Home Circle.

Two Girls Who Changed Places.

BY HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH.

When they left the pier that morning, Muriel was, without any question, the most important person in the boat. She sat in the stern, with cushions piled about her, and a magazine in her lap, if she should be inclined to read. Mary, sitting a few feet away, was comparatively insignificant, as she had been brought along merely to pick up Muriel's handkerchief if she should let it fall, to talk if Muriel felt in the mood for conversation, and, otherwise, to keep silent. The boatman, too, was there to sail across the lake as long as Muriel pleased to go eastward, and to turn as soon as she changed her mind. All of which proved conclusively that the girl in the stern was the most important member of the trio.

It was a perfect morning, with just enough white clouds in the sky to help one realize the exquisite blue, and with breeze enough to temper the sun's heat. The shore they had left was only a line marking the distinction between earth and sky, and, on ahead, the blue water sparkled invitation. Muriel had made up her mind for a long sail. There was a lunch basket which could be opened as soon as she was hungry. She would sail on and on, till her mood changed and she wearied of the exhilarating onward rush. All her life she had acted on the principle of following out the impulse of the moment, for she was a very important person in her little world. Nobody had ever doubted that, Muriel least of all.

All at once the grizzled boatman put his hand to his heart, groaned, and sank in a heap. The sail swung forward as the rope slipped from his relaxing fingers, the boat careened perilously. One girl—the girl in the stern—shrieked. The other sprang forward, caught the trailing rope, and in another minute the boat was flying onward over its former course, a pool of water in the bow the only evidence of its temporary indiscretion.

"Oh, Mary, what is it? What has happened?" Muriel put her hands before her eyes, shrinking, shivering. "What has happened?" she wailed again.

"I guess Joe fainted or something like that, Miss Muriel." Mary, clutching the rope, looked down at the motionless body of the man beside her. "If you could come over and splash a little water in his face."

"Oh, I can't! I can't bear to come near him! He looks as if he were dead! Oh!"

"If—if you hold this rope, I'll see what I can do for him."

"I can't, Mary. I don't know a thing about sailing."

"Neither do I. But I noticed how he's been holding the sail, and I pulled it back to the same place. I'd like to take it down, but I don't know how. I guess you'll have to come over here and help, Miss Muriel, for we can't leave Joe lying in a heap like that."

After a little further urging, Muriel obeyed. She sat in Joe's former place, and shivered slightly, as Mary pulled the unconscious man forward and dashed water in his livid face. She worked over him some time before he muttered something and his eyelids twitched.

"Feel better, Joe?" the girl asked, gently. But though the man opened his eyes and stared into her face, he did not reply. With some difficulty Mary raised his head and slipped a cushion under it. Then she went back to Muriel and relieved her.

"I guess it's something more than a faint with Joe," she said. "A heart attack of some sort, I shouldn't wonder. I hope he comes to before the wind changes."

"What has that to do with it?"

"Why, we can keep right on going while the wind stays as it is. All that we need to do is to keep the sail steady. But if it whirled around to another quarter, as it does sometimes, I shouldn't know what to do. I'm going to learn something about managing a sail-boat before I'm much older." To herself she added, "If we get back alive."

Presently Muriel seemed to wake to a realization of the state of affairs. "Why, we're going away from home just as fast as we can!"

"Yes."

"Can't you turn around and go the other way?"

"Why, Muriel, I've no more idea how to turn a sail-boat around than how to manage a locomotive. Maybe Joe'll come to himself after a while enough to tell me what to do." She waited a moment, then added, in a matter-of-fact tone, "You'd better get the basket now and eat a little."

"I'm not hungry," said Muriel, fretfully. It did not occur to her to ask if Mary were hungry. Such forgetfulness is not an uncommon result of being a person of importance.

But the time came when she was hungry enough to eat, and it was Muriel who opened the basket and waited on Mary. Joe was still in a semi-conscious condition, muttering occasionally, sometimes opening his eyes, in a long, unseeing stare. On all sides of them stretched the blue water. Once Mary noticed a line of black smoke in the sky, like an indistinct pennant of crepe, and called her companion's attention to it. "It's a steamer. I only wish they were near enough to see us."

Toward sunset the wind went down. Mary improved the temporary calm to make some experiments she had not dared to try earlier. As a result of these the sail was presently furled and the mast unshipped. Mary permitted herself a deep sigh of relief. "There! I'm glad that's done."

"Glad! How can you talk of being glad!" Muriel broke into hysterical tears, not the first of that trying day. And Mary tried to comfort her with hopeful words. But when the sunset colors were lost in the shadows of the on-coming night, it took all her courage still to be hopeful, encouraging.

It was the longest night Mary had ever known. Muriel, worn out by the paroxysms of emotion, slept at last, and moaned in her sleep. The sick man, stretched at the bottom of the boat, moaned, too, and murmured a child's name. Through the dragging hours Mary sat, wakeful, every sense alert. And when the first pale light of the morning put out the stars, her heart began to thump, for she was sure there was land in sight.

Muriel woke at last at the sound of voices. A bent old man in a shabby boat was talking excitedly with Mary.

"Luck was with ye all right! It's a wonder ye ain't at the bottom of the lake! I'll see if I can tow ye in."

Muriel sank back against her cushions with a sob of relief. Soon they would be on shore. They would go at once to the hotel, and enjoy the luxury of sleeping in a real bed. Muriel felt that she had never appreciated a bed before. She was hungry, too, in spite of her lunch basket. And of course telegrams must be sent at once, reassuring her friends as to her safety.

In spite of the early hour, there were people at the dock—sunburned women in calico dresses, bare-legged children, and half-grown boys. She noticed an odd lack of men. And though she strained her eyes, she could not make out the outlines of a hotel, only plain little cottages lacking paint and standing out in the sun, as if fearful of some danger lurking in the shadows.

Since Joe's attack at his post, Mary had taken the lead. But as Muriel stepped ashore, the old habit of authority returned for one brief moment.

"I should like to go to the hotel at once—the best hotel, please. Mary, we must telegraph Aunt Marian immediately."

A wrinkled woman near her broke into a laugh. Muriel looked around, bewildered. No one else had laughed, but every face wore a smile.

"Why, there ain't no hotel here, bless you!" said the woman who had laughed. "This is Blueberry Island. And there ain't no telegraph neither. But when the men get back from fishing at the end of the week, you can send a message ashore."

That was the beginning of a week which Muriel will never forget. The cottages of the fishermen opened hospitably to receive them, but the accommodations were such as she had never imagined in moments when her fancy had indulged in the most headlong flights. Vainly she pleaded for a boat to be sent to the mainland. Two old men and a few boys under a dozen years of age were the only male representatives of the whole population of Blueberry Island. Muriel's persuasion fell on deaf ears. Money was respected on the little island, but the people there had learned that they could do without it.

Muriel had been accustomed to think of herself as a person of importance. During her stay on Blueberry Island she learned the lesson of humility. She saw Mary adapt herself to the new life, meeting the hardships without a word of complaint, lending a helping hand in every home along the straggling row, showing one wife how to prepare her frugal fare more appetizingly than ever before, waking ecstatic gratitude in the mind of one bride-to-be by some practical assistance on the wedding dress. The children followed her from cottage to cottage like attendant satellites. The two old men were pathetically eager to hear what she had to tell of the outer world. The sick boatman, Joe, was fretful if another than Mary administered to him. As for Muriel, she found herself treated with a kindness in which pitying tolerance was painfully evident.

"I don't know," she heard one woman say, "how a body could grow up and be so no-account!" She did not need to ask the name of the subject of the conversation.

After all they were not compelled to await the return of the fishermen. One day a smart launch touched at the island, and needed no urging to be induced to carry passengers on its return trip. In fifteen minutes Joe had been carried abroad, and the whole population of Blueberry Island was out to say farewell.

"My! I wish you could come back to my wedding!" said the bride-to-be, fumbling for her handkerchief.

"You never told us the last of that story!" wailed the children, clutching at Mary's skirts.

Muriel looked about her. Every eye was on the other girl. All the regret was for parting with her. The swift-moving little launch would bring them ashore before the day was over. Again she would be Muriel Wentworth and a person of importance. But in the week when all advantages had been stripped from her, save those which were inherent, she had taken the second place. The first had been last, the last first. As she stepped abroad the launch and turned to look back at Blueberry Island, she was sure she could never forget.—The Girls' Companion.