

# Catch a Falling Star

by Kathleen Mayer

Harriet hunched the sturdy backpack a little on her back and surveyed the heads and packs that bobbed along the trail ahead of her. At least they were moving. She wondered for the seventeenth time why she had ever assented to David's plea.

"Please, Aunt Harriet," he had said. "You know you don't have anything else you have to do this weekend. I promised these boys I'd take them for their overnights, and now Mary's not feeling well and needs me to stay with her. You know you can do it—you taught me and Mike back when we were scouts and that scoutmaster we had was such an jerk."

She had only humphed at him. He knew then he was on the right track. "These kids need you, Aunt Harriet." Another humph. It's their last requirement before they can be Tenderfoot Scouts. For some of them it will be the first time they've been out in the woods." He knew he had her.

"Did it ever dawn on you that there may have been a reason why I didn't have children?" Harriet said. And tell me why on earth I'd want to spend a night in the woods with a lot of other people's children?" Harriet bristled at David's grin. "And why you had to take on this ragtag scout troop when you knew Mary was having trouble carrying this baby?"

"These are special kids," he said again. "I'll bring you my scoutmaster shirt before you go."

"I'm not wearing any scout shirt!" she had fumed.

"They'll behave better if you wear it," he replied, grinning again. "Besides, there are a lot of women scoutmasters these days."

impossible to get out of sight of a waterfall. The minute you left one behind, there was another one between the trees up ahead. The trail started out low, next to the creek, then climbed until the creek was a hundred feet or more below. This time

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of year there were still a few of the early flowers left: trillium and oxalis and chocolate lily in the shady places. The poison oak wouldn't be out for a month or two, and then only on the talus slopes. Harriet called them rock-falls, the piles of boulders chipped off of the rock faces that towered above the trail in places. Poison oak and ferns and little succulents grew between the boulders where they faced south and caught the summer sun.

She had hiked this trail every spring for more springs than she liked to count.

"Hey Aunt Harriet!" yelled one of the boys.

"I don't answer to 'hey' and you're to call me *Miss* Harriet. Try again, young man." David was going to hear from her later about calling her "Aunt Harriet" in front of the boys before they left.

"Miss Harriet, Charley up ahead, he's got a problem."

Harriet counted the now stopped heads and packs. The impertinent one was just ahead of her and there were four more ahead of him. At least no one was lost yet. "Which one is Charley and what seems to be his problem?"

"The one in front. I think he's scared."

Impertinence was the patrol leader, though Harriet couldn't think why, except that he was louder than anyone else. David had told her to let the boys figure things out for themselves, (these boys *need* you, he had said). She shifted the weight of her pack and asked, "Well, what do you intend to do about it?"

"I don't know aunt...ma'am...miss." His face colored. "The trail's so steep there."

Charley had reached the first of the really steep drop-offs along the trail. There were several of them, places where the trail was only about three feet wide with a sheer cliff going up on the left, and a sheer cliff drop-off going down to the right.

They were treacherous in icy weather—a couple of years ago a woman had fallen to her death here one icy day—but safe enough the rest of the year. Steel cables were anchored along the wall on the left, a hand-rail in the wilderness. Harriet supposed some intrepid ranger had drilled the holes in the rock years before so the cables could be fastened there. The cables were smooth now from the hundreds of hands that had held them, some just sliding along, others with a more desperate grasp. These places on the trail were fine if you didn't look down.

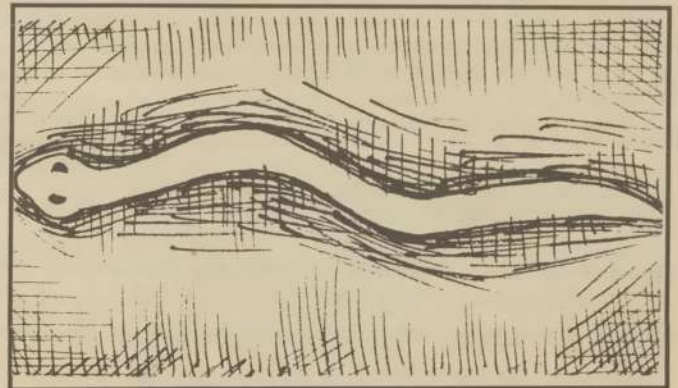
"Guess we'd better rest for a minute," Impertinence mumbled. He beckoned to the others. "Hey, you guys, come here." The middle heads and packs looked to see what he wanted. He beckoned again, and they slowly assembled around Impertinence and Harriet. Charley looked a little stuck. "Charley, come on back." Charley stayed put.

"What's the matter, you chicken?" yelled the boy who had been the second pack-and-head.

"Nah, he's just a baby." This from the third pack-and-head.

Still no movement from Charley.

Pack-and-head number four was about to take up the chorus, but started guiltily at the tone in Harriet's voice. "Baden-Powell told me once that scouts who used such language with their comrades had no business being scouts." They looked around to see if she meant it. Well, evidently David had told



them something about Lord Baden-Powell, and they seemed to be willing to believe her old enough to have known him. The idea! She humphed to herself. She couldn't have been more than a girl of fifteen when she had read in the papers about his U.S. tour. Something about being honored as scouting's founder. She had wished then to have been born a boy, but had since decided better of it. She looked the bunch of them over and decided she needed to get Charley back with the others on the wider part of the trail. She would let Impertinence deal with him after that.

"Charley," she said. His head turned at the authority in her voice. "Come here at once." Charley came. When he reached the other boys, he stopped. Harriet decided to watch and wait. She couldn't quite make out what they were saying, but she figured she would be able to tell if the boys started harassing Charley again. Sure enough, one of them looked over at her, then looked quickly away when he saw she was watching. A moment later, Charley broke away from the group and came toward her. His hands were behind him, as though his pack was too heavy and he was trying to keep some of the weight off his shoulders. She wondered how Impertinence was planning to get Charley past these places on the trail.

"Miss Harriet," Charley began. Harriet waited. With a sudden movement, Charley's hand whipped out from behind his pack and he shouted, "Here!"

The garter snake was no more than two inches from her face, and here where the trail was a little wider there was nowhere to go. Not that it mattered. The little snake was a lot more worried about the situation than Harriet. Not her favorite animal, certainly, but harmless enough if they didn't rattle.

"He's lovely, Charley," she told him. Charley's face fell. "Is this why you stopped on the trail? You're not scared of the height?"

"No, ma'am," Charley mumbled. "I mean, I'm not scared. Except he was kind of slippery to grab. He was right there on the rock wall."

Harriet tried to remember the patrol leader's name, but all she could think of was Impertinence. He had been in on it all along, and Harriet knew she had better salvage the situation in a hurry. "Did all you boys see this snake?" she called. The boys eyed each other sheepishly. A couple of them scuffed the trail with their boot toes, another one spit to the side. "In case you're wondering, you're not in trouble as long as you don't throw this poor creature over the cliff," Harriet continued. "Your scoutmaster told me you need to find ten different kinds of wildlife, so you have nine to go." Impertinence grinned, and with a start, Harriet remembered his name. Adam. He did seem to have some original sin in him. She called out, "Adam! Do you think you can get this ragtag scout patrol moving?"

Charley let the relieved snake slither away. The scouts shrugged back into the packs they had taken off while they were waiting, and Harriet and the boys started down the trail. They still had a mile to go to the lake where