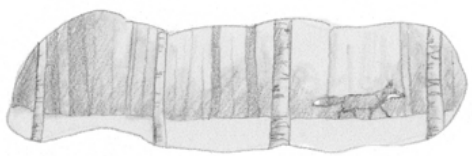
ONE SNOWY *Night*



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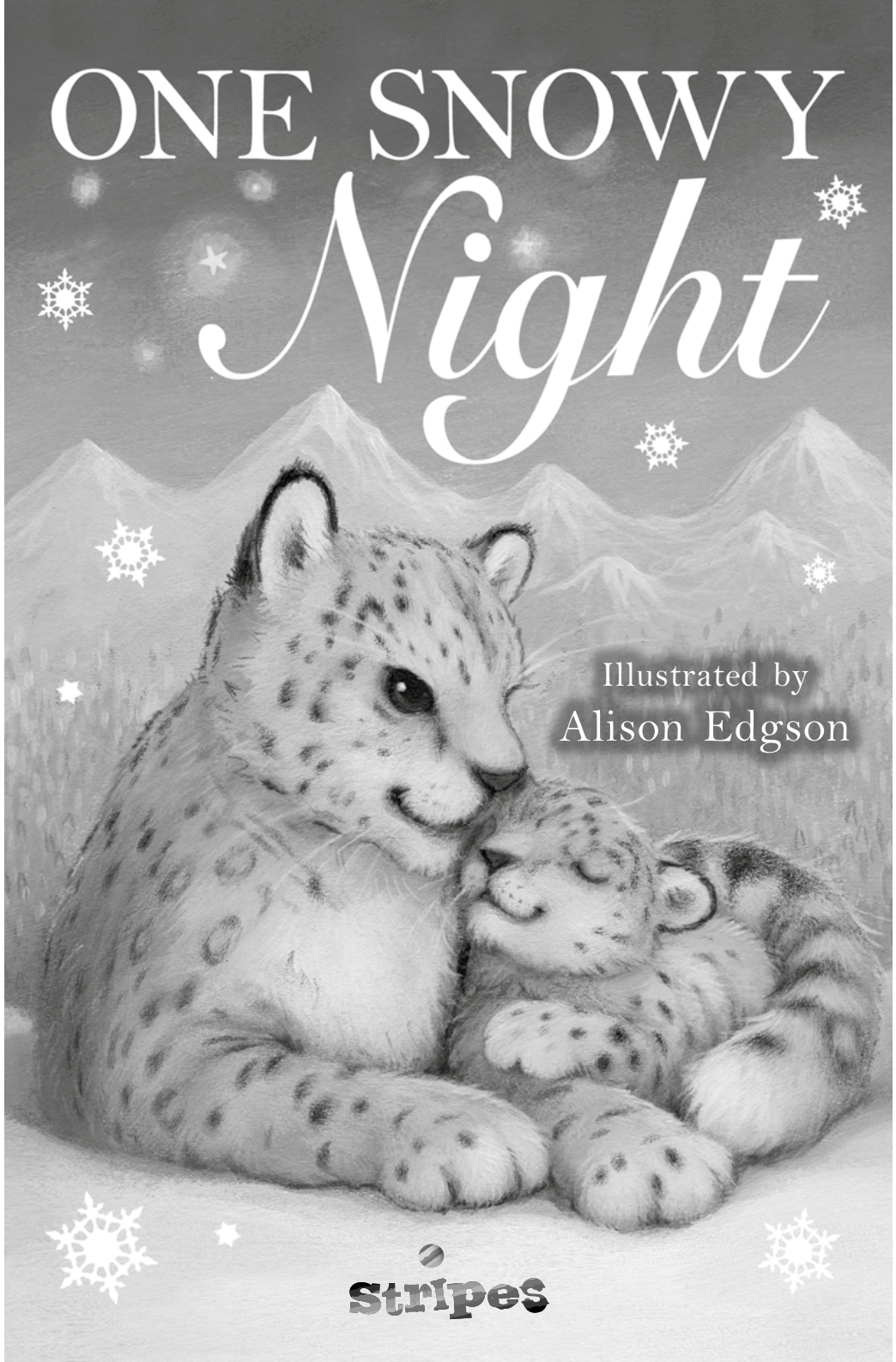
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Stripes

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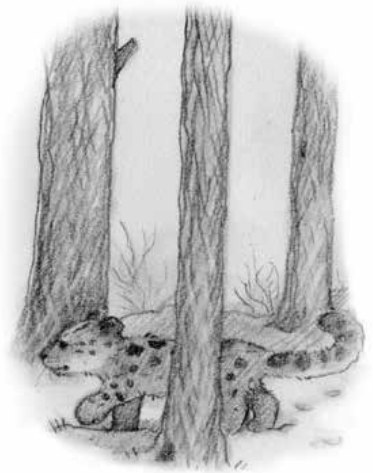
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IN THE SNOWY MOUNTAINS

Linda Chapman





Amy gazed out of the plane window at the clear blue sky. She could still hear her best friend Olivia's astonished voice. "You're going to Mongolia in the Christmas holidays?"

Amy had nodded. Her mum was a wildlife journalist and had been asked to visit Mongolia to write an article about snow leopards. Amy was going with her and was really excited. Snow leopards were incredibly rare and the thought of seeing one in the wild was amazing!

"You'll have to tell me all about it when

you get back," Olivia had said enviously. She loved animals almost as much as Amy did.

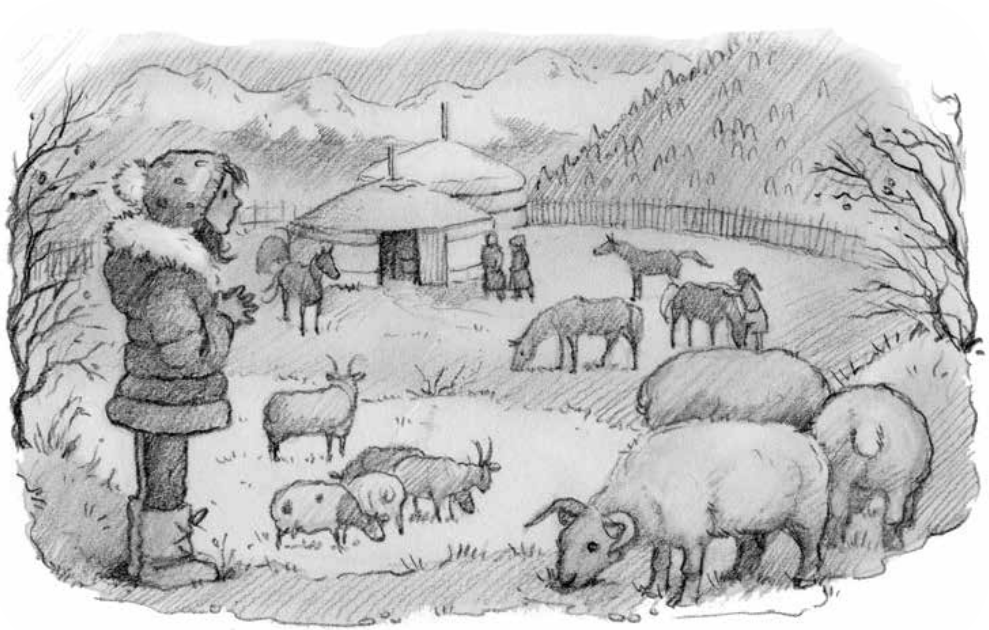
"I will," Amy had promised.

When they arrived in Mongolia, Amy and her mum met up with Alex, a vet, and Sarnai and Ganzorig, the two scientists who were researching the snow leopards.

The team had hidden cameras across the mountains to film the leopards. Local herders were checking on the cameras, sending the data back to the team. The team's mission that week was to visit one of the locations for a few days, look at the cameras and try to tag any adult snow leopards they could find in order to keep track of them.

In the morning, they all piled into a jeep and set off to the herders' camp. After

several hours they arrived in the foothills of a towering, snow-topped mountain. Amy caught her breath. There were long-horned sheep and shaggy ponies everywhere, being watched over by dark-haired people wearing long blue, brown and orange robes and sturdy sheepskin boots. The sound of baaing and bleating echoed across the valley as Amy got out of the jeep. The clear, cold air stung her cheeks and she was very glad of her thick winter coat, hat and gloves.



The herders lived in large, round cream-coloured tents called gers. Outside the gers more people were bustling about – some milking cattle, others carrying hay to the wooden pens or buckets of water. The children were helping too, sweeping up and grooming the shaggy ponies.

One of the men hurried over with a warm smile and greeted them in Mongolian.

"This is Batsuri," Alex, the vet, told Amy and her mum as the two scientists spoke to him. "He looks after the cameras for us in this area. You two will be staying with him and his wife, Dushmaa, while we will stay in another ger. Batsuri and Dushmaa speak some English."

Batsuri noticed Amy. "Hello, little one," he said. "You like?" He swept his arm around.

"Oh yes!" Amy breathed. "It's so beautiful! Thank you for having us to stay."

Batsuri smiled. "You are very welcome. Come." He pointed to a ger where a young woman was standing at the entrance.

"Please come in!" she called.

Everyone went inside. The walls of the ger were lined with colourful woollen rugs and there were more rugs spread on the floor. There were two wooden beds, covered with red and yellow throws, and in the centre was a stove – the chimney going out through the roof.

Hearing a bleating noise, Amy looked round in surprise. There was a pen in the ger with a black-and-white goat and a sheep in it. "You've got animals in here!" she said.

Dushmaa smiled. "Yes, we keep any sick

or weak animals with us so we can feed them and help them get better. Our animals are our friends. Now, please –" she smiled round at them all – "sit down and I'll get some tea."

Soon the team were drinking hot, milky tea. It was a bit of a squash in the ger but it was cosy and warm. Amy didn't understand much of the conversation as the team asked Batsuri questions about the snow leopards in Mongolian.

Dushmaa tapped Amy on the arm. "I am going to feed the animals. Would you like to help?"

Amy nodded eagerly. She helped Dushmaa put hay in pens and fill water troughs, then they groomed the ponies.

One of them – a fat brown pony called

Nartai – seemed restless. As Amy groomed her, Nartai stamped her hooves.

"Is she all right, Dushmaa?" Amy asked.

Dushmaa nodded at the mare's very round tummy. "She is going to have a foal soon. Maybe very soon."

In the afternoon, the team and Batsuri set off into the snowy mountains with a pony to carry their bags and equipment. Dushmaa gave Amy some strips of dried meat in case she got hungry.

After an hour's walking they reached a rocky area where Batsuri said he hoped they might see a snow leopard. A camera was hidden in a thorny bush. Over the previous seven months it had taken pictures of a snow leopard and her cub, but Batsuri was worried because there

had been no pictures of them in the last few weeks. As the scientists examined the camera, Amy wandered a little further along the path.

"Don't go too far!" her mum called.

"I won't!" Amy called back.

She sat down on a rock near some trees and pulled out the dried meat. It was chewy but tasty. Suddenly a movement in the trees caught her attention. Two pale blue eyes were staring at her from the shadows. Amy froze. It was a young grey snow leopard about as big as a medium-sized dog but with a very long tail. Its eyes flicked hungrily to the meat in her hand. Amy wasn't scared. Her mum had told her snow leopards never attacked people. Moving slowly, she threw the meat on to the ground.



For a moment the skinny young leopard hesitated but then hunger got the better of it. Bounding out of the trees, it grabbed the meat then disappeared into the trees again, vanishing like a ghost. Amy leaped to her feet. She'd seen a snow leopard! Actually seen a real one in the wild! She ran to tell her mum.

When the scientists heard Amy's news

they were concerned. Snow leopards almost never approached humans. Something must be wrong. And where was the cub's mother? It was very young to be out alone. Amy's worries grew as she listened to them discussing the cub.

Alex gave Amy some more meat. "Let's see if it will come out again. It may be less scared of you because you are a child. The rest of us will stay back. If it does come, Batsuri will follow and try to find the den."

Amy placed the meat down by the trees and waited. *Please come*, she willed the cub.

There was a movement in the trees and the cub crept out. Delight rushed through Amy but she sat very still. The cub gobbled up the meat and then bounded away again.

But this time Batsuri was following.

"Now what?" Amy said, re-joining the others.

"Now we wait and see what Batsuri finds," her mum said grimly.

The minutes stretched by. Just when Amy felt she couldn't bear to wait any longer, Batsuri appeared. He spoke in rapid Mongolian, gesturing anxiously.

Alex translated. "Batsuri found the den. The mother is injured and looks in a bad way. The cub is too young to be able to hunt properly yet – they are starving."

Amy bit her lip. The poor snow leopards!

Batsuri leaped on to the pony.

"Where's he going?" Amy's mum asked.

"To get some fresh meat," said Sarnai. "He's left us a trail so we can go to the den

and see if Alex can help the mother. Come on!"

The team followed the trail Batsuri had marked by tying strips of material to trees and bushes. They reached a cave in the mountainside. Alex crept forward with a tranquilizer gun. The darts in it would put the snow leopards to sleep for a little while so he could treat the injured mother.

Amy gripped her mum's hand. Could the team help the leopards? Had they got there in time?

"Finished!" Alex declared, cutting the last of the stitches that had been used to close up the nasty wound on the mother leopard's leg.

Both leopards were still asleep. The young cub was skinny but otherwise

healthy. While Alex had worked, Amy and her mum had helped by holding lights and passing what was needed. Amy now crouched by the mother leopard. She longed to stroke her soft fur but she knew the leopards would not like to find the scent of humans on them when they woke up. They were wild, majestic animals, not pets. Amy gazed at them, taking in their pale fur with dark grey spots, their large fluffy paws and long tails. They were so beautiful.



Wearing gloves, Sarnai fixed a GPS collar to the mother's neck so they could track her movements. Meanwhile, Ganzorig had set up a camera on the cave wall so they could monitor the pair's progress after they left.

"Will the mother be OK?" Amy asked, looking at the sleeping leopards.

Alex nodded. "The wound will heal. She needs some food though."

Just then Batsuri arrived with a sackful of meat. "I will bring more tomorrow."

"Good, they'll be safe in this cave while the mother recovers." Alex smiled at Amy. "Thank you. By feeding the cub and getting it to come out you gave us a chance to work out what was going on. Without you, the world might have had two fewer snow

leopards in it."

Amy felt a rush of happiness as she looked at the peaceful, sleeping cub. She hoped that one day, it too would have cubs of its own who would grow up to roam the mountain, wild and free.

By the time the team reached Batsuri's ger it was dusk. They were met with the delicious smell of lamb stew. Dushmaa wanted to know all the news.

"It was amazing," Amy began. "I saw a snow leopard cub and Batsuri tracked him and—"

She broke off with a gasp as she noticed that the animals in the pen had been joined by Nartai, the pony, and a tiny foal. She hurried over. "Nartai's had her baby!"

"Yes. I was right!" Dushmaa called.

"The foal was born this afternoon. I have brought them in here to keep them warm for the night."

Amy wished she could have a horse, sheep and goat in her home! *I really am going to have some good stories to tell Olivia*, she thought.

Her mum came over and hugged her. "Isn't it wonderful here?"



"Oh yes!" said Amy.

"Food time!" Dashmaa called.

Amy and her mum joined the others around the stove.

Meanwhile out on the mountain slopes, a snow leopard cub with a full tummy played while his mother watched over him. Above them, the bright Mongolian stars sparkled in the velvet-black sky.

WHAT'S HAPPENED TO WINTER?

Liss Norton





It was the day before the rabbits' skating party but there was no ice on the pond.

"What's happened to winter?" said Clover with a sigh. She gazed out of the window and scratched her soft brown ears anxiously. "There's not even a sniff of snow."

Every year the rabbits held an ice skating party to celebrate midwinter but this year the summer had stretched on and on. The trees were still full of green leaves and butterflies still danced among the flowers.

Clover's friend Dandelion, a grey rabbit with a very twitchy nose, shook his head.

"I checked the pond on my way here," he said, "and there's no ice at all, just water. The party will have to be cancelled."

"No way!" said Clover in a determined voice. "Everyone's been looking forward to it for so long." Last year had been her first skating party but she could still remember the thrill of whizzing round the pond by twinkling lantern light, and tucking into hot carrot pasties.

Clover's grandad was reading the Rabbit News. "Do you know why winter hasn't come, Grandad?" Clover asked.

"It's Jack Frost's job to bring snow and ice," he replied. "But he seems to have forgotten us this year."

"Someone needs to remind him then," said Clover. She took Dandelion's paw and

led him outside. "Let's go and find Jack Frost and ask him to bring winter here, to Rabbit Valley."

Dandelion's eyes shone with excitement. "Do you think we can? Oh, Clover, that would be such a big adventure!"

"Of course we can," said Clover. "If we go far enough north, we'll find Jack Frost. I'm sure of it!"

They packed carrot sandwiches and thick jumpers into a backpack. "Here we go then," Clover said excitedly as they set off.

They walked a long way, through shady woods, across fields of tickly grass and up and down steep hills, but there was no sign of winter anywhere.

At lunchtime, just as they finished their sandwiches in Hedgehog Wood, a hedgehog

family came to see them. They looked very tired. "Do you know what's happened to winter?" they asked, yawning. "We're ready to hibernate but it's not cold enough."

"We think Jack Frost's forgotten to come this year," Clover said. "When we find him, we'll ask him to bring winter here, as well as to Rabbit Valley."

She and Dandelion hurried on, but all too soon the sun began to sink. "It's nearly night," Dandelion sighed. "We should give up and go home."

"Let's go just a bit further," said Clover. "Maybe Jack's over the next hill." She couldn't bear to think of heading home without finding him.

They raced up the hill, still searching for any sign of winter, but they'd both

begun to think that it was hopeless. "We'll turn back if we can't see anything from the top," Clover said sadly.

They reached the top of the hill and stood gazing around while they got their breath back. The setting sun cast long rosy shadows across the land.

"Look at that castle," Dandelion said, pointing to an enormous building that glinted pale pink in the sun's rays. It had tall spiral towers topped with sharp spikes and the windows glittered with frost. A fir tree stood beside the front door. It was covered in snow and more snow lay on the ground.



Clover's heart began to pound. "That castle looks as though it's made of ice!" she cried. "It must be Jack Frost's castle. Come on, Dandelion!"

They raced down the hill. With every step the air grew colder and their breath puffed out of their mouths in icy clouds. Reaching the castle's front door, they could see that the whole building really was made of shimmering ice. Clover jangled the bell that hung beside the door.

"Who's that?" croaked a weak voice from inside.

"Clover and Dandelion from Rabbit Valley," Clover replied. "We're looking for Jack Frost."

"Come in!" the voice called. "I'm upstairs in bed with a terrible cold."

Clover and Dandelion exchanged excited looks. "We've found him!" breathed Clover. She opened the door and they stepped into a wide entrance hall with a flight of glittering ice stairs leading up.

"I'm glad we brought our jumpers," Dandelion said, shivering. He pulled his on and Clover did the same.

"I've never been anywhere as c-c-cold as this before," she said through chattering teeth.

They scampered upstairs and found Jack Frost. He was lying in bed with the blankets pulled up to his chin. He had long, sharp fingers, pointed ears and hair that stood up in icy spikes. His skin was pale blue and ice crystals clung to it. He was shivering violently.



Clover was shocked to see how ill he looked. "Can we do something for you?" she asked.

"I'd love a mug of cocoa and could you light the fire, please," he replied. "I don't usually feel the cold but I just can't get warm today."

The wood was already laid in the fireplace. Clover lit it and watched, pleased, as flames sprang up, warming the room.

Dandelion ran down to the kitchen and made cocoa for them all.

They sat by Jack's bed and sipped their steaming drinks. "I feel a bit better already, thanks to you," Jack said, setting down his empty mug. "Now tell me why you've come."

"We wanted to ask why you hadn't brought winter to Rabbit Valley," Clover explained. "Tomorrow's the day of our midwinter skating party but there's no ice on the pond. We can see you're too ill to go out, though."

"I am," Jack said. "I'm very sorry to spoil your party. My winter crystals are ready to scatter but I don't feel well enough to get out of bed."

Clover's heart skipped a beat. "I've got

an idea," she said. "Can we scatter the crystals for you?"

Jack's blue eyes brightened. "Of course you can! That's a wonderful idea. My crystals are in a basket on my sledge, which you can find parked round the back of the castle. Sprinkle them as you go along and winter will spring up all around you."

"Let's do it now!" cried Clover. "Come on, Dandelion. There's not a moment to lose."

They said goodbye, promising to come again with the sledge to check that Jack was all right, then dashed downstairs and round to the back of the castle. Jack's sledge was beautifully carved from a single block of greeny-blue ice and held a basket filled to the brim with glittering crystals. Clover

threw a pawful of them into the air and snowflakes began to whirl around them like tiny ballerinas in frilly white dresses. The two friends watched, entranced, as they settled thickly on the ground.

"Let's go," Clover said. She could hardly wait to get back to Rabbit Valley with the precious winter crystals, but they had to spread winter everywhere else as they went along too.

Dandelion pulled the sledge while Clover tossed the ice crystals this way and that. They reached Hedgehog Wood and all the hedgehogs came running to meet them. "You've brought winter," they cheered as Clover scattered more crystals and snow began to fall. "Thanks! Now we can start our long winter sleep."



"You're welcome," Dandelion said. "Sweet dreams!"

The two friends ran on and on, spreading winter far and wide. It was dark now but the shining moon set the snow gleaming so brightly that it was easy to see the way.

At last they finally reached Rabbit Valley. "Oh no!" gasped Clover. "Jack's basket is almost empty!"

Dandelion peered anxiously into the basket. The few crystals that were left looked very small and they weren't as sparkly as the ones they'd scattered before. "Throw them close to the pond," he said. "Even if there aren't enough to make it snow, they might freeze the water so we can still skate."

Clover scooped up the last few crystals and placed them carefully around the pond. She held her breath as she waited to see what would happen, but nothing changed. No snowflakes fell, no ice appeared on the pond.

"I can't believe we went all that way and spread winter everywhere, but didn't keep enough for Rabbit Valley," she said sadly. "The skating party really will be cancelled."

Miserably, she and Dandelion trudged back to their burrows and went to bed.



Clover woke late the next day. She remembered at once about running out of crystals. *Why didn't I save enough for Rabbit Valley?* she thought unhappily.

Suddenly she heard a cheerful shout outside. "Got you!"

Clover sprang out of bed and flung open her curtains. The ground was blanketed with deep snow and her friends were building snow rabbits and throwing snowballs.

Clover dashed outside. "Is the pond frozen?" she called.

"Frozen solid," her friends chorused. "Winter's come at last!"

A shiver of excitement ran through Clover, from her ears to the soles of her feet. The crystals had worked after all!

That night Clover, Mum and Grandad put on their warmest clothes and headed for the pond. The way was lit with twinkling lanterns that made the snow sparkle, and the path was crowded with their friends and relations all hurrying to the party.

Dandelion came running up, holding tight to his ice skates. "I can't wait for the party to start!" he cried.

"Me neither," agreed Clover. The snow was deep and the air was cold – it hardly seemed possible that yesterday had been as warm as summer.

They reached the frozen pond and gazed in delight at the flickering lanterns and the tables piled high with cakes, pies, cookies and jugs of steaming blackberry juice. A band was playing merry music, and the air was full of the smell of roasting chestnuts and toasting marshmallows.

