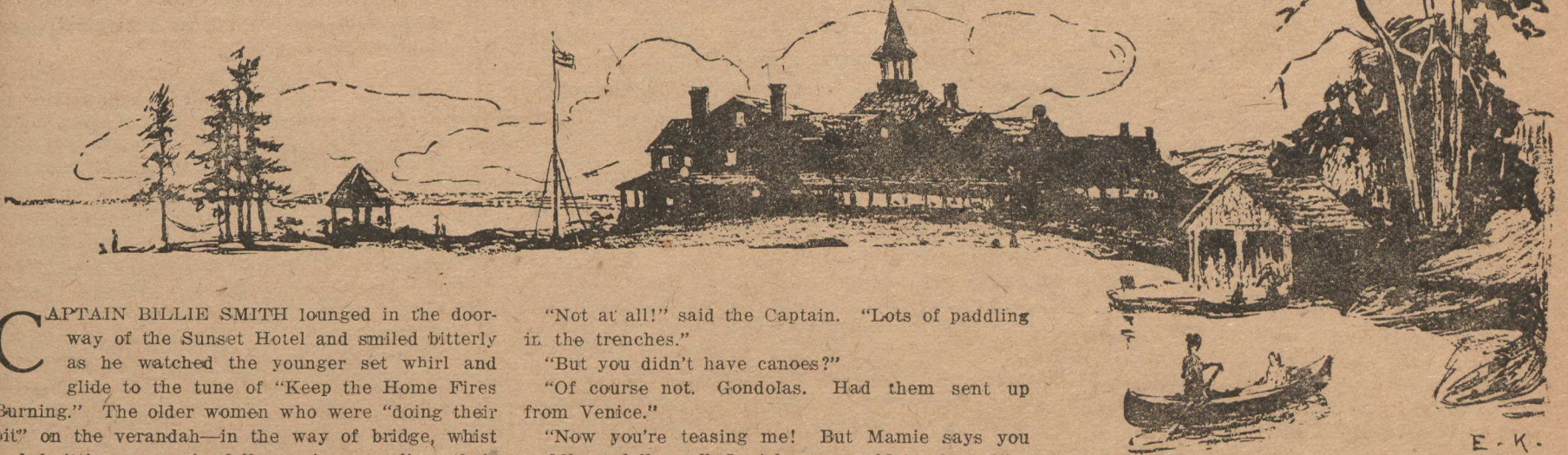


At Sunset Point

By ESTELLE M. KERR—



CAPTAIN BILLIE SMITH lounged in the doorway of the Sunset Hotel and smiled bitterly as he watched the younger set whirl and glide to the tune of "Keep the Home Fires Burning." The older women who were "doing their bit" on the verandah—in the way of bridge, whist and knitting—were in full evening regalia, their decolete gowns serving to accentuate the deep sunburn on their throats and faces. The very scarcity of men seemed to spur them to unusual effort to make themselves attractive, though there was only one amongst the males—they admitted to each other—only one that really mattered. The slight limp that prevented him from dancing was only an added attraction, for had he not gained it at Ypres, and what tales could he not tell—things, they said, they were "dying to hear about," if only they could "get him started!"

"Getting him started" became the chief aim of all the summer girls at Sunset Point, but so far with scant success. Once he took Mamie Linghorn paddling and the consequent excitement would have amounted to jealousy had not her dearest friend told him she did it. Mamie, it seems, happened to be sitting in the boat-house. After dinner, when the hero appeared, so suddenly and unexpectedly that Mamie tumbled right into his canoe! Then she raised her big blue eyes to his and said:

"Oh, is this yours! I'm so sorry! I was wondering if I could rent it, the afterglow is wonderful on the water! Are you going all alone?" All this without moving, mind you!

"Well, I intended to be solitary, but since I find a passenger already aboard . . ."

"Oh, Captain Smith, how good of you! And you will tell me some of your experiences, won't you? All the boys that have been home on leave say it is so nice to talk to a girl again. It's a novelty, at least, isn't it?"

"You forget that I'm just out of the hospital. Oh, I've not been lacking in feminine society. Trained nurses and V. A. D.'s—the best of women!"

"I felt as if I ought to be knitting or something," Mamie confessed afterwards, "but I told him about all the tag days and bazaars. He was most attentive and insisted on bringing me in early for fear I should take cold. But he wouldn't talk about the war except to say we didn't realize it."

NEXT day every girl in the hotel was at work on a pair of socks, while some of the older women went about with a lost expression inquiring: "Have you seen my knitting?" And just as Captain Billie appeared, Mamie's mother pounced on hers and exclaimed:

"I do wish, Mamie, you would get some knitting of your own. Now I shall have to rip out every stitch you have done!" And the Captain was rude enough to laugh. Then he went off with his mother and was absent all day. Now here he was, lounging in the doorway with a sardonically amused expression.

"Why amused, I don't know," Gertrude Farley afterwards remarked. "The girls here dance exceedingly well, and only the very latest steps." Gertrude stopped in the doorway to fan herself and sent her 16-year-old partner for a glass of water.

"This must be quite a change for you, Captain Smith," she said, "paddling and all that sort of thing."

"Not at all!" said the Captain. "Lots of paddling in the trenches."

"But you didn't have canoes?"

"Of course not. Gondolas. Had them sent up from Venice."

"Now you're teasing me! But Mamie says you paddle awfully well, I wish you would teach me!"

"I should be delighted . . ."

"Oh, how nice of you—couldn't we begin now?"

"Sorry, but I promised to take my mother out. I think she must be ready, will you excuse me?" Captain Billie whispered in his mother's ear.

"But, dear boy, I'm horribly afraid in a canoe!"

"Sh! That's a good little mater!"

Then the "Mowhawk Belle" whistled.

All the young people hurried down to the wharf to inspect the new arrivals, and in the confusion Captain Billie and his mother slipped away.

To-night the recent guests were disappointing and the girls soon joined their elders on the verandah.

"Well, my dears, did anybody exciting come?" asked Mrs. Linghorn.

"No—just two old ladies," said Mamie.

"An old lady and her daughter, I should say," amended Gertrude.

"Well, when you're past thirty you might just as well be a real old lady and be done with it."

"Be done with what?"

"Oh, beaux and fun and parties. I'm sure she's kind to her aged mother, but she wears year-before-last clothes and you would think anyone who could afford to come in a place like this would have the decency to wear silk stockings, now wouldn't you?"

"Hush, here they come! Why, it's Mrs. Godfrey Brown! Dear me, how stout she's grown! Perhaps that is just in contrast to her daughter—she must be the eldest unmarried one."

"Sure to be! 'Eldest unmarried' is written all over her. I can just see her spending her days fetching her mother's shawl."

"Must be a great comfort," sighed the Fat Lady. "There was another daughter who was a bit wild. Went to Paris and studied art. I hear she exhibited a most shocking picture in the Academy!"

"Who are you attacking now?" asked Captain Billie Smith, as he and his mother joined the group.

"Attacking? Why, what do you mean?" said Miss Linghorn. "We were speaking of the Brown girls. The elder we suspect of being patriotic on the grounds that dowdiness and patriotism go hand in hand, but an agreeable contrast to her younger sister, an artist of whom we have heard the most scandalous reports."

"Come," said Captain Billie. "You interest me."

"The worthy elder sister, I suppose," murmured Mamie.

"The Molly Brown I knew in Paris wasn't what one would call worthy."

"Her mother and sister are here."

"I didn't know she had a sister."

"Yes, an old unmarried one, who wears cotton stockings."

Just then someone in a bathrobe and red diving cap hurried from the hotel and crossed the verandah.

"Who can it be?" asked one.

"No one goes in bathing at this time of night!" said another.

"Why, it's a boy!" cried a third.

"No, it's a woman, but no stockings!" said Mamie, as the breeze blew open the bath-robe.

"Why, I believe—I do believe it's the elder Miss Brown!"

No one noticed that Captain Billie had deserted them until he, too, was seen flying across the lawn.

"Molly!" he called. "Molly!"

She turned and held out both hands, and the bathrobe slipped. Captain Billie picked it up and folded it around her, and together they strolled down the beach.

"MAMIE," said Gertrude, suddenly. "Let's go to the Point! Perhaps we might sit down under those pine trees, I expect he's telling her all sorts of thrilling stories. Of course if it's anything personal we won't listen," she added, virtuously.

Mamie was right. Molly lay on the beach while Captain Smith, reclining beside her, acted as if he had at last found a listener to stories he had been longing to tell.

"Really, Molly," he was saying, "I'm ashamed to be alive! If it hadn't been for this beastly ball in my leg I should certainly have 'gone out' with them. They were heroes, every one of them! I'm pretty well fed up with civilization. Just look at these women, listen to them!"—he waved his hand embarrassingly near the pine trees. "Really, Moll, if you hadn't turned up to-night I was planning to take the next boat home."

"And when I saw all those dreadful people in evening dress on the dock, I was wondering how soon I could escape!"

"Such old gossips! Such utterly useless young ones!"

"Well, you wouldn't call me exactly useful, would you, Billie?"

"No, perhaps not, but somehow you're different. By the way, Mollie, you are your mother's only daughter, aren't you? There is a case of mixed identity which, in the interests of the verandah gossips, I feel that I should solve. One old lady says you spend all your time knitting."

"Never finished a pair of socks in my life."

"More shame to you! It is further alleged that you wear cotton stockings!"

"I can prove an alibi at the present moment," said Mollie, digging her bare toes into the sand.

"Then you are not your own elder sister, that is certain. Now, the question is, are you the younger one?"

"I confess to thirty-three."

"Sh, don't mention it! The information may be used against you."

"This younger sister is lacking in common decency."

"In defence I produce—this bath-robe."

"She paints scandalous pictures."

"And wins medals for them."

"Mollie, I fear you don't take this seriously."

"Oh, let them talk and speculate, it is their chief joy in life, and mine is to idly bask in the sunshine."

"Then let's bask together, for that's what I need."

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