

MABEL L. TYRRELL



THE
ENCHANTED
CAMP

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Alice looked up at her big brother (page [41](#))

THE
ENCHANTED
CAMP

A STORY FOR GIRLS

BY
MABEL L. TYRRELL

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THE ENCHANTED CAMP

CHAPTER I

HOW IT STARTED

YEARS later, when they were grown up, and Dan was Chancellor of the Exchequer—Dan of all people!—they would meet sometimes, and talk about that camp, and they all came to the conclusion that it had *really* been enchanted.

Especially did they remember that second night when Alice was trying to put the fire out, and the sparks flew like bits of live gold towards the dead oak on which the ferns grew. Ah, if they had only guessed then! Little pudding-faced Alice with “grubs” on her stockings—that is, badly darned holes all cobbled up. Alice was as little like a wraith or a wood nymph as it was possible to be, yet without her the Enchanted Camp would have been incomplete. And the funniest thing of all was that while they were there they did not know that it was enchanted, though there were times when they thought it might be—they had only treated it as a joke. But it was after they had gone home, and started their thrilling, wonderful lives afresh, that they knew for certain that their camp had been under a spell.

That is the strange thing about enchantment. You do not always recognize it till it has gone, and then you look back upon it and think how wonderful it was.

And it started in the most commonplace way. Rosina Stewart had measles, which left her looking very washed-out; John Craig failed to win a scholarship, which left him very work-up—not to say bad tempered—and the Howards were what Dan termed “down in the mouth” because their parents were obliged to go to India and leave them in the charge of Miss Ernestine Howard, who was their aunt, also the Craigs’ aunt. You see the Craigs and the Howards were first cousins.

Now Miss Ernestine Howard was a brisk, energetic lady, and when she saw Rosina’s white face—Rosina was her godchild and no relation to any of them—and John Craig’s grim mouth, and Virginia Howard’s pathetic eyes, she knew at once that something must be done, otherwise the summer would be a complete failure. She had no intention of having a crowd of moping nephews

and nieces wandering round her trim garden in a perpetual state of nothing-to-do, and as she had invited the three Craigs to spend their holidays with her, she determined that by hook or by crook she would make John forget his bitter disappointment—she refused to call it bad temper—which acted as a damper on all the others, and in rather an off-hand way she suggested camping out for a week or two. They simply jumped at it!

“They” were Virginia Howard, aged eighteen, and her brother Lyn, a boy of fifteen; the three Craigs, John, Dan, and Alice, aged respectively sixteen, fourteen, and ten; and lastly Rosina Stewart, a girl of about Lyn’s age, whom none of them knew very well, but for whom Miss Ernestine had a very tender corner. Rosina had a stepmother, and also a very bad habit of looking on the blackest possible side of things. Miss Ernestine made up her mind to change all that, but it was the Enchanted Camp which really did it.

Miss Ernestine made her suggestion one summer’s evening when the rain beat dismally against the windows of her rather prim drawing-room, and her well-kept tennis lawn gleamed like a pond in the twilight. Not a very auspicious night for mentioning camps and caravans! Her three nephews and two nieces lounged uncomfortably on hard chairs, for there was nothing in the shape of a sofa or cushion in Miss Ernestine’s severe house, and the five of them sat up as if they had been electrified, though John felt obliged to say that if Aunt Ernestine was tired of them, and wanted to drown them, she was setting about it in the right way.

“Nonsense,” replied Miss Ernestine. “The glass is rising.”

Then Virginia burst out laughing.

“How beautifully blue the sky!” sang Virginia. “The glass is rising very high, and people say, I know not why, that we shall have a fine July!”

During her last term at school Virginia had taken a leading part in *The Pirates of Penzance*, for she had a sweet voice which rang like a little silver bell, and now, as she sang, her eyes brightened, and her mouth smiled mischievously. Virginia was very gay, and extremely capable when she forgot to be pathetic. She thought pathos suited her style of beauty, but she found it very difficult to keep up the pose which she had assumed since her eighteenth birthday.

“Camp out?” said Dan, as if speaking to himself. “I wonder how much it’ll cost. A jolly good idea, but who’s going to pay for it, Aunt Ernestine?”

“We’ll send round the hat!” cried Lyn. “Or have a house to house collection! Did you ever see any one like Dan? No matter what you speak of,

stars or potatoes, he brings it down to L.S.D. You're qualifying for a miser, Dan, that's what you're doing."

"No," answered Dan—he never allowed Lyn to ruffle his excellent temper—"but I like to know where I am."

"You can all give a little of your pocket-money towards the general expenses," said Miss Ernestine, "but I'll stand Sam for the initial outlay."

Her speech was another queer thing about Miss Ernestine. She looked so prim and proper in her everlasting coat and skirt of blue serge, white blouse, and frizzled grey hair neatly encased in a net, that her speech did not seem to go with her appearance. There were occasions on which she used slang, but if she heard her nieces doing likewise she was down on them like a ton of bricks, as Dan would say. A funny mixture was Miss Ernestine; Alice was said to resemble her.

"Do you really mean it, Aunt Ernestine?" asked Virginia. "Oh, how lovely it would be to camp out if only the weather were fine! I've never done it, but I should love to. We'd want tents and things, wouldn't we?"

"Three tents," said Miss Ernestine decidedly. "And I should hire them. One for myself, one for the boys, and one for the three girls. Does any one know how to put up a tent?"

"Who's the third girl?" asked John suspiciously.

"I shall write and ask my goddaughter Rosina to come with us," said Miss Ernestine. "She wants a change, and it will be much better for you all to have an outsider among you. Rosina's a sweet girl."

Thereupon John made up his mind to dislike her; if she were a "sweet girl" she would certainly be horrid, and he said so, and also that he didn't see why they should have anybody but just themselves, and the precious Rosina would only be in the way, etc. But nobody took any notice of John, and Miss Ernestine repeated her question regarding tents.

"Oh, I can do it!" cried Virginia. "A few strings, you know, and a few pegs to knock in the ground, and a pole in the middle! Easy as pie! And we'll want oil stoves and spirit lamps."

"Indeed we shall want nothing of the kind," replied Miss Ernestine. "No oil stoves for me. We'll have camp fires; trenches cut in the ground, and we'll burn wood. I'm not going to run the risk of setting England alight."

"Where shall we go?" asked Alice.

Alice had the most irritating knack of asking obvious questions. Everything that Alice did, said, or asked was always what somebody else was going to say, do, or demand, only they did not think of saying so until after Alice had said it. Alice sat on the floor with her round face shining like a rouged apple dumpling, and her podgy hand posed carelessly over a lumpy “grub” just below her knee. She was not anxious for Miss Ernestine to see the “grub,” because she was a little tired of being told that her general appearance was a disgrace to the family. Alice did not speak much; indeed she had said nothing at all since camping had been mentioned, and now she must go and ask that question which had been on the tip of every one else’s tongue.

“I was just going to suggest the marshes at Winchelsea,” replied John. “Don’t breathe so heavily, Alice. It’s not ladylike.”

“Marshes!” exclaimed Virginia. “Full of ditches and sheep that will come wandering into the tents at night and scare me to death! We couldn’t possibly camp on a marsh.”

“There’s the river,” said Lyn. “Let’s have a covered-in boat as well as tents, then we can go to all the regattas. Virginia will like that because she can put on glad rags, and bask about like a lady with Japanese umbrellas and things!”

Then Virginia threw a cushion at her brother, and Miss Ernestine was obliged to ask them to refrain from horse-play in her drawing-room, and declared that the river was too damp for her. So Dan suggested the Welsh hills. But apparently there was no place in the United Kingdom suitable for camping out. There was something the matter with every spot. If it happened by chance to please both the Craigs and the Howards, it had some outstanding and horrible defect in Miss Ernestine’s estimation. Then Dan suggested Piccadilly Circus, and John the North Pole. When things reached this point Alice spoke.

“There’s the New Forest,” she said.

They all looked at Alice as if they had never, never seen her before; none of them could bring themselves to say that they had just been going to suggest the New Forest, because it was the one spot in England they had forgotten to mention. Of course the child must be doing William Rufus at school, otherwise her brain could not have expressed so inspired a proposition. But Alice did not understand their looks at all, and, making a great effort, she tried to explain more clearly.

“The New Forest,” she said, nodding her head of straight bobbed hair. “I think it’s in—er—Hampshire. You know—William Rufus was killed there. Sir Walter Tyrrell was out hunting with him, and he drew his bow, and the arrow

struck an oak, and it went right through the king's heart and killed him dead."

"Fancy an oak going through a king's heart," said John. "He must have been large hearted, Alice."

"But it was the arrow that went through his heart," explained Alice, who never perceived her brother's sarcasm. "And we could take Sennacherib."

Then they all began talking together. Of course they would go to the New Forest. The New Forest was the only place fit for a camp, and it had been at the back of their minds all the time, only they had forgotten it in the heat of the moment. Virginia said that without knowing it, in fact subconsciously, she must have conveyed her idea to Alice. But Alice didn't know anything about Virginia's subconscious mind; she only knew that she wanted to go to the New Forest, and it looked very much as if they were going to do so.

Alice did not say another word while they talked of tents and permits, and Miss Ernestine unearthed from the back of her brain some old gentleman she had known years ago when she was a girl, and who owned something or other in the New Forest, and to whom she promised to write before the ten o'clock post went out. Then they spoke of pots, pans, provisions, straw for mattresses, candles, and electric torches, and a most delightful but creepy sensation came over Alice, and caused her to gasp a little. She conjured up visions of immense trees, and bits of star-spangled sky peeping in through tent flaps, and a shadow or two lurking in the ferns and heather. Perhaps the spirit of William Rufus might take the air on a fine night, or the ghost of Sir Walter might come back and go through the whole performance of the arrow and the oak again, and try and find out whether he had really meant to kill the king, or if it were just an accident. Alice shuddered; they must certainly not go too near the Rufus Stone.

"We mustn't go too far in," said Alice suddenly. "It would be such a long way to carry water, and—er—er—we might get lost."

"I was just going to mention water," said Dan. "It is one of the most important things in a camp. Drinking water, and washing water. We must be near a well, or a house of some kind where we can go every day and fill our pails. I'll take on the water supply if you like. I'd rather do a bit more work than be poisoned through drinking stagnant pools."

"Well, you needn't look at me like that, Dan!" cried Virginia. "I'm not going to make you drink stagnant pools. And Alice is quite right about not going too far in; she might get lost, and it would worry us all terribly if we were always thinking about Alice getting lost."

"Oh, she'll get lost all right wherever we go," smiled John. "She always

does. Alice is the sort of girl who gets lost in her own drawing-room, you know. Creeps round the curtains to water the plants on the window-sill, and doesn't recognize her own piano when she comes out on the other side. Nothing will prevent Alice from getting lost. Anyway, I'll drive you down in Sennacherib."

Thereupon Virginia was out of her chair like a flash of lightning; waving her arms like an animated windmill she began talking at a terrific rate. Father had strictly forbidden any one to lay a finger on Sennacherib but herself. Sennacherib only held together by the intervention of some mysterious and beneficial force, and if John touched him he'd fall to bits, and no power on earth could ever give them a new Sennacherib. Virginia had known Sennacherib all her life, and his queer little ways were as familiar to her as the inside of her own pocket; she loved him, she was terribly proud of him, she and her father had spent hours and hours in the garage operating upon Sennacherib, renewing bits of his inside, polishing his magnificent brasses, touching up his immense crimson body scarred by many wounds, and she alone would drive him.

"You are only sixteen, John," she finished breathlessly, "and I shouldn't *dream* of letting you touch Sennacherib! Father trusted him to me, and said that neither you nor Lyn were to interfere. You can wash him down for me, and Dan—as a great treat—can see to the petrol as well as the water supply, but I'm the only one who drives Sennacherib!"

"Don't get so excited, Virginia," said Miss Ernestine severely when she could get a word in. "Sennacherib's more bother than he's worth, and I know he'll go off with a pop one day and leave us all stranded on the highroad. Nevertheless if he can carry us, and some of our paraphernalia, to the New Forest, and run into Lyndhurst now and again for provisions, he'll be worth his keep. And of course you'll drive—I wouldn't trust myself to any one else."

Virginia sat down, pacified, and they got out papers and pencils, and made lists. Alice walked away; she thought she had sixpence somewhere, but she wanted to make sure. She had an idea that she could buy a book on how to put up tents for sixpence.

CHAPTER II

SENNACHERIB AND OTHER THINGS

SENNACHERIB stood on the well-raked gravel outside Miss Ernestine's highly polished front door like a triumphant monarch in the midst of a battlefield. Around him were recumbent tents, and what appeared to be numerous dead bodies, which, on closer inspection, proved to be bundles of blankets and ground sheets.

Virginia, with her yellow hair flying out from her head like little wings, and the sleeves of her orange-coloured jersey rolled up above her elbows, darted hither and thither between the house and Sennacherib, talking a great deal, and doing—as far as the others could see—nothing. Alice plodded steadily backwards and forwards carrying frying-pans, pounds of sugar, a ham done up in paper, enamelled teapots, and numerous other oddments; she said nothing at all, but breathed heavily.

John and Lyn busied themselves packing Sennacherib, and Dan had gone to the station to meet Rosina. John said that Rosina would appear loaded with hatboxes and trunks, and he didn't know where they were to be put, or Rosina either. Miss Ernestine sat calmly in her sunny dining-room eating eggs; she thought she might as well have a good breakfast before starting, as you never knew with Sennacherib what time you might arrive anywhere.

They had decided, absolutely, to start at seven o'clock in the morning, and it was now eight. Rosina's fault. She had telephoned the night before saying that she could not possibly get to Chiswick before a quarter to eight, and, after a great deal of palaver, Virginia had said that it couldn't be helped, and all Rosina had to do was to hurry from the station, take her seat in Sennacherib, and off they would go at eight o'clock precisely. John, Dan, and their kit were going down by the 8.30 train, because, as Virginia explained, Sennacherib was not elastic.

"I know we'll miss that train," panted John, stowing bundles of blankets into Sennacherib's interior. "It's no use, Virginia, *we must go now.*"

"You can't leave poor Lyn to do all the packing!" cried Virginia. "And I haven't found out my route yet, so I can't help. You must take the next train."

John literally snorted with fury. There he was in his new grey flannel suit, ruining the knees of his trousers, sitting on pots of jam and hams, when he ought to have been at the station waiting for the train. He had started the day badly by having a little discussion with his aunt concerning clothes, and he had been obliged to give way to that very determined lady. John had decided to travel down in shorts and a flannel shirt, but Miss Ernestine had declared that none of her nephews should leave her abode looking like ruffians, and issued a decree imposing grey flannels for the boys, and jersey suits *and* coats for the girls.

“I don’t care what you wear when you’re in the forest,” she said, “but you shall not travel in trains looking like hooligans and having my name on your baggage. I insist that everything shall be marked Howard. I can’t help it if you are Craigs or Stewarts, so it’s no good talking to me any more. Gloves *and* coats for the girls. You shall not go through the ancient city of Winchester looking like gypsies. Sennacherib will disgrace us quite sufficiently—what does he look like?—and you shall not add to the general lamentable appearance of the family.”

So that was that, and there was nothing to say; there never was after Miss Ernestine had spoken.

Lyn did not mind; he was a bit of a dandy, and as he was going down with Sennacherib in the capacity of spokesman and bird-feeder, he rather fancied himself in his light, biscuit-coloured trousers, vivid pullover which resembled certain striped sugar-sticks, and felt hat. It was Lyn’s first felt hat, and he was terribly conscious of it, and took surreptitious squints at Sennacherib’s gleaming headlights to make sure that it was on at the right angle. Lyn passed things up to John, and took good care not to bulge the knees of *his* trousers.

“That’s all,” said Alice at last.

“Is it really?” asked John. “How amazing! Well, there’s no room for the precious Rosina. Not a square inch when I’ve got that mountain of tinned fruit in. Aunt Ernestine takes up space for two, and I’ve left her a sort of dugout on the back seat, but Alice will have to sit on the tents, and Rosina will have to take Lyn’s place and go in front with Virginia. Lyn will have to come by train with us—if there happens to be another train to-day.”

But Virginia said it was quite impossible. She caught sight of Dan and Rosina tottering up through the garden under the weight of many bundles, and she spoke in rapid whispers. She said that Lyn *must* come with her, because if Sennacherib became obstreperous, or stood still in the middle of a crowded town, the policeman would come and talk to her, and she was nervous of

policemen, and never knew what to say to them, and Lyn could always answer back so well. And her mouth got dry, too, when she was driving—she supposed it was the rush of air—but Lyn always fed her with peppermints, especially after they had taken a nasty corner, and Rosina could not be expected to do that properly, and she'd put peppermints in her ear or something, and there would be a terrible accident. Lyn must come, and John must take Rosina down by train.

Virginia had a great advantage over John, because Dan and Rosina arrived as she finished speaking, and John could not refuse to travel in the same train as Rosina before her very face, though he would certainly have done so had she not been there.

Rosina was a small girl with a pale face, dark, curling hair, and a wistful little mouth. She wore an extremely fashionable red jumper suit, a red felt hat, and she was very smart, and what Dan called “just so.” She had no hatboxes, and no trunks; her luggage consisted of an officer's “fleabag” rolled up in good leather straps, and a kitbag with her father's name printed neatly upon it. John could not possibly take offence at such luggage, therefore he turned his attentions to Rosina herself. She was a pillar box, that's what she was; a freshly painted pillar box. She was terribly visible, and every one would see her. She wouldn't be able to carry more than one of her bundles, and she looked as if a puff of wind would blow her away. He supposed he'd have to look after her ticket for her because she hadn't a bag, and he was sure she had no pockets—he knew from experience that Virginia never had any, and he was tired of carrying all Virginia's accessories when Lyn was not there to do so. What a calamity! He and Dan travelling to the New Forest with a pillar box staggering in their wake.

Meanwhile Rosina was greeting the others; with the exception of John and Alice she had seen them all before, but she hardly knew them. Miss Ernestine kissed her affectionately, and Rosina smiled and looked so happy that Virginia had not the heart to tell her she must go by train with John. John seemed to think that it was everybody's fault but his own that he had failed to win a scholarship, and was too old to go in for it again, therefore he said nasty, sharp things, and was not a bit like the old John of the summer before. Perhaps he would change back again after he had got over his disappointment, but meanwhile he was like a bear with a sore head, and Virginia went to see if it were possible to squeeze Rosina in somehow.

“You look rather full up!” laughed Rosina. “Won't it be a lovely drive! Where am I to sit? Oh, what's that card on the dashboard?”

“Oh, that's Sennacherib's special little bit of poetry,” replied Virginia.

“Read it! John made it up—last summer. I must just go and speak to Aunt Ernestine, and get my precious A.A. book, then I can start.”

No, she certainly had not the courage to tell Rosina there was no room for her, and while she fled towards the house Rosina climbed into the driver’s seat, and read the neatly printed card which was attached to Sennacherib’s scratched dashboard by four drawing-pins.

“The Humber came down like a dragon of old,
His headlights were gleaming, and flashing, and bold;
His engine shrieked fiercely like thunder at sea.
And none of his tactics could humans foresee.”

J.C.—with apologies to Lord Byron.

Rosina laughed merrily; she knew she was going to enjoy herself, and she turned eagerly towards Miss Ernestine, who advanced towards Sennacherib with a certain definite resolution in her footsteps. Miss Ernestine never minced matters.

“Rosina dear, I’m very sorry,” she said, “but I’m afraid you will have to go by train with John and Dan. We’ve taken many more things than we had intended, and Sennacherib can’t carry even an extra straw. I’d go myself only I do not like to leave Virginia alone, and Lyn must come with us as we never know what may happen when Sennacherib’s on the road. You won’t mind, dear, will you? You’ll take the ten-thirty to Lyndhurst—mind you don’t lose it—and when you get out at the station call a taxi or something to take you to the camp. John knows all about it. I’ve given him plenty of money. We ought all to arrive about the same time—say half-past two, to three.”

Then, as far as Rosina was concerned, the sun fell out of the sky, and the whole world looked black. How she had looked forward to that drive to the New Forest! She felt that she was a martyr. She always thought that she was born for the sacrifice, and now she was sure. Of course she was an outsider, and they didn’t really want her at all; that horrid boy with the straight mouth hated her, and the others most likely were only putting up with her because they couldn’t do otherwise; she had been silly to think that she was going to be happy. The tears were very near Rosina’s eyes, but she was much too proud to show them, and when they all gathered round and said how sorry they were, she insisted that it did not matter at all.

So Miss Ernestine was hoisted into her dugout, Alice clung like a limpet to the hard canvas sacks in which the tents were folded, Virginia pulled on her smart gauntlets and sat bolt upright before the wheel, while John wound up

Sennacherib, and Lyn waited beside the bonnet in case his assistance was needed.

Sennacherib never started without a fuss. He rejoiced in fusses and commotions. He revelled in trying one's patience to the uttermost. What he loved most of all was a scene with gaping crowds and policemen with notebooks. That morning he was worse than usual. Virginia listened intently for some sign of life to issue from Sennacherib, John wound and wound furiously, Lyn flooded the carburettor, but nothing happened.

"I shall not stop the engine till I get there," thought Virginia, becoming nervous, as she always did when Sennacherib was in this mood.

Miss Ernestine sat back and closed her eyes; she knew better than to offer advice when Sennacherib was preparing for the pirouette so to speak, and eventually Lyn was obliged to ask the very hefty postman who happened to be passing if he would mind lending a hand.

By this time Sennacherib had had enough of it all, and hardly had the postman's hand touched the winder than a gurgling roar burst forth; Rosina jumped backwards into the geraniums, and with a flying leap Lyn took the seat beside Virginia. Down the well-kept drive floundered Sennacherib with tent poles sticking out behind him like spears poised upon his broad shoulders; he took the turn into the road with an audacious swagger, then settled down into a stately stride.

Alice, clinging to her slippery canvas, glanced back, and perceived three figures picking up bundles, then hurrying stationwards. John was well ahead; how tall he was, nearly six feet already, a foot for each year, thought Alice, and Dan looked like a baby elephant in his new suit. Dan was short and fat like herself, and she hoped he would grow. Dear me, Rosina resembled a walking pillar box. How nice it must be to look so pretty and wear a scarlet jersey, and a skirt that swished. Ah, they had all vanished! And the post office had fled by on one side and the bank on the other, and the houses became smaller and smaller, and dwindled into cottages, and at last there was nothing but a long brown road, grass, and trees. It was all so lovely that Alice loosened her hold on the tent, took a more comfortable position, and looked at a bit of Virginia's pink cheek, and a wisp of yellow hair straying out from under her little black hat. What a marvellous person Virginia was, thought Alice. Dear me, there was Lyn feeding the bird! They called it feeding the bird when Lyn put peppermints into Virginia's mouth; they kept her cool, and Alice looked round hastily to see whether they had passed a policeman who had held them up. Sennacherib had been known to do that—pretended not to see. No, there was nobody about, and the road was clear.

“Alice!” called Virginia. “You’ve got the book of the words, haven’t you?”

“No,” answered Alice. “You took it from me a long time ago.”

“Then it’s stayed behind!” cried Virginia indignantly. “In all that hustle about Rosina. No road book—no maps—no itinerary!”

“Basingstoke and Winchester!” cried Miss Ernestine. “For goodness’ sake don’t stop, Virginia, and on no account turn back.”

“It’ll be all right, old girl,” whispered Lyn, and he put three peppermints into his sister’s mouth because he did not like her to talk too much while she was driving.

As it happened it was all right, but only because the signposts were quite definite, and Sennacherib went like a bird. Virginia was a skilful driver, and she loved driving; she almost forgot Rosina in her joy of feeling Sennacherib respond to the touch of her firm hand, and the world looked so beautiful in the sunshine that she wondered how Aunt Ernestine could go to sleep like that and look at nothing. Alice had scrambled to the top of the tents and poked her head between Lyn and Virginia; her eyes were glued to the speedometer, and she screamed when once the little black hand jumped to thirty. Of course with Sennacherib you never *quite* knew what you were really doing—that was why it was so exciting; he might have been doing sixty and just pointed to thirty to keep Virginia calm. Oh, it was all lovely! Lyn took off his first felt hat because he could not be bothered with it, and allowed the wind to ruffle his nicely smoothed black hair.

Then, after nearly three hours of unimpeachable conduct, Sennacherib stopped dead in the narrow street of the ancient and royal city of Winchester. On a hill, too. Nothing would induce him to go on. A very haughty policeman waved to Virginia, cars hooted behind her, carts and cars stopped in front of her, Lyn said smart things and treated it as a joke, but Sennacherib did not budge.

“You can’t stay here all day,” said the policeman severely, and three men and a boy offered assistance, but to no avail.

The traffic was completely blocked, a crowd collected, four men hung over Sennacherib’s bonnet, and Virginia was on the verge of tears. She ate peppermints all by herself. Miss Ernestine hid herself behind the *Times*; she did not wish any one to see her; she always expected things like this to happen.

“Perhaps,” said Alice, “he wants more petrol.”

When Sennacherib’s tank had been replenished, and people had stopped

laughing, and he had been coaxed to move up the steep street and through the ancient archway, they were all very subdued and serious.

“Fancy disgracing us like that in the streets of the ancient city of Winchester,” said Alice, trying to lighten the atmosphere. “Look, I had time to buy some lovely post cards.”

But they did not want to see the post cards, and nobody responded. Presently they entered the outskirts of the forest, and Virginia’s mouth began to curve pleasantly again; Lyn looked less hurt, and Miss Ernestine less shocked. Alice could hardly contain herself for joy, but one would never have guessed it.

Trees, trees, nothing but trees, and grass, and patches of heather, and trees again. All sorts of trees. Some straight and prim, others stately as princes, many wearing fluffed-out dancing dresses, some gleaming like grey knights in armour, and king oak stretching his generous, protecting branches up to his sovereign lord, the sun.

Lyn and Virginia looked round and smiled at Alice. She just nodded back.

“The New Forest,” she whispered.

CHAPTER III

THE PITCHING OF THE TENTS

EVEN MISS ERNESTINE was a little vague as to where they were going to meet Mr. Purkiss. Mr. Purkiss was the great Manitou who was to lead them to their happy hunting ground. As a matter of fact they were going to camp at the very end of one of his fields, which, as they told Alice, was really the forest. Alice had been bitterly disappointed when it had been explained to her that tent pegs would not hold on soft, spongy ground, neither was it advisable to camp under trees whose leaves took a delight in dripping long after the rain had ceased. Alice said that she didn't suppose it would rain. Virginia said nothing, but had also felt subdued, and as Sennacherib lumbered through the gay little town of Lyndhurst her heart beat rapidly, and she wondered whether that old Purkiss was going to put them in his farmyard, all mixed up with chickens and things. She knew she could not bear that; the forest had already cast its spell upon her, and the forest alone would satisfy her.

"We are to meet Mr. Purkiss at the cross-roads," breathed Alice.

"We are to meet Mr. Purkiss at the cross-roads, Virginia," called Miss Ernestine from her dugout.

"We're to meet old Purkiss at the cross-roads," said Lyn.

If they said it again before they reached the top of the hill Virginia knew that Sennacherib would make a bee line for the front door of the Crown Hotel, so she gave him his head, and he squirmed in and out between horrible charabancs and country buses, and took side turnings, and went round corners, and found himself in the forest again. You could hear Miss Ernestine breathing and clutching the sides. Virginia had not the remotest idea where the cross-roads were. They were certainly drawn on a piece of paper which Mr. Purkiss had sent, but that, of course, reposed peacefully in the A.A. book on Miss Ernestine's doorstep.

"There's Mr. Purkiss," said Alice after a time. "Standing under a sort of pine tree."

Yes, there he was, and coming from the opposite direction was a taxi with

what appeared to be a pillar box sitting in one corner.

Mr. Purkiss thought they were remarkably clever to have found him so easily, and to have met at precisely the right moment. Virginia accepted the credit for it, and after Miss Ernestine had greeted her old friend, and they had told one another that they did not look a day older, and paid the taxi, they left Sennacherib by the side of the road with Alice to look after him, and trooped away to see the camping ground. It was funny, thought Alice, that she always had to do things like that. Just wait in Sennacherib when her heart was nearly breaking to see their future camp; but, of course, somebody had to wait.

If the whole world were scoured there would not be found another spot like that on which the Enchanted Camp was pitched.

It was an open space, yet not too open, grassy, sandy, with an immense beech tree rising up proudly in the middle. One of those queer, twisted beeches with a trunk like grey satin, and roots running over the ground like veins in a beautiful hand; its leaves were but a green mist through which the blue sky was sometimes visible. And there was a giant oak, dead, but wonderful. So grey was the oak that it might have been carved in stone, and the grey-green lichens clung to it in patches, and innumerable ferns grew all over it, even on the topmost branches. How strange it looked there in the vivid sunshine. The dead oak had a very curious effect on Virginia. She had intended giving Dan a piece of her mind, for she considered it was his fault that Sennacherib had disgraced them in the ancient street of Winchester, for he had offered to see to the petrol supply, but as she gazed upon the lifeless giant she came to the conclusion that quarrels were very silly things. That old oak had had plenty to put up with in his time—storm, wind, rain, cold—yet here he was letting bygones remain bygones, and helping to make that spot so very beautiful. Virginia took Dan's arm, and they looked at the thin, straggling young hollies which formed a natural screen, and shut off Mr. Purkiss's field, and from them their eyes wandered to an opening in the midst of trees beyond the beech where the ground dipped gently, and before them lay a magnificent view of the forest. Trees, slopes, mysterious dark patches of undergrowth, and no sign of habitation or the hand of man. They had expected it to be lovely, but Rosina repeated the words of the Queen of Sheba and said that even the half had not been told her.

"Where do we get water?" asked Dan. "Drinking water?"

"From one of the pumps in my yard," explained Mr. Purkiss. "It's a good way to walk, across the field beyond the hollies, but I thought you would rather be here than in the field. My house is over there, but you can't see it as it is screened by the trees. There's a quantity of wood stacked up near the

cowshed, and you can take as much as you like. I can let you have milk, too, and my housekeeper bakes bread twice a week. I shall be glad to help in any way. This is the very heart of the forest.”

It all sounded almost too good to be true. And thank goodness you could not see Mr. Purkiss’s house! He was a dear, dear old gentleman, and of course he must have a house, but what a blessing he had the sense to hide it!

“Sennacherib can stand on the other side of the beech tree,” cried Virginia. “With a nice tarpaulin over him he won’t spoil the view at all. Oh, I must go and get him—and there’s poor Alice! To think she hasn’t seen anything! Alice!”

She darted away towards the road, and, with the exception of Miss Ernestine, they all ran after her, and between winding up Sennacherib, and persuading him to walk on the grass, they tried to tell Alice how perfectly beautiful it all was. Sennacherib simply hopped from crag to crag in his anxiety to see the dead oak, and the beech, and the rest of it, and when he was nicely settled on his gravelly patch they unpacked him without more ado, and decided to pitch tents immediately.

The girls chose the pitch in the sun near the hollies, Miss Ernestine said she would have her tent beside Sennacherib, and the boys went beyond, and were partly hidden by blackberry bushes.

“I’m very hungry,” announced Alice when the commotion was at its height.

Miss Ernestine was hungry too, and to Virginia’s disgust they cut sandwiches on Sennacherib’s bonnet, and ate all over the place. It annoyed Virginia to see them eating when she wanted nothing herself; the peppermints she had consumed on the way were sufficient to stay her hunger till supper-time. She picked up a slippery canvas sack, and staggered with it to her pitch.

“I’m going to put up my tent!” she cried.

She was surprised to find that the tent pole was in two pieces, and after digging a nice deep hole in the ground she put one end of the pole into it, and fixed the other into the socket at the top. She was very proud of it because it was quite straight, then she turned her attention to the tent. Now Virginia had never taken a tent out of its bag, neither had she ever put one up, and she was amazed at the difficulty which confronted her. It was a bell tent, and it was wedged into that bag as if it intended growing there, and she could make no impression on it whatever.

“How do you get a tent out of its bag?” she cried.

“With your teeth!” answered John, and his voice was not quite pleasant.

Virginia decided to ask no more questions, but Rosina came running up to her with a half-eaten sandwich in her hand, and by dint of much exertion, vigorous kicks, and the breaking of a few finger-nails, the two girls eventually extracted the tent from its covering, and placed it on the ground. By this time Alice had also joined them.

“It’s terribly large,” said Rosina, undoing ropes which hung in a most peculiar fashion from the tent.

“I don’t see how we’re ever going to get it on top of the pole,” said Virginia hopelessly.

“Perhaps I’d better knock some pegs in,” suggested Rosina.

“I’ll go and ask John how you ought to start,” said Alice.

Thereupon Rosina turned on Alice, and her dark eyes flashed; even Virginia was amazed, for Rosina looked such a quiet girl. Rosina said she would rather die in the attempt than ask John anything. They’d get that tent up without his help or her name was not Rosina Stewart.

“It’s going to be pleasant if she and John are not on speaking terms,” thought Virginia. “I expect he was horrid coming down in the train. But who would have expected such determination from a little white-faced thing like Rosina? I believe she’s braver than I am.”

“Dan’s very nice,” murmured Alice.

“He’s a dear, but he’s got enough to do with Aunt Ernestine’s tent,” replied Rosina. “You stay where you are, Alice. The great thing is to find the door.”

They found it, and being the tallest Virginia got inside the tent and put her head in the funny little cap which was meant for the tent pole, and with a wooden mallet she tried to poke the tent up over the pole. But she merely became tangled up in the canvas, and nearly suffocated.

“Alice,” asked her muffled voice, “didn’t you buy a book about tents?”

“No,” answered Alice; “it cost a shilling.”

“Are you getting on all right, Virginia?” called Lyn’s gay voice from afar.

“Quite!” shouted Virginia, feeling that she must at any cost be loyal to Rosina, and she struggled out of the tent, which fell in a heap on the ground.

Then Rosina tried, but she fell down with the tent on top of her, and Virginia had to look for her.

“You mustn’t have a hole at all,” panted Alice excitedly. “You must lay the tent on the ground, stick the pole in that funny thing in the top, then lift it up. And somebody must tie it all round on pegs, quickly.”

“But a pole can’t adhere to the ground by force of suction!” cried Virginia. “It *must* have a hole to stand in.”

“It mustn’t,” insisted Alice. “You must mark the spot where you want it to be, then you lift the whole thing up, put the pole on the spot, and it stands by itself when somebody’s done something with the ropes.”

“How do you know?” asked Rosina suspiciously.

“Well,” confessed Alice, for she always strove to be absolutely truthful, “I went and looked at the boys—but they didn’t see me.”

“Oh,” they answered, and tried the new way.

They got the tent up, but in the wrong place; the door opened right into the hollies.

“To think that we’re doing this for our pleasure,” murmured Virginia, trying to walk away with the heavy tent while Rosina twisted it round on the pole, endeavouring to find the opening, and induce it to face the beech. With Miss Ernestine’s help they eventually got it up—after a fashion—and feeling a little exhausted went to Mr. Purkiss’s field to fill their palliasses with straw. Mr. Purkiss had put the straw all ready for them in an old cart, and as they pushed it into their mattresses they wondered whether they would be able to sleep on such spikes.

They were spreading their ground sheets in the tent when John went by on his way to the straw; he smiled sarcastically.

“I hope you haven’t pitched it on an ants’ nest,” he said. “Anyway it looks artistic. Virginia always did like things crooked—pianos and photographs.”

Of course Rosina did not know John, therefore she mumbled as he walked away that she didn’t care if it fell down in the night and slew her; she hadn’t asked John for help, and that was all that mattered. But Virginia sighed, and went with Dan to cut the trench fire.

John was angry with the world in general because he himself had not behaved as a gentleman should. He had made Rosina feel that he did not want her in camp, and been extremely disagreeable to every one. He had said nothing that Rosina could actually take offence at, and he tried to persuade himself that it was all her fault because she had no business to wear a scarlet dress, and have a face that made you feel she was unhappy. As he filled his

palliasse John looked at the sunset spreading over the sky like a rose-pink cloak trimmed with fire, and he thought what fun it would be frying kippers for supper if only Rosina were not like a thorn in his foot. If there were any wind the tent would fall on top of her in the night, and probably the pole would knock her head; she was the sort of girl who would get hurt if a tent pole so much as glanced at her.

As he walked back with his palliasse on his back he saw Rosina kneeling outside the tent knocking in pegs most ineffectually. She thought it was Lyn, who had been chipping her most unmercifully the moment before; she didn't mind what Lyn said, nor how much he laughed at her—nobody did.

"It's this frill part," she said, without looking round. "It's all askew."

"You mean the valance," said John. "You can't expect it to be straight when your guy ropes are all over the place."

Rosina immediately resembled a block of stone.

"I call it a frill," she replied icily.

"All the same it's a valance," returned John, but more meekly. "It's better to put the pegs for the guy ropes opposite the seams in the tent."

Rosina was not sure which were the guy ropes, there were so many, so she walked away without a word to see about supper. They had sandwiches and cocoa for supper, rather smoky cocoa, because Dan said he hadn't quite got the hang of the fire, and John grumbled because he wanted kippers. He looked scornfully at the beech, and noticed that it was quivering all over. He felt that it was laughing at him for wanting kippers, and suddenly he wanted to laugh too, for it struck him as being all so very odd. But he could not laugh outright after being so sour to every one, therefore he walked hastily away.

"By jingo," thought John, "I could have a jolly time here if only I let myself."

Then Lyn and Rosina went and got a pail of water from Mr. Purkiss's, but they upset half of it coming back, and it splashed down Rosina's new dress, but she did not mind. So Miss Ernestine sent Dan back for another pailful, because, she said, she was not going to be limited for water, and Dan decided that something must be done about this water fetching; it must be properly organized. Dan liked things in order and shipshape; at school his nickname was Old Maid.

They washed and cleared up without John, and nobody mentioned him though they all wondered where he was. Darkness fell; Miss Ernestine said it

was time for bed. Rosina went to get the candles which were somewhere in her tent, and behold, the tent was taut, and trim, and upright, without a wrinkle anywhere, and the valance neatly pegged down for the night.

“Spirits,” thought Rosina, and she called Alice.

“John?” whispered Alice.

“It couldn’t be—but don’t mention it to any one,” murmured Rosina, and when they returned with the candles there was John making a gadget on which to hang mugs.

They made a great deal of noise as they prepared for bed, and Miss Ernestine screamed because there were spiders in her tent, and they had to persuade her that there were none. When she had been apparently convinced against the testimony of her own eyes, they wished her good-night, and stepped out into the darkness. As they walked past Sennacherib they halted simultaneously. A strange silence had fallen upon the forest, and something invisible had wrapped itself around them. It enveloped them gently, tenderly, and they listened, straining their ears for something that they never actually heard.

Then the leaves of the beech tree began humming a little tune, a twig snapped from the dead oak, an owl hooted.

“It’s enchanted,” said Alice.

“Enchanted,” whispered the others—even John.

CHAPTER IV

GETTING UP AND SETTLING DOWN

“VIRGINIA! ROSINA! A-LICE! WOOD! *Breakfast!*”

The three girls sat up in a great hurry, and blinked.

A streak of pale sunshine flickered in through the open tent flap, causing the dew to glitter like jewels on the grass.

“Breakfast,” mumbled Virginia in a slightly injured voice, and she put out her hand and felt for her little clock, which she had placed for safety in her shoe.

“It’s only seven,” she said, “and we decided to have breakfast at eight. I haven’t opened an eye all night.”

“I opened both mine in the middle of the night,” yawned Rosina, “because I felt something like the Houses of Parliament between my shoulder blades. In fact, I couldn’t get off humps. I shall have to move nearer to Alice. Oh, isn’t it nice to lie in bed and see the sky and the grass!”

Alice had unpegged the valance and was peeping outside. She beheld John in shorts and a dreadful old jersey coming along with one of the new enamelled pails swinging in his hand; he was whistling, and Alice came to the conclusion that he was going to fetch milk.

“Eggs!” cried Alice, who seldom wasted words.

John looked round to see where the voice came from, and perceiving a couple of large bright eyes right down in the grass, he hunted about for a fir cone; but Alice pulled down the valance before he found one, and laughed merrily.

“John’s all right to-day,” thought Alice; but according to her usual custom she said nothing.

They dressed quickly, and when they were nearly ready they heard Lyn shouting that the big new dixie for boiling water had been stolen in the night. But Virginia had only taken it to stand her clothes in because she did not fancy placing them on the damp earth, and she said that Dan must arrange something

for her. Rosina tied the looking-glass to the tent pole with Alice's stocking, and while she pinched the waves in her pretty dark hair she said that Dan must arrange something for the mirror too. Alice did not require a looking-glass, therefore she was outside before the others, and scampered away to Mr. Purkiss's field to get wood. Alice had discarded stockings, and she jumped like a plump but nimble gazelle through the wet grass; she wore her shabbiest and most darned tunic, therefore she was perfectly happy because nobody could tell her to be careful of her clothes.

John fried the eggs for breakfast, and he gave Rosina the only one that was not broken. Feeling that this was a peace offering, Rosina said "Thank you" quite nicely. How could one remember by-gones when the sun was shining, and the sweet, fresh perfume of the forest mingled with that of bacon and coffee? Miss Ernestine made the coffee; she insisted on it; she was fond of her coffee, and never forgot the smoky cocoa of the first evening. Miss Ernestine sat on a ground sheet, and she looked exactly the same as usual, but the others had changed. Miss Ernestine always wore a navy blue coat and skirt, and a white shirt. There were different degrees of coats and skirts, old, middling, and best, but only Miss Ernestine could recognize them; to the rest of the world they were one and the same.

She looked round, scrutinizing her nephews, nieces, and goddaughter as they laughed and ate, but all she said was that they were a band of ruffians. The beech tree threw a leaf at them now and again, and the bright flame of the fire cast a strange reflection upon Virginia and Dan. There is nothing quite as queer as a fire out in the open in daylight. You cannot see where the flames end; they break off, and vanish, and behave in an amazing fashion. At night a fire is quite different, but in the daytime——

Virginia, in a blue sleeveless jersey and old grey skirt, looked at the fire, but said nothing; Rosina, in crumpled scarlet, smiled to herself; Lyn threw little twigs at the flames till Dan told him not to be so wasteful.

"We've got to settle this water business before we do anything else," said Dan. "There are four pails——"

"Three," broke in Alice. "One is for milk."

"There are three pails," continued Dan, "and they must be filled three times a day. It takes four people to carry three pails properly—in a row—so you've all got to take your turn except Alice and Aunt Ernestine."

They groaned, and Miss Ernestine said she would trot along and fill a pail when she felt inclined.

“But because Alice is too small to carry water she’s not going to get out of working,” said John. “Exercise is good for Alice, and we can’t have her looking like an overgrown dumpling. I’m going to rig up a shelter over the fire, just in case it rains—a couple of hurdles with an old ground sheet over them—and Alice will have to collect twigs and tie them in little bunches to the hurdles that they may get bone dry. I had the dickens of a job to get that fire going this morning, and Alice will have to see to it that there are always five or six dry logs about. There’s one good point about Alice. You can trust her, but Virginia’d forget with the greatest of ease.”

Virginia laughed because John’s voice had changed in the night, and was almost as pleasant as Lyn’s; nevertheless she turned her back on her cousin, and asked Dan to name her special duty. Nobody noticed that they all asked Dan what they were to do; very strange indeed, considering that John was nominally the commandant. Even John did not notice it, and Dan was the last to be aware of it.

“You might take over the teas, Virginia,” said Dan quite seriously. “You’d remember tea-time. If the boys do breakfast and supper, the girls might do dinner and tea.”

That suited Virginia very well, specially as she knew they would often have tea elsewhere; there were so many places they had decided to visit.

“I’ll get the bread from Mr. Purkiss’s if you like,” volunteered Rosina. “And I can make Irish stew and spotted dog.”

“Splendid!” cried John. “But I notice Lyn’s got no duties, the lazy beggar!”

Lyn rolled over on his back and picked a few bits of dry lichen from the very beautiful pullover which he wore with white shorts.

“I’m going to hire a bike,” grinned Lyn, “then I can trot in to Lyndhurst and fetch Aunt Ernestine’s letters—in fact, everybody’s. I’m postman.”

“And strut about in the streets like a peacock!” cried Virginia. “And go and have ices and morning coffee, and be away for ages, and get out of peeling potatoes, and go for rides in the forest, and forget the post!”

She was obliged to stop because she was breathless, and Alice asked what they were going to do that day. John said there was enough work in camp to occupy them till the afternoon: beds to be rolled up, gadgets to make for keeping clothes dry, lines to put up for dishcloths, and something or other in the shape of a larder to be invented.

“And find the tin-opener,” nodded Alice, who had visions of going without

peaches by moonlight. “Lyn threw it into Sennacherib at the last moment.”

Of course they must find the tin-opener, they all knew that; they went to look for it, except Miss Ernestine, who scraped enamelled plates and turned back her blue serge cuffs preliminary to washing-up. Miss Ernestine had no duties to do; they all told her that she must consider herself on a holiday.

They were obliged to come to the conclusion that Sennacherib had dropped the tin-opener on the road, but as they had taken off his tarpaulin they thought they might as well rub him up a bit, and Alice was sent to Mr. Purkiss’s to fetch the best end of the neck of mutton which the butcher from Lyndhurst had promised to leave there. If dinner was late it was Sennacherib’s fault, but the Irish stew made by Rosina, assisted by Dan and Alice, made up for a great deal. It was full of potatoes, carrots, turnips, and whatnots which could not be recognized but were perhaps dumplings, and the flavour of that best end of the neck was such that they spoke of it till the end of their lives, and never, never tasted the same again. That stew was special to the Enchanted Camp; bits of grey lichen from the dead oak floated in it, a vague suspicion of smoke clung to it, and although, when they returned home, they all tried making Irish stew, it was never a success, for there was something missing which they could not supply.

When Miss Ernestine was again scraping plates, Alice asked what they were going to do.

“I’m going to have a nice afternoon reading,” said Miss Ernestine. “And perhaps I shall snooze.”

They turned up their eyes in horror! Snooze when the forest and the sky were singing a duet together! Poor, poor Aunt Ernestine.

“There’s the Rufus Stone,” said Alice, who wished to see it by daylight.

Oh yes, they all knew there was the Rufus Stone, and Alice was sent up to Mr. Purkiss’s to find out where it was. She came back with a face like a poppy, and clasping a guide to the New Forest tightly to her heart.

“Whatever’s the matter, Alice?” asked Lyn.

“It was one of the ancestors of Mr. Purkiss who put the body of William Rufus in a cart and drove it to Winchester,” she gasped. “He passed through here—through our camp.”

“O Alice, why did you talk to Mr. Purkiss about William Rufus?” cried Virginia, who disliked the thought of that cart coming through her camp. “I hope he didn’t tell you that there was a phantom cart which appears on

moonlight nights?”

Alice nodded in the affirmative.

“But it wasn’t our camp then,” said Dan. “If you believe the inhabitants, I expect you’ll find that that cart has been over every inch of ground in the New Forest. This is the wrong direction for Winchester.”

Virginia and Alice felt comforted, but Rosina was slightly disappointed, for although she did not believe in ghosts, she was greatly interested in them.

“Call me if you hear the bumping of phantom wheels in the night, Alice,” grinned John, looking at a map in the guide book. “It strikes me that Mr. Purkiss is fond of a joke. Ah, here’s the Rufus Stone. About three miles away. Who’s game for a six-mile walk?”

They all were, except Miss Ernestine, and a little later they set off, taking their tea with them.

John had the map, but Dan led the way most unobtrusively, and they all ambled after him much in the same manner as the folk wandered after the Pied Piper in the story. They went through grass and fern, and silvery glades in which the beeches glistened, and Alice asked why some of the trees were such a queer shape, but nobody could tell her. Alice behaved rather strangely, but no one but John noticed it; he kept his eye on Alice. There was a great bond of sympathy between John and his little sister; they understood one another without speaking very much, and almost always they thought and felt the same things. Three times Alice tried to wander off by herself among the bushes, but each time she came back and took her place behind Rosina, who was picking flowers as she walked. John whistled, and when they were out of the wood and on the rough road to Minstead, he noticed that Alice ran hither and thither, and looked quite relieved. John kicked stones thoughtfully; he wanted a quiet talk with Alice because there was something about the camp which he could not understand, and Alice had a strange habit of putting the dots on the i’s, as you might say. John was extremely sensitive to atmosphere and his surroundings, and that morning as he was lighting the fire he had “felt” something, but for the life of him he could not tell you what it was. It had nothing to do with any silly stories of ghosts, and nothing to do with that spell-like silence which began wrapping itself around the forest at twilight, but was quite apart from both. He was certain that neither Virginia, Dan, nor Lyn had noticed it, he was not sure of Rosina, but he knew that Alice was conscious of it, though probably she did not know what it was any more than he did himself.

John lingered behind, cutting sticks from the bushes with which to make racks for keeping one’s shoes off the grass in the tents, and at last Rosina was

absolutely obliged to catch him up. She was ready to be friends if he showed her that he regretted his behaviour, but she did not feel inclined to make the first step towards reconciliation. Rosina was beginning to think that perhaps, after all, she was not such an outsider, and it didn't matter much if John didn't want her, because all the others did. Virginia had told her so. And the Irish stew had been a terrific success. She brightened tremendously as she thought of that Irish stew, and held her head up proudly.

"I thought I'd make shoe-racks for the tents," said John.

"Very nice," murmured Rosina.

"We're lucky to be on a bit of a hill," remarked John, "because it isn't so damp. Old Purkiss has chosen a splendid spot for us—don't you think so?"

"Yes, I do," answered Rosina, who could no longer prevent herself from becoming enthusiastic. "The beech tree and the dead oak are wonderful. I daresay I'm silly, but I feel there's something queer and lovely about them."

"There's something queer about the whole camp," laughed John.

"Enchanted," smiled Rosina. "Alice said so last night, and I believe she's right. I don't want this holiday ever to be over!"

So she had not noticed the other thing, thought John; that outside thing which wanted to get into the magic circle, as it were, and could not. John said no more about the camp, but remarked that there was something pretty awful waiting for him when the holidays were over.

"What?" asked Rosina.

"I'll tell you another day," replied John. "Nobody knows—not even Alice or Virginia, and they ferret out most things."

Rosina was too shy to question him, but she was very puzzled and curious. Just then they reached a sandy slope, and John offered to race her to the bottom, and, knowing she could run like the wind, Rosina accepted. The forest undulated away on either side of them, and below were beautiful beech woods. The others joined in the race, which John allowed Rosina to win by about half a yard, and when they reached the bottom they were breathless.

A few trees stood together in a clump with their branches spread out like the skirts of a ballet girl about to dance.

"The Rufus Stone," said Alice.

CHAPTER V

VERY IMPORTANT EVENTS

THE RUFUS STONE was not a stone at all, or rather one could not see the stone because it was encased in a strait waistcoat of solid iron. So they all stood round and read the inscriptions in mumbling voices, and suddenly John tapped the stone with a long white wand of a stick, and said in a solemn voice—

“This is the iron which encases the stone, which replaces the oak, which marks the spot, which induced the arrow to turn aside and enter the heart of William the Second.”

They laughed, and Alice wondered—aloud—whether Rahere had been there.

“Who on earth was Rahere?” asked Virginia.

Now Alice was “doing” William Rufus at school, therefore she explained that Rahere was a very beautiful young man, gay and rich, who danced and sang, and made jokes all day long, and was a great favourite at the court of Rufus; then, quite suddenly, because he was afraid he had laughed too much, he built Saint Bartholomew’s Church and founded Saint Bartholomew’s Hospital to make up for it.

“Oh,” they said, and they thought that was all they would ever hear concerning Rahere; but they were very mistaken.

Then they had a heated discussion as to whether Sir Walter Tyrrell had killed the king by accident or design, and in their mind’s eye they saw the knight fleeing across the forest on horseback, his hair floating in the wind, his heart pounding like an engine, his ears strained to catch the sound of distant shouts.

“It was an accident,” said Alice.

“Yes, it was an accident,” they murmured, and they went to look at the famous oak and beech which grew together.

The two giants were so closely united one to the other that their boughs and roots were intermingled, and the two great trunks appeared to come from

one solid base. Those twin trees swayed Rosina's destiny from the very moment she looked upon them, only she did not know then. She only felt queer—there was no other word for it—and she tried to think of a story about an oak and a beech. But all those which came into her head were so silly that she turned away and blinked her eyes hard because they were full of tears. But she did not feel in the least unhappy, only very exalted; the exaltation one experiences when one sees a regiment of soldiers marching with banners flying. Unconsciously Rosina's feet took a swinging, marching step, for the oak and the beech had dropped a little seed into her heart, and she marched away towards her destiny not knowing in the least what it was. She only knew that she must get a paper and pencil and write something about that oak and beech.

“Look at Rosina marching off by herself like a Gordon Highlander!” cried Lyn. “What airs!”

“Ponies!” shrieked Alice. “Crab apples! Look!”

Ponies and crab apples occupied them till they reached camp. They could not eat the crab apples because they nearly took the skin off their mouths, but they tried hard, and at last decided to make them into jam.

“Awful waste of sugar,” said Dan. “I don't suppose we shall be able to eat it.”

However, they took no notice of Dan, and John, Lyn, and Alice climbed every crab-apple tree they came to till the girls refused to carry any more fruit.

“Do you peel apples to make jam?” asked Virginia, who was no cook. “If you do somebody else must do it, and they'll have to put on a pair of spectacles to see the apples at all, and use opera glasses after they *are* peeled, because there'll be nothing left to speak of. Oh dear, there are those ponies standing in the middle of the road again.”

That was one of the peculiarities of the New Forest ponies; they loved the middle of the road. They had the whole forest to wander about in, yet they must amble down to the roads, and stand stock still in them, or lie down and sleep on them, or cross calmly over when charabancs were passing. They preferred the main roads to the by-roads, because the former were well kept, and had smooth surfaces which were nice and cool in warm weather. They didn't care tuppence for cars, motor-bicycles, or charabancs—they might have been gnats buzzing by for all the notice the ponies took of them; after all, the forest was theirs, and these intruders had only to get out of their way.

“I know Sennacherib won't like them,” wailed Virginia. “They'll bump

into him when he least expects it, or turn round and look at him and have their noses flicked off.”

Virginia was half afraid of them herself, but each time they saw ponies on the road she insisted upon Alice driving them into safety under the trees.

“But they come back directly Alice’s back is turned,” objected John. “We shall never get home in time to cook the supper if you’re going to shoo every pony you come across.”

“I can’t help it,” returned Virginia. “You don’t drive Sennacherib.”

Very calmly Dan took a cut across country where the ponies no longer impeded their progress, and when they reached camp Miss Ernestine had got the fire going, and John’s famous kippers laid out in style in the frying pan.

“Yes, I had a very nice afternoon,” replied Miss Ernestine in answer to many questions. “Twice I woke up with a start because I thought I heard something—the twigs of that dead oak crack in an amazing fashion—then I made myself a good strong cup of tea and a piece of toast.”

“You didn’t hear the bumping of a cart, I suppose?” asked Alice.

“I should think not!” answered Miss Ernestine. “But there was an immense stranger in my tea, so I’m going to have a visitor, no doubt.”

“Did you bite him?” inquired Virginia.

“I did; he was as hard as nails,” replied Miss Ernestine.

“A man,” nodded Alice. “I wonder who he’ll be?”

“I hope he won’t come to supper, because somebody will have to go without a kipper if he does,” remarked Miss Ernestine.

Luckily the visitor did not turn up to supper, and Alice was bitterly disappointed because they had forgotten to buy a tin-opener. Lyn banged a tin of pineapples on a stone until it looked most disreputable, but refused to give up what he called its dead.

“We’ll take Sennacherib in to Lyndhurst to-morrow and give the old chap a drink,” said Lyn savagely.

Virginia thought of the ponies, and shuddered as she filled the dixie with the last of the water.

“Sennacherib drinks like a fish, but we say as little as possible about it,” whispered John to Rosina. “He’s a blot on the family, you know, and he’d ruin us, only Aunt Ernestine’s such a brick that she’s promised to pay for his drinks

down here.”

“Talking of drink,” laughed Rosina, “reminds me that I’ve got to go and fetch ours for to-morrow morning.”

As usual they all went except Miss Ernestine, and when they were walking back through the field with the pails full to the brim, Rosina asked the sort of question that one would expect of Alice.

“Where is Cassiopea?” asked Rosina, gazing skywards.

They put down the pails and looked for Cassiopea; Alice pointed out the Big Bear which everybody knew, and Virginia thought she could see that very bright star in Orion whose name, of course, she forgot.

“I know Cassiopea looks like a capital W a bit askew,” said John.

“Yes,” nodded Alice, walking about with her head at such an angle that she became a public danger. “Just like the sign you put in the windows for Wall’s ices.”

Now it happened that Lyn’s chin was also pointing skywards, therefore he did not see Alice, so he bumped into her, and she clutched him; to prevent himself from walking on Alice Lyn stepped back into a pail, and over he went, rolling down the little slope into Mr. Purkiss’s ditch, accompanied by streams of icy water.

Even by starlight he looked rather queer when they pulled him out, and Virginia was obliged to put her handkerchief in her mouth to prevent her laughter from becoming too audible. The sugar-stick pullover was unrecognizable, so shrouded was it with black mud, likewise Lyn’s nice brown hair, and all John could do was to empty the only remaining pail of water over him.

“A-a-a-lice’s fault,” spluttered Lyn, who was the only one who saw nothing to joke about.

“O Lyn, Cassiopea’s!” gurgled Rosina.

“You’d better come back with us and stand under the pump,” grinned John. “We can’t carry enough water to the camp to wash you and your togs.”

So Lyn washed his pullover under the pump with his teeth chattering, and Alice hoped fervently that it would not shrink. There was only one subject on which Lyn was touchy, and that was his personal appearance, but even he could not help smiling when looking up from the pump he beheld Cassiopea grinning down upon him from the velvet black sky like a slightly dissipated

capital W. She had been there all the time, and Lyn shook his fist at her, and told her she had done it on purpose.

They hurried Lyn back in case he should take cold, and whichever way they went Cassiopea came with them. They could recognize no other stars in the sky now but Cassiopea, and when they reached camp there she was hanging in her lopsided fashion over the dead oak, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“Aunt Ernestine!” cried Virginia. “Cassiopea’s thrown Lyn into the ditch and scratched his legs badly!”

“Iodine!” called Alice.

“Dear, dear,” murmured Miss Ernestine, and she darted into her tent where the medicine chest was kept, but came out again immediately with eyes like saucers and breathing quickly.

“There’s—somebody in the tent,” she faltered.

John stiffened, the girls said “Oh,” and Dan walked boldly forward.

“Who’s there?” he called.

There was no answer.

“Well, I like to know where I am,” remarked Dan. “I’m going in.”

John, Lyn, and Miss Ernestine were beside him immediately, and the girls stood together in a little group hardly knowing what to do. It was quite dark, and the candle-light in the lantern poised on the roots of the beech tree danced behind its glass cage, flickered, and vanished.

“Come out, whoever you are!” cried Lyn. But as still there was no reply they picked up the sticks with which John intended making boot-racks, and went in.

“Alice, get my electric torch!” called Dan.

Then Miss Ernestine screamed. For a strong-minded woman she really had a terrifying scream. Rosina’s knees gave way when she heard it. There was a scuffle, much shouting, and as Alice issued forth from Dan’s tent brandishing the torch like a sword, it was all she could do to prevent herself from running into a pony who disappeared into the darkness like a shadow.

“A pony!” cried Miss Ernestine. “I’ve never been afraid of burglars, and now I’ve screamed at a pony. I put out my hand and touched something warm and palpitating. Oh, I must have my tent laced up all day or these ponies and spiders will drive me to a lunatic asylum.”

They calmed her down, and while Virginia painted her brother's scratches with iodine, she formed a resolution to keep her tent closed in future. Rosina and Alice might grumble about the lack of air, but she had no intention of running the risk of having a visit from a pony. Why, he might eat her hair while she slept—it was just the colour of straw!

“I don't think much of your visitor, Aunt Ernestine,” grumbled Lyn, going away to his tent. “We could have done without that sort of guest, and Cassiopea too.”

Owing to the general confusion they retired for the night without putting out the fire, but Virginia saw it glowing as she fastened the flaps of her tent, and sent Alice to see to it. Alice knelt on the grass and beat the smouldering wood with a stick, and the sparks flew towards the dead oak like bits of living gold, then vanished in the night. The skeleton of the forest giant cracked like the bones of a sleeper who has slumbered for many years, and was awaking to life. John came softly over the grass, and knelt beside Alice.

“You mustn't do that, Alice,” he said. “A spark might set the oak on fire.”

“Would it?” murmured Alice. “But it's so lovely to see them flying like fairies in the black night. And the dead oak's so mysterious.”

“Not only the dead oak,” replied John. “I don't mean ponies in tents, or phantom carts, or—or the sort of spell that comes over the camp directly it's dusk.”

“No,” nodded Alice.

“What do you think about it?” asked John. “The others haven't noticed it.”

Alice looked up at her big brother, whom she considered the most wonderful person in the world; she knew he sometimes said unkind things, but they only went in at one of Alice's ears and came out at the other. Alice did not know what it was to be spiteful. She held up both her hands, and began counting on her fingers.

“Seven of us,” she said. “Sennacherib's eight, and something or other else, nine. That's what I think about it; only, of course, there can't really be a Number Nine.”

“Hum,” said John. “The something or other did not come to the Rufus Stone with us; it stayed round the camp.”

“I'm not afraid of it as I am of mice,” said Alice. “But I don't want to walk into it at any time when I'm by myself. Better not tell Virginia.”

“Nor Rosina,” murmured John. “We don’t want them having fits all over the place. I shall examine every inch of the ground round the camp to-morrow, and search for traces of Number Nine.”

“A-lice! If you don’t come in I shall shut you out with the ponies,” cried Virginia.

So Alice vanished into the tent, and was asleep long before Rosina and Virginia had left off arguing about the door being shut. At last they compromised, and Rosina rolled up part of the “frill” to get a little air, declaring that no pony could creep through six inches of space. They were just going off to sleep when Dan came and called them.

“I say,” he cried. “It looks very dark. Even that old Cassiopea has gone, and if it rains in the night you must get up and loosen your guy ropes.”

“But I shall get wet!” exclaimed Virginia.

“You’ll get wetter still if the rain shrinks the canvas and the ropes pull all your pegs out,” answered Dan. “Your tent will go off pop like an umbrella shutting up.”

This prospect was so awful that Virginia went to sleep with one hand stretched out beyond the “frill,” that she might feel the first drop of rain.

CHAPTER VI

JUST RAIN

IT was a dreadful morning, one of the very worst. The rain did not come down in drops, but in one continual sheet of clear water which ran in little rivulets between the crooked roots of the beech tree.

Virginia declared that it was a shame, but Miss Ernestine said it was an experience. Stockingless—stockings were useless—but in galoshes and mackintoshes, the girls gave advice to the boys who were trying to light the fire. Miss Ernestine sat inside her tent with only her face looking out of a slit, and told them to warn her when the water was boiling.

“We mustn’t let the fire go out all day,” said Alice.

“First light it,” mumbled John; “then if you care to sit in a teeming downpour like a martyred vestal virgin, I’m sure you’re welcome to it, Alice.”

At last they borrowed a little petrol from Sennacherib, which induced some of Rosina’s writing-paper to flame, and finally kindled the sticks. Lyn said he was afraid he had a cold, therefore he kept in his tent, and asked Alice to bring him his breakfast, or dinner, or supper, whichever happened to be ready first. Then a couple of ponies came and took shelter beside Sennacherib, and as nothing would persuade them to move on, Virginia left the sausages she was frying to look after themselves, and went to close her tent. Luckily Alice rescued the sausages, and when eventually the breakfast was ready there seemed to be no place in which to eat it. As Miss Ernestine’s tent was the least encumbered they decided to turn it into a living-room for the day, but she insisted upon them leaving their mackintoshes outside, as she objected to the tent being converted into a bog.

Dan did the washing-up, and they all sat in Miss Ernestine’s tent and watched him. He crawled about with a ground sheet over him, and looked just like a giant toad. Alice *would* talk about the tin-opener, so they sent her to Mr. Purkiss’s with Lyn’s pullover and a very polite message asking if it could kindly be dried. Alice was so wet that she could not get any wetter, therefore it did not matter what she did.

The menu which Miss Ernestine had drawn up for their middle day meal consisted of fried chops, two vegetables, and pancakes, but as nobody would undertake to carry it out Rosina was asked to transform the chops into Irish stew.

“We must have something that can be cooked with the lid on,” said Virginia, “and as we are all in the soup a little more or less will not matter.”

“The rain’s making you quite sharp,” grinned John.

“And boiled rice,” said Alice, who had returned from Mr. Purkiss’s. “It will be quite nice with peaches—if we get a tin-opener. Mr. Purkiss hasn’t got one, as he’s afraid of tin poisoning.”

Now if there was one thing on earth that Virginia hated it was boiled rice, so she put on her mackintosh and went and looked at the sky. It was a dark, uniform grey, but Virginia perceived that the rain now came down in drops instead of rivers, and she wondered whether Sennacherib would be offended if she took him into Lyndhurst to get a tin-opener. She examined the grass all the way down to the rough, sandy path which led to the road, and reflected that even if Sennacherib were in a spiteful mood he could not possibly have the face to get marooned in that grass. But if she left it much longer Sennacherib would have an excuse for anything, so running back she called out that she was taking Sennacherib to Lyndhurst to buy the morning paper, and if anybody wanted anything they had better write it on a piece of paper.

Strangely enough Lyn’s cold evaporated as if by magic, and in less than four minutes he was out of bed and dressed. He said he must hire a bicycle for the benefit of the family. Miss Ernestine thought she would keep drier sitting under Sennacherib’s patched hood than in her tent, so she undertook to buy provisions. It ended by them leaving John, Rosina, and Alice at home to get dinner, and the others ambled off with Sennacherib.

“You’d—better—get—the peppermints out,” said Virginia as they bumped over the grass. “If—there are—ponies I may need—them.”

Sennacherib took a delight in bumping whenever he had the chance. Lyn put his hand into the cubby hole under the dashboard where the special tin box was kept, but when he opened it he found it was empty.

“But I didn’t eat them all on the way down, did I?” asked Virginia in a shocked voice.

“I don’t think so,” answered Lyn. “There were a few left when I fed you for the last time. Dan, have you been eating Virginia’s peppermints?”

“I can’t stand the hateful things!” cried Dan indignantly from the back.

“Rosina wouldn’t, and John can’t bear the smell of them,” said Virginia, guiding Sennacherib carefully along the rough path. “It must be Alice—unless you took them yourself, Lyn. We must buy some more, even if we forget the tin-opener.”

Lyn vowed he had not touched them, therefore Alice came in for the entire blame, and Virginia made up her mind to speak to Alice; but she never did, because she forgot all about it.

Meanwhile Alice was peeling potatoes, while Rosina crouched under the shelter over the fire offering bits of wood and straw from her own mattress to the one smouldering log. The water trickled down her neck from the collar of her shining mackintosh, her brown legs were beaten by the stinging rain, upon her head was Dan’s sou’wester—most unbecoming—and her heart and mind seemed singing a little song together. Rosina was perfectly happy.

“Oak, awake, provoke, bespoke,” hummed Rosina, and they all seemed to her such nice words. You see, Rosina was still thinking of the oak and beech who grew together; as a matter of fact, she was wondering whether she would be a poet.

When the fire was once more blazing Rosina sat back on her feet and watched it; then she saw John, or rather part of a ground sheet which was over John’s head, popping up and down behind the bushes. She wondered what on earth John was looking for; he had been wandering round the camp like a stray camel for ages.

“Virginia’s going to buy a new tin-opener!” she called. “I pinned a notice over Sennacherib’s piece of poetry.”

John had not been successful in his detective enterprise, and had found no traces whatever of the mysterious Number Nine; indeed he had become so muddled with his own footsteps and those of the two ponies who had followed him since Sennacherib had gone to Lyndhurst, that he gave it up as a bad job, and went and knelt beside the fire, sheltering his head, and warming his wet hands.

“Can I do anything?” he asked.

“No,” answered Rosina. “When the water’s boiling I shall just put everything in and let it boil. I’m only sitting here while Alice scrapes the vegetables, because I want to dry a few sticks for to-night; otherwise there’ll be no cocoa.”

“I wondered why you were toasting twigs,” laughed John. “Are you sure you are not getting very wet?”

“Getting? I’ve got!” exclaimed Rosina. “I’ve never been so wet in my life. At home I should be in a terrible state if I were as wet as this, but here it doesn’t seem to matter at all. I know I’m looking like a drowned rat, and my hair is dripping, but I don’t care.”

“You look absolutely topping,” said John. “I think it’s wonderful of you to—to take the rain like this, and make Irish stew.”

“You thought I could only walk down Bond Street, and sip tea elegantly, and wear showy clothes, didn’t you?” questioned Rosina.

John became scarlet; he stammered and spluttered, and could find no excuse for himself; but for the first time in his life he acknowledged spontaneously that he had been in the wrong.

“As a matter of fact, I’ve got a vile temper,” he said, “and when I came down here I felt that all the world was against me because I hadn’t won that scholarship, and a chap whom I considered an absolute dud got it. I hope—er—you’ll forget about everything. You know I told you something awful was going to happen to me when I got home?”

Rosina nodded, and went on toasting sticks.

“I’m going into an office,” said John.

Rosina sat up quickly, her eyes bright, and the sticks fell into the fire.

“You call that awful!” she cried. “Why, it’s splendid! Earning your living and being independent? I should like that better than anything in the world.”

“M—yes, it’s not so bad,” reflected John. “But it’s only since I’ve been down here that I like the idea. I may rise to be the head of the firm—that’s what chaps do in books! My folk haven’t got any money, you know; we’re not like the Howards, and they’re not rich, but Lyn will go to college and all that. Aunt Ernestine is seeing to Alice’s education, and—and here am I going into an office.”

“What will Dan do?” asked Rosina.

“Dan?” smiled John. “Oh, Dan will have to sell something, I suppose! Dan’s not exactly brilliant.”

“Does he want to sell things?” questioned Rosina.

“I don’t think he’d mind as long as he knew where he was!” laughed John. “Anything cut and dried suits Dan. He keeps accounts and a diary. A regular

old maid, but one of the very best.”

“He came and loosened our guy ropes in the pelting rain last night,” nodded Rosina. “Dan thinks of everything, doesn’t he? What sort of an office are you going into?”

“Shipping,” replied John. “Hours, nine till five-thirty. Duties, answer telephone, write letters, and make myself useful to an old gentleman about three yards round the waist who breathes heavily, and wears a gold watch chain. I’d never seen a gold watch chain hung with seals till the governor took me up to interview the old Johnnie. He was very nice, but I was as nervous as a kitten. D’you think there’s any luck for me?”

“Luck?” repeated Rosina. “You were born under a lucky star. It sounds like a story to me. I envy you.”

John grinned, thinking that perhaps after all it was the beginning of something very wonderful, and as he squeezed the water from the long lock of hair which fell over his forehead but should have been brushed neatly back, he asked Rosina what she was going to do.

But Rosina was giving away no secrets. She couldn’t tell John about that little seed in her heart; he might laugh if she said she would like to be a sort of Rosina Shakespeare. She made a trench in Dan’s sou’wester for the rain to run off, and murmured that she had not made up her mind.

“I’m not very happy at home,” she said. “I’ve got no brothers or sisters. I’m so glad to be friends with Virginia and all of you, and I was terribly afraid you wouldn’t like me, and that I should be in the way. I’ve never been so happy as I am here. When I leave school I shall have to do something for a living, and I’m looking forward to that more than anything else.”

“Potatoes, cabbage, and beans,” said Alice, arriving with a pail in her hand. “You do look serious, Rosina.”

Rosina laughed, and put the vegetables into the dixie where the chops were cooking; and soon afterwards Sennacherib arrived, and Virginia had a regular set-to with him, getting him back into his place, and covering him up with his tarpaulin.

“Leave the cakes for tea, and the fruit in Sennacherib!” called Miss Ernestine. “They’ll be drier there. Goodness gracious me, I hope we shan’t get pneumonia!”

The rain did not cease all day, and there was nothing to do but eat. John, Rosina, and Alice put on dry clothes after dinner, and left the others to get wet.

They had a very smart tea in Miss Ernestine's tent, with pink paper table napkins, and a pink cloth spread on a suitcase. There was a large variety of cakes, and a great deal of discussion regarding them. Miss Ernestine declared that the creamy ones were seven for a shilling, and she had bought two shillings' worth, allowing two cakes each. However, there were only twelve in the cardboard box.

"They're tuppence each," said Virginia, "and I don't suppose they give an extra one in at Lyndhurst. That nice girl in the shop wouldn't have cheated us out of two cakes. Did she tell you they were seven a shilling?"

"Tell me, tell me," muttered Miss Ernestine. "Of course she didn't tell me, but I feel sure I saw a notice stuck in the chocolate one saying they *were* seven for a shilling."

"Anyway there are only twelve now," said Dan. "It's no good talking; we must divide the twelve, I don't mind having only one, because they give me toothache."

Alice looked up from stirring her tea and found John's eyes fixed upon her.

"If it pours like this to-night," remarked John, "I shall sleep in Sennacherib. Lyn bumped his head on the tent, so the rain's oozing in all down my side, and I'd rather have cramp in Sennacherib than a stiff neck in the tent."

They all said he was welcome to Sennacherib, and Lyn asked Alice why she looked as if she had been struck by lightning.

"I was thinking of the Isle of Man," said Alice.

"The Isle of Man!" they cried in a chorus.

"Yes," explained Alice. "Daddy told me that in the Isle of Man folk put milk and butter on the doorstep for the little people. Perhaps there are little people here—fairies, you know—and they've taken our cakes because we haven't put anything out for them."

"Better save your supper to-night for them," suggested Lyn.

And that is exactly what Alice did—at least, part of her supper—but she told nobody about it. She placed an apple, a cold sausage, and a piece of bread in a shelter which she made with wood near the dead oak. It was not exactly because she believed in fairies, but as a sort of trap for Number Nine. She knew that if John were going to sleep in Sennacherib it was only to watch for Number Nine, though he did not tell her so. If Number Nine were a pony or a cow they would soon find out; but if he were one of the little people, then

Alice would not know where she was at all, and she didn't believe that even Dan would be able to explain it.

But would Number Nine be tempted to leave footprints on the wet earth by an apple, a sausage, and a piece of bread? That was the question!

CHAPTER VII

VIRGINIA'S SCARE

IT rained for three days. If it stopped at all it was during the night. Everything and everybody in camp was damp, but when one became accustomed to being wet it didn't seem to matter. John became stiff from trying to sleep crouched up under Sennacherib's tarpaulin, therefore he gave it up, for it appeared useless from every point of view. Sometimes they sighed, and wondered whether the sun would ever shine again.

"I can hardly remember that it is usual to have dry feet," laughed Virginia, as she paddled from her tent to Sennacherib; Sennacherib was attacked by rust spots, and it was all Virginia could do to keep them down.

"I wonder how Number Nine is getting on?" reflected Alice, as on the second day of the rain she buried the sausage and the bread which had not tempted Number Nine.

They visited Beaulieu Abbey in a downpour on the third day, and had a terrible tussle getting Sennacherib home again. He evidently did not care about standing under the beech tree, so he stopped three times on the road, and pretended to get stuck in the swampy grass leading to the camp.

"There are days when I almost hate you," said Virginia, shaking her fist at Sennacherib when eventually she had urged him into his moorings; but late that night she was sorry for what she had said, and thought she would go and tuck Sennacherib up to show him she bore him no ill-will. Virginia had discovered that whenever she was bad tempered her resentment usually hit back at her in some shape or form, and she knew perfectly well that if, in her anger, she had neglected to cover poor Sennacherib properly he would only develop more rust spots by morning, and give her no end of work.

As it happened Miss Ernestine had retired early, the boys were asleep, and the only reason why Virginia was awake at such an hour was because she and Rosina had been talking about the future which seemed so very beautiful and mysterious.

Before coming to the Enchanted Camp neither Virginia nor Rosina had

thought very much about the future, but to Rosina it now seemed so wonderful that she confessed to Virginia that she felt exactly as if a magician had given her a wand which she didn't quite know how to use.

"A wand," murmured Virginia. "Really and truly it's your own mind, Rosina, and you'll use it to write beautiful things which will make you famous. If we hadn't come here, perhaps you wouldn't have found out that you had a wand."

Rosina glanced round the tent and smiled because she was so glad she was not the old Rosina who looked on the black side of everything. How queer a tent was at night! Full of shadows and thick darkness, with only a slender wall of canvas to protect one from the wind and rain. All the wild, untamed things were raging outside, flinging themselves hither and thither in the forest, tearing at the trees, searing deep lines in the kind old earth, who always forgave them because she knew they could not help it. But the tent was like an oasis in the midst of fantastic, unknown forces. Alice was but a mysterious breath hidden under a brown blanket, and the clothes hanging round the tent pole seemed so many live garments swaying gently, and puffing themselves out as if making ready to break away from the tiresome life of being just clothes, and going off into the forest to join the wind and those other strange things. The flickering candle caused the shadows to leap about, too, and gave Virginia a halo. Virginia was sitting in a heap upon her bed, and she might easily have been mistaken for some beautiful lost spirit because, with the exception of her face, she was all in the shadow, but her sweet face with its rough yellow hair gleamed like a pale flower. Virginia was wondering whether she had a wand of any kind.

"Some day," whispered Rosina—she was but a happy, vibrating voice coming out of the darkness—"when I've learned to wave my wand properly, I shall buy a Sennacherib."

Then Virginia laughed, and threw back her head; she had a joyous way of laughing when one least expected it.

"You can't!" she cried. "There's only one Sennacherib in the world, and he's mine. You can buy an Alexander the Great, or a Tom Thumb, but not a Sennacherib with whims and fancies, and queer ways like mine! Poor old darling—I don't think I covered him up properly."

"You don't mean to say that you're going out to see?" asked Rosina.

"Yes, I am," answered Virginia, struggling into her wet mackintosh. "Where has Alice put her galoshes? I've walked holes in mine."

Having found Alice's galoshes, and placed the candle in the lantern, Virginia undid the flaps of the tent and went out. It was a wild night. The wind howled distressfully, and the rain pattered like hailstones against Virginia's mackintosh.

"Funny how quickly you get accustomed to things," thought Virginia. "At home I take shelter in a shower, and here I am tramping out in the middle of the night with a storm raging and thinking nothing of it. How grim and wonderful the night is! Just as beautiful as the day, only in another way. Oh dear, I hope Sennacherib is not getting wet!"

She examined him by the light of the lantern, which gave about as much brilliance as a large, luminous moth, and after satisfying herself that the tarpaulin was tied securely over his bonnet, and tucked nicely round his front wheels, she went to see if the ground sheet she had placed over a weak spot near the back seat was still in place. If the wind blew it away Sennacherib's scarlet leather—at least it had once been scarlet leather—would certainly suffer. Virginia stood on the footboard, poised the lantern on some part of Sennacherib's anatomy, and felt with her hand for the ground sheet.

Suddenly she became stiff with fear, and her hair prickled on her head beneath the hood of her mackintosh. Her throat was dry, and she could not scream. She did not know what she was afraid of, but she listened intently, her hands clutching the tarpaulin, and she made no sound. It seemed to her that she waited a long time, but the faint, mysterious pulse which she had felt vibrating through Sennacherib, and which had so scared her, did not beat again. She was beginning to think that her imagination was affected by the darkness and the howling of the wind, when suddenly the lantern fell over. Virginia did not stop to think; she fled back to the tent, darted in, and stood panting and clinging to the pole.

"Virginia! What's the matter?" whispered Rosina; she could see nothing, but *felt* Virginia's terror there in the darkness.

"Hush! Don't wake Alice," murmured Virginia. "Get a light."

Rosina found matches, lighted a fresh candle, and beheld Virginia standing by the tent pole with the water dripping off her mackintosh, and her eyes wide with fear.

"There's something under the tarpaulin," she whispered. "Oh, it was horrible! It—it knocked over the lantern. I felt it breathing. It was terrified—so was I."

"Knocked over the lantern?" repeated Rosina. "It must have been a poor

little pony.”

Virginia sat down on her bed and wondered whether it had been a pony. But a pony could not get under the tarpaulin, and it was certainly from beneath the covering that the mysterious breathing pulse had come.

“It was not a pony,” said Virginia.

“Well, we must go and see what it was,” replied Rosina. “The lantern may set something on fire,” and she took her mackintosh from its hook on the tent pole.

Virginia felt very disinclined to venture out again, but Rosina’s intrepidity gave her courage, and because she could not let her friend go alone she accompanied her. They clung together, walking arm in arm, and from the shelter of her mackintosh Rosina flashed on the electric torch, which only succeeded in making the rain which happened to find itself within range of its gleaming eye shimmer like a silvery lake in a realm of darkness.

Rosina lifted the tarpaulin and flashed the light underneath it. Both girls peeped into the worn cavern formed by the large back seat; it was empty.

“The floor is very wet,” murmured Virginia.

“Our feet were not exactly dry after walking through the ruins this afternoon,” answered Rosina.

“It smells of damp clothes, too,” said Virginia.

“Well, doesn’t everything in the camp?” asked Rosina. “Even the apples we ate instead of pudding! Wet clothes, wet canvas, wet tarpaulin, I can taste and smell them in everything. You can see for yourself there’s nothing there, Virginia. The rain is getting on your nerves, my dear! Come along in—Sennacherib’s all right.”

“I suppose so,” murmured Virginia, and she looked for the lantern.

They found it on the ground, and went back to the tent, where Alice was sitting up in bed with her mouth wide open, and staring vacantly at the candle that flared in the enamelled basin which they used for their ablutions.

“I couldn’t think what had happened to you,” gasped Alice.

“Go to sleep,” said Rosina. “We only went to see if Sennacherib was properly covered. It’s an awful night. Oh dear, is there *anything* dry? Have you got such a thing as a dry handkerchief with which I can wipe my face, Virginia?”

“Poor Number Nine,” thought Alice as she snuggled down under her warm

blankets.

“We won’t tell the boys,” said Virginia, just before she went to sleep; “they’d only laugh at me. But you and I must keep our eyes open, Rosina, and make sure there are no gipsies lurking round the camp. Suppose they made off with Sennacherib’s headlights?”

“Ponies—cows—most likely wind,” mumbled Rosina.

To every one’s surprise the morning broke clear and bright, with a blue sky, and the sun felt as if he had been stoking his furnace in the night and was ready to blaze forth at any moment. The spirits of the campers rose to such heights that Miss Ernestine walked about with her hands over her ears.

“Where’s that half brown loaf?” asked Miss Ernestine, but nobody answered her. “We *must* eat up the stale bread in one way or another, and I’ll make a bread pudding.”

But Miss Ernestine never found the brown loaf, and knowing that the others were not very fond of stale bread she determined to give them a lecture on the evils of waste that very evening. She could not bear to think of good food being wasted, even if it were not particularly palatable, but she did not wish to accuse any one openly. It might be John, it might be Virginia who got rid of stale bread in this mysterious fashion—Miss Ernestine had noticed it on another occasion. She would certainly speak to them that evening, but she had not the heart to call them together now that they were dancing about in the sunshine, and spreading their clothes on bushes to dry.

“Alice, run round to Mr. Purkiss’s and ask him if he can let us have a few old newspapers to light the fire!” cried John. “Ours are pulp.”

“Alice, tie the frill of the tent up to let the warm air in!” called Virginia.

“Alice, you might clean the mud off my shoes a bit while I groom Sennacherib,” shouted Lyn.

So Alice bounced about like a very happy ball, and strangely enough nobody suspected that she was an angel without wings, and she would have been most surprised had any one told her that such was the case.

The tents steamed in the heat, Rosina’s red dress dried a peculiar shade of pink in the sunshine, John whistled, and Virginia sang. With the sun shining, and the blue sky hanging like an azure canopy above the trees, Virginia almost forgot her scare. Almost, but not quite. Several times during the day she would suddenly think of the lantern falling over, and she could not quite make herself believe that the wind was responsible for it.

In the afternoon Dan and Alice took a bus to Christchurch; they were inveterate sightseers, and wished to behold the longest parish church in England just because it was the longest, but the others preferred the forest and the sun. They collected wood for the fire, and talked a quantity of nonsense, but when Dan and Alice returned, hot and very weary, there was a sumptuous repast steaming in saucepans and frying-pans, and the dinner was a merry one. Alice was eating the last spoonful of custard when she heard an unusual step issuing from behind the hollies, and looking over her shoulder beheld a strange woman advancing towards the fire.

She was very poorly clad, and wore a ragged shawl about her shoulders, and a dirty yellow handkerchief tied over her head. Her hair was black, and curled round her brown face, and she had gold rings in her ears; on her arm was a basket of heather.

“Good-evening, pretty ladies,” she said. “Evening, my lovely gentlemen! Now buy a bit of white heather; do, dear. It’ll bring you luck, and you’ll never want for nothing.”

“We don’t want anything now, thank you,” said Miss Ernestine hastily. “Here’s sixpence, but I’ve nothing else to give you.”

Very calmly the gipsy sat down on the ground between Virginia and John, and Virginia could not help thinking of Sennacherib’s headlights.

“I’m going to tell you your fortune, dearie,” smiled the woman, looking at Virginia. “Cross Gipsy Rhona’s hand with a bit of silver, my love, and she’ll tell you the future. Ah, there’s a beautiful gentleman with——”

“Nonsense!” interrupted Miss Ernestine. “We don’t want our fortunes told.”

But of course they did, all but Miss Ernestine, and the gipsy with the brown, pleasant face knew it, too.

“Look here, dearie,” she said, nodding to Miss Ernestine, “you’d like to know for certain that you’re goin’ to marry a millionaire and live ’appy ever after, now wouldn’t you?”

“Not at all,” replied Miss Ernestine severely, “because I am not going to do anything of the sort, or marry anybody. Go away, my good woman.”

“Let’s have a little bit of fun,” pleaded Gipsy Rhona. “It’s Friday, and a good evening for telling fortunes. I’ve had nothing to eat all day, lovely lady, and not a penny to buy a bit of supper. There be five of us out there in the old cart on the road—not to mention the old ’oss. The rain don’t exactly ’elp them

what live on the road. I saw the smoke from your fire so I came along full of hope, and if you'll cross my hand with a bright half-crown what you'll never miss, I'll tell you your fortunes all in a bunch like, and I won't mention that millionaire again. Gipsy Rhona speaks the truth. There's no bunkum about her."

So while Miss Ernestine went to see if she could find half a crown Alice put some food on a plate, and then opened a tin of her favourite peaches.

"You're one of the angels what's come down to earth for a bit of a holiday," said Gipsy Rhona, patting Alice's plump shoulder with her thin hand, which sparkled with imitation diamond rings. "Come close, and I'll whisper your fortune in your ear so nobody'll know. You'll be happy all your life, little lady."

CHAPTER VIII

GIPSY RHONA TELLS FORTUNES

MISS ERNESTINE crossed Gipsy Rhona's hand very ceremoniously with a half-crown, then took her seat on the ground. The gipsy made a sign for them to come closer to her, and with hearts thrilling with a pleasant excitement they moved nearer, forming a circle. Even the boys could not conceal their interest, though John tried to appear only slightly amused.

It was still quite light, and the dead oak was silhouetted against the luminous sky, forming a weird background to the little group; twigs snapped sometimes, and bits of grey lichen dropped down, but there was rather a long silence as the gipsy looked keenly from one face to another. Her eyes were sharp and curious; nothing appeared to escape them. Faces, hands, feet, clothes, she scrutinized them all, and in her excitement Virginia began to laugh softly, and John giggled.

"Remember what I say," said Gipsy Rhona. "One of you—perhaps two—but certainly one of you will be among the great ones of the world. Remember me when you have power and gold in your hands."

Her voice had changed completely, and was so low and convincing that even Miss Ernestine felt obliged to listen, though she knew it was all nonsense. Lyn and John looked at one another; they were both convinced that they were the only two in the party likely to attain greatness, and they smiled in rather a superior manner.

Then Gipsy Rhona pointed her long finger at John, and her eyes twinkled with mischief.

"You're not fond enough of hard work to be a great man, my pretty gentleman," she said. "You like to take it easy, and I don't blame you, for I feel like that meself! But it's no good holding your head up and keeping your mouth open for the plums to drop into it, 'cos the dratted plums want a mighty lot of persuasion, not to say fighting for. But you'll succeed all right—after you've knocked the sourness out of your little temper. Come, my beauty, don't look shy; you know you've got a temper, and I told you Gipsy Rhona spoke only the truth. And something wonderful's going to happen to you in—say

three weeks or a month from now. You'll get your chance. You'll walk up steps to it into a large building, and outside in the street there's a lot of traffic. On the wall there's pictures of ships. And it's there—but not yet—that you'll meet a beautiful lady with brown eyes—eyes like treacle—and you'll marry her and live happy ever after. But though you'll work for ships all your life, and rise pretty high, you won't go to sea. There's the gentleman what'll travel," and she moved her hand swiftly and pointed to Lyn.

John was immensely relieved; he felt hot and cold, and did not know whether to be angry or amused. She must have read his thoughts about that shipping office, but to go and tell him in front of every one that he was bad tempered was really too much. John almost got up and walked away, but remembering in time that this would only be a display of bad humour he resolved to stay, and listen to the home truths he hoped she would mete out to the others.

"There's not many parts of the world that you won't know," continued the gipsy, shaking her finger at Lyn. "A bit of a rolling stone you'll be, and you'll never gather much moss because you'll give it away as quick as you'll collect it. Happy, good-natured, fond of your food, ready to do a good turn, but a bit lazy, that's you."

"Sounds as if I were likely to grow fat!" laughed Lyn. "How am I going to get round the world? Before the mast?"

"Sitting in a deck-chair under the funnel," replied the gipsy promptly. "You'll have adventures in a land where there's many elephants, and beware of a brown man with a ring in his nose. You'll always have a lot of leather bags and cases to look after, but you'll get somebody else to see that it's done."

"D'you mean that I'm to be a traveller?" asked Lyn, who was becoming quite interested in his future career. "Beads for the natives sort of business?"

"You want to know too much," replied Gipsy Rhona. "That's all I've got to tell you."

"But isn't there a lady with honey or treacle eyes waiting to be rescued from some brigand?" asked Lyn.

"I'm not going to tell you that for half a crown the whole jumping lot!" cried Gipsy Rhona, and turning slightly round she pointed to Dan.

"There's the great one," she said. "Your name, my little gentleman, will be known all the world over."

Dan became scarlet because he thought she was laughing at him, and he did not know where to look.

“Don’t be shy,” laughed Gipsy Rhona. “My, they’ll talk about you; and the things they’ll say, good and bad! But you won’t mind them; you’ll get accustomed to it, and you’ll just get on with the washing like. Ah, look at your hand! There’s a hand for you, and there’s a head.”

Dan did not know what to do with his rather dirty, strong, square hands, and as he knew that his head was too big for the rest of his person he blushed a little more deeply.

“Who’s the other great one?” he asked, hoping to turn the conversation to somebody else.

“I’ll tell you—the little lady in the red dress,” said the gipsy. “You’ll have some bad times, my dear, same as the little gentleman, but you keep your pecker up, because there’s a mighty fine future for you. Gold all pouring along in streams, and all made by your own effort. I don’t know what you’ll do, but I can see your hands moving a lot. There’s honour and glory for you. But beware of ladders, and don’t cross the sea in October. Red’s your lucky colour, and don’t you go thinking you’re silly, and moping because you can’t have what you want at once. You’ll get it one day if only you keep a smile on your face, and put your shoulder to it. I’m not as young as I look, my dear, and you can take it from me that work’s the only thing that gets you anywhere. Work and good manners. Ain’t I working for me half-crown now, and should I have got it if I hadn’t been polite like? I don’t think!” and she winked at Miss Ernestine.

They could not help laughing, and John, who was feeling quite happy by now, and picturing himself in the place of the old gentleman with seals on his watch chain, quoted the motto of Winchester School. Alice had bought it on a post card the day Sennacherib had stood still in the streets of that ancient city.

“‘Manners maketh man,’” said John. “I suppose you couldn’t be a little more definite about the line of business the little gentleman is going to take up? I’m his brother, so I’m interested. Is he to be a bacon king, or an oil magnate?”

“He hasn’t asked me hisself, and I’m not telling his secrets,” replied Gipsy Rhona. “But it’s not a joke. Directly I set eyes on him I knew he was a peach. My, won’t you have to work, though, my little gentleman! Tell me your name, darlin’, so that I’ll remember you when I’m an old woman, and maybe I’ll come along and remind you of what I’ve told you this night.”

Dan told her his name, hoping devoutly he would never see her again, because he was becoming more and more embarrassed and sure that she was poking fun at him.

“You haven’t told *me* anything,” murmured Virginia.

“Your face is your fortune, dovey,” smiled Gipsy Rhona. “Your face and your laugh. Laughing makes the world go round, and you’ll make the world go round all right. You’re one of the lucky ones. Things will come to you because they just like you, and they know you’ll make the best of good and bad. You’ll get what you want without much trouble. You’ll sail through life like a ship on a summer sea, and you’ll make no enemies. I don’t say that you’ll have to work much, either. Lor, you’re lucky! But beware of thunderstorms, and houses with blue doors. Green’s the colour that brings you luck. You won’t be rich, but you’ll never want for nothing. Now, lovely lady,” and she turned towards Miss Ernestine, “shall I tell you a bit about that millionaire?”

“Certainly not,” replied Miss Ernestine firmly. “A famous nephew and goddaughter are quite enough for me.”

“I daresay you’re right,” remarked the gipsy. “My, you’ll be proud of them. Let’s see, how many are you?” and she counted them.

“Seven,” she laughed. “Lucky number. You’ll be eight going back.”

“We’re eight now,” said Alice. “There’s Sen—the car.”

“Oh, I don’t count that there old cocoa-tin,” replied the gipsy. “And there’s just one more thing I’ve got to tell you. You’ll always be friends. Wherever you go, or whatever becomes of you, you’ll always help one another. I’ve got the seeing eye to-night—it’s not often that I see so clear—and I see eight of you holding hands in a circle all through your lives.”

“D’you think John’s treacle-eyed lady will join in?” asked Lyn.

“Don’t act the goat,” cried John, who had hoped they had forgotten the treacle-eyed one in imbibing so many other things.

The gipsy shook her head.

“She won’t come along for a good time yet,” she said. “It’s not her. I don’t know who it is. Now say I’ve done you well for half a crown, and add sixpence for luck.”

Miss Ernestine grumbled, but gave her sixpence, and Gipsy Rhona prepared to take her departure. She was a long time doing it because the girls plied her openly with questions, and the boys slipped a few in tactfully as if

they did not really mean to do it at all. Except Dan; he said nothing, but was looking furtively at his hands to see if there were anything peculiar about them, and feeling his head in an innocent fashion to make sure he was not developing any odd bumps.

“You’re going to do a pal a good turn,” said the gipsy to John. “And if you take to gardening in your spare time you’ll grow beautiful cucumbers.”

How they laughed! They all knew John’s tendency for growing mustard and cress in boxes on his window-sill, and once a tomato plant in a pot had blown off, and fallen upon the hat of an old gentleman, making a regular sensation in the street. The Craigs lived in a fourth story flat, therefore the flower-pot had gathered quite a lot of strength on its way down. That Gipsy Rhona had mentioned gardening in connection with John was to them all a proof of her marvellous powers, and they were convinced that she was a very remarkable woman. She eventually wished them a very happy good-night, bowed ceremoniously to Dan, and with her basket of heather on her arm, and a half-eaten tin of peaches in her hand, she walked off.

“Suppose it all comes true,” sighed Rosina.

“Of course I do like moving about,” confessed Lyn. “I hate being in the same place for years on end. Perhaps I’ll travel for some patent beef in a bottle firm! I always thought I’d be a soldier, you know, and it’s pretty well settled that I’m going to Woolwich.”

“But Dan’s the important one!” cried Virginia. “Oh, Dan, what are you going to do?”

“Light the fire that’s gone out,” replied Dan dryly. “Put on the water for washing-up. As usual I suppose Alice and I are to wash-up?”

The others felt just a trifle guilty, but after all Dan and Alice always did take things on, and one became accustomed to relying on them.

“There’s something I want to tell you,” said John, throwing little stones at the dead oak. “The old girl was right about the shipping business. I’m going into an office directly the holidays are over, and she must have read it in my mind. Yes, John Henry Craig is going out into the world to seek his fortune, and knock the sourness out of his pretty little temper!”

They were amazed; they gathered round John and oh-ed and ah-ed, and suddenly he seemed to have become a very wonderful person indeed. Rosina broke a bit of white heather from the sprig the gipsy had given her, and presented it to John for luck, and Miss Ernestine said she would give a little dinner-party for John when they got home; in talking of John they forgot Dan

and his greatness.

“Let’s drink his health,” suggested Lyn. “Alice, where is the lemon squash and the glasses?”

They drank it, and gave him three cheers, and John grinned happily, but he was seriously annoyed when Lyn refilled the glasses and toasted the treacle-eyed lady. John did not know what he could do to live down that treacle-eyed lady, and came to the conclusion that it was wiser to take no notice of her at all, and treat her as a joke when she became too obvious.

“Virginia’s the lucky one,” he said. “I’m jolly glad you’re going to be famous, Rosina, and I hope you won’t be too proud to know me. I wonder how long this will all take to come about?”

“Not more than a month of Sundays,” replied Dan. “D’you know that this drinking water disappears as if by magic? I’m always fetching it, and I believe Virginia takes it to wash her face with instead of pump water.”

“I don’t!” cried Virginia. “I’ve collected rain water because it’s so good for the complexion!”

“Considering I fill the kettles, I ought to know how much there ought to be,” returned Dan. “Somebody takes it.”

“I dip out a mugful now and again,” confessed Lyn. “I must drink if I’m thirsty.”

“I make allowances for a mugful here and there,” grumbled Dan.

“You can’t calculate every mouthful of food and every drop of water in a camp!” laughed Virginia. “You ought to be a sort of Lord High Treasurer, Dan!”

“I only like to know where I am,” murmured Dan. “And there are all those crab apples. They can’t be wasted, so who’s going to make jelly?”

“I will,” volunteered Rosina. “Only not to-night, because we’re all much too excited! How can you sit there and wash plates, Dan, when you’re going to be a great man?”

“Well, somebody’s got to wash the plates,” thought Dan. “Do they expect them to get done by themselves?” and he and Alice plodded away while the others sat round the dead oak, and laughed, and built up for themselves glorious, brilliant futures until Cassiopea came and hung herself in the dark sky, and looked down upon them with her wry, humorous smile.

CHAPTER IX

THE GAY RAHERE

ONE evening, during the second week in camp, Lyn came back from Lyndhurst with an exciting piece of news to relate. There was going to be a fair and a sale of New Forest ponies the very next day.

“And we might have missed it,” breathed Alice.

“You might—if it hadn’t been for me,” replied Lyn. “It’s been up on walls and people’s front gates for weeks, only nobody took the trouble to read it but me.”

What Lyn omitted to relate was the fact that he had had a skid, owing to the manner in which his eyes had been roving, and all at once he had found his bicycle facing a hoarding, and he had had some difficulty in preventing his head from coming in contact with a scarlet and white poster which he read to conceal the fact that he had run into it. And on that small incident hung a number of remarkable events. It decided Dan’s career.

Of course they all wanted to go to the fair, so they decided to have an early lunch the following morning, and set out on foot. Virginia would not take Sennacherib because she said it would give him a taste for frivolity, and most likely he would refuse to come back. He had been rather tiresome about returning to camp lately—besides, he did drink so heavily.

Before they started Miss Ernestine inspected them to make sure they looked respectable, and Alice was sent to change her stockings.

“I haven’t got a pair without grubs,” said Alice.

“I’ll lend you some,” sighed Rosina; and when Alice reappeared in a pair of biscuit-coloured hose which were too large for her, they decided that she didn’t look much better.

“We must walk round her, and hide her,” said Lyn. “And what’s that safety-pin doing in your collar, Alice?”

“Holding it shut,” replied Alice truthfully.

Miss Ernestine replaced the safety-pin with her own cameo brooch, but it

looked so odd in Alice's crumpled white jumper that she had to take it out again, and Dan offered one of his ties, which, he said, would conceal the crab-apple jelly stain. When Alice passed muster they set off, but during the time she was being inspected John set one or two traps for Number Nine. Number Nine was beginning to worry John seriously. For several days he had apparently quitted the camp, but now he had evidently returned, for bread and water had vanished mysteriously, and Virginia had told John about the scare she had had when tucking up Sennacherib. It all seemed very trivial and silly, and there was nothing one could actually take hold of, yet John felt strongly that there was something or some one lurking round the camp, therefore he arranged several neat little traps, unaware that Alice had done likewise, but in quite a different spirit.

When they arrived at the fair everything was in full swing. It was a very small fair, and did not look particularly prosperous, but the good humour of the people made up for much. Of course there were coco-nut shies, and roundabouts with paintless horses bobbing up and down sedately, and several booths where one could win magnificent china and glass vases if one were lucky enough to throw a penny on a red number. Highly coloured sweets were displayed in glass bottles, and there were beautiful ladies with golden hair, and rings in their ears, selling gingerbread and pearl necklaces. There was a nice merry air about it all, and the presence of several lads dressed as jockeys gave it a very horsey appearance. These lads could tell you the names of all the horses which were going to win races in the future, and they sold this valuable information for a penny.

The campers mingled with the crowd of farmers, gipsies, and holiday-makers, and made their way up the incline to the place where the ponies waited to be sold. They were standing behind a rough, circular barrier made of green stakes, and many of them were roped together with their soft noses resting on the shorn branches of young trees which separated them from the public. There were ponies of all sorts and conditions—big and little, dirty and well groomed—and Alice did not think they looked very happy. Some of the older ones, nicely groomed and wearing harness, did not appear to mind being stared at, and shouted at, and mixed up with a number of people, and told to do things which were quite impossible because of the crowd; but the little unshod ponies looked depressed, and hung their heads as if reflecting as to what would become of them before the end of the day.

“Oh,” cried Alice suddenly, “look at the one with a rose in his hair!”

He was quite small, with an Alexandra rose stuck in the matted mane which fell over his forehead in a rakish fashion, and he grinned from time to

time. There was a rope round his neck, and he was tied to a stake, but he looked as if he were pretending to be free. He swished his long, dusty tail, and when Alice approached he grinned again, and seemed to say—

“I don’t care for anything! I’m poor and dirty, but I’m going to make the best of it! Look at the rose in my hair! Oh, I’m a gay one, I am, and really the world is nothing but one large joke!”

“He’s got a face like Rahere!” burst out Alice.

“A face like Rahere,” laughed John. “I thought Rahere was an elegant courtier. He wouldn’t be flattered if he heard you, Alice!”

“I know what Alice means,” nodded Virginia. “He’s got a happy, gay spirit like Rahere had, and he’s full of jokes. I can see it in his eyes. Oh, John, there must be a hundred of them. What happens to them, I wonder?”

“Who buys them?” asked Alice. “Where do they go to?”

“To the mines—many of them,” replied Lyn. “Specially the small ones.”

Alice was horrified. She stood up as straight as a stocking needle, and clasped her hands nervously.

“To the mines?” she repeated. “Coal mines? All down in the dark where they can never see the sun? Oh, no!”

“We’ve all got to work for a living,” said Dan primly. “I shall have to.”

“But not in a coal mine!” cried Alice. “And even if you had to work in a coal mine you’d come up every night, and have Saturday and Sunday off! But they don’t bring the ponies up unless there’s a flood or something. Oh, I can’t bear to think of it!”

“Well, come and look at that fine chap over there,” said Lyn.

They wandered off, and watched several ponies being sold, but before long their feet strayed back in the direction of the little fellow with the rose in his mane. He seemed to know them, grinned roguishly, and kicked up his heels.

“He doesn’t know that he may go to the mines,” said Alice. “I believe he thinks something nice is going to happen to him, and that makes it much more awful. I don’t like to think of him down there in the dark.”

“Here’s tuppence, go and buy gingerbread,” said John, and he pressed two pennies into Alice’s hand.

Dan turned hastily away; he was extremely fond of animals, and suddenly he was very angry. Why should Rahere go to the mines? Why didn’t they have

electric contrivances to pull the trucks down there in the dark? Men went of their own free will because they wanted money which they could enjoy in the sunshine, but the ponies had no choice.

“If we could only buy him for Alice,” sighed Virginia.

“She might keep him chained up in her wardrobe, or on her window-sill,” replied John, and he took the matted hair out of Rahere’s eyes.

“Somebody ought to make a law forbidding them to go down mines,” said Dan. “They get blind from living in the dark, so I’ve been told.”

“You’d better see to it,” suggested Lyn. “You’ve got to be a Lord High Chancellor or a Prime Minister to make laws, and you know you’re going to be a great man, Dan.”

“Well, what’s to stop me being a Prime Minister?” asked Dan crossly.

They said they didn’t know, but they thought there might be a number of things in the way; but the discussion did not continue because Miss Ernestine arrived on the scene looking most aggressive, and asking if any one had been nasty to Alice because she was eating gingerbread all by herself behind the coco-nut shies, and said she didn’t want to go on the roundabouts.

“It’s Rahere,” explained Rosina. “He’s upset her—in fact, all of us.”

“Who in the world is Rahere?” asked Miss Ernestine.

When they had explained she only said “Oh,” and went slowly off to see if she could buy a button-hook; she had already lost three button-hooks in camp, and suspected Virginia of taking them. Virginia was always scraping nuts out of some part of Sennacherib where they should not be, and no button-hook was safe if she were about; but Miss Ernestine was thinking of Rahere, and could not fix her mind properly on button-hooks.

John wended his way to the coco-nut shies, where he found Alice.

“Look here, Alice,” he said severely, “you don’t mean to say you’re moping about that dirty, ugly little pony?”

“I—I don’t know,” answered Alice, trying her best to be truthful, but of course she did know.

She remembered that Gipsy Rhona had told her that she was to be happy all her life, and here she was feeling miserable, and with an immense lump in her throat, because a pony with a rose in his hair, and a face like Rahere, was going to the mines. The mines—after living in the sunshine and sleeping under the green trees, and having the beautiful freedom of the forest. And he didn’t

even know it! Alice blinked hard at John, and he took her to throw pennies on red numbers, which she did not do.

It was most peculiar that their feet led them again towards the rough barriers, but Alice gave her brother the slip before they reached them. She had no intention of behaving like a baby before them all, and she wanted to go and see Rahere by herself. John found Dan stroking the little pony, and Rosina feeding him with pear-drops.

“He belongs to those gipsies over there,” said Dan, “and he *is* going to the mines if he’s not sold to-day. They’ll let him go for six pounds.”

“He could pull Aunt Ernestine’s lawn-mower beautifully,” said Rosina. “The lawns are getting too much for old Day, the gardener, and I know Aunt Ernestine will have a heart attack or something if she insists on doing them herself. You see, he could be Alice’s and live at Aunt Ernestine’s.”

“Who could live at Aunt Ernestine’s?” asked that lady, arriving with Lyn on one arm and Virginia on the other.

They explained, and Miss Ernestine said she wanted no gay Rahere to pull her grass-cutter, and she was not going to provide him with galoshes, and he’d ruin her beautiful lawns with his hoofs, and eat her out of house and home.

“A little creature like that wouldn’t eat more than a bird,” murmured Virginia. “Oh, Aunt Ernestine, look at the rose in his hair! He won’t wear a rose when he’s down in the mines.”

“And where are the six pounds coming from?” asked Miss Ernestine.

They looked at Dan. Dan was the only one of them who ever had any money to speak of, and how he came by it was a mystery considering his pocket-money was the same as John’s, and John never had more than a few shillings. But Dan had a marvellous gift that no one was aware of. He could save without being mean, and appeared rich though he was poor; he had a generous spirit, but he never did anything without weighing it well first.

“I’ll give two pounds,” said Dan. “One I’ve got here, and the other’s at home.”

“Four shillings,” murmured John—it was all he had.

“About eight,” said Virginia; “but I must have a box of peppermints to go home with.”

“How are we going to get him home?” cried Miss Ernestine, and as she spoke as if Rahere had already been purchased they breathed more freely,

turned the conversation skilfully, and spoke of the joy that Alice was about to experience.

Then there was a long discussion with a very ragged gipsy, after which Miss Ernestine produced some notes from a concealed pocket in her blue serge skirt, and Rahere was theirs.

“But you must pay me the promised sums,” said Miss Ernestine as the gipsy untied Rahere, and gave the cord to Dan.

“Of course!” they cried, and off they went, leaving Miss Ernestine to complete the business, and see to whatever formalities there might be.

“Alice!” they shouted, and they swept down the incline towards the coconut shies, with Rahere tossing his mane in the midst of them, and the pink rose bobbing rakishly over one eye.

“Alice!”

They did not mind the people staring at them at all, nor the jockeys asking them if they had bought a Derby winner, nor the beautiful ladies selling gingerbread and pearl necklaces making jokes about Rahere’s rose. They had a merry answer for every one, and Virginia, who was usually very dignified in public, lost her hat in the race down the hill, and her hair stood out in a bush, and she laughed because it was all so lovely. They had actually bought Rahere! No mines for him!

When Alice saw them she did not know what to think; the thought of buying Rahere had never occurred to her, and she could not imagine why he was scampering along with the others like a toy pony on a string.

“He’s yours,” said Dan. “Yours for keeps, you know. But he’ll have to live at Aunt Ernestine’s. Mind he doesn’t pull you down! I’d better hold the rope.”

When she realized what had happened Alice could not speak; she only put her arm round Rahere’s dusty neck and kissed him on the forehead, but she would not let Dan hold the rope. She wanted to feel that Rahere was really her own, because she found it so hard to believe. Then Miss Ernestine bought a brush with which to groom him, and a new rope halter to put over his head, and they could not have tea in Lyndhurst as they had intended because Rahere might feel out of place in a tea-shop.

So they ate gingerbread and chocolate at the fair, and drank glasses of lemonade, and Rahere poked his nose everywhere, grinning each time they laughed.

Miss Ernestine said they looked most disreputable as they went home, and

she hoped devoutly they would meet nobody she knew. Virginia had no hat because it had been trampled, Lyn carried two hideous dolls which he had won, Dan and Rosina sang a duet, while John blew a mouth organ and did the Charleston. Alice, with her biscuit-coloured stockings concertinaing round her legs, bounced along beside Rahere, dancing on the end of his cord to the tune of John's music, and springing over the ferns and clumps of heather like a pixy.

Alice was so happy that she wanted to hug everybody, and they had to tell her that they couldn't really be kissed any more. She laughed up at John, her eyes twinkling merrily.

“Now we're ten,” she whispered.

CHAPTER X

NUMBER NINE

THE tents looked quite ghostly in the soft light. The green of the trees and the hazy blue of the sky seemed merged together, and the white tents had lost their hard outline, becoming one with the beech and the dead oak. Ashes lay in the fire trench, Sennacherib stood forlorn and lonely; there was no sound.

“It is a deserted camp,” whispered Rosina to John as the party approached, Rahere and Alice still leading the way. “A deserted camp in a forest, and we are travellers who have suddenly come upon it.”

“I wonder what we shall find,” smiled John. “Hi, Alice, halt! This is a deserted camp, and we must not enter without due respect and consideration. The spirits of the last occupiers may still haunt the place.”

Alice tugged at Rahere, brought him to a standstill, and they all entered into the pretence, even Miss Ernestine, who had the reputation of being matter-of-fact on all occasions.

“Look at that poor old car,” said Miss Ernestine, pointing to Sennacherib. “Did you ever see such an antediluvian affair? So high on the leg and queer-looking altogether. Ah, this camp must have been deserted centuries ago.”

“Then it’s a great find,” retorted Virginia. “Old things are most valuable, and I claim that motor for my own.”

“We’ll be able to make a fire in the trench!” cried Alice. “Come along—let’s see if any one’s here!”

John ventured a little ahead of the others, and called out. There was no answer, so he knelt down and examined the trench where the fire had been.

“The ashes are still white,” he remarked; then he sprang up, his face grim, and his hands clenched.

Dan ran towards him, Alice stood with her mouth wide open—catching flies, as Lyn said—and Miss Ernestine asked briskly what it was all about.

“The ashes are warm,” replied John. “Warm—I’m not joking now.”

One after the other they placed their hands on the blackened twigs, and Dan pushed his underneath them; but he was obliged to withdraw it quickly, for the bottom of the trench was hot.

“Quick—examine the tents!” exclaimed Lyn.

With beating hearts they ran towards their different tents, but as far as they could tell nothing had been touched. The mattresses, neatly rolled and strapped, were in their accustomed places, clothes hung from the tent poles, Virginia’s clock was still hidden in one of her shoes, and different little odds and ends reposed upon the low tables formed by old suitcases standing on little logs. There was nothing of real value in the camp, for Miss Ernestine had taken all the money with her, and they trusted Sennacherib implicitly, knowing that he would not run off with any stranger unaccustomed to his whims and fancies. Dan counted the plates, mugs, knives and forks, and found none missing.

“Whoever it was he doesn’t seem to have done more than light a fire,” muttered Dan. “Some tramp most likely, making himself a cup of tea,” and he went and examined the teapot, which was as dry inside as teapots usually are, and had not more than the usual tea-leaves sticking to its sides.

Then they looked for footmarks, and John examined his traps, but the fresh sand he had sprinkled in different places was untouched, and the cotton he had tied between bushes unbroken. But Rosina discovered the cotton, and was so mystified by its presence that John was obliged to confess that for some time he had suspected that some one was lurking round the camp. Then other odd little happenings cropped up, and Miss Ernestine remembered the bread pudding she had never made.

“You know we would never throw away bread, Aunt Ernestine,” said Rosina. “This—this Number Nine must have taken it. And most likely he took shelter in Sennacherib the night of the rain. If he’s a tramp, why doesn’t he come here and ask for help?”

They stood discussing the matter for some time, then Alice slipped away, and went to see if her special little bait was taken. Having tied Rahere to the beech tree, and cut a nice little mound of fresh grass for him, she felt at liberty to attend to Number Nine. Number Nine interested Alice enormously, but she did not feel towards him as the others did. She was not in the least annoyed that he had used their fire and taken their stale bread, for after all this was an Enchanted Camp, and one expected strange things to happen. All said and done, was it very much stranger than the coming of Rahere? That morning she had never even seen Rahere, and now he was one of them. She stroked

Rahere's funny, crooked, whimsical face as she passed him, and whispered in his ear that she would buy him a new rose for his hair every Alexandra Day. Then she tripped over to Sennacherib, lifted the tarpaulin, and crept in.

"Oh," said Alice, and her heart began to beat in a most peculiar fashion.

On Sennacherib's shabby seat was a piece of white cardboard, and pushing up the tarpaulin to let more light in, Alice read carefully the words pencilled on the cardboard. The top portion was in her own round and very studied handwriting, the bottom part was a rapid scrawl of black letters, and the words almost ran one into the other as if the writer had been in a great hurry.

"For the little people, or Number Nine, if he requires it," read Alice aloud; then beneath: "Number Nine is very grateful. Number Nine will do no harm."

Alice felt most subdued; with the card in her hand she walked slowly to the group standing round the fire, still arguing as to what had better be done.

"Alice, run along and ask Mr. Purkiss to come round," called Lyn. "Oh, lor! Here she is standing at my elbow! What's the matter, Alice? Still catching flies?"

Alice handed the card to John, and seemed to find it difficult to explain anything; she became more and more confused as she spoke.

"Of course I don't really believe there are little people," she said, "but I don't know for certain. And I pretend sometimes. But I knew there *was* a Number Nine—and so did John. We weren't exactly afraid of him, but—but he's queer. I put food for him by the dead oak, but he didn't take it. Oh, it was horrid—I had to bury the sausage!"

"But what does this card mean?" interrupted Lyn. "Get on with this part of the story, Alice."

"That's what I'm doing," replied Alice.

"Let the child say what she likes and don't interrupt her!" cried Miss Ernestine impatiently. "Don't fidget, Virginia. Now, Alice, go on."

"I didn't take any one's apples or cake," continued Alice, trying to be more lucid. "I saved my own. I thought perhaps he didn't like sausages. Then I heard Virginia tell Rosina that she was perfectly sure there was something sheltering in Sennacherib the night it rained so much, and I thought it must be Number Nine."

"Virginia! Why didn't you tell me?" asked Miss Ernestine.

"Because I didn't think it *could* be," answered Virginia. "In the morning

when the sun was shining I thought it was all a silly idea on my part, and it was only sometimes at night that I thought *perhaps* there had been something sheltering there.”

“So you put the notice in Sennacherib this morning, Alice,” said Dan, “and also something for Number Nine. Is that right?”

“Yes,” nodded Alice. “I put cake and fruit on a cardboard plate and they’ve gone, and there’s writing on the bottom of the card.”

“Number Nine is very grateful. Number Nine will do no harm,” read John aloud.

“I haven’t the slightest idea what to do,” said Miss Ernestine. “But we can’t go on like this. I won’t have unknown Number Nines about the camp. I’d rather go home.”

“Oh, Aunt Ernestine!” they cried. “We’ve got three more days! We can’t go home!”

“Yes, we can—to-morrow, unless Number Nine comes out and shows himself,” said Miss Ernestine decidedly.

They were greatly perturbed, and made a number of useless suggestions. At last Dan said something that seemed a little more sensible, and led the others to think that some sort of a solution was forming in his mind.

“At least Number Nine has entered into the spirit of the camp,” said Dan. “He wouldn’t have written that on Alice’s notice if he hadn’t understood a bit about us. There’s Mr. Purkiss, you know.”

This seemed quite a new side of the question, and they began to wonder whether Mr. Purkiss were playing them a joke. He was full of fun, and a very jolly old gentleman with a story of some kind to relate every time they met him.

“I never thought of Mr. Purkiss playing us up,” mused John. “We should look silly if we all decamped just because he is having a little joke.”

“I know!” cried Alice. “Let’s ask him to come to supper and see Rahere!”

“I was just going to suggest that,” said Lyn. “Ask him to supper, and pump him.”

“Has any one mentioned this Number Nine to him?” asked Miss Ernestine.

“Once,” nodded Alice. “I had to wait a long time for the eggs.”

So Virginia went to ask Mr. Purkiss to supper because Alice could not be

trusted to do it tactfully; she might give them away. They told Alice she was to hold her tongue during the meal, and leave all investigations to her elders and betters. Number Nine and the cardboard notice were not to be mentioned, but they would handle Mr. Purkiss discreetly and induce him to give himself away, then they would form their plans accordingly. They would show him that they were not as green as they looked, and not so easily mystified as all that. They would turn the tables on Mr. Purkiss, that's what they would do. Old Purkiss with his stories of phantom carts, and his tricks to make them think there was a ghostly outsider trying to get into the magic circle! Poof—a good thing they had thought of Mr. Purkiss, otherwise Miss Ernestine might really have made them pack up in the morning.

“Let's give him a jolly good dinner and a comfortable seat,” said John gleefully, “and if I know anything of Mr. Purkiss, he'll let the cat out of the bag before he's smoked his first pipe!”

Mr. Purkiss accepted the invitation, and came back with Virginia. He brought them a large basket of greengages, and Virginia carried a huge bunch of flowers which he insisted on picking for her from his garden. They all enjoyed their meal tremendously, for Mr. Purkiss was good company, and never tired of talking of the forest in which he had lived for over seventy years. He told them the age of some of the trees, and said that the beech under which Rahere stood winking and blinking must be quite three hundred and eighty years old.

“Oh, Mr. Purkiss, how do you know?” asked Alice eagerly before she had time to remember that she must not speak.

“By old documents relating to the forest,” answered Mr. Purkiss. “Look at that beech—see how his limbs stretch up from his gnarled stem; multiple branches twisting together, free to do as they like. He's a pollard tree. In his youth, when he was just big enough to be called a tree, they cut off his head, his poll, and out of his trunk there sprung shoots which have grown to those great straight branches. That's why some of the trees are such a queer shape. We've got a record of when many of the trees were pollarded and sold for timber. He's seen something, that old beech—and the dead oak, too.”

“He's seen some odd things during the last ten days,” remarked John, looking innocently at the beech.

“I don't doubt that!” laughed Mr. Purkiss, filling his pipe and leaning back against Lyn's rolled-up mattress. “Have any of you heard that cart taking William Rufus to Winchester?”

There he was, seizing the very first opportunity that offered! Miss

Ernestine smiled, and remarked that though they had not actually heard the cart they had become acquainted with other amazing phenomena. Mr. Purkiss screwed up his eyes till they were but slits in his face, and, bending forward, he beckoned to Alice. Poor Alice did not know what to do; she had been forbidden to speak, yet Mr. Purkiss was a very great friend of hers, and she was accustomed to having long conversations with him when she went to his house on numerous errands. Dan pinched her, so she went round to Mr. Purkiss, and held her head sideways towards him in a confidential, listening attitude.

“Seen any more of Number Nine?” asked Mr. Purkiss in his loud and very audible whisper.

“Not exactly *seen*,” replied Alice, also whispering, and striving to be truthful.

Mr. Purkiss roared with laughter, and they all came to the conclusion that they had discovered his secret. He was Number Nine himself! Well, they would take on the joke themselves now. Rosina whispered to John, and John wrote a note on a piece of paper, and passed it round. They read it secretly when Mr. Purkiss was not looking, and nodded consent. Mr. Purkiss did not leave till ten o’clock, and they all enjoyed his company so much that they asked him to come again, which he promised to do.

“He’s game!” said John as soon as Mr. Purkiss was out of earshot. “He knows he’s given the show away by asking about Number Nine, but he’s going to play it out till the end. He’ll come to-morrow.”

“There couldn’t have been any one in Sennacherib that night,” laughed Virginia. “It must have been the wind.”

“I always told you it was!” cried Rosina.

“I couldn’t read that bit of paper without my glasses,” said Miss Ernestine. “I saw something about ghosts on it. What do you intend doing?”

“It’s Rosina’s idea, and a jolly good one,” answered John. “We’re going to give a ghost party to-morrow evening, and invite Number Nine, Aunt Ernestine. You’ll all have to come as ghosts, you know.”

“Dress up in sheets, or blankets, or towels, or anything ghostly,” explained Rosina. “And we mustn’t tell one another what sort of a ghost we intend being. We must just appear one after the other at the dead oak, and disguise our voices. It’ll be fun guessing who we are! Number Nine will give himself away, I fear, because his size is not exactly sylph like!”

“Hum,” said Miss Ernestine. “How are you going to issue an invitation to Number Nine? Send it round when Alice goes to get the eggs?”

“When we’ve taken so much trouble to-night to keep him from suspecting that we’ve found him out?” cried Lyn. “O Aunt Ernestine, where’s your artistic sense?”

“Never had any,” replied Miss Ernestine; “but I want to know exactly what you intend doing, because I won’t have any tricks played on Mr. Purkiss. He may have a heart, and not be able to stand shocks—to say nothing of ghosts.”

“We’re going to write an invitation on a card, and pin it to the dead oak,” said John. “Then we shall just wait and see what happens to-morrow night. We gave him a hint because we asked him to come again, and he accepted. He won’t have a shock because he’ll know that he is to meet ghosts, and come as one himself.”

“I hope he won’t think us *very queer*,” murmured Miss Ernestine.

They were late going to bed, because the invitation to Number Nine took some time to compose and write. When it was ready they attached it to the trunk of the dead oak with seven drawing-pins, and drew a circle round the tree which they outlined with white stones.

When Cassiopea was sinking to rest in the ocean she slid down and down in the dark sky till she became on a level with the notice. Only Cassiopea saw who was reading it. It ran thus:

“At nine o’clock to-morrow night seven ghosts of the forest, and the dragon with the bright eyes, will meet beneath the dead oak which stands in the midst of the Enchanted Camp, and these restless spectres of the night do hereby most cordially invite their unknown brother, Number Nine, to join them within the magic circle. (Ghosts only admitted.)”

CHAPTER XI

THE GHOST PARTY

THE dead oak was a silver grey skeleton in the half-light. It was not dark at nine o'clock, for there were luminous patches of green-gold light lying in the sky like slender fishes basking in an opal sea, and the pale white moon appeared as a phantom ship about to set sail. It was neither day nor night, but a curiously silent hour between the two when the earth seems waiting for something. The great forest held its breath for a moment, before the unseen activity of the night replaced the noisy hurry of the day.

The birds and insects had ceased their songs; a colourless moth flitted here and there. Presently a brown figure approached the oak, and took its seat within the circle of white pebbles. The figure was bent, and walked with a staff; it was wrapped in an army blanket which was drawn well over its head and pinned beneath its chin. Strands of lank hair—which looked very like ravellings from Alice's stockings—straggled over its ghastly white face, and as it mumbled to itself it showed gaps between its white teeth, which, on closer inspection, proved to be bits of black paper neatly stuck on.

A small, round, barefooted ghost, clothed in what appeared to be several dishcloths, followed it; it breathed heavily, for its head was entirely enveloped in a cloth tied round its neck with a ragged cord. From two small holes in the cloth it glanced rather timidly at the pilgrim with the staff.

"Hail, brother," said the pilgrim in a hollow voice. "I see you carry a lantern; what seek you?"

"My—my horse," murmured the dishcloth ghost. "He strayed in the forest many hundreds of years ago, and I am still looking for him. Methinks I behold his shadow beneath the beech yonder."

Then, from behind the beech tree, appeared a terrible apparition carrying its head. It was swathed in a white sheet, and in its arm reposed a head wrapped in a cloth but exposing a yellow, melon-like complexion, and two hollow black eyes.

The little, round ghost gasped as this phantom leaned against the oak, and

the head in its arm sat up and looked round in a horrible fashion.

“Ah, brother, yours was an untimely end,” sighed the pilgrim.

“Aye,” replied the headless one, and with his long white finger he pointed to the bushes.

A beautiful nun was walking towards them. She resembled Virginia very closely, though her face was deathly white, and no hair escaped from the coiff tightly bound around her head. She appeared to see nothing, but walked as one in a dream with her hands spread out before her.

Then there was a rattling of chains, and a limp figure concealed in a blanket, with huge chains dragging round its feet and hanging from its hands, made its way into the circle, followed by a thin and elegant executioner wearing a black mask, and carrying a hatchet. The executioner and his victim wore long black hair resembling that of the pilgrim, and they followed one another closely round and round the inside of the circle, the executioner never quite succeeding in catching up with his victim.

“Behold, here comes our friend the ghostly witch,” murmured the headless one, and into the circle there stepped a substantial ghost clothed in a black and shining garment, the hood of which stood upright on its head, and was heightened by a stick on which sat a black cat. Grey hair hung round this creature’s white face, and it limped, and leaned on a broom-stick.

Seating itself in a niche formed by the roots of the oak the witch looked round searchingly, then lighted a lamp which was concealed under its cloak. Its eyes swept over the dishcloth ghost, the nun, and the two slowly moving figures, but looked keenly at the headless phantom and the pilgrim.

“Dear me, I wish that executioner and his victim would sit down,” said the witch. “It makes me giddy to watch them prowling along like a cat stalking a mouse, and I can’t bear the sound of chains rattling.”

The executioner halted at once, and fell into the attitude of a statue: hand on hip, hatchet poised, and one toe resting lightly on the ground. The victim fell in a heap at his feet and groaned.

“Hum,” said the witch, “a very smart-looking executioner, I must say.”

“We are seven,” murmured the pilgrim.

“Eight,” wailed the nun, pointing to a grey mound beyond the beech from which two huge and brilliant eyes were gleaming. “Behold the dragon, the keeper of the Enchanted Camp.”

Then a twig snapped in the undergrowth. The ghosts were silent, and looked eagerly in the direction of the sound, but no phantom appeared.

“Nine o’clock,” breathed the little, round apparition.

“We know that,” murmured the executioner.

They waited in silence for several long minutes, then a twig snapped again, and there were footsteps. The little ghost began to giggle.

“Sssss-sh!” whispered the headless one.

The footsteps came nearer, and from behind the dragon with the gleaming eyes appeared a thin, hesitating figure with a sack over its head. The witch sprang up, and would have spoken had not the headless one caught her arm, and whispered something in her ear. They had expected a large, portly ghost with a good ringing laugh, but this slender figure took their breath away. Shabby blue trousers, much frayed, hung round its broken boots, but from the knees upwards it was concealed by a patched sack.

“Number Nine,” it faltered.

Its voice was almost inaudible, and it made no attempt to come within the circle. There was a tense second of amazement during which the seven within the circle drew nearer together, and the headless one pulled aside a cloth and revealed a second face.

“Leave it to me, Aunt Ernestine,” whispered John to the witch.

“You—you *invited* me,” muttered Number Nine.

“You’re quite right, we did,” replied John. “Welcome, Number Nine. But, you see, we expected somebody else. We don’t know you; what do you want?”

“This is no longer a joke,” said Miss Ernestine. “Will you kindly take that sack off your head and tell us who you are?”

“Come inside, Number Nine,” murmured Alice.

The figure waited to see whether this invitation would be seconded, and receiving a curt nod from Lyn, the executioner, stepped over the barrier of stones and threw the sack behind him. He was a lad of perhaps fifteen, thin, nervous looking, wearing a frayed blue suit, an old flannel shirt pinned together at the throat, and his blue eyes, which glanced appealingly from one to the other of his examiners, had a curiously hungry regard. The campers did not strike him as looking funny in their odd costumes, for he was playing for a great stake which to him meant fortune, and having schooled himself to face an ordeal, the moment for him was too serious to be treated as a game. He had a

very slight advantage over his hosts which he determined to make use of; he knew something of the characters of these boys and girls, and that gracious lady with the rather loud voice, whereas they knew nothing of him.

“Who are you?” asked Miss Ernestine decidedly, yet kindly. “Now I don’t want any hokey-pokey or long tales, so answer me frankly. You’ve been spying on us ever since we came here, haven’t you?”

“I couldn’t help it,” replied the boy. “I was here before you. I’ve only got the dead oak there for a shelter, and I keep my things in it.”

They were astonished; John looked round at the oak in amazement; he had certainly never examined it closely, but had often remarked that its huge trunk was hollow in parts. He had even climbed it once, and so had Dan, but Mr. Purkiss had asked them not to do so in case it was unsafe.

“Have you no home?” asked Miss Ernestine.

“No,” replied the boy. “My parents are dead, and I’ve been on my own for the last two years. I’ve got nobody. I earned a living in Southampton last winter, then I couldn’t get any work to do, and being summer-time I thought I’d live in the forest and maybe save a bit of money. There’s no work here, though, and nobody in Lyndhurst will take me on because I’ve got no decent clothes. But I go into Lyndhurst every day, and sometimes do odd jobs—cleaning in the garage mostly. My father was a bootmaker, ma’am, and—and I’ve been to school, and we had a nice little cottage once—and—and—I lived like other people till I had to fend for myself.” He broke off abruptly, and looked appealingly at Alice.

“Did you ever take anything from our camp?” asked Miss Ernestine. “Or sleep in our car?”

“I once took some peppermints, and—and a couple of cakes—the day I was nearly starving,” he confessed; “but after that I never took anything but stale bread, and a drink of water sometimes. I’m sorry, ma’am, I know I shouldn’t have taken it—but I was terribly hungry—and it was stale, and I was afraid to ask for it. Afraid and—and ashamed. I didn’t know what you’d do to me. Yesterday I made tea on your fire when you was at the fair. A lady caravaning over Brocklehurst way gave me a bag of tea and sugar, and a shilling for washing down her caravan. I used my own saucepan,” and he nodded to the dead oak.

“You were in the car the night of the storm,” said Virginia.

“Yes,” he murmured. “I was wet through tramping backwards and forwards to Lyndhurst, where I stay mostly during the day, and I did want a bit

of shelter. You can't keep dry in the oak when it rains bad. I was scared of you, miss, 'cos I thought most likely you'd have the place searched, and give me over to the police."

"I don't think you know us very well after all," remarked Miss Ernestine. "It was very foolish of you to behave as you have done. What is your name?"

"Wilfred Stokes, ma'am."

"Well, Wilfred Stokes," continued Miss Ernestine, "why didn't you come and speak to us, and tell us the plight you were in, instead of hiding and behaving like a spy?"

The boy flushed scarlet, but he held his head up, and looked at Miss Ernestine straight in the face.

"I was afraid to," he replied. "When you've come to this you're afraid of things—and ashamed, too, because of taking the bread. Then the little girl there," and he pointed to Alice, "put out food for me, and I never took none till yesterday. When the sun was shining again I didn't feel so bad, and I liked to watch you having your supper of an evening, and listen to you talking. I've never seen no other people like you. I began to pretend, like you, that this was an Enchanted Camp, and I knew the tall—gentleman—called me Number Nine. I was back early yesterday, before you came home from the fair, and I just couldn't help playing up to the little girl. I heard what you said about Number Nine, but I wouldn't have let you pack up and go home, ma'am; I'd have come out and confessed, indeed I would."

They laughed at that, and the tension became less; Rosina, the pilgrim, said she had never suspected anything, and they all began talking, and questioning Wilfred Stokes, and asked him how he got into the dead oak without being seen.

"I hung about in the bushes till you were all in your tents," he replied. "On fine nights I sleep out on a couple of sacks that I hide in the oak to keep dry. I've got a saucepan, a mug, and a two-shilling piece stored there. A gentleman driving in the forest gave me the two shillings for helping him to put on a tyre in the pouring rain. It's all I've got, and I took the little girl's dinner yesterday so as not to spend it."

Dan began taking the chains off his hands, and he said in rather a grave voice—

"What are you saving for?"

"To go to London," replied the boy. "I can't live in the forest during

winter, and there's no work here."

"Why did you come and see us to-night when you've kept away all this time?" asked Lyn.

The boy did not answer, and there was a long silence.

"I expect he thought we'd help him," said Alice at last.

So like Alice that! Giving information that every one knew already.

"And Lyn's clothes would fit him," continued Alice, making another obvious statement.

"Did you think we'd help you, Wilfred Stokes?" asked Miss Ernestine.

"I—I didn't know," he stammered. "You were so kind and happy together. I never saw such happy people. I didn't understand you at first, but I soon got you, and I thought I'd—well—play up to the ghost party and see what happened."

"And what do you expect to happen?" asked Virginia.

Then Wilfred Stokes played his last card. He was a clever boy, far-seeing, courageous, and accustomed to grasp any opportunity which came within his reach, and turn it to his own advantage. He was no longer frightened of these people, but he was terribly afraid that they would vanish into the great city which was but a name to him, taking their magic with them, and leaving him alone to strive and struggle, and battle with what he called his ill-luck. Given a chance, the smallest ghost of a chance, Wilfred Stokes thought that he might succeed in making a little place for himself in the world, for it was not ability which he lacked but the material things with which to make that ability a profitable commodity. He wanted a suit of decent clothes, respectable boots, and, above all, a kind, strong hand to lead him for a little while, and a cheery word to encourage him. Wilfred Stokes felt that he was sinking down in the world, and he believed this to be his one and only chance of rising to the surface again. The others did not fully realize the agony the boy experienced at that moment; his hands were hot, his teeth chattered, and it was all he could do to speak steadily. He knew that the next few moments would perhaps make his fortune, therefore he smiled at Virginia and tried to answer lightly.

"Well," he said, "what could happen in a place like this but a miracle? You call it the Enchanted Camp, don't you? I expect a charm or something to fall on me and give me a chance to live happy ever after!"

"Charms have to be bought," replied Miss Ernestine quickly. "What can you do?"

“I’m good with a car,” he replied. “And I know a bit about horses. I’ve got to live somehow till I’m old enough to go for a soldier. That’s what I shall do when they’ll take me.”

“You’ll go for a soldier!” cried Lyn eagerly. “That’s what I’m going to do! I’m keen on soldiering.”

“Keen on a smart uniform,” murmured John, but he looked at Miss Ernestine with eyes almost as pleading as those of Wilfred Stokes; indeed Miss Ernestine found seven pairs of eyes fixed upon her in silent supplication, and she reflected for a moment without speaking; then she held out her hand to Number Nine.

“I’ll give you a chance,” she said. “I’ll take you back to London and find you a job, and keep an eye on you, if you promise me faithfully to try hard and be of some use in the world, and never to take anything again which does not belong to you. I like your courage, but I shall tell you some of your failings in private another time. Come along closer in—you’re one of us now, Number Nine.”

Then they all began singing “For he’s a jolly good fellow,” but Number Nine could neither see nor hear, for his heart was pounding like an engine, and his eyes burning like fire; nevertheless he had never been so happy in his life.

CHAPTER XII

FAREWELL

“OUR last day,” sighed Alice.

“Don’t talk about it!” cried Rosina. “It will be bad enough when we have to strike tents to-morrow morning, but forget it till then.”

“I wish I could go with John, and Dan, and Wilfred, and Rahere,” said Alice. “I’m sure there won’t be room for me in Sennacherib with Rosina. I’m bigger than all the tinned fruit we’ve eaten.”

“We can always tie you to his bonnet,” laughed Virginia. “Wilfred, have you seen to Sennacherib’s sparking-plug?”

“Yes,” cried Wilfred, appearing from the vicinity of the oak. “Come and look at him, Miss Virginia; he just dazzles you.”

Wilfred Stokes had changed in such an amazing manner that it was difficult to recognize him. The Enchanted Camp had indeed cast its spell on Wilfred, and in two short days he was a different boy. His eyes were almost as bright as Lyn’s—from the first Lyn and Wilfred had felt some bond between them, perhaps it was that both were generously endowed with the spirit of adventure—and the nervous, tense expression had almost left his face. Then Sennacherib had taken Wilfred to Bournemouth, and Lyn had chosen for him some new clothes. But Miss Ernestine had kept a severe and critical eye on Wilfred’s wardrobe, for she knew Lyn’s taste in socks and pullovers, and being unaccustomed to mince matters she announced openly that if Lyn chose to look like a sugar-stick it was none of her business, but she objected to Wilfred appearing as a bull’s-eye or a canary. Therefore Wilfred was provided with a neat, darkish grey suit, which was all he required for the moment, and the usual accessories which accompany a suit. He found it difficult to express his gratitude in any way but by polishing and repolishing Sennacherib, and grooming and regrooming Rahere; but he had had a little private conversation with Miss Ernestine, and he longed for the time to come when he would be able to prove to her that he was worthy of her kindness. Wilfred Stokes was going to do his bit in the world, and a little bit over, too, for he did not see that there was any other way of repaying his friends. He had a deep respect and

admiration for John; John had taken him under his wing, and was coaching him in many little matters of speech and behaviour of which Wilfred was ignorant. John was the sort of boy who did not make friends readily—he was not like Lyn, who was hail-fellow-well-met with every one who crossed his path—therefore he prized Wilfred’s appreciation very deeply, and determined to keep it and help the boy all he could.

When Wilfred approached Virginia with the request to come and look at Sennacherib, it was hard to believe that only two days previously he had stepped into the magic circle in his rags and misery, for now he was brimming over with joy and happiness. The sleeves of his grey flannel shirt were rolled up, exposing a pair of thin, energetic arms, his trousers were creased in a manner warranted to please even Lyn, his good thick shoes were polished, and his face one humorous smile.

“I just love that Sennacherib, Miss Virginia,” he said eagerly.

“To tell you the truth, so do I!” laughed Virginia. “I’m so glad you’re as silly as we are, Wilfred. I hope Sennacherib won’t disgrace me to-morrow—he’s awful sometimes!”

“What a dreadful smell of furniture paste!” said Miss Ernestine, passing with a pail of potato peelings which she was going to bury.

“I’ve been polishing the seats a bit,” confessed Wilfred.

“Polishing the seats!” echoed Miss Ernestine. “Well, if it’s as hot as this to-morrow we shall all stick to them, judging by the amount of bees-wax you’ve used, Wilfred.”

“Aunt Ernestine, just see how lovely Rahere looks!” cried Alice.

Rahere had been transformed almost as much as Wilfred; his coat was beginning to shine, and he tossed his nicely combed mane out of his eyes with a hint of pride now as well as rakishness. Alice, as usual, bobbed on the end of his cord, but she had not changed at all visibly. Miss Ernestine stood still and counted five “grubs” on her stockings, and one large “potato” above her heel.

“I’m keeping the pair you bought me in Bournemouth for to-morrow,” said Alice in rather a meek voice. “I thought these would do for the forest, and—and Mr. Purkiss can’t see very well. I’m going with Rahere to fetch the eggs.”

“Eggs?” asked Miss Ernestine. “Don’t let Rahere step on them.”

“Alice, you might as well pay the milk bill,” called Dan, who was doing accounts under the dead oak.

“And, Alice, you might hurry back instead of chattering for hours with old Purkiss, because I want you to help me to get rid of no end of rubbish,” cried Lyn. “Virginia’s used newspapers for wiping out frying-pans, and she’s poked them behind my tent with empty tins and egg shells.”

“Oh, I was going to burn them this afternoon—really and truly,” said Virginia.

“If you didn’t forget, my dear!” retorted Lyn. “I know something about my sister’s memory! Wilfred, how about going into Lyndhurst to see if there are any letters? You can come on the back of my bike.”

“And leave us to do all the tidying up!” broke in John. “Not if I know it! You’ll jolly well stay here, my beauties, and lend a hand. Where’s Rosina? She hasn’t done a stitch of work all day. Rosina!”

There was no reply, for Rosina was hidden in a holly bush composing an ode to the Enchanted Camp, and she had no intention of appearing till it was finished. Only Number Nine knew where she was; indeed he had told her of this natural maze, where he had often hidden when unable to get to the dead oak. It looked like a number of holly bushes growing in a clump, but there was just one way of getting in, and if you were careful, and made yourself small, and did not mind a few scratches, you could push through a narrow path to a little open space where the moss grew in cushions, and there was a sturdy tree stump to sit on. Here Rosina concealed herself for the best part of the afternoon, but Number Nine remembered to bring her some of the plums that Mr. Purkiss had brought down.

So the day passed, and evening came. As they sat over their supper they felt just a little sad till Rosina said something which cheered them tremendously. Rosina, of all people! Rosina, who had always looked on the black side of things!

“After all, going home’s an immense adventure,” said Rosina. “We’re all quite different from the people who came here two weeks ago, and it will be a terrible thrill starting new, and seeing what the world looks like now.”

“By jingo, so it will!” said John. “Think of me in a stand-up collar trotting up to town every day! I wish I could begin to-morrow! It’s rather a good stunt, you know, getting into that office.”

“You’ll have to buy a newspaper and a pipe, John,” laughed Virginia. “You won’t be a real daily-breader till you have a newspaper under your arm, and a pipe in your hand.”

“And look out for the treacle-eyed lady,” broke in Lyn, bobbing for shelter

behind Miss Ernestine's broad back. "We haven't told Wilfred about her. Come over here, Number Nine, and I'll introduce you to Number Ten!"

"Number Eleven!" cried Alice. "Rahere's Number Ten."

They had a long discussion about it, but came to no satisfactory conclusion.

"Anyway I'm Number Nine," said Wilfred, "and when the treacle-eyed lady turns up we can let her choose, perhaps. But I'm Number Nine, and I wouldn't be anything else in the world—not even the King of England! Mine's a wonderful adventure, and I don't mind going back at all because it's only the beginning for me."

"Same here," said Dan. "I know where I am now, and what I want to do."

"What, Dan?" they cried in chorus.

"Ask no questions and you'll hear no stories," grinned Dan.

"And I'm going to boarding-school," sighed Alice. "But I shall spend week-ends with Rahere—and Aunt Ernestine. Fancy, I shall wear stockings without grubs, and behave like a lady. Virginia said every one did at her school, and I'm going to the same."

"Hard work for you, my poor Alice," sympathized Lyn. "I think it's going to be awful fun starting again; and look here, Number Nine, you're not going to the army before me! I'm not going to have you bossing me, and if I don't pass my exams you will be a general before I can say knife!"

"Don't you be so sure that Number Nine's going to be a soldier," said Miss Ernestine. "I know somebody who makes all sorts of horrible wheels that go round, and things that seem to go off with a bang if you as much as look at them, and I have a feeling that they may be the sort of magic that Number Nine would like to play with."

"Oh, I should," nodded Wilfred. "But we'll come back here sometimes, won't we?—just to visit my old oak and thank it."

"Our old oak," corrected Alice. "Rosina's written a piece of poetry."

They all repeated the last phrase, and looked at Rosina as if she had done something dreadful; she blushed, and told Alice not to be silly.

"But you have," insisted Alice. "You read it to me."

"I didn't expect you to go and tell every one," said Rosina. "I know I can't write poetry, it's too hard work. It's rubbish—it's silly—it is really."

“It isn’t,” said Alice. “Read it.”

Rosina could see quite well that she would have no peace till she did read it, and she regretted having made Alice her confidant. She became very red, and more nervous than she had ever been in her life, but they argued with her, and reminded her that this was their last night, and she could not refuse anything on their last night.

So Rosina sat back on her heels, her thin hands clasped tightly on her knees, her dark hair lying smoothly on either side of her pale face, and her red dress, softened by the treatment it had undergone and the mysterious half-light, gleamed like a rose against the grey background of the dead oak. Rosina’s voice was soft and sweet as she recited her first poem, and her last. It was her attitude and the expression she put into the words rather than the words themselves which held her listeners—years later Rosina made a name as a play-writer.

THE ENCHANTED CAMP

Somewhere in the forest there stands a dead oak,
And on it the lichens have cast a grey cloak,
And near it a beech tree, majestic, immense,
Veiled in a verdant drapery dense,
Stands like a knight, dauntless and brave,
Protecting his friend with his glittering glaive.
The smooth earth beneath them sparkles with gold,
And jewels flash vividly, recklessly bold,
Secure in the knowledge that those who pass by
See stones, sand, and pebbles, or tears from the sky.
We pitched our tents there, thoughtlessly smiling,
We knew not the spell of that spot so beguiling;
We laughed when the sun shone, but when twilight came,
We knew that this place breathed some mystical name.
Between those pale hours of six until eight,
There came a brief moment—sometimes it was late—
When over the forest a silence profound
Fell like a mantle dropped on the ground.
We heard not a whisper, no voice murmured low,
We saw not a shadow, the wind ceased to blow,
But over us all there fell a sweet charm,
The tall knightly beech did softly disarm,
The lifeless oak stirred, breathing once more,
And that fleeting name which we still ignore
Passed o'er the camp, and as if in a trance
We whisper softly—is it Romance?

Rosina's voice had sunk to a murmur which trailed away in silence. They looked at the oak with its tufts of green ferns growing in its grey branches, and from it their eyes wandered to the silvery beech. Stars were beginning to show dimly in the pale sky, and the mysterious, waiting feeling was creeping over the forest. Rahere waited, his head slightly on one side. Mr. Purkiss appeared from the gloom, and held up his finger in warning. The others waited, tense and breathless.

“Hark—it's coming,” murmured Virginia.

Then an owl hooted, a twig snapped from the dead oak, the leaves of the beech began singing a little song. It was night.

“What *is* that name we can't hear?” asked Dan.

“I told you when we first came,” laughed Alice. “Enchantment!”

“Three cheers for the Enchanted Camp,” cried Mr. Purkiss. “Now then—
all together! Hip, hip, hip!—*Hurrah!!!*”

THE END

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[The end of *The Enchanted Camp* by Mabel L. Tyrrell]