

CHAPTER *N^o 1*



The first day of 1896 blew in with a bitter wind and the threat of snow. In spite of the cold, Emily and her younger sister Jane were happy to be outside in Beacon Hill Park.

Things were bustling at home. Ten guests would be arriving later that afternoon for the Murdochs' annual New Year's party. A few of those guests had already sent ahead their Chinese servants to help Hing prepare the dinner, and Mother and Father were making sure that everything was perfect, down to the last detail. Because

the girls kept getting in the way, Mother had sent four-year-old Amelia to bed for a nap and told Jane and Emily they could go to the park and feed the ducks—provided they dressed warmly and hurried home the instant they heard the gong.

The ducks were used to the girls' weekly offerings and quickly gathered around. But when a mob of seagulls squawked in for their share, Emily would have none of it. "Shoo!" she yelled. She ran in circles, flinging her arms in an attempt to scare them away. "This is a *duck* pond!"

"Look, Em!" Jane called out. She had several of the ducks trying to eat out of her hand. "One of them's pecking my finger."

"You chase the gulls for a while and let me feed them," Emily said, racing over to her sister. She took some grain from the small bag that Jane was carrying, moved a few yards away, then crouched down and held out two handfuls. "Here, ducks! Over here!"

"Over *here!*" Jane countered. Soon they were

deeply involved in a contest over who could attract the greater number.

Suddenly, the clamour of a gong echoed across the park.

“Oh, no!” Emily cried. “Is it that time already? Come on, Jane. We’ve got to go home.” She scattered the remaining feed and grabbed her sister’s hand.

Emily was used to Hing’s gong. Before he’d started using it, she had always arrived late for lunch on school days. Hing had finally laid down the law. “I stand outside, beat gong when dinner ready,” he’d said. “If you not here, you miss.”

The gong outdid the clanging of the streetcar and could be heard throughout James Bay. The moment Emily heard it, she would stop whatever she was doing and run like the dickens. She didn’t want to make Hing angry. If he was angry, there would be no lemon tarts!

No, the gong was not to be taken lightly—not on regular days, not on New Year’s Day, and certainly not when Father was home.

Home was only three blocks from the park. But as the girls were nearing the end of the second block, Emily spotted something that made her forget the gong and come to an abrupt stop.

“Oh, Jane!”

“What?”

“See, on Sullivans’ verandah? The bicycle.” She leaned over the picket fence and sighed. “It’s a Red Bird. That’s what I wanted for Christmas.”

“Maybe you’ll get one for your birthday,” Jane said. “It’s not that far away.” She gave Emily an encouraging smile and continued on home.

Emily stared at the bicycle. A birthday present? Jane could be right. Father had often said that a tenth birthday was extra special.

Another clanging of the gong tore her away. She could picture Father pulling out his watch, his foot tapping with impatience. Of course, once she had her bicycle, she would always be on time.