope you won't think me rude, Miss Esther, that in my own trouble I have forgotten to congratulate you on having found your father. Betty has written me all about it and I certainly hope it may add to your happiness. I used to wonder even when I was a little boy if you felt very lonely at the asylum without a—a single relative."

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"You wondered about me; then you knew about *me*?" Esther asked quietly, and turned, stopping short in the path to give Dick Ashton a long, quiet look. Something passed between them without words, one of those subtle and silent communications of thought for which there has been no satisfactory explanation. Yet in the instant each one of them knew that the other had guessed his and her secret, or if not quite guessing it, at least had very reasonable foundations for their suspicion.

Dick's formerly pale face crimsoned and he looked down at the ground, beginning to walk slowly on. "We—we thought it best this way, Miss Esther, and still think so. It has been hard upon you perhaps, but isn't it better that one person should suffer than that a number should be made unhappy?" There was almost entreaty in Dick Ashton's voice and at the same time he meant to make no betrayal if Esther did not know what he supposed she might possibly have learned within the past few weeks.

Esther's reply left no room for doubt. "It is best this way now," she answered slowly. "I can't say that I think it altogether fair or just at the beginning. But so far as I am concerned, why

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you need never worry.”

“I wish there were some way in which we could make it up to you, but we have nothing now to be of any assistance to anybody. It is what my mother meant in a measure when——”

Esther nodded. “I understand and there is no need of talking about repaying me. Betty has already done more than that and there is nothing in the world I would not do or give up for her sake. I care for her more than she may ever know.”

His companion’s voice trembled so that Dick feared she might be losing her self-control and knew that they had a hard enough task before them.

They were not very far from Sunrise cabin now and feared that at any moment Betty Ashton might come out to meet them, since Dick had telegraphed that he was coming to see her on important business in order that she might be a little bit prepared for what was to follow.

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“It is a pretty dark road for all of us just now, Miss Esther, but some day perhaps without our having to make the decision things will right themselves *somehow*,” he returned kindly.

And at this instant the young man and girl discovered Betty flying along the path in their direction. It was a fairly warm April afternoon and she wore her blue cape, the cape which Esther remembered so well during the spring of her own coming to the big Ashton house. She had on no hat and her hair was tied back in a loose bunch of red-brown curls.

Evidently Betty had suspected no trouble from Dick’s telegram (Betty and trouble were so far apart these days), for she laughed and waved both hands in joyous welcome at her brother’s approach.

“Where did you two people find one another? I believe it was all arranged beforehand and Dick Ashton’s visits to our cabin are quite as much to see Miss Esther Clark—Crippen I meant to say—as they are to see poor little me.” Betty had always enjoyed teasing Esther and now she expected this silly remark of hers to make her friend blush and scold, but Esther seemed not to have paid the least attention, not even to have heard her. And in the same instant Betty guessed that something serious had occurred.

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Her expression changed instantly. Betty looked suddenly older and unlike any one had ever seen her look before.

She took her brother’s hand. “Never mind, Dick, I think I know already,” she whispered, and unexpectedly it seemed to be Dick who was having to be upheld and consoled.

Esther slipped silently away, leaving the brother and sister together in their sorrow, and somehow in her loneliness she felt almost envious of them in the closeness of their grief.

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## CHAPTER XXII

### SAYING FAREWELL TO THE CABIN

"For my part," announced Polly O'Neill, "I am not so heart-broken as I expected at having to say farewell to Sunrise cabin. It is so different for us all, with the Princess not here and having to think of her back home in their big house with only her mother and one little maid of all work. To think that I used to tell the Princess I thought she ought to be poor a little while just to find out what it felt like! I could cry my eyes out now when I realize that it has actually come true."

It was the May meeting of the Sunrise Council Fire and because it was to be the last meeting for some time which might be held on their old camping grounds, the girls and their guardian had decided that it should take place outdoors and that at the close of their regular program there should be, a general talk over the history of the past year.

Esther rose quietly at this speech of Polly's, partly because she seemed to wish to find relief in action and then because the May night was cold, and put several fresh pine logs on their already glowing fire.

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"You must not think I am ungrateful, Rose dear," Polly continued. "This winter has been to me the most wonderful one, sometimes I think the turning point in my whole life, but if Betty is going to be trying to take boarders in that big Ashton house to support herself and her mother and let Dick finish his medical studies, why I think Mollie and mother and I had better be back in our own tiny cottage to give her our valuable advice."

"But Betty won't be keeping boarders herself, will she? I thought it was Mrs. Ashton who was to look after things with Betty to help," Nan Graham spoke in a kind of awed tone. "Still it wouldn't seem very nice of us to keep on living here in our cabin, which Betty did a great deal more toward building than the rest of us, if she were not here to share it."

Mollie shook her head decidedly, so that the feathers of her Indian head-dress made fantastic small shadows on the ground. "I don't think that would matter in the least and certainly not to Betty," she said in her sensible, far-seeing fashion. "Betty would love to think of our being here and she would come and visit us whenever it were possible, but circumstances seem to have changed for all of us. Here is mother coming home from Ireland and Polly and I will want to keep house for her and look after things while she is at work just as we have always done, and then Mrs. Meade says she isn't willing for Eleanor to be away from her any longer, and Nan feels she ought to go home and help her mother with the younger children, and Esther going away after a while to New York to study. Dear me, what changes a few months can bring! I am glad they have not brought such big ones to us, Polly."

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Sylvia Wharton had been in the act of wrapping a white woolen shawl about the small Faith, who was cuddled close to Rose Dyer, but now she

stopped and stared hard at Mollie and then at Polly with an apparently wooden expression of face.

"What makes you feel things won't be different for you and that your mother will go back to work?" she stammered, feeling their guardian give a little warning tug at her dress but unable to change the form of her question once it had taken a start in that way in her mind.

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However, both the sisters only laughed, Polly exclaiming in an amused tone: "Of course we don't know anything definitely, oh Sylvia, in this world of surprises, but merely that present indications point the way Mollie has just mentioned." Fortunately, Polly, who was usually quick as a flash to follow up any suggestion, had her mind on other than her own affairs to-night.

"Esther," she continued the next moment, "this is a kind of confessional to-night, or at least it may be if we girls decide that we are willing to confide in one another (autobiography is so much more interesting than history anyhow), so I wonder if you would mind telling us why you changed your mind so suddenly about going away from Woodford to study. At first you said nothing in the world would persuade you to go and then all of a sudden, after Betty's misfortune, when it looked as though you might be a help to her, you determined to leave. Don't answer me if you don't like, Esther, I know you have a perfectly good reason. Of course *I* change my mind without a reason, but you don't."

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Esther now felt that the eyes of all the members of the Camp Fire circle were fixed upon her and that many of them held the same question that Polly had just so frankly asked.

For a moment she hesitated, looking a little appealingly at Miss McMurtry and then at Rose Dyer. Rose nodded her head.

"I would tell just what I felt, Esther, as far as you can," Rose recommended. "It is only fair to you that Betty's dearest friends should understand your position, even though you would rather that Betty herself should not know. I feel you can trust them to keep your secret."

Esther wound the seven strings of honor beads into a single chain before she spoke. "It sounds rather absurd of me and pretentious I know," she began slowly; "of course I have a great many reasons in my mind why I feel it best for me to go away from Woodford right now and the most important one I cannot tell, but there is another which perhaps I have the right to let you try to understand. I am not deserting Betty just when she seems to need me most; it is because Betty now is poor and some day I may be able to help her if I do go away and succeed with my music that I am willing to go. You see Betty has done such a lot for me and has wanted to do so much more and—and—" Esther could not continue with her confession, but it was hardly necessary, for rising from her place Polly marched solemnly around their circle and sitting down by Esther put her arm about her neck.

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"I understand you perfectly now, Esther, though I want you to believe that no one of us has ever doubted you. You are too unselfish and too unworldly to care to make a big success in the

world with your talent if it is only for yourself, but the thought that maybe you can some day bring back wealth and happiness again to the Princess makes most any effort worth while?"

Esther bowed her head, too full of emotion to answer Polly's question in words.

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"I supposed I cared for Betty a lot, I have known her so much longer than you have," Polly went on thoughtfully, "but I don't half love her as you do, Esther, even in this little while. I suppose it is because you haven't any relatives of your own and your father is still so new to you. But didn't you have a baby brother or some one long years ago——?"

Polly's remark was never finished because Miss Dyer now got up quickly. Because the evenings were so cool the May Council Fire had started early and though it was well nigh over, there was still a faint reflection of daylight.

"I thought I heard the wheels of a wagon several moments ago," she explained, "and now I think I can see Dr. Barton's buggy being driven this way. I wonder what in the world he can want with us at this time of the evening? Polly, will you come back to the cabin with me to see."

The Council Fire was being held at no great distance from the Sunrise cabin, but perhaps it was Rose Dyer's purpose at this moment to separate Polly and Esther.

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Of course Polly followed with entire willingness, but a few feet from their door, seeing Dr. Barton's buggy draw nearer and that it held two occupants instead of one, her face crimsoned and she bit her lips to control her vexation. She was returning to join the girls when Dr. Barton's voice called after her: "Don't go away, Miss O'Neill, please, our call is upon your sister and you. I was driving through the woods and found Mr. Webster with a telegram which had been telephoned to the farm and which he was bringing out to you and I offered to give him a lift."

Although neither of the two young men had received any invitation to alight, they both got out of the buggy and both wearing somewhat crestfallen expressions, stood gazing at the two young women.

"I will call Mollie," Polly declared stiffly, drawing back from Billy's hand which held a square of paper in it.

"You need not speak to me, Miss O'Neill, simply because I happen to be your messenger boy," the young man said as haughtily as Polly could have spoken. "And you need not feel any contamination at accepting this message from me. The telegram was telephoned out to our farm and my mother wrote it down, so I haven't the faintest idea what the paper contains."

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Without showing any further signs of recognizing the speaker, Polly reached for the paper, but the next instant her frightened cry for Mollie brought her sister, Sylvia Wharton, and half a dozen other persons to her side. "I must have read it wrong, it is so dark, or your mother must have made some mistake!" Polly cried, forgetting her policy of silence in her agitation.

And then standing with a white face and clenched teeth she watched Mollie read the message.

Mollie did not betray any great grief or anger, only a considerable amount of surprise, so that Polly for an instant believed her own eyes must have deceived her.

"Why, I can't quite understand it," Mollie said aloud, seeing the puzzled group of faces around her. "Mother telegraphs that she and Mr. Wharton, Sylvia's father, have been engaged to be married for the past few months and that she was coming home to tell us about it and to ask us if we were willing, but something has happened or else Mr. Wharton has just persuaded her, for they are married already and are sailing for home to-morrow. Mother says she is very happy and hopes we will forgive her and be almost as overjoyed as she is in coming home to us. At least that is what I think the cablegram means. Billy was mistaken in thinking it a telegram. How do you feel, Polly dear? I am too dazed to take it all in."

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"I feel," said Polly, with a return to her old passionate, uncontrolled manner, "that I shall never be happy again as long as I live." And then observing a slow, hurt look in Sylvia Wharton's usually unmoved face, she turned for an instant toward her. "I don't mean to hurt your feelings, Sylvia, or to say anything against your father, but it just isn't possible for you to understand what this means to me." And with this thoroughly Polly-like point of view she ran away and hid herself inside the cabin.

Billy Webster walked off with Mollie and the other Camp Fire girls to talk things over, giving Dr. Barton a chance to linger for a few moments with Rose Dyer.

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"I don't know why you seem so offended with me these days, Miss Rose," that young man was soon saying in rather an humble voice for so stern and upright a judge of other people's duties, "but may I say that I think your work among the Camp Fire girls this winter has been quite wonderful and that I never dreamed you could or would be interested in anything outside of society? Oh, Rose——"

"Rose of the World," Rose Dyer finished in a slightly mocking tone, which did not show whether or not she had forgiven the young man's former opinion of her.

However, he was obstinate and so would not be interrupted. "Oh, Rose of a Thousand Leaves," he ended for himself.

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## CHAPTER XXIII

### FUTURE PLANS

"It was Sylvia who really arranged things for me," Polly explained confidentially.

The girls were in Betty Ashton's own blue room,



having said good-bye to Sunrise cabin and turned their backs upon it for a time at least. But the cabin had been left ready to receive its owners at any time when they might be able to come back to it and week-end parties and Council Fire meetings were often to take place there, besides more important events which the girls could not well anticipate now.

But to-day was Betty Ashton's birthday and although she was in too deep mourning for any kind of gayety, her Camp Fire friends had planned to stop by her house during the afternoon to leave little gifts for her, along with their best wishes. And Mollie and Polly O'Neill had arrived first.

"I shall miss you terribly, Polly," Betty returned wistfully; her bright color had gone in the last few weeks and there were slight shadows under her gray eyes. "Still I feel sure that under the circumstances it is best for you to go. You are too restless anyhow to have wanted to stay in Woodford and the new life with the new people and sights will make you much happier. You will probably have a good deal of liberty at a New York boarding school and you'll be able to go to the theater now and then and do many of the things you will like. But Mollie and I hope you will come back for Christmas and will write us pretty often."

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Polly looked thoughtfully from her friend to her sister. "I know I am an absolutely selfish person and I would rather neither one of you would even attempt to deny it. I am not leaving my home though simply because I am restless. The truth is I simply can't get used to mother's being married to Mr. Wharton and to living in their great ugly house instead of our own beloved cottage. I don't like Frank Wharton and though Mr. Wharton is very kind and wants to do everything for Mollie and me, he is one of those dreadfully literal persons, so I am afraid we never will understand one another."

"But you used to say, Polly, that you were tired of our small house and that you wanted to live in a big one with lots of money and servants. And now you have it you are dying to get away." And Mollie sighed, for the thought of being parted from her sister even as far away as the next fall, was very hard to bear, and yet she would not leave her mother, since for both of her daughters to go away would look like a reflection upon her marriage.

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"Heigh, ho!" laughed Polly. "Perhaps I have made some such statement in the past but I suppose I wanted to get rich in my own little way, like I wish to do everything else. And *in*consistency, which is not a jewel, is certainly Polly O'Neill. But don't let's talk about me any more, it's Betty's birthday. However, I would like to register this statement— Sylvia Wharton is the most extraordinary person I ever met. And what Sylvia starts out to do in this world she'll do. It was Sylvia who saw I wasn't happy in her home, Sylvia who talked things over first to me, and then suggested my departure to mother and her father. And though our parents were both horribly opposed to the idea at first, Sylvia brought them around without any arguments or excitement simply by continuing to make plain statements of the facts."

"Well, the wheel of fortune we hear so much about has truly turned, dear, and you're rich and I'm poor and now we must wait to see what will happen next," Betty remarked, hearing a faint knock at her bedroom door and moving forward to open it, but in passing she stopped and kissed Polly lightly on the forehead. "Don't look as though you were the wheel, Polly child, and had made the changes. I am not going to be half so miserable being poor as you girls think I will. Just think of how much more self-respecting I am going to feel if, when I go to bed some night, I can say to myself: 'Betty Ashton has earned her salt to-day.'"

Betty now opened her door and there on the threshold stood Rose Dyer with a bunch of pink roses and Faith with a pot of lemon verbena in her hand. Faith was not yet well enough to go home to the boarding house in Boston, so Miss Dyer had brought her to her own home in Woodford, where she and Mammy were still to look after the odd child.

On the arrival of Polly and Mollie a few moments before, Betty had not been in the least surprised. The two girls usually ran in to see her every afternoon now and had been giving her birthday presents for nearly as many years as she could remember, but when Rose and Faith also appeared she realized that the members of the Sunrise club might all be coming in to see her during the afternoon in just this same quiet fashion. And the next instant she was convinced when Sylvia solemnly appeared with a box of candy, which she thrust awkwardly at her.

"It's against our Camp Fire rules to eat candy, Betty, and I don't approve of it or like it very much myself, but I couldn't think of anything else to bring when Polly and Mollie went off without me; and there won't be enough to make so many people sick."

During the laughter over Sylvia's remark, Nan Graham walked shyly in through the now open door, bearing a loaf of cake.

"I couldn't bring a real present, Betty," she explained with far more grace and sweetness than one could have dreamed possible of so rough and untrained a girl the year before, "but this is the kind of cake you used to like when I made it at the cabin and I thought you wouldn't mind eating a piece on your birthday for old times' sake."

Feeling a sudden rush of emotion, Betty gave Nan a swift embrace and then excusing herself from her friends for a moment slipped out of the room for two purposes: she wanted to find her mother and make her join her friends and she wanted to prepare a great pitcher of lemonade for her guests, for Betty was neither foolish nor selfish in her sorrow, and if her friends had come to her to bring their good wishes, she desired that the afternoon might pass as pleasantly as possible.

Things had not gone quite so badly with the Ashton fortune as Dick Ashton had originally feared, although conditions were surely bad enough. For Mrs. Ashton still had the house and Betty a small income settled on her by Mr. Ashton years before as a dress allowance, which now had to cover many other needs. For the

completion of Dick's medical course there were several thousand dollars that an aunt had left him as a legacy when he was only a small boy and to use the capital in this way now seemed the wisest investment he could make. To keep the big Ashton house and try and make it yield an income was perhaps not quite so wise, but this had been Betty's dearest desire, and her mother and brother had agreed to it for her sake. To give up the home of her ancestors, to see the beloved old portraits stored away in some one's attic or stuck up in a small room where they would seem absurdly out of place, Betty felt that she could bear everything, do anything if only their old home remained! And so she was allowed at least to try the experiment of renting rooms or taking boarders, whichever might turn out the simpler plan.

But when Mrs. Ashton was finally persuaded to join Betty's friends, it was fairly plain that the greater part of the planning and work for the future must fall upon Betty and not her mother, for Mrs. Ashton looked dazed by misfortune and was already a semi-invalid, querulous and rebellious against more evil fortune than she had character or health to withstand. It was no wonder therefore, that even Betty's best friends doubted whether she would be able to meet the responsibilities that had so unexpectedly come upon her, although rejoicing that a year of Camp Fire training found her far better prepared than most girls of her age and position.

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Esther had been sitting in the room with Mrs. Ashton when Betty found them, as the older woman seemed to enjoy the society of her daughter's companion more than any one's else these days, so the two girls soon brought the lemonade back to Betty's room. In her absence Betty found that her writing table had been cleared and was now decorated with Rose's flowers, Nan's cake and Sylvia's candy, with sandwiches which Meg had just brought in and which "Little Brother" was rapidly devouring, and with a little pile of gifts at the head. Betty's eyes filled with tears, but instinctively her hands flew toward a small square of canvas that stood facing her leaning against one of her candlesticks. It was a painting of the Sunrise cabin which Eleanor had made after Betty had returned home and quite the best piece of work she had ever done. The painting had been made in the dawn and the colors of the sunrise flooded the log cabin, touching the tops of the tall pines standing a little in the foreground and making a crown of light for the high peak of the Sunrise Hill.

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"It is too lovely; I ought not to have it," Betty exclaimed, extending her picture toward Miss McMurry, for she and Edith Norton had at this moment joined the party; but seeing that their first Camp Fire guardian shook her head, Betty then turned to Rose Dyer. "Oughtn't you to have it then, Rose, and let the Sunrise Camp Fire girls just come in and look at it now and then?"

But at this Eleanor Meade laughed. "Look here, Princess, we all know your passion for giving away your possessions, but do you think you ought to thrust my gift upon some one else while I am standing here watching you? I would like humbly to mention that I painted that picture of the Sunrise cabin for your particular birthday

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gift and that I would prefer to have you keep it."

"And I would like to add," said Miss McMurtry, with an affectionate, even an admiring glance toward the Betty for whom she had once felt so keen a disapproval, "that among us there is no one with quite the same claim upon whatever has to do with our Sunrise club as Betty Ashton. For though she may have forgotten, we have not, that it was to Betty's enthusiasm and a great deal to her efforts that we owe the organization of our club." The chief guardian now leaned over, lighting three candles on Betty's tea table—"Work, Health, Love."

"We wish you all the good things that following the law of the Camp Fire may bring you, Betty dear," she whispered.

"Seek beauty  
Give service  
Pursue knowledge  
Be trustworthy  
Hold on to health  
Glorify work  
Be happy."

While the older woman was speaking, Esther had slipped quietly over to Betty's own piano, which had been brought home from the cabin to her room, and now in order to relieve the atmosphere of emotion which was making ordinary conversation impossible at this moment, she commenced singing her own and Betty's favorite Camp Fire song, the other girls joining in an instant later.

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"Lay me to sleep in sheltering flame,  
O Master of the Hidden Fire,  
Wash pure my heart and cleanse for me  
My soul's desire.  
In flame of sunrise bathe my mind,  
O Master of the Hidden Fire,  
That when I wake, clear-eyed may be  
My soul's desire."

And before the song had ended, half a dozen of the girls in the room at least were wondering whether they were any nearer to the all-important knowledge of what their soul's desire might be.

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\* \* \* \* \*

A year the Sunrise Camp Fire girls have tried living and working together, following to the best of their different abilities the Camp Fire law, but while the third volume in this series will show them still under its influence, they will be pursuing their own careers under utterly different circumstances in a story to be called: "The Camp Fire Girls in the Outside World."

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