

THE SONG

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Box 3
File 15

Janet Mitchell sat in her favorite place on the top step of the stair landing, with a writing pad across her knee, and a fountain pen in her hand. She had written Dear Betty, but she could get no further. What could anyone say to Betty? Such interesting things were always happening to her, and her letters fairly bubbled over with news of them. Any kind of answer would be dull and unah- in comparison.

Betty's father was an engineer and he was often sent to faraway places. And whenever he could, he took his family with him. Now he was in Europe, and Betty and her brother Jack had been allowed to go too. Their parents had said they'd learn more in a year of travel than in a schoolroom. But Janet's father was a doctor, and he stayed on in one place, seldom ever taking a vacation, even.

Betty's last letter had been from Venice, and Janet picked it up to read it again. But she knew it almost word for word from memory.

"It's just like the geography books said," she had written. "Sings and sunshine and lazy waters. This morning a gondola came right up to the door of the hotel for us, and we floated all over Venice in it. The gondolier stood up in front of us while he paddled, and he sang such a gay song, Jack and I had to join in, though we didn't know a word we were singing. The pigeons at St. Marks lit on our shoulders, begging for grain. And we saw a little old woman making the most beautiful lace you could ever imagine.-"

And so the letter went on and on. Janet drew idly on her writing pad,

"I received your letter from Venice," she began, then she

paused again. There was simply no more to say. The day was gray and drizzling, and it had been over a week since the sun had been out. At school they had had to stay indoors during recess, for it was too wet and muddy to play outside. So there wasn't even a basketball game to write about. Janet threw her writing pad aside in desperation.

She saw her father coming down the stairs and she stood up to let him pass.

"Dad, they need doctors in Europe too, don't they?" she asked.

"Why yes, of course. Doctors are very much needed over there," her father replied.

"Then why couldn't you be sent to some foreign country like Betty's father, and take Mother and little Helen and me?"

Doctor Mitchel smiled at the excitement in his daughter's eyes. But he shook his head and answered simply, "Doctors are needed here too, Lanie."

He picked up his black doctor's bag from the hall table, and put on his coat and hat to go out on a call. But he stopped at the door and called to Janet.

"How'd you like to come along with me?"

Janet was all too eager for something to do on such a dismal Saturday. She rushed for her slicker and drew the hood snugly over her head, and followed her father to the garage.

They took the jeep stationwagon, which meant they were going far out in the country where the roads were rough and muddy.

"We'll have to hurry, for little Johnny Davis has had a fall from a grapevine he was swinging, and he's in pain."

The wind howled and the rain beat against the windshield so fast it was as if they were under a deep sea. And the tall trees along

the roadside bowed and swayed and scattered their leaves in all directions. But the jeep station wagon pushed steadily ahead. They turned off the main highway, on to a narrow dirt road, passing through deep puddles and over rocks and ruts, and they crossed a bridge where the waters of the creek had risen so high, the waves lapped against the station wagon tires.

The river had risen too. Janet could hear its mighty roar, sounding above the wind and the trees and the falling rain. When the station wagon turned and drove up to the top of the high levee, she could see the waves rushing swiftly along, carrying planks and tree branches and whatever had come within its reach.

They drove to a place where a horse and some cows were staked. The animals stopped nibbling the grass and looked up in curiosity, and there was a clatter of hens cackling in a coop and pigs squealing in a pen close by. Down in the valley below, a little farm house stood on high piers, surrounded on all sides by water. And a rowboat, tied to the porch rail, bobbed up and down with each splash of the waves.

"Here comes the doctor!" they heard a boy's voice call out excitedly. "Tell Johnny this ~~is~~ tonight now. The doctor's come."

A man in overalls came out on the porch and, cupping his hands, shouted through them. "Leave your car there, doctor. I'll row over after you."

His arms moved swiftly with the oars, fighting against the strong current that tugged at the boat, and weaving in and out among the treetops that rose above the water.

"I'm glad you made it, doctor," he said when he reached the levee. "We were afraid the high water would keep you from coming."

He held the boat steady while Janet and her father stepped in, then he rowed back to the house as fast as he could. He pointed out

a broken vine hanging from a tall pin oak growing close to the house.

"Yonder's where he fell," he said. "Tried to act like Dan'l Boone and swing from the house to the barn without getting in the water."

Doctor Mitchell, with his black bag, went into a room where sounds could be heard of a child crying and a mother's voice trying to soothe and comfort him. Janet heard someone call to her from the kitchen.

"Come in here, child, where it's warm."

She went in to find a little old woman sitting in a rocking chair near the stove. She was piecing gay colored scraps of cloth to make a quilt. Two boys, older than Janet, were sitting beside her. One got up to bring in another chair and the other added more wood to the fire. A kettle on the stove began to bubble and sing, and a cat curled up on the floor beneath, purred in accompaniment. But a little mongrel puppy lay with its head on its front paws, looking with sad eyes toward the door where the sounds came from. The father came ~~in~~ ^{silently} and joined them, ~~and none seemed to care to speak~~ and they all sat silently, with their heads turned toward the room of the sick child.

"Now let's see what a brave boy you are, Johnny," they heard the doctor say. "Just a little more, and it'll all be over."

"Granny," the boy's father spoke in a low whisper, "Sing that song Johnny always likes to hear, about the monkey's wedding."

"The monkey married the baboon's sister,
Gave her a ring and then he kissed her."

The old woman's voice rose high and quavering. Her rocking chair kept time while she sang on to the end. And all the while her fingers were busy making dainty stitches, until the design of the quilt slowly began to take shape. When one song was ended, the woman began another one, and each was funnier and livelier than the last. The man and his two sons began stamping their feet to the rhythm, and

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joined their voices to hers. They sounded light and gay, but they glanced now and then with anxious eyes toward the door of the adjoining room.

Chickens a crowin' on Sourwood Mountain

Ho ding, dong, doodle day.

So many pretty girls I can't count 'em

Janet sang the last line with them.

Ho ding, dong, doodle day.

The rain slackened and the sky began to clear. At last the sun shone through the parted clouds, sending its beams into the kitchen.

"My true love is a sun-burnt daisy.

Now another voice joined them from the room beyond. The man and the two boys and the grandmother exchanged glances of relief, but they went on with the song, raising their voices even higher.

"She won't work and I'm too lazy,

Ho ding, dong, doodle day.

The door opened, and Doctor Mitchell came out.

"It's nothing more serious than a broken arm and a few bruises," he was saying. "He'll be as lively as ever in a couple of weeks if he promises not to swing on any more high grapevines."

The boy's mother smiled as she followed the doctor into the kitchen. And through the open door, Janet saw the boy himself, sitting up in bed and singing away for dear life.

Janet wondered, when she was again in the row boat, going back to the levee, why she had ever found it hard to ~~think of things to~~ write a letter to Betty. Interesting things could happen anywhere. She had rowed in a boat right up to the porch of a farmhouse. And she had seen a little old lady piecing a quilt with a design more beautiful than anyone could imagine. But best of all, she had seen a boy smile

and heard him join in a gay song because his pain had left him.