

Mareline Who Couldn't Help Her Helping

© 2006 Jason Ohler

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Mareline. She was (as a student for her age) – the same age as you! Mareline had a head full of frizzy red hair that went everywhere at once, looking like a wild cinnamon tree. She had a big smile, and shoes that squeaked so loudly as she walked that it sounded like they were laughing.

But Mareline had a problem at school. She was too helpful in math class! Whenever a classmate raised her hand to ask the teacher a question Mareline would wave her hands and yell, “Let me help!” and leap out of her chair and run over to see what she could do. Over and over her teacher, Ms. Crumley, would tell her, “Helping is my job, Mareline. Please sit back down.” But Mareline couldn't help it. She just loved to help too much to sit still.

Then one day in math class she went too far, as far as Ms. Crumley was concerned. Ms. Crumley had asked the class “When you add two brussel sprouts plus two brussel sprouts, how many brussel sprouts do you have?” The kids started grumbling about how no one liked brussel sprouts, so why should they add them together when they wish they would disappear. When no one answered Mareline stood up and said, “Hey everyone! We don't like brussel sprouts so let's add something we like, like scoops of banana chocolate sherbert raspberry swirl ice cream!” “Great idea!” everyone said. “What do you get when you add two scoops with two more scoops?” Mareline asked. “Four scoops!” the class answered. “And if we were having a party and needed 10 scoops, how many more would we need?” “Six!” Everyone cheered and said “Math is fun when you are adding scoops of ice cream!” But Ms. Crumley was not amused.

“Mareline that is enough of your helping! I have warned you over and over but you haven’t listened. You need to go to sit in *time-out corner*.”

OOOOO... said the class. Not time-out corner. It was a desk far far away in the very back corner of the room that faced the wall. “I’m sorry, Ms. Crumley,” Mareline said as she moped and trudged her way to time-out corner. “I was just trying to help.” As the year went by, Mareline was so helpful and was sent to time-out corner so often that after awhile everyone called time-out corner Mareline’s corner.

One day when Mareline was sitting at the time-out desk she started to look closely at the wall in front of her. It’s amazing what you see when you look at a wall up close. From a distance it seems so smooth, but up close it has all sorts of bumps, and rips and divots and scratches... as she was staring at the wall she said to herself “geewhiz, that looks like a face... I see warts, and that looks like two little eyes, and a crooked smile...” Then suddenly the face on the wall came alive and said, “Mareline! We have been waiting for you. Hurry. My people need your help.”

“Ohmygosh!” Mareline shrieked. She turned around to look at the rest of the class was so far away that no one seemed to notice anything.

“In my world you are known as Mareline the helper!” the wall said. “Your reputation is known throughout our land. I’ve come to get you because we desperately need your help. We may not survive the winter. Please hurry!”

“But where am I going? How do I get there?” Mareline asked.

“Just follow me!” And with that, something grabbed her hand and pulled through the wall. Suddenly she was riding on the back of a

strange looking creature that had fur and fins, gills and legs. “I’m part wolf and part fish,” the creature said. “My friends just call me Wish.” The world around her was an upside down world. Oranges were red and apples were orange. The sky was white, and the clouds were blue. And as she galloped past groups of people, she could see that they were all trying to do things by themselves. No one was helping anyone else. They looked sad, and hungry and tired. This was a very troubled, upside down world indeed.

“You see,” said Wish, “Here, people don’t help each other. They gather wood alone, so they can’t bring much back to the village. They fish alone, so they can’t bring back any of the big fish on their own. They hunt alone and can only bring back the little bit they can carry. Now we’re all hungry and cold. If everyone helped each other, there would be enough food and firewood for everyone. It’s up to you to teach them how.”

“Great!” Mareline said. “I love helping!” Mareline saw a group of hunters getting ready to leave and all go their separate ways. She hopped off of Wish and ran up to them, waving her hands in the air. “Hey, hey, don’t go alone, go together! That way you can bring back much more than if you went by yourselves.” But the hunters were so afraid at the sight of this young girl running at them screaming at the top of her lungs that they ran away, afraid.

Then Mareline saw a group of fisherman getting ready to leave and all go in their own boats. She ran up to them yelling “Hey, hey, don’t go alone, go together in one big boat! That way you can bring back much more than if you went by yourselves.” But the fishermen were so afraid at the sight of this young girl running at them screaming at the top of her lungs that they ran away, afraid.

Mareline sat down on a rock. Wish came up and sat beside her. “I guess I’m not that good of a helper after all,” Mareline said. And she began to cry.

Wish put his paw-fin around her shoulder and said, “Mareline, maybe you just need some help yourself learning how to help others. Helping’s great. But sometimes quiet helping is better than loud helping.”

While Mareline was thinking about Wish said she suddenly saw a group of villagers getting ready to all go their separate ways to find firewood. This time she walked up to them, stood quietly, and raised her hand. One of the villagers said, “Yes, young lady?” Then Mareline calmly explained that if they all went together they could use some fallen tree branches to drag back much more wood than if they didn’t help each other. “Great idea!” they all said. And thanks to Mareline, the village had firewood that winter. And because the wood gatherers told the hunters and fisherman about her advice, they began to help each other. And soon there was food for everyone.

Suddenly Wish appeared at her side. “You did it! You saved us! We all knew you could. Now I better take you back to class before someone misses you. Put your hand over your eyes, like this.” And Wish took his paw-fins and put them over his wolf-fish eyes to show her. Mareline covered her eyes and when she took her hands away, she was sitting at the desk in time-out corner. Life was going on as usual.

The next day Mareline was back at her old desk when one of her friends, Trudy, put up her hand to ask Ms. Crumley a math question. Mareline wanted to jump up and run over to Trudy. But instead she raised her hand slowly, respectfully, so as not to cause a stir. Ms. Crumley was shocked. “Yes Mareline?” “Ms. Crumley, I just wanted you to know that I am happy to help Trudy or anyone else with their math questions if you would like me to. But if you would prefer I sit her quietly, I can do that too.” So surprised and pleased by Mareline’s mature offer, Ms. Crumley asked her to go

help Trudy. Mareline was so good at helping her friends that Ms. Crumley identified a few other students who were good at math and let them become math helpers too. Soon everyone was good at math. Ms. Crumley's math class went to the state competitions and won that. Then they went to the national math competitions, and won that! Then they went to the international competitions, and won that. Then they even went to the interplanetary 4th grade math competitions on Mars where they won that, even beating those incredible math students from Saturn!

Well maybe Ms. Crumley's students didn't do to Mars. But they sure lived happily, and helpfully, ever after.