

## HOW THEY CAMPED OUT

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

"It looks so much like snow I think it would be wiser to put off your sleighing party, Gwen," said Mrs. Arnold, looking anxiously out at the heavy sky and streets still drifted by the last winter storm.

"Not before night, mamma; we don't mind its being cloudy, we like it, because the sun makes the snow so dazzling when we get out of town. "We can't give it up now, for here comes Patrick with the boys." And Gwen ran down to welcome the big sleigh, which just then drove up with four jolly lads skirmishing about inside.

"Come on!" called Mark, her brother, knocking his friends right and left, to make room for the four girls who were to complete the party.

"What do you think of the weather, Patrick?" asked Mrs. Arnold from the window, still undecided about the wisdom of letting her flock go off alone, papa having been called away after the plan was made.

"Faith, ma'm, it's an illigant day barring the wind, that's a thrifle could to the nose. I'll have me eye on the childer, ma'm, and there'll be no throuble at all, at all," replied the old coachman, lifting a round red face out of his muffler, and patting little Gus on the shoulder, as he sat proudly on the high seat holding the whip.

"Be careful, dears, and come home early."

With which parting caution mamma shut the window, and watched the young folks drive gayly away, little dreaming what would happen before they got back.

The wind was more than a "thrifle could," for when they got out of the city it blew across the open country in bitter blasts, and made the eight little noses almost as red as old Pat's, who had been up all night at a wake, and was still heavy-headed with too much whiskey, though no one suspected it.

The lads enjoyed themselves immensely snowballing one another; for the drifts were still fresh enough to furnish soft snow, and Mark, Bob, and Tony had many a friendly tussle in it as they went up hills, or paused to breathe the horses after a swift trot along a level bit of road. Little Gus helped drive till his hands were benumbed in spite of the new red mittens, and he had to descend among the girls, who were cuddled cosily under the warm robes, telling secrets, eating candy, and laughing at the older boys' pranks.

Sixteen-year-old Gwendoline was matron of the party, and kept excellent order among the girls; for Ruth and Alice were nearly her own age, and Rita a most obedient younger sister.

"I say, Gwen, we are going to stop at the old house on the way home and get some nuts for this evening. Papa said we might, and some of the big Baldwins too. I've got baskets, and while we fellows fill them you girls can look round the house," said Mark, when the exhausted young gentlemen returned to their seats.

"That will be nice. I want to get some books, and Rita has been very anxious about one of her dolls, which she is sure was left in the nursery closet. If we are going to stop we ought to be turning back, Pat, for it is beginning to snow and will be dark early," answered Gwen, suddenly realizing that great flakes were fast whitening the roads and the wind had risen to a gale.

"Shure and I will, miss dear, as soon as iver I can; but it's round a good bit we must go, for I couldn't be turning here widout upsettin' the whole of yez, it's that drifted. Rest aisy, and I'll fetch up at the ould place in half an hour, plaze the powers," said Pat, who had lost his way and wouldn't own it, being stupid with a sup or two he had privately taken on the way, to keep the chill out of his bones he said.

On they went again, with the wind at their backs, caring little for the snow that now fell fast, or the gathering twilight, since they were going toward home they thought. It was a very long half-hour before Pat brought them to the country-house, which was shut up for the winter. With difficulty they ploughed their way up to the steps, and scrambled on to the piazza, where they danced about to warm their feet till Mark unlocked the door and let them in, leaving Pat to enjoy a doze on his seat.

"Make haste, boys; it is cold and dark here, and we must get home. Mamma will be so anxious, and it really is going to be a bad storm," said Gwen, whose spirits were damped by the gloom of the old house, and who felt her responsibility, having promised to be home early.

Off went the boys to attic and cellar, being obliged to light the lantern left here for the use of whoever came now and then to inspect the premises. The girls, having found books and doll, sat upon the rolled-up carpets, or peeped about at the once gay and hospitable rooms, now looking very empty and desolate with piled-up furniture, shuttered windows, and fireless hearths.

"If we were going to stay long I'd have a fire in the library. Papa often does when he comes out, to keep the books from moulding," began Gwen, but was interrupted by a shout from without, and, running to the door, saw Pat picking himself out of a drift while the horses were galloping down the avenue at full speed.

"Be jabbers, them villains give a jump when that fallin' branch struck 'em, and out I wint, bein' tuk unknownst, just thinkin' of me poor cousin Mike. May his bed above be aisy the day! Whist now, miss dear! I'll fetch 'em back in a jiffy. Stop still till I come, and kape them b'ys quite."

With a blow to settle his hat, Patrick trotted gallantly away into the storm, and the girls went in to tell the exciting news to the lads, who came whooping back from their search, with baskets of nuts and apples.

**"Here's a go!" cried Mark. "Old Pat will run half-way to town before he catches the horses, and we are in for an hour or two at least."**

**"Then do make a fire, for we shall die of cold if we have to wait long," begged Gwen, rubbing Rita's cold hands, and looking anxiously at little Gus, who was about making up his mind to roar.**

**"So we will, and be jolly till the blunderbuss gets back. Camp down, girls, and you fellows, come and hold the lantern while I get wood and stuff. It is so confoundedly dark, I shall break my neck down the shed steps." And Mark led the way to the library, where the carpet still remained, and comfortable chairs and sofas invited the chilly visitors to rest.**

**"How can you light your fire when you get the wood?" asked Ruth, a practical damsel, who looked well after her own creature comforts and was longing for a warm supper.**

**"Papa hides the matches in a tin box, so the rats won't get at them. Here they are, and two or three bits of candle for the sticks on the chimney-piece, if he forgets to have the lantern trimmed. Now we will light up, and look cosey when the boys come back."**

**And producing the box from under a sofa-cushion, Gwen cheered the hearts of all by lighting two candles, rolling up the chairs, and making ready to be comfortable. Thoughtful Alice went to see if Pat was returning, and found a buffalo-robe lying on the steps. Returning with this, she reported that there was no sign of the runaways, and advised making ready for a long stay.**

**"How mamma will worry!" thought Gwen, but made light of the affair, because she saw Rita looked timid, and Gus shivered till his teeth chattered.**

**"We will have a nice time, and play we are shipwrecked people or Arctic explorers. Here comes Dr. Kane and the sailors with supplies of wood, so we can thaw our pemmican and warm our feet. Gus shall be the little Esquimaux boy, all dressed in fur, as he is in the**

picture we have at home," she said, wrapping the child in the robe, and putting her own sealskin cap on his head to divert his mind.

"Here we are! Now for a jolly blaze, boys; and if Pat doesn't come back we can have our fun here instead of at home," cried Mark, well pleased with the adventure, as were his mates.

So they fell to work, and soon a bright fire was lighting up the room with its cheerful shine, and the children gathered about it, quite careless of the storm raging without, and sure that Pat would come in time.

"I'm hungry," complained Gus as soon as he was warm.

"So am I," added Rita from the rug, where the two little ones sat toasting themselves.

"Eat an apple," said Mark.

"They are so hard and cold I don't like them," began Gus.

"Roast some!" cried Ruth.

"And crack nuts," suggested Alice.

"Pity we can't cook something in real camp style; it would be such fun," said Tony, who had spent weeks on Monadnock, living upon the supplies he and his party tugged up the mountain on their backs.

**"We shall not have time for anything but what we have. Put down your apples and crack away, or we shall be obliged to leave them," advised Gwen, coming back from an observation at the front door with an anxious line on her forehead; for the storm was rapidly increasing, and there was no sign of Pat or the horses.**

**The rest were in high glee, and an hour or two slipped quickly away as they enjoyed the impromptu feast and played games. Gus recalled them to the discomforts of their situation by saying with a yawn and a whimper,--**

**"I'm so sleepy! I want my own bed and mamma."**

**"So do I!" echoed Rita, who had been nodding for some time, and longed to lie down and sleep comfortably anywhere.**

**"Almost eight o'clock! By Jove, that old Pat is taking his time, I think. Wonder if he has got into trouble? We can't do anything, and may as well keep quiet here," said Mark, looking at his watch and beginning to understand that the joke was rather a serious one.**

**"Better make a night of it and all go to sleep. Pat can wake us up when he comes. The cold makes a fellow so drowsy." And Bob gave a stretch that nearly rent him asunder.**

**"I will let the children nap on the sofa. They are so tired of waiting, and may as well amuse themselves in that way as in fretting. Come, Gus and Rita, each take a pillow, and I'll cover you up with my shawl."**

**Gwen made the little ones comfortable, and they were off in five minutes. The others kept up bravely till nine o'clock, then the bits of candles were burnt out, the stories all told, nuts and apples had lost their charm, and weariness and hunger caused spirits to fail perceptibly.**

**"I've eaten five Baldwins, and yet I want more. Something filling and good. Can't we catch a rat and roast him?" proposed Bob, who was a hearty lad and was ravenous by this time.**

**"Isn't there anything in the house?" asked Ruth, who dared not eat nuts for fear of indigestion.**

**"Not a thing that I know of except a few pickles in the storeroom; we had so many, mamma left some here," answered Gwen, resolving to provision the house before she left it another autumn.**

**"Pickles alone are rather sour feed. If we only had a biscuit now, they wouldn't be bad for a relish," said Tony, with the air of a man who had known what it was to live on burnt bean-soup and rye flapjacks for a week.**

**"I saw a keg of soft-soap in the shed. How would that go with the pickles?" suggested Bob, who felt equal to the biggest and acidest cucumber ever grown.**

**"Mamma knew an old lady who actually did eat soft-soap and cream for her complexion," put in Alice, whose own fresh face looked as if she had tried the same distasteful remedy with success.**

**The boys laughed, and Mark, who felt that hospitality required him to do something for his guests, said briskly,--**

**"Let us go on a foraging expedition while the lamp holds out to burn, for the old lantern is almost gone and then we are done for. Come on, Bob; your sharp nose will smell out food if there is any."**

**"Don't set the house afire, and bring more wood when you come, for we must have light of some kind in this poky place," called Gwen, with a sigh, wishing every one of them were safely at home and abed.**

**A great tramping of boots, slamming of doors, and shouting of voices followed the departure of the boys, as well as a crash, a howl, and then a roar of laughter, as Bob fell down the cellar stairs, having opened the door in search of food and poked his nose in too far. Presently they came back, very dusty, cobwebby, and cold, but triumphantly bearing a droll collection of trophies. Mark had a piece of board and the lantern, Tony a big wooden box and a tin pail, Bob fondly embraced a pickle jar and a tumbler of jelly which had been forgotten on a high shelf in the storeroom.**

**"Meal, pickles, jam, and boards. What a mess, and what are we to do with it all?" cried the girls, much amused at the result of the expedition.**

**"Can any of you make a hoe cake?" demanded Mark.**

**"No, indeed! I can make caramels and cocoanut-cakes," said Ruth, proudly.**

**"I can make good toast and tea," added Alice.**

**"I can't cook anything," confessed Gwen, who was unusually accomplished in French, German, and music.**

**"Girls aren't worth much in the hour of need. Take hold, Tony, you are the chap for me." And Mark disrespectfully turned his back on the young ladies, who could only sit and watch the lads work.**

**"He can't do it without water," whispered Ruth.**



**"Or salt," answered Alice.**

**"Or a pan to bake it in," added Gwen; and then all smiled at the dilemma they foresaw.**

**But Tony was equal to the occasion, and calmly went on with his task, while Mark arranged the fire and Bob opened the pickles. First the new cook filled the pail with snow till enough was melted to wet the meal; this mixture was stirred with a pine stick till thick enough, then spread on the board and set up before the bed of coals to brown.**

**"It never will bake in the world." "He can't turn it, so it won't be done on both sides." "Won't be fit to eat any way!" And with these dark hints the girls consoled themselves for their want of skill.**

**But the cake did bake a nice brown, Tony did turn it neatly with his jack-knife and the stick, and when it was done cut it into bits, added jelly, and passed it round on an old atlas; and every one said,--**

**"It really does taste good!"**

**Two more were baked, and eaten with pickles for a change, then all were satisfied, and after a vote of thanks to Tony they began to think of sleep.**

**"Pat has gone home and told them we are all right, and mamma knows we can manage here well enough for one night, so don't worry, Gwen, but take a nap, and I'll lie on the rug and see to the fire."**

**Mark's happy-go-lucky way of taking things did not convince his sister; but as she could do nothing, she submitted and made her friends as comfortable as she could.**

All had plenty of wraps, so the girls nestled into the three large chairs, Bob and Tony rolled themselves up in the robe, with their feet to the fire, and were soon snoring like weary hunters. Mark pillowed his head on a log, and was sound asleep in ten minutes in spite of his promise to be sentinel.

Gwen's chair was the least easy of the three, and she could not forget herself like the rest, but sat wide awake, watching the blaze, counting the hours, and wondering why no one came to them.

The wind blew fiercely, the snow beat against the blinds, rats scuttled about the walls, and now and then a branch fell upon the roof with a crash. Weary, yet excited, the poor girl imagined all sorts of mishaps to Pat and the horses, recalled various ghost stories she had heard, and wondered if it was on such a night as this that a neighbor's house had been robbed. So nervous did she get at last that she covered up her face and resolutely began to count a thousand, feeling that anything was better than having to wake Mark and own she was frightened.

Before she knew it she fell into a drowse and dreamed that they were all cast away on an iceberg and a polar bear was coming up to devour Gus, who innocently called to the big white dog and waited to caress him.

"A bear! a bear! oh, boys, save him!" murmured Gwen in her sleep, and the sound of her own distressed voice waked her.

The fire was nearly out, for she had slept longer than she knew, the room was full of shadows, and the storm seemed to have died away. In the silence which now reigned, unbroken even by a snore, Gwen heard a sound that made her start and tremble. Some one was coming softly up the back stairs. All the outer doors were locked, she was sure; all the boys lay in their places, for she could see and count the three long figures and little Gus in a bunch on the sofa. The girls had not stirred, and this was no rat's scamper, but a slow and careful tread, stealing nearer and nearer to the study door, left ajar when the last load of wood was brought in.

**"Pat would knock or ring, and papa would speak, so that we might not be scared. I want to scream, but I won't till I see that it really is some one," thought Gwen, while her heart beat fast and her eyes were fixed on the door, straining to see through the gloom.**

**The steps drew nearer, paused on the threshold, and then a head appeared as the door noiselessly swung wider open. A man's head in a fur cap, but it was neither papa nor Pat nor Uncle Ed. Poor Gwen would have called out then, but her voice was gone, and she could only lie back, looking, mute and motionless. A tiny spire of flame sprung up and flickered for a moment on the tall dark figure in the doorway, a big man with a beard, and in his hand something that glittered. Was it a pistol or a dagger or a dark lantern? thought the girl, as the glimmer died away, and the shadows returned to terrify her.**

**The man seemed to look about him keenly for a moment, then vanished, and the steps went down the hall to the front door, which was opened from within and some one admitted quietly. Whispers were heard, and then feet approached again, accompanied by a gleam of light.**

**"Now I must scream!" thought Gwen; and scream she did with all her might, as two men entered, one carrying a lantern, the other a bright tin can.**

**"Boys! Robbers! Fire! Tramps! Oh, do wake up!" cried Gwen, frantically pulling Mark by the hair, and Bob and Tony by the legs, as the quickest way of rousing them.**

**Then there was a scene! The boys sprung up and rubbed their eyes, the girls hid theirs and began to shriek, while the burglars laughed aloud, and poor Gwen, quite worn out, fainted away on the rug. It was all over in a minute, however; for Mark had his wits about him, and his first glance at the man with the lantern allayed his fears.**

**"Hullo, Uncle Ed! We are all right. Got tired of waiting for you, so we went to sleep."**

**"Stop screaming, girls, and quiet those children! Poor little Gwen is badly frightened. Get some snow, Tom, while I pick her up," commanded the uncle, and order was soon established.**

**The boys were all right at once, and Ruth and Alice devoted themselves to the children, who were very cross and sleepy in spite of their fright. Gwen was herself in a moment, and so ashamed of her scare that she was glad there was no more light to betray her pale cheeks.**

**"I should have known you, uncle, at once, but to see a strange man startled me, and he didn't speak, and I thought that can was a pistol," stammered Gwen, when she had collected her wits a little.**

**"Why, that's my old friend and captain, Tom May. Don't you remember him, child? He thought you were all asleep, so crept out to tell me and let me in."**

**"How did he get in himself?" asked Gwen, glad to turn the conversation.**

**"Found the shed door open, and surprised the camp by a flank movement. You wouldn't do for picket duty, boys," laughed Captain Tom, enjoying the dismay of the lads.**

**"Oh, thunder! I forgot to bolt it when we first went for the wood. Had to open it, the place was so plaguy dark," muttered Bob, much disgusted.**

**"Where's Pat?" asked Tony, with great presence of mind, feeling anxious to shift all blame to his broad shoulders.**

**Uncle Ed shook the snow from his hair and clothes, and, poking up the fire, leisurely sat down and took Gus on his knee before he replied,--"Serve out the grog, Tom, while I spin my yarn."**

Round went the can of hot coffee, and a few sips brightened up the young folks immensely, so that they listened with great interest to the tale of Pat's mishaps.

"The scamp was half-seas over when he started, and deserves all he got. In the first place he lost his way, then tumbled overboard, and let the horses go. He floundered after them a mile or two, then lost his bearings in the storm, pitched into a ditch, broke his head, and lay there till found. The fellows carried him to a house off the road, and there he is in a nice state; for, being his countrymen, they dosed him with whiskey till he was 'quite and aisy,' and went to sleep, forgetting all about you, the horses, and his distracted mistress at home. The animals were stopped at the cross-roads, and there we found them after a lively cruise round the country. Then we hunted up Pat; but what with the blow and too many drops of 'the crayther,' his head was in a muddle, and we could get nothing out of him. So we went home again, and then your mother remembered that you had mentioned stopping here, and we fitted out a new craft and set sail, prepared for a long voyage. Your father was away, so Tom volunteered, and here we are."

"A jolly lark! now let us go home and go to bed," proposed Mark, with a gape.

"Isn't it most morning?" asked Tony, who had been sleeping like a dormouse.

"Just eleven. Now pack up and let us be off. The storm is over, the moon coming out, and we shall find a good supper waiting for the loved and lost. Bear a hand, Tom, and ship this little duffer, for he's off again."

Uncle Ed put Gus into the captain's arms, and, taking Rita himself, led the way to the sleigh which stood at the door. In they all bundled, and after making the house safe, off they went, feeling that they had had a pretty good time on the whole.

"I will learn cooking and courage, before I try camping out again," resolved Gwen, as she went jingling homeward; and she kept her word.