

The Tent-Lady's Conquest of Youth

BY HARRIET CROCKER LE ROY.

THE Tent-Lady lived in a snow-white canvas tent among the tall eucalyptus trees on the slope of the gentlest, greenest little hillside in the world. All day long the leaf-shadows quivered and danced upon the white walls and roof of the Tent-Lady's home and all day and night the sweet, spicy odors of the eucalyptus trees found their healthful way into the little dwelling. At night the moon shone whitely through the long branches of the sheltering trees or soft darkness enfolded it protectingly.

The Tent-Lady had a little cough—just a little troublesome cough of which she tried to take no notice. Not even a box of cough drops or the smallest, mildest bottle of cough medicine could have been found inside the Tent-Lady's home, for she did not believe very much in medicine. She had laughingly protested, but at last consented, when anxious friends in the East backed by the family doctor, had bundled her off to California.

Fortunately she had come in time. The little cough still hung on but was slowly disappearing. The Tent-Lady's voice, when she called out cheerily to the passing school children, was getting stronger and clearer and one day they even heard her singing to herself in a wonderfully sweet little voice the gay, catchy chorus of some popular song.

So the school children loitered along to school, scuffling their feet along the sidewalk and looking back over their shoulders at the Tent-Lady who stood in the tent door polishing a tumbler with a snowy towel and smiling at them.

The girls said to one another that she was "awfully dear," and the boys, after the manner of boys, didn't say anything but jostled and punched one another rudely off the sidewalk and looked over their shoulders with non-committal eyes.

The Tent-Lady had been a school teacher back in Ohio although the boys would never have suspected her of it, and she did not tell them. For boys, it is well known, are perfectly sure that school teachers, as a rule, are the meanest, hatefulest, dried up old maids in the whole world! Although they know better and often have a sneaking regard for one of the despised class it seems to be the fashion among boys to make believe they think so whether they do or not.

Gradually—slowly but surely, the Tent-Lady won the heart of every single boy and girl who passed her white tent beneath the tall eucalyptus trees on their way to school. Little by little, just by the magic of her smile and her happy words of greeting she made for herself a following.

But one Saturday morning she clinched matters and settled the business for all time. Surely the Tent-Lady understood to the finger tips and toe nails that oft incomprehensible creature—a boy. And girls, too, for that matter, but perhaps not quite so well.

On this eventful Saturday morning she had called out a bright greeting to Petey Smith, who was straggling homeward with a pound of butter and a parcel of sausage for breakfast.

"Just one minute, please," called the Tent-Lady, running toward him in her big gingham all-over apron. "I wonder if you can tell me of any place not far away where I'd be allowed to make a fire and cook my dinner. I'm just wild to go out camping today, but I don't know where to go. I want to fry bacon on the end of a willow switch over the fire and roast potatoes in the ashes and make coffee in a lard pail and cook onions in a frying pan and spread a newspaper on the ground and all the good things on the newspaper and—eat!"

Petey Smith stared at her. He squeezed the pound of butter tightly under one arm and stuffed the sausage into his coat pocket. He wanted all his fingers free to point with.

"There's a dandy place over beyond Temple street," he said, "some of us fellows went there once and played Injun. Won't nobody care if we make a fire there if we stomp it out when we're through with it."

The Tent-Lady laughed. "We?" she repeated. "Will you go too? My! My! I thought I'd have to go alone and I didn't want to. One person makes such an awful small picnic, you know."

Petey Smith grinned and scratched one bare sun-browned leg with the toes of his other foot. "I guess Jim Sanderson'd like to go along too," he said. "Him an' me was goin' rabbit huntin' today but we can give that up easy enough. Ain't a single cottontail, just ackrabbits, where we was goin', anyway."

"Well, now, I'll tell you," said the Tent-Lady briskly. "You round up a few boys and girls—anybody—and have them bring something for the feast—anything—a loaf of bread or a few potatoes or a dozen doughnuts or something, and come along here about 10 o'clock. I'll be ready and we'll go over there and be real savages sure enough. Not too many now, please. Just a nice little crowd."

Petey Smith moved off on willing feet. "You bet you!" he called back and all that the Tent-Lady could see presently was a confusion of corduroy pants and bare legs as Petey Smith flew homeward. To tell the truth the Tent-Lady was

lonely—lonely and a little homesick. No one had come to see her. People who live in a tent are not always desirable acquaintances, you know—so much tuberculosis, you see—and you don't know just what kind of persons they are—and anyway it hardly pays, don't you know, to get acquainted for they're only transients after all—and all the rest of it.

So the Tent-Lady was a little lonely—just a little. It becomes monotonous in time to confine all one's remarks to the grocery boy, be he ever so friendly.

Long before 10 o'clock the eager guests arrived in a body. Petey Smith, full of importance, with a flour sack over his shoulder half full of potatoes; Jim Sanderson with a can of salmon and no can opener but his trusty jackknife; Fatty Watson with a bakery cake crushed under one fat arm; Scrubby Pierce with a berry pie already oozing crimson juice through the newspaper wrapping; Scrubby's small sister, Pearl, who had "tagged along," he disgustedly informed the other boys, bearing a loaf of bread and her chum, Gladys Donovan, who had also "tagged."

The Tent-Lady welcomed them all and in a short time the gay procession started, the boys laden like pack mules with tin plates, cups, frying pan, baskets and boxes.

On the way the Tent-Lady and the girls picked up and carried every bit of wood they came across and when they reached the clump of eucalyptus trees over beyond Temple street and deposited their burden there was a goodly pile of fuel.

The boys, with wild whoops of joy, scattered in search of more—all but Petey Smith, who, under the Tent-Lady's instructions, started to construct a wonderful furnace of cobblestones on which to boil coffee and set the frying pan.

It was a glorious dinner. The Tent-Lady in her big all-over apron knelt before the fire and buried the potatoes in the hot ashes, fried the bacon and made the coffee, ably assisted by all-too-willing hands.

The Tent-Lady would have made a good general. She set the two little girls to work spreading the newspapers on the grass and arranging the tin dishes with some semblance of order; kept Fatty Watson eagerly stuffing in more fuel and coloring his round face crimson with his exertions and the heat; got Jim Sanderson to open his can of salmon and made use of Scrubby Pierce as "general utility man." Not one but was allowed to help about that dinner and at last it was ready and they all sat down.

Why do baked beans warmed over in a tin pail taste better than any other way? Why do strips of bacon, smoky and curly from toasting on the end of a green switch over the fire taste better than in a restaurant or hotel? And why do baked potatoes, too well done on one side and a little rare on the other, taste more delicious than when served at home in the usual conventional way?

That was the beginning. Every Saturday the Tent-Lady and her happy crowd repeated the delightful performance. Saturday morning work was done on Friday after school, candy money saved to spend for "stuff to cook," other boys smuggled in and a girl or two added until the Tent-Lady declared a round dozen of them was surely enough.

And when school closed for the Summer vacation and the handsome homes in that section closed too, and the families went to the various beaches, envious glances were sent toward the Tent-Lady's little white tent and the poor rich boys would gladly have stayed at home all Summer because it was fun to go over the hill and camp out.

For they kept it up all Summer—the Tent-Lady and her jolly crowd of worshippers. By this time she had become the rising and setting sun in every boy's heart, while the girls told one another over and over again how sweet and "dear" she was.

By the Fourth of July when, firecrackers and all, they sought the well-known clump of eucalyptus trees and made preparations for a wonderful dinner in honor of the day, every last little bit of the Tent-Lady's cough was gone. In fact she had forgotten how to cough. Her laugh was like a peal of silver sleigh bells and she could lead the boys and girls straight through a glee club song without stopping once to clear her throat. And there were pink roses blooming in her cheeks and she could run up the steepest little hills on the way to the camping ground without even Petey Smith's grimy paw to help her.

In September when school re-opened there was a wonderful surprise for the sixth-grade boys and girls. There, at the teacher's desk—sweet and happy-faced, in the whitest of tailored shirtwaists and the neatest of blue skirts stood—the Tent-Lady.

She laughed at their astonished faces. "You didn't dream that I was a school ma'am, did you?" she asked.

After they had settled into quiet and were staring at her with unbelieving eyes, Petey Smith, in his new school suit and necktie, raised his hand.

"Have we got to quit our campin' out, Saturdays?" he asked, with his appealing eyes fixed on the Tent-Lady's face.

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One could have heard a pin drop, it was so still in the schoolroom.

"No, indeed," the Tent-Lady said, with one of her flashing smiles, "you couldn't hire me to give it up."

And the next moment Petey Smith and

Fatty Watson as by one accord, started the class yell. The principal, passing along the hall outside the door, stopped a moment. "Rather early to be giving the class yell for a new teacher," he thought. But the principal did not know.

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