

THE CHRISTMAS CAMERA

ALTA HALVERSON SEYMOUR



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illustrated by Lorence F. Bjorklund

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A RACE THROUGH THE FOREST

Trik Dahlquist, running at his best speed through the pine and white birch forest, slowed down and looked about him with alert but anxious gray eyes.

Today the older schoolboys in the little town of Lilleborg, on the Swedish coast, were celebrating the beginning of summer vacation with a favorite race called orienteering.

With compass and map, each boy was making his way alone through the forest from a given point miles above the town, aided by small red and white flags marking the various routes. The boy to reach the home schoolground first would receive a greatly-desired prize of a camp rucksack, complete with cooking kit. And

what a fine thing that would be on the summer bicycle trip all the boys hoped to take!

Erik had high hopes of winning, even though it was his first year of the race, for he had become one of the fastest runners in the school. But he knew that in order to win this race, you had to be much more than a fast runner. You had to have a fair knowledge of the forest and know how to use your head as well as your compass and map. And you had to keep your eyes wide open, even as you ran, for those red and white flags! He bit his lip as he often did when puzzled or anxious. It looked very much as if he was lost or at least way off the course.

It was when the thrush's song lured him aside that he lost the flags. Of course he shouldn't have stopped, but there was one thing Erik liked if possible even better than running races or camping. That was taking pictures with the new camera his sister Astrid had given him on his twelfth birthday.

So far, he hadn't had nearly enough opportunities of taking photos to suit him. School took up long hours each weekday, and there was plenty of homework besides, especially now that he was studying English, which was anything but easy. Plus there were many small jobs Father found for him to do around the



paper factory, of which he was director, and the chores around home, weeding Mother's garden, and running errands.

Erik had slung his camera over his shoulder that morning, meaning to get a few pictures at least, now that he had this chance. He didn't find the thrush, but he did snap a picture of a little wren on its nest, and another of two perky squirrels. Then he had gone on

again, faster than ever, but he had seen no more of the red and white flags.

Unless he found his way soon, he might be here in the forest all night. He shivered a little at the thought. One good thing—there would be little real darkness this June night when the sun went only for a short time below the horizon. Even so, the prospect of a night in the forest, alone and clad only in his light running gear, was anything but pleasant.

Erik studied his compass and map and made some careful calculations. If he was figuring right, he shouldn't be too many miles from home. But what was the shortest way out of the forest? Perhaps it would be best to try to go toward the sea. It wouldn't be easy to follow the shore line home, for much of it was rocky, but he'd have a fair idea where he was. But how could he chart a straight course to the shore? There were so many indentations, so many bays and coves. He thought a moment. At least he could bear to the west.

As he started running again, his mind went back somewhat ruefully to the talk at breakfast that morning.

“You're going to win, aren't you, Erik?” his eight-year-old brother Axel had said confidently. Wasn't Erik smart enough to do just about anything?

Linnea, a year younger than Erik, wasn't so sure. "Trouble with Erik is," she said with sisterly frankness, "he'll be stopping to look at a bird's nest or examine a flower or something. I suppose Sten Ottergren's most likely to win."

"Erik can run as fast as Sten or faster," said Axel loyally.

"Well, I do hope you will win, Erik," said Linnea, "especially because Cousin Bertil's coming soon, and Aunt Ebba's always writing about the prizes and things Bertil wins in his Stockholm school. I'd like to have him see our family can win a few things too."

"Why don't you try winning something then?" Erik asked, good-naturedly enough.

"Never you mind. Just you wait and see what I'm planning to do in sewing class next fall," said Linnea calmly. A laugh went around the table, for easy-going, happy-go-lucky Linnea was hardly, they felt, the prize-winning kind.

Dark-eyed Astrid, the eldest sister, rose from the table and went to give her mother and father the polite Swedish curtsy and thanks for the meal. "Time for me to get to work," she said. "I have to be prompt." Her father had found her a summer vacation job in the factory office, and she was eager to do him credit. But she paused to rumple Erik's hair as she passed him.

“The best of luck, boy,” she said, and he smiled back at her. Between these two was a deep bond of understanding. He was sure she had gone without something she wanted herself to get the camera she knew he longed for, and now, as he ran, he was hoping the pictures he had snapped would do him and the new camera credit.

He was trying hard to make up for lost time, and though in some places the thick ferns and underbrush got in his way, in other places there were clear aisles between the tall pines. On he ran, sincerely wishing he could see just one of those friendly red and white flags, and stopping now and then to consult map and compass. At last he thought he could hear the sound of the sea.

Another spurt and he was out of the woods, the ocean pounding against the rocky shore not far away. Erik gave a deep sigh of relief and looked quickly around. He often rowed some distance from home to fish. Perhaps a familiar landmark was nearby. None was in sight, however, and he set off down the rocky shore toward Lilleborg.

But he had gone only a short distance when he did see a landmark, and not a very welcome one—a small red hut perched on a cliff. Erik knew very well who lived there: Gunnar Eklund, an old fisherman who

had come a year or two ago to take possession of the hut that had long stood vacant. Gunnar went his solitary way of fishing, buying his few supplies in the town, but having little to do with anyone. It was known that he sent and received mysterious packages to and from Stockholm and even farther places, but no one knew what they were, though many spoke of it and wondered.

Erik stopped short now, his face anxious. The quickest way was certainly past the hut of Gammal Gunnar, as people called him, but what if the old fisherman was home? If what folks said was true, he wasn't one to welcome an intruder. Yet any other way would mean a long, slow climb. The boy made up his mind quickly, took his courage in his hands, and ran straight on, hoping that Gammal Gunnar would be away fishing.

But as he neared the hut, he saw to his dismay that the old man was sitting on a bench near the door, his face intent as he looked out to sea. Erik was strongly tempted to run by as fast as he could, without a word. Then something a little lonely in the lean figure persuaded him. He paused and gave the polite evening greeting, "*God afton.*"

A pair of sharp blue eyes met his, a curt "*God afton*"



was followed by the gruff query, “What are you doing here, young fellow?”

Erik swallowed hard. “Orienteering race,” he managed to say, and made a quick explanation of his plight. “Guess I didn’t do a very good job of it,” he wound up ruefully.

“You used your head anyway—that’s surprising in a boy,” said the man drily.



During an orienteering race, twelve-year-old Erik Dahlquist is lured off course to snap photos of a little wren on her nest. He loses his bearings until spotting a familiar landmark, the red hut on the cliff by the sea.

It's Gunnar Eklund's place. The reclusive old fisherman is said to not take kindly to trespassers. After a brief *God Afton*, the two strike up a friendship. Later, it turns out old Gunnar has good advice for Erik when his know-it-all cousin Bertil arrives from Stockholm to stay for the summer.

Join the Dahlquists and learn Swedish customs as they celebrate the holidays. There's Midsummer's Eve, crayfish fishing in August with a huge feast, culminating with St. Lucia Day and then *Julafton*.

This endearing read-aloud, of warm relationships between family and friends, is sure to become a favorite. Charming illustrations by Lorence F. Bjorklund.

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