

Crane Laura Dent

The Automobile Girls at Newport: or, Watching the Summer Parade



Laura Crane

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CHAPTER I – BARBARA TO THE RESCUE

“Pink hair ribbons!”

Barbara Thurston’s brown, bright face seemed to twinkle all over, as she clinked a yellow coin on the marble top of the little sewing table.

“Silk stockings!” chorused Mollie Thurston gleefully. “Wasn’t it the luckiest thing that the hotel people wanted so many berries this year!” And she, too, sent a gold piece spinning over the smooth surface. “But, perhaps, we won’t be invited after all,” she sighed.

“Nonsense!” rejoined Barbara energetically. “When Grace Carter says she’ll fix a thing, you can wager she will. She’s known Ruth Stuart for three summers now, and she’s told us we’d be invited to Ruth’s party this year. I can read the invitations already. The only thing worrying me was what we’d wear. Now the strawberry crop has turned out so well, and mother’s a brick, and will let us use our money as we wish – I think we’re fixed. Then – who knows?”

“I am sure Ruth Stuart’s lots of fun when you get to know her,” interrupted Mollie eagerly. “If Cousin Gladys wasn’t boarding at the hotel with her, we’d have met her long before. Isn’t Gladys a stuck-up goose? Never mind. We’ll have the laugh on her when she sees us at the party. Let’s be delighted to meet her. I should love to watch her when she is fussed!”

“After all,” mused Barbara, thoughtfully, “her father was in partnership with papa. It’s mighty funny that uncle got all the money. I wonder – ” She stopped playing with her gold piece and gazed thoughtfully out of the sitting room window at the hot, empty, yellow road that ran so near the tiny cottage.

Barbara Thurston was sixteen, Mollie just two years younger, and nearly all their lives had been spent in that little cottage. John Thurston, the girls’ father, had died suddenly when Mollie was only three years old.

He had been at that time in the wholesale clothing business with his wife’s brother, Ralph Le Baron, and was supposed to be a rich man. But when his affairs were settled up, his brother-in-law, the executor, announced that a very small interest in the business remained to Mrs. Thurston. He hinted, darkly, at stock speculation on her husband’s part, and poor Mrs. Thurston, overcome by grief, had not wanted to question deeply.

She, herself, happened to own the little cottage, in Kingsbridge, in which she and her brother had lived as children. Acting on his advice, she settled there with her two little girls, and had remained ever since, subsisting on the small income her brother regularly transmitted to her from her dead husband’s tiny business interest. Le Baron and his wife, with their daughter, Gladys, usually spent the summer in Kingsbridge, at the one “summer hotel” in the place; but intercourse between the two families had come to be little sought on either side. Kingsbridge was a quiet little village in New Jersey, and, except for the summer visitors, there was little gayety. Gladys Le Baron, especially, had shown herself icily oblivious of the existence of her younger cousins, Barbara and Mollie.

These two were delightful examples of self-reliant young America. Barbara, the elder, looked a regular “nut-brown maid,” with chestnut hair that never would “stay put,” and usually a mischievous twinkle in the brown eyes beneath the straying locks. But there was plenty of genuinely forceful energy stored away in her slim, well-knit young body, and her firm chin and broad forehead told both of determination and intelligence.

Her sister, Mollie, was fair, with lovely curling blond hair, and a quaint drollery of speech that won her many friends. Both sisters had grown up quietly, helping their mother about the house, as they could afford no servant, going to the village school, and, when they wanted anything beyond the plainest necessities of life, earning it.

This summer both had set their hearts on “really-truly” party clothes, not “hand-me-downs.” Their friend, Grace Carter, daughter of Squire Carter, the village dignitary, had promised them invitations to “the event of the season,” the party to be given by her friend Ruth Stuart, a rich Western girl who quite recently had come to spend her summer at Kingsbridge. And didn’t Ruth Stuart live at the same hotel with Gladys Le Baron, the snobbish cousin?

To meet the enemy on her own ground, and to have the fun of a party besides, was certainly worth picking strawberries for, thought Barbara and Mollie. So they scoured the country round for the sweet wild ones the hotel visitors liked best. Now each of the girls was fingering gleefully her twenty-dollar gold-piece that meant many days’ work in the past, but pretty dresses in the future.

The prospect was too alluring for Barbara to spend much time in wondering about the real “why” of their fallen fortunes, though the question had come to her before, and would again. Now she was ready to join Mollie in eager planning as to “just what they’d get.”

“Go get a pencil and paper, Molliekins, and we’ll set it all down,” she laughed.

Mollie went into the further room and Barbara waited, eyes absent-mindedly fixed on the yellow stretch of road.

Suddenly she became conscious of a curious pounding. There was a queer, wild rhythm to it, and it seemed to be coming nearer and nearer.

Barbara put her head out of the open window. She could see nothing but a cloud of dust far down the road. Yet the pounding sounded louder every moment.

Then she knew. The noise came from the furious feet of runaway horses. And they were coming past the house with their helpless, unknown victims.

What could Barbara do? Her mother was asleep upstairs and there was no man about the place. There was no other house near. Besides, the slightest delay might prove fatal.

All this seemed to flash through Barbara’s brain in a second. She knew she must act. Swiftly and easily as a boy she vaulted the open window, pausing only to snatch a closed umbrella that leaned against the sill. How glad she was she had forgotten to put it away in the closet when she came in from the shower yesterday!

In an instant the girl sped through the gate and out into the road, opening her umbrella as she ran.

There she paused, squarely in front of the approaching dust cloud, very near now. She could hear the click of the stones, cast aside by the flying feet of the horses, and she caught a glimpse of two black heads, wild-eyed and foam-flecked, through the whirling dust.

Barbara strained her eyes to locate hanging bridles. But meantime, swiftly and mechanically, she was opening and shutting the big black umbrella.

“If they’ll only stop!” she murmured.

And they did. Fear-crazed already, their legs trembling after a terrific run, the horses dared not seek encounter with that horrible bat-like creature that seemed to await them.

Scarcely five feet away, their wild pace broke. They hesitated, and Barbara flung herself forward and seized the dangling bridles. For a moment she pulled on them with wrists of steel, but it was not necessary. The horses drooped their weary heads and gladly stood still.

Then, and only then, Barbara glanced at the carriage and its occupants.

It was an open four-seated carriage, and in it were Ruth Stuart, Grace Carter, Gladys Le Baron and a strange young man somewhat older than the rest of the party. The girls were leaning back, with closed eyes and white faces. The young man was staring straight ahead, with a blank expression, fear depicted on every feature.

Barbara dared not leave the horses even now. “Mollie! Mollie!” she called.

Mollie was already out of the house. From the window, terror-stricken, she had seen it all.

"Get the girls out," Barbara directed. "I can't leave these brutes, though I guess they're all right now."

In the meantime, Grace and Gladys had opened their eyes. Mollie now stood at the carriage step, her hand outstretched.

As they recognized their rescuers, Grace's pale face lit up. Even Gladys, for once, tried to summon a gracious and grateful smile.

"We're all right, Mollie," spoke up Grace, "but I think Ruth has fainted. I'll help you get her into the house."

Suddenly the young man started up. "I beg your pardon," he remarked in a smooth, pleasantly-modulated voice, "but you really must let me help. I have been utterly helpless so far," and his glance wandered admiringly and a trifle shamefacedly toward Barbara.

In an instant, he had sprung over the wheel and gently half lifted, half dragged Ruth Stuart off the seat.

As her feet touched the ground, she too opened her eyes, only to close them again with a shivering sigh. Grace was at her side in a moment.

"Try to walk to the house, dear," Grace urged. "It's only a few steps."

Mollie took the place of the young man, and, between the two girls, Ruth stumbled to the gate.

The young man stepped up to Barbara. "Can I help you?" he ventured, looking at the now quieted horses.

But a cold voice sounded from the carriage, where Gladys still sat. "I think you might think a little about me, Harry," she exclaimed.

The young fellow bit his lip and hesitated.

"Please," broke in Barbara, "please take her to the house. I can't get these horses and this carriage through the gate. It isn't big enough. But I'll hitch them to the fence and stay with them for a few minutes. You must need rest, all of you!"

Harry Townsend bit his lip as he caught the sarcastic inflection in Barbara's last sentence, but did as he was directed, and walked slowly toward the house with Gladys.

Left to herself, Barbara led the horses, still attached to the carriage, toward the fence, and hitched them by the reins in a clever way all country girls know. "Good boys! Poor boys!" she murmured, petting them, for they were still shivering pitifully with fright.

For several minutes she stood talking to them. Then Mollie's anxious face appeared at the door, and in a moment she stood beside her sister.

"What shall we do?" she asked. "Miss Stuart is feeling very ill, and wants to go home at once. She and all the others refuse to step foot into that carriage again – and I can't blame them; but, you know, it's two miles to the hotel, if it's a step, and we haven't a telephone. Grace says Ruth's father would send the au-to-mo-bile," – Mollie pronounced the word with reverent care – "but what's the quickest way of getting the message to them? Mother suggests running over to Jim Trumbull's and seeing if he'll hitch up and drive to the hotel. But it's half a mile to his place, and he's very likely to be away anyhow. What do you – ?"

Barbara interrupted her decisively. "I'll just drive those horses back to the hotel myself, Mollie Thurston," she said calmly.

"Barbara, you can't! It's risking your life!"

"Nonsense! There isn't an ounce of spirit left in the poor, frightened things. I guess I haven't broken Jim Trumbull's colts for him without knowing how to handle horses. You go tell Miss Stuart that her automobile will be here in two shakes of a lamb's tail. And see, Mollie," the twinkle shone in Barbara's eyes, "of course they'll give me a ride back in the auto!"

Laughing at Mollie's protests, the plucky girl untied the horses and turned them carefully.

“Stand at their heads, just a minute,” she cheerfully directed. Then Barbara gathered up the reins and climbed up to the high seat.

“Drop anchor, Mollie,” she called, and trotted slowly down the road behind the quieted blacks.

CHAPTER II – LOST, STRAYED OR STOLEN

“Mollie Thurston, has Barbara driven off with those awful horses?”

It was Grace Carter who spoke. She had reached the doorway of the cottage just in time to catch a glimpse of the departing equipage.

Without waiting for a reply, she turned from the open door to the group inside just as Mollie rejoined them, exclaiming:

“Barbara is driving the runaways to the hotel for the machine!”

Mrs. Thurston started. She had been downstairs for some time helping to make the victims of the accident comfortable. She was a slim, sweet-faced little woman, whose entire world lay in her two lively young daughters, in whom she had unlimited faith.

But, in a moment, she smiled and said, “I am not afraid to trust Barbara with anything.”

Ruth Stuart’s lately pale face was glowing. “I think that is regularly splendid of her!” she exclaimed, with more animation than she had shown since she had left the carriage.

“Oh, Barbara is used to taking care of herself,” Gladys Le Baron interposed with a supercilious smile.

Mollie looked at her cousin a moment. “Yes,” she answered steadily, “we think it is a pretty good thing in our family.”

Gladys flushed, and had no reply ready. Ruth looked surprised and Grace plunged into the breach.

“Oh,” she tried to murmur off-handedly, “Barbara and Mollie and Gladys are cousins, you know.”

“And you never – ” Ruth turned to Gladys, then stopped and smiled. “Well, it’s awfully jolly to have met you all in this nice, informal way. Grace has often spoken of you,” she said.

The girls had to laugh at this, so Ruth continued: “I’m well enough now to be proper and conventional, I suppose. I believe you know I’m Ruth Stuart. Mrs. Thurston, Mollie, have you met Gladys’s friend, Mr. Townsend?”

The young man came out from the corner near the window, where he had been seated, and bowed gayly. Ruth nodded in a satisfied fashion.

“There, doesn’t that finish it?” she sighed. “The rest of you are all acquainted, aren’t you? Now, won’t one of you, please tell me why those awful horses aren’t running still? I know some horrible white hay-caps started them, and Jones fell off the seat, and now we are here. Who stopped us?”

Everybody turned to Ruth at once. “Why, Barbara stopped them,” Grace managed to say first. “Barbara – ”

A gay laugh sounded in the doorway, and Barbara herself appeared before them.

“Now I’ve caught you!” she cried merrily, her bright eyes sweeping the circle. Then she turned to Ruth with a mock curtsy.

“Your ladyship’s chariot waits,” she declaimed, then continuing in quick explanation: “You see, your driver was scarcely hurt and he rushed back to the hotel at once and sent the automobile along the road where he had seen the horses disappearing. Before I’d gone a quarter of a mile, I met the machine with the chauffeur, and doctor and Jones himself. We sent Jones back with the horses, though they weren’t bothering me a bit, and I came back in the automobile. How are you feeling?” and the bright voice softened sympathetically, as she noted Ruth’s pale cheeks.

For answer the girl arose quickly, and held out both hands to Barbara. “You’re a brick,” she said simply. “I fainted, like a goose, and they’ve just told me what you did. I am so glad I know you, and I guess my father will be glad, too – not to say thankful! Now, please won’t you and your sister dine with us to-morrow? No? Make it lunch; then I’ll see you sooner. I won’t take no for an answer, because I have a very important plan. Dad decides as quickly as I do. So if you’ll only say yes – but

I can't tell you about it now. Perhaps, if I make you curious, you'll be more interested when the time comes!" Ruth laughed mischievously.

"What have you up your sleeve now, Ruth Stuart?" asked Grace, curiously. "I never saw such a girl as you are for chain-lightning projects!"

"You'll see," laughed Ruth. "You're in it too, you know. You must be one of my lunch party to-morrow. I know you and Mr. Townsend have another engagement, Gladys, so you will pardon my delivering my invitation before you. Now, I won't say another word.

"Come," she continued, addressing the party, "we must be off at once. If the news of this runaway circulates through the hotel and reaches either your father or mine, Gladys, they'll be wild with fright. Good-bye, Mrs. Thurston, and thank you. You've been awfully good to us. As for you two" – holding out her hands to Barbara and Mollie – "wait till tomorrow at lunch!"

Drawing the two Thurston girls with her, she stepped outside the door and to the gate, the rest of the party following. The machine was waiting in the road, and out of it hurried the hotel doctor toward Ruth.

"Aren't you hurt, Miss Stuart?" he cried. "I would have come in, but Miss Thurston said she would go in first and see how you were."

"I'm perfectly well, doctor," smiled Ruth. "It's too bad you had to come way out here. I hope father will not hear you have been sent for!"

She patted affectionately the nearest tire-rim of the big automobile. "Bless the 'bubble's' heart," she murmured. "He wouldn't run away with his missus. Barbara, Mollie, this is my best friend, Mr. A. Bubble. I think you'll get better acquainted with him before long. I wish you could come with me now, but I'm afraid neither you nor 'Bubble' would be quite comfortable. And you three must get along well together from the start."

The doctor helped Ruth into the big red touring car and Gladys and Grace followed. The two men and the chauffeur crowded together in the front seat.

"Au revoir," chorused the autoists, and "see you tomorrow," nodded Ruth emphatically to the girls. Then, in a whirl of dust, the big machine sped out of sight.

"Isn't she a dear?" burst forth Mollie, as the sisters turned to go back to the house. "How her eyes shine when she talks! I wonder if I could do my hair that way. I was sure she'd be nice – but what do you suppose she means by that plan? Barbara, for heaven's sake, how did you happen to think of that umbrella stunt? It was great, but you did look so funny – like a sort of desperate, feminine Darius Green with his flying machine! No wonder you stopped the horses!"

"Oh, I heard of a man who stopped a stampede of cattle that way out West once," Barbara answered abstractedly. There was a puzzled look on her face. "Mollie," she said abruptly, as they entered the house, "you didn't take our money with you, when you went into the bedroom for pencil and paper?"

"Why, no," replied Mollie wonderingly. "It must be over there on the table now. I remember I noticed it as I came into the room. I wondered, for a second, why you'd gone away and left it so near the open window. That was before I looked through the window and saw what you were doing. It must be there," and Mollie hurried over to the window.

The next moment she turned an astonished face to her sister. "Barbara!" she exclaimed, "it isn't here, anywhere!" Indeed, the marble top of the little table was absolutely bare. There was no sign of either of the gold pieces.

"Let's look on the floor," said Barbara, quietly. "One of our guests may have unconsciously brushed them off."

Both girls stopped and began a careful survey of the carpeted floor, under the table, and near the window. Their search was unrewarded.

"Let's look in the grass outside," suggested Mollie. "You might have brushed them off as you went through the window."

“But didn’t you say you saw them on the table, when you came back into the room and found me gone?” queried Barbara, thoughtfully.

“I was sure I did,” Mollie replied. “But sometimes one remembers imaginary things. And if the money had been in the room when I came in, it would be there now. I’ll ask mother – ”

“No, don’t,” said Barbara quickly; “at least, not yet.” Mrs. Thurston had gone into the kitchen directly after her return from the gate, and had heard none of the conversation. “There’s no need to worry mother about it now. Of course we must find it somewhere. Money doesn’t walk off by itself. We’ll go out and look in the grass under the window.”

On hands and knees the girls worked through the closely cropped grass underneath the sitting room window. Not two days before, they themselves had clipped this bit of lawn with big shears, and it was so close that there seemed no possibility of anything being hidden in it. Certainly nothing was to be found. The girls even looked over the short path, and ground near it. “Your skirts might have switched those small things a long way,” observed Mollie, wisely. Yet, as before, the result was – nothing.

Giving it up, at last, the girls sat down in a little garden seat at one side of the tiny yard, and looked at each other ruefully.

“I am so glad I feel sure Miss Stuart will invite us to her party, now,” commented Mollie dryly. “Our new gowns and the pink hair ribbons and the silk stockings will be so awfully fetching! But where, where, where, by all that’s mysterious, can those double-eagles have flown?”

Suddenly she looked curiously at her sister. “Barbara, you are thinking of something!” she exclaimed. “Have you any nameable idea?”

“No,” said Barbara, quickly; “it isn’t nameable.”

“All right; you never would talk when you didn’t want to,” complained Mollie. “And I know you want that money back as badly as I do. Tell you what – I’ll say the fairies’ charm. Don’t you remember the one the old gypsy woman taught us? Wish she were here to say it for us! She promised to do all sorts of things for me when I found her in the field with a sprained ankle and helped her back to camp. Why! why! Barbara, this is *uncanny*– she’s coming now!”

In truth, down the road a queer little bent figure was seen approaching. “I know her,” continued Mollie eagerly, “by that funny combination of red and yellow handkerchiefs she wears on her head. Do let’s go and meet her and tell her – it can’t do any harm.”

“What nonsense, Mollie!” laughed Barbara. But she followed her younger sister, who had already started down the road toward the quaint, little, gaudily-turbaned dame.

Between them, the girls brought her into the yard, Mollie meanwhile busily explaining their predicament. “You’ll help us, won’t you, Granny Ann?” she coaxed childishly. “You said, that time that I helped you home, you’d always be near when I wanted you.”

Granny Ann sat on the garden seat, looking gravely down at the half-laughing, half-serious girls huddled at her feet.

“I knowed,” she began in a high, cracked voice, “I knowed my little fair one,” lightly touching Mollie’s curls, “would need me to-day. Far away I was, when I heard the shadow of her voice callin’ out to me – and miles I have traveled to reach her. Granny Ann is thirsty, and she has had no food since morning.” The old woman looked reproachfully at her listeners.

Barbara’s eyes twinkled at Mollie’s rather crestfallen face, when the sybil voiced this most human request. But she said cheerily: “All right, Granny; supper isn’t ready yet, but I know mother’ll have something.” Then Barbara hurried into the house, the gypsy dame waiting solemnly until she reappeared, a moment later, with sandwiches, doughnuts and a big glass of milk.

Granny Ann smiled, but she didn’t speak until the lunch had quite disappeared. Then the old woman rose impressively. “There’s one sure magic for fetching back money that has gone,” she declaimed. “Because you have been good to me, ‘Little Fair One,’ you and your sister, I will say the golden spell for you.” With her hands crossed, Granny Ann began to croon dreamily:

Gold is gladsome, gold is gay,
Here to-night and gone to-day,
Here to-day and gone to-morrow,
Guest of joy and host of sorrow.
Gold of mine that's flitted far,
Forget me not, where'er you are.
Mine you are, as Pluto wrought you,
Mine you are, whoever's sought you,
Come by sea or come by land —
Homeward fly into my hand!

Three times Granny Ann repeated this. Then, with a queer dignity, oddly assorting with her variegated raiment, she turned to the girls. "It will return," she said; "now, I must go to my own people."

"But I thought you said you came here for us by yourself!" protested Mollie.

The gypsy dame drew herself up. "I travel not alone!" she said, stiffly. "Good-bye."

"Oh, good-bye, and thanks ever so much, Granny Ann!" cried both of the girls.

But Granny Ann did not turn her head. Barbara looked at Mollie, her eyes dancing. "The blessed old fraud!" she teased; "her people decided to camp somewhere about, and she thought she'd come over for a call and a lunch, and whatever else she could get! I believe she actually expected us to cross her palm with silver for saying that little rhyme. But I wish I knew really —"

All at once a faint chug-chug sounded in the distance. In a moment a big red touring car appeared, enveloped in dust. "Why, it looks like Ruth's car!" exclaimed Mollie, excitedly. "Yes, I do believe that young man seated beside the chauffeur is the Mr. Townsend who was with them. Barbara —"

But Barbara was walking quickly toward the gate. A moment later the automobile stopped before it, and Harry Townsend stepped out.

"Miss Thurston," he began, soberly, "have you lost any money?"

"Oh, yes!" burst out Mollie, who was just behind, before Barbara could speak; "two twenty-dollar gold-pieces! We've hunted and hunted. We had them this afternoon —"

"Then these must be yours," said the young man, extending his hand to Barbara. In it were two golden double-eagles. "When the young ladies were getting out at the hotel these were found on the seat, and Miss Stuart was sure you had dropped them out of your pocket, Miss Thurston, during the few moments you were in the machine. I am very glad to be able to restore them to you."

"Yes," said Barbara, "but I —" Then she stopped. "Thank you, Mr. Townsend," she said, giving him a clear, direct glance. For some unknown reason the young man's eyes wavered under it, and he climbed hurriedly into the automobile. "I am very glad," he murmured again.

"Miss Stuart expects you to-morrow," he added quickly, and the machine backed round and hurried off.

Barbara stood looking at it, the money still in her hand. But Mollie was laughing happily. Then she saw Barbara's face. "Barbara, what is it, dear?" she demanded. "You look exactly as you did before Granny Ann appeared, and I asked you if you were thinking of something. What is it? Can't you tell me?"

Barbara shook her head. "It really isn't anything, Molliedkins. I did have an idea in my head, but I must be mistaken somehow. You are sure you saw the money on the table after I left the room? It must have been there, then, when the crowd from the automobile came in. I thought I saw some one standing near the table with one hand resting on it, when I came back and called out: 'Now, I've caught you!' But I must not think anything more about it. Please don't ask me any questions. Let us

just be glad we have the money back. It is queer, though. Mr. Townsend says the money was found on the seat. I wonder who found it, and whether it was found on the front or back seat? Let's ask Grace. I don't understand it. But he brought the money back, and he's Miss Stuart's friend. Of course we will keep quiet, you and I, Mollie, whether the money was lost, strayed or stolen!"

"Well, I am sure, Barbara Thurston," Mollie answered a little indignantly, "I am not likely to talk of what I know nothing about. If there is any mystery about the disappearance of that money, I am sure you have left me utterly in the dark."

"Don't be cross," said Barbara, putting her arm in Mollie's. "But do you know if Mr. Townsend is a special friend of Gladys's?"

Mollie shook her head. "How should I know?" she said. "Let's go in, it's nearly dark."

CHAPTER III – RUTH’S PERFECT PLAN

Wonderment over the mystery of the money, and excited anticipation of Ruth Stuart’s luncheon and “plan,” kept the Thurston girls from getting to sleep very early that night. They awoke bright and fresh next morning, nevertheless. Just before eleven they started on their two-mile tramp to the hotel. They were hardly out of sight of the house, however, when what should they see but the now familiar red car speeding toward them. “Look – yes, it is!” cried Mollie. “Ruth herself is making it go!”

The young driver waved a free hand for a second, as she neared them, then wheeled in a broad turn and stopped. “I was so afraid you might have started,” she protested tactfully, “for it is such a fine morning for a nice leisurely walk. I was so anxious to see you that I simply couldn’t wait, and I told Dad I’d take the ‘bubble’ and spin out to meet you. Now, won’t you please hop in, and ride back with me?”

The girls “hopped” with delighted celerity, and Ruth turned back to them for a moment. “I have reams to talk about,” she continued, “but, to tell you the truth, I want my father to be with us, when I begin. So, now, if you don’t mind, we’ll just ride.”

Neither Mollie nor Barbara will ever forget their first ride. “I felt as if I had chartered my own private flying machine, and I was sure the angels were jealous,” Mollie confessed, naïvely, at lunch.

They reached the hotel very quickly, and after a cosy chat on the private balcony belonging to Ruth’s tiny suite of rooms, found themselves seated around a little table in a cool, palm-shaded corner of the big dining-room. Between them, opposite Ruth, sat big, blue-eyed, open-hearted, Robert Stuart, Ruth’s “Dad.”

Robert Stuart had made his fortune out West, in the mining country. That was how he started, anyway. For years, now, he had lived in Chicago, buying and selling real estate in the vicinity. There his wife had died, and there his eighteen-year-old daughter Ruth had spent nearly all her life. During the summers she had traveled more or less, and the last few years had frequently gone East. Her father’s sister, Aunt Sallie Stuart, had brought the girl up since her mother’s death, which had occurred when Ruth was a little girl. Aunt Sallie was not present at the luncheon, because of a bad headache. “Grace Carter has come over and is staying with her, like a dear,” Ruth explained. Later, if Auntie felt better, the girls were to go up to her room.

Ruth, as has appeared, was an extremely impulsive young person. Fortunately, most of her impulses were inspired by a natural kindness, and a cheerful, youthful energy, with a stratum of good common sense at bottom. There was apt to be method in her madness. Her “plan,” for instance, had long been her desire, but before she had never seen the way.

Ruth couldn’t wait for the cold bouillon to be taken off. “Father, I want to tell them now!” she exclaimed. After his cheerful, “Go ahead, daughter,” she burst out: “Barbara, Mollie, won’t you go on an automobile tour to Newport with Grace Carter and me, with Aunt Sallie for chaperon? Won’t you, can’t you come?”

While the amazed girls could only look at her and at each other, she hurried on: “Oh, yes, you probably think I’m crazy. But I’m not. You see it’s like this: all my life I have longed to travel by myself; at least, with the people I want, not in a train, or a big crowded boat. Dad knows the feeling; it’s what makes him run away from Chicago, and get out on the prairies and ride and ride and ride! I’m a girl, so I can’t do that or lots of things. But I can run an automobile. For two years I have just been waiting to get the right crowd. Grace is a dear, but I wanted two more. The other girls I know are all right to meet at dances and to see now and then; but they’d collapse at the thought of starting off on a lark like this. You two – you’re different, I knew it the minute I saw you. Besides,” she continued, “Grace has been telling me things about you. I always know right off whether I like anybody, and it doesn’t take long to find out how much I like them. I like both of you a whole lot – and I know we will have a perfectly delightful trip if you will go with me. If you don’t, I simply can’t go – that’s all.

It would be absurd setting off in that great machine with only Grace and Aunt Sallie to rattle around like two peas in a pod. Daddie understands, and he likes you just the way I do – I can see it in his eyes. So it's just up to you! Do you like me a little bit – well, say enough to visit me in my automobile for a month or so? Oh, please say you do!"

She stopped, her voice catching impulsively over the last words. Barbara's eyes were shining. "I don't believe we need to tell you that," she said softly; "you must just know. But there's mother. And we haven't the money."

"Now that's not fair," Ruth broke in. "The money is out of the question altogether. You are my guests. Why, it's you who will do me the favor," she pleaded, as she caught the look of dissent on Barbara's face. "Remember, if you fail me, I can't have my trip at all – and I have been looking forward to it for two whole years. As for your mother, if she will consent to it, Dad and I have a beautiful plan, to keep her and Dad both from being lonely. Poor Dad is sick and tired of hotel cooking and I told him all about your dear little cottage and the dandy tea and cookies your mother makes, and – and – do you suppose your mother would let Dad take his meals with her while we are away? Then he won't be too wretched living all alone up here. Also, you wouldn't have to worry about your mother, nor would I have to worry about Dad. Aunt Sallie has been with him so long that I don't know what he'd do all by himself. He could get on very well, if only your mother would look after him at meals, I know that."

"Now I won't say another word about it for the rest of our lunch. Then we'll run in and call on Aunt Sallie. Afterward we will take the car out and see your mother, and get her to say yes! Then you'll say it, too, won't you? But don't let's spoil this good chicken salad, through worrying about it."

In a more or less complete, yet altogether happy silence, the luncheon was finished. Ruth and her father did not try to force their guests to talk, realizing that the girls would want to think. From the smiling glances the two Stuarts exchanged now and then it was evident they hoped the thinking would have a happy outcome.

After the last course had been served, and the finger bowls, a sprig of rose geranium floating in each, had been pushed aside, Ruth said quietly: "Now we will go to see Aunt Sallie for a few minutes. Daddie, you'll have the machine at the door?"

The girls filed into the elevator, and soon were speeding down a long hall to Aunt Sallie's suite, just across from Ruth's. The latter knocked softly, and Grace Carter came to the door. "Yes, ever so much better," Grace murmured, in reply to Ruth's whispered inquiry. "She wants you to be sure to come in with your friends before they go. Yes; I am sure she would be glad to see them now."

As the girls entered the vestibule of the apartment, Grace gave Barbara's hand a furtive squeeze, and whispered: "I'll just never recover if you don't come." There was no chance for a reply, for a precise, though rather kindly voice called from the room beyond: "Ruth, please bring your friends in here."

With some trepidation the girls advanced toward "Aunt Sallie." She was a somewhat stout woman, who reclined on a couch in a handsome violet negligée. She scanned the girls sharply for a moment, then in her carefully enunciated syllables, which contrasted oddly with her smooth, plump face, she said: "So you're the young ladies who stop runaway horses! Well, I never could have done it when I was young. But I'm sure I am indebted to you, and I am happy to know you, my dears. I hope and trust, since my madcap niece is bound to take her trip, that you will come along to keep her company."

The girls smiled, and Ruth murmured to them: "You see, you really must come for the sake of my family!" Then Aunt Sallie stretched out two plump, jeweled hands and remarked: "I am sure I shall see a great deal of you very soon, my dears, and you will see all you want to of me. So, if you don't mind, I'll ask you to excuse me now, my head is so tired."

"She likes to take a cat-nap pretty often," explained irreverent Ruth, as soon as they were safely outside the door. "But Aunt Sallie is a good sort, just the same, and the best possible dragon for our

trip. Your mother needn't be in the least afraid to trust you to her. Now for your mother," Ruth added as the girls entered the elevator.

In front of the broad piazza, the automobile waited on the driveway, with Mr. Stuart as chauffeur. "Pile in," he smiled, and, in a trice, the girls were whirled homeward once more.

There a mighty conference was held. At first, Mrs. Thurston simply gasped. Then she dumbly shook her head. Barbara and Mollie both protested that nothing would persuade them to leave their mother against her wishes. As Ruth said afterwards, "Daddie did the whole thing." He explained to the girls, and to their mother, how brief the separation would be. To the mother he expatiated on the delights and educational value of such a trip. To the girls he hinted, delicately, that perhaps the little mother would get a bit of a rest, all by herself, for a few weeks, even with him to take care of. To all present Mr. Stuart enlarged upon the duty of charity toward him, a homeless vacation visitor, starving from eating only hotel food, and toward his daughter, a sisterless girl with a longing for friends. Though the Thurstons shook their heads, between smiles and tears, at the absurdity of these arguments, they finally said a grateful "yes."

"One really doesn't need any clothes except veils and dusters for an automobile trip, and I have a big extra stock of those," concluded Ruth. "I want to run up here for you people – let me see – to-day is Friday – next Monday morning. That's such a nice day to start."

"Yes," again cried Mollie and Barbara.

The girls joined hands and made a low curtsy to Mrs. Thurston and Mr. Stuart. "Allow me to introduce you," said Ruth in her most impressive voice, "to 'The Automobile Girls' on their way to Newport."

"Long may they flourish!" concluded Mr. Stuart, turning to the girls' mother. "I'll come up with Ruth and help you start them off, Mrs. Thurston. Then, if I may, I will come back and have lunch with you later in the day."

"Till Monday!" called Ruth, and the machine whirled off.

Barbara and Mollie watched it from the gate. "I wish – I wish I could do something for them," mused Barbara, her chin sunk in her hand, her brown eyes showing that soft brightness that only came to them when she was greatly moved.

How well she was to repay the Stuart kith and kin she could not then guess.

CHAPTER IV – MOTHER’S SECRET

Mollie danced into the kitchen, waving the feather duster. “I’m so happy, I can’t keep still!” she declared, waltzing in a circle around her mother and Barbara, who were in the kitchen washing the breakfast dishes.

“It is just as well you don’t have to,” Mrs. Thurston laughed. “But, children, do be sensible a minute,” she urged, as Barbara joined in the dance, still polishing a breakfast tumbler. “I’ve been thinking, that going to Newport, if only to stay a few days, *does* mean more clothes than automobile coats and motor veils.”

“Now, you are not to worry, mother dearest,” interrupted Barbara, “or we won’t go a single step. Beside, have you forgotten the twenty-dollar gold-pieces? They are a fortune, two fortunes really.” Barbara had been doing some pretty deep thinking herself, on the clothes question, but it would never do to let her thoughts be known. As elder daughter she tried to save her mother from all the worries she could. “While there are no men around in the family, you’ll just have to pretend I’m older son instead of daughter,” she used to say. “When Mollie marries I’ll resign.”

“I’m through dusting,” Mollie called from the dining-room. “This time I am surely going to get paper and pencil to put down what clothes we most need, if Barbara won’t stop any runaway horses while I am away.”

Mollie’s golden head and Barbara’s tawny one bent anxiously over the paper.

“Ruth’s such an impetuous dear! Starting off on our trip Monday does not give us time to get anything new. Mother, will you go in to town shopping for us, and then send the clothes on later? I suppose we shall be on the road some time. Ruth says we are to stop in any of the places we like, and see all the sights along the way,” continued Barbara.

Gloves, ribbons, stockings, hair ribbons, and – oh, dear, yes! A pink sash for Bab and a blue one for Mollie. Forty dollars wasn’t such a fortune after all. Where was the money left over for the party dresses? Both girls looked a little crestfallen, but Barbara shook her head at Mollie as a signal not to say anything aloud.

Mother had come into the open dining-room door and was watching the girls’ faces.

“I’ve a secret,” Mrs. Thurston said, after a minute. “A beautiful secret that I have been keeping to myself for over a year, now. But I think to-day is the best time I can find to tell it.” Mrs. Thurston was fragile and blond, like Mollie, with a delicate color in her cheeks, and the sweetest smile in the world.

“It’s a nice secret, mother, I can tell by your face.” Mollie put her arm around her mother and pulled her down in a chair, while she and Bab sat on either side of her. “Now, out with it!” they both cried.

“Daughters,” Mrs. Thurston lowered her voice and spoke in a whisper, “upstairs, in my room in the back part of my desk is an old bank book. What do you think is pressed between the pages?” She paused a minute, and Mollie gave her arm a little shake. “In that book,” the mother continued, “are two fifty-dollar bills; one is labeled ‘Bab’ and the other is labeled ‘Baby.’” Mrs. Thurston still called her big, fourteen-year-old daughter “baby” when no one was near.

Mollie and Barbara could only stare at each other, and at their mother in surprise.

“Please, and where did they come from?” queried Barbara.

“They came from nickels and dimes, and sometimes pennies,” Mrs. Thurston replied, as pleased and excited as the girls. “Only a week ago, I went to the bank and had the money changed into the two big bills. Oh, I’ve been saving some time. I saw my girls were growing up, and I imagined that, some day, something nice would happen – not just this, perhaps, but something equally exciting. So I wanted to be ready, and I am. I will get the prettiest clothes I can buy for the money, and I’ll have

Miss Mattie, the seamstress, in to help me. When you arrive in the fashionable world of Newport, new outfits will be awaiting my two girls.”

Mrs. Thurston’s face was radiant over the joys in store for her daughters, but Barbara’s eyes were full of tears. She knew what pinching and saving, what sacrifices the two banknotes meant.

Soon Bab asked: “You don’t need me any more, do you, mother? Because, if you don’t, I am going up to look in the treasure chest. I want to find something to re-trim Mollie’s hat. The roses are so faded, on the one she is wearing, it will never do to wear with her nice spring suit.”

There was a little attic over the cottage, and it almost belonged to Barbara. Up there she used to study her lessons, write poetry, and dream of the wonderful things she hoped to do in order to make mother and Mollie rich.

Barbara skipped over to the trunk, where they kept odds and ends of faded finery, gifts from rich cousins who sent their cast-off clothes to the little girls. “This is like Pandora’s chest,” laughed Barbara to herself. “It looks as if everything, now, has gone out of it, except Hope.”

Bump! bang! crash! the chandelier shivered over Mrs. Thurston and Mollie’s heads. Both started up with the one word, “Bab,” on their lips. It was impossible to know what she would attempt, or what would happen to her next.

Just as they reached the foot of the attic steps an apologetic head appeared over the railing. “I am not hurt,” Bab’s voice explained. “I just tried to move the old bureau so I could see better, and I knocked over a trunk. I am so sorry, mother, but the trunk has broken open. It is that old one of yours. I know it made an awful racket!”

“It does not matter, child,” Mrs. Thurston said in a relieved tone, when she saw what had actually happened. “Nothing matters, since you have not killed yourself.”

She bent over her trunk. The old lock had been loosened by the fall, and the top had tumbled off. On the floor were a yellow roll of papers, and a quaint carved fan. Mrs. Thurston picked them up. The papers she dropped in the tray of the trunk, but the fan she kept in her hand. “This little fan,” she said, “I used at the last party your father and I attended together the week before we were married. I have kept it a long time, and I think it very beautiful.” She opened, with loving fingers, a fan of delicately-carved ivory, mounted in silver, and hung on a curious silver chain. “Your great-uncle brought it to me from China, when I was just your age, Mollie! It was given him by a viceroy, in recognition of a service rendered. Which of my daughters would like to take this fan to Newport?”

Barbara shook her head, while Mollie looked at it with longing eyes. “I don’t believe either of us had better take it,” protested Bab, “you have kept it so carefully all this time.”

But her mother said decidedly: “I saved it only for you girls. Here, Mollie, suppose you take it; we will find something else for Bab.”

As Mollie and her mother lifted out the tray of the old trunk, Bab’s eyes caught sight of the roll of papers, and she picked them up.

“Hello, hello!” a cheerful voice sounded from downstairs.

“It’s Grace Carter,” said Mollie. “You don’t mind her coming up, do you, mother?”

Grace was almost a third daughter at the little Thurston cottage. Her own home was big and dull! her mother was a stern, cold woman, and her two brothers were much older than Grace.

“No,” said Mrs. Thurston, going on with her search.

“I couldn’t keep away, chilluns,” apologized Grace as she came upstairs. “Mother told me I’d be dreadfully in the way, but I just had to talk about our trip. Isn’t it too splendid! You are not having secrets, are you?”

“Not from you,” Mrs. Thurston said. “See what I have found for Bab.” Mrs. Thurston held out an open jewel-case. In it was a beautiful spray of pink coral, and a round coral pin.

“I think, Bab, dear,” she said, “you are old enough, now, for such simple jewelry. I will buy you a white muslin, and you can wear this pin at your throat and the spray in your hair. Then, with a coral ribbon sash, who knows but you may be one of the belles of a Newport party?”

Barbara flushed with pleasure over the gifts, but she looked so embarrassed at her mother's compliment that Mollie and Grace both laughed.

"I declare," Grace said, "you have less vanity than any girl in the world. Oh, wasn't it fortunate I discovered your money yesterday? Just as we all jumped out of the car I heard something clink, and picked up one of your twenty dollars. Harry Townsend said he found the other tucked away in the leather of the front seat."

"And I sat in the back seat all the time I was in the car," reflected Barbara, under her breath.

When a turquoise blue heart on a string of tiny beads had been added to Mollie's "going-away" treasures, she and Grace went down stairs.

Barbara still held the roll of papers in her hand and kept turning them over and over, trying to read the faded writing. She caught sight of her father's signature. "Are these papers valuable?" she asked her mother.

Mrs. Thurston sighed deeply as she answered: "They are old papers of your father's. Put them away again. I never like to look at them. I found them in his business suit after he was dead. He had sent it to the tailor, and had forgotten all about it." Mrs. Thurston took the papers from Barbara's hand and put them back into her trunk.

"Do you think they are valuable, mother?" persisted Barbara.

"I don't think so," her mother concluded. "Your uncle told me he looked over all your father's papers that were of any value."

After the two had mended the lock of the old trunk, and turned to leave the attic, Barbara was still thinking. "Dearest," she said thoughtfully, "would you mind my going through those papers some time?" To herself Bab added: "I'd like to ask a clever business man, like Mr. Stuart, to explain them to me."

But Mrs. Thurston sighed as she said: "Oh, yes, you may look them over, some day, if you like. It won't make any difference."

What difference it might make neither Mrs. Thurston or Barbara could then know.

CHAPTER V – THE GLORIOUS START

Before daylight, on the great day, Mollie's two arms encircled a sleepy Barbara, and a soft voice whispered in her ear: "It isn't true, is it, Bab, that you and I, two insignificant little girls, who never could have conceived of anything so glorious, are off to-day for Newport, escorted by Ruth's distinguished friend, 'Mr. A. Bubble'?"

Barbara was wide awake in a minute.

"I suppose it's true," she said, "because it was last night, before we went to bed. Otherwise I would think we had both dreamed it."

The two girls talked in excited whispers. It wouldn't do to waken mother any earlier than they must, for she was tired with their preparations, though her daughters had persuaded her to have a little country girl in to help with the work, now that she was to have so important a person as Mr. Stuart for "boarder."

But at seven o'clock it was mother who called:

"Get up, girls. It is time for coffee and clothes, if you are to start off at ten as you promised. It will not do to keep Miss Stuart and the girls waiting. As for Mr. A. Bubble, I don't believe he can stand still, even if he tries."

Aunt Sallie having called on Sunday afternoon, had waived ceremony and stayed to tea in the tiny cottage, so impressed was she with Mrs. Thurston's quiet charm and gentle manners.

The two girls hurried into their kimonos. Mother had suggested these garments for this morning, since they were to dress so soon afterwards in their "going away" clothes.

By the time that Barbara and Mollie had put on their pretty brown and blue serge suits, with their dust coats over them, they heard strange noises on the front porch, mingled with giggles and whispers. Barbara was putting the sixth hat pin into her hat, and tying the motor veil so tightly under her chin that it choked her, when Mollie peeped out the front window.

"It's a surprise party, I do believe," she whispered. "There's Harold Smith, with a big bunch of pink roses. I know they are for you. The girls have little bundles in their hands. What fun! I didn't know they had heard of our trip. How fast news *does* fly around this village."

While Mollie and Barbara were saying their good-byes on their little veranda there was equal excitement at the big hotel.

Before breakfast Ruth had gone out to the garage with her arm in her father's.

"I want to see with my own eyes, Dad," she said, "that the machine is all right. Isn't it well that I have a taste for mechanics, even though I am a girl? Suppose I hadn't studied all those automobile books with you until I could say them backwards, and hadn't helped you over all the accidents – you never would have let me go on this heavenly trip, would you? I am going to be as careful as can be, just to show you did right to trust me, also not to give Aunt Sallie a chance to say, 'I told you so.'"

Ruth had pretty, sunny, red-gold hair and big, gray-blue eyes. Though she wasn't exactly a beauty, her face was so frank, and her coloring so fresh and lovely, many people thought her very good-looking.

Mr. Stuart smiled at his daughter's enthusiasm. "She's 'a chip of the old block,'" he said to himself. "She loves fun and adventure and 'getting there,' like a man. I am not going to stand in her way."

Mr. Stuart was feeling rather nervous about the trip this morning, but he didn't intend Ruth to know.

To judge by the looks of the automobile, the chauffeur must have been up all night. The machinery was cleaned and oiled. The extra tires, in their dark red leather cases, were strapped to the sides of the car. A great box of extra rugs and wraps, rubber covers for the machine and mackintoshes in case of rain, was tied on the back. Between the seats was an open hamper for lunch, with an English

tea service in one compartment, and cups, saucers, a teapot and a hot-water jug and alcohol lamp, all complete. The luncheon was to be sent down later from the hotel.

"You are to take your meals at the inns along the way, when you prefer," Mr. Stuart had explained, "but I don't mean to have you run the risk of starving in case you are delayed, or an accident occurs. Be sure to take your picnic lunch along with you, when you start out each day. What you don't eat, feed to the small boys along the road, who will insist on playing guide."

Aunt Sallie was the only one of the hotel party who enjoyed breakfast. Grace had driven over early, and was breakfasting with Ruth in order to save delay. Both the girls and Mr. Stuart were too excited to take much interest in their bacon and eggs, but Aunt Sallie ate with a resigned expression that seemed to say: "Perhaps this is my last meal on earth." Yet, secretly, she was almost as delighted as were the girls in the prospect of the trip.

"Now, Sallie, you are not to go if you don't wish to," Mr. Stuart had protested. "You must not let Ruth drag you into this trip against your will."

But all he could persuade his sister to answer was: "If Ruth is going on such an extraordinary excursion, then, at least, I shall be along to see that nothing worse happens to her."

Gladys Le Baron came into the dining-room, stopping in front of Ruth's table. "You dear things," she drawled in her most careful society manner, "how can you look so fresh so early in the morning? I hope you appreciate my getting up to see you off." Gladys wore a lingerie frock more appropriate for a party than for the breakfast room.

But Ruth answered good naturedly. "I do appreciate it, if it is such an effort for you. Did you know Mr. Townsend is going to ride over to the Thurston's with us to see us start? He tells me you and he are both to be in Newport while we are there."

"Yes," Gladys declared with more airs than before. "Mrs. Erwin has asked me to be one of the house-party she's to have for her ball. She told me I could bring a friend along, and I have asked Mr. Townsend."

"Wonderful! We won't expect you to associate with us!" laughed Grace.

"Gladys," Ruth asked, "would you like to drive over to Mrs. Thurston's with us? Father is going, and the carriage will be there to bring him back."

"I would like to go," murmured Gladys, "if I didn't have on this old frock. I don't know Mollie and Barbara very well, but I suppose I shall have to see a great deal of them, now you have taken them up. I wonder how they will behave at Newport? They have hardly been out of Kingsbridge before."

Grace and Ruth both looked angry, and Mr. Stuart broke in, quite curtly: "I am sure we can depend on their behaving becomingly, which is all that is necessary at Newport or any other place." Ruth's father was a business acquaintance of Gladys's father, and had known her mother when the latter was a girl, but the airs of Mrs. Le Baron and her society daughter were too much for his western common sense. Only Aunt Sallie was impressed by their imposing manner.

Ruth was very popular at the big summer hotel, and a number of the guests had assembled to see her off. But Ruth let her father run the car and sat quietly by his side. "You'll turn over the command to me, captain, won't you, when the trip really commences?" and she squeezed his arm with a little movement of affection.

"Yes, lieutenant," Mr. Stuart said quietly.

"Oh, Miss Ruth," called Mr. Townsend from the back seat, "do show all these people how you can handle your car!" But she only shook her head.

"Goodness me, what are all those people doing on Mrs. Thurston's porch?" Ruth asked, in alarm. "I hope nothing has happened." But, as the car neared the quiet little house, which stood midway between the hotel and the New York high road, she saw the party of young people gathered on the front lawn.

"It's only their friends, come to say good-bye to them," Harry volunteered. In answer to "What a bore!" from Gladys, he continued: "I don't know why you should think it a bore. Miss Stuart enjoys

her friends's popularity." Mr. Townsend had been trying, for several weeks, to make himself equally agreeable to Ruth and Gladys. They were both very wealthy, and it seemed wise to him to associate with rich people. But as Ruth was not easily impressed with what she called "just foolishness," he had become very intimate with Gladys Le Baron.

When Mr. Stuart tooted the horn to announce their approach to the cottage a chorus of tin horns answered him from Mrs. Thurston's front garden. As the car drew up to the gate, the boys and girls began to sing, "See the Conquering Hero Comes," while Barbara ran down to the car and Mollie urged her friends to be quieter. "I just don't know what Miss Stuart and Mr. Stuart will think of us!" she blushinglly remonstrated.

But Aunt Sallie and Mr. Stuart were in for all the fun going this morning. Barbara was invited to call her seven friends who had come to give the girls a send-off, down to meet the occupants of the car. Even Gladys, as she was forced to get out of the automobile to let the other travelers in, was condescending enough to permit Harold Smith to assist her. Harold was an old friend of Barbara's, and one of the cleverest boys in the village.

Mr. Stuart went into the house for the suit cases and satchels, which were all the girls were to take with them, as they were to manage with as few clothes as possible. It had been arranged that extra luggage was to be expressed to them along the way.

Barbara had caught Mollie storing away a sample package of cold cream among her most treasured possessions.

"I am sure I don't see why you should laugh so," Mollie urged quite seriously. "It reads on the label 'especially adapted for automobile travelers to remove dust and tan from the face after the drive.' Aren't we going to be automobile travelers?"

"Sure and we a'ire," said Bab, imitating the old Irish washerwoman, "and it shall put grease on its nose if it likes."

"Come, daughter," said Mr. Stuart finally, as Ruth was trying to explain to a group of admiring boys the first principles of running an automobile. She talked as familiarly of an emergency brake and a steering wheel, of horse power and speed-transmission, as most girls talk of frills and furbelows.

"It's ten-thirty," Mr. Stuart continued, "and, if this party is to be a strictly on time affair, you must be off! You couldn't have a more wonderful day."

It was late in the month of June. The summer clouds were sailing overhead, great bubbles of white foam thrown up into the blue depth of the sky. The sun shone brightly and the whole atmosphere was perfumed with the bloom of the honeysuckle, that hung in yellow clusters from Mrs. Thurston's porch.

Barbara and Mollie flung their arms around their mother until she was completely enveloped in their embrace. Ruth kissed her father, and put her hand to her trim leather cap with a military salute. "It's all right, captain," she said; "I'll bring my crew and good ship 'Bubble' safely into port."

Aunt Sallie was anxious to be off. She could see that Mrs. Thurston was on the verge of tears at the thought of parting with her daughters. Still the young people were laughing and talking, and storing their little gifts under the seats in the car, as though they had all day before them.

"Hurry, child," Aunt Sallie urged, reaching out a hand to Mollie. "Jump up on the back seat with Grace and me. We will let Mistress Barbara sit with Ruth for the first of the journey." Aunt Sallie was very imposing in a violet silk traveling coat, with a veil and hat of the same shade; indeed, Miss Sallie had a fancy for a "touch of lavender" in everything she wore. With her snow-white hair, and commanding appearance, she would add prestige to the party, Mollie thought, no matter how dusty and wind-blown the rest of them might appear.

The girls hopped gayly in. Toot, toot, toot! the horn blew three times. Chug-chug-chug! and the great machine began to breathe with deep, muffled roars. Mr. Stuart gave the starting crank a strong turn, and the car slid gracefully along the road, red, blue, pink and violet motor veils floating behind in the breeze.

“Here’s good luck to you!” shouted Harold Smith, and roses and flowers of every kind were flung after them. Mollie and Grace picked up those that fell into their laps, and turned to wave their hands and throw kisses for good-bye.

“They look like a rainbow,” said Mr. Stuart, turning to Mrs. Thurston, who was no longer trying to hide her tears. Then he smiled at her gently. She was such a tiny, girlish-looking little woman, it was hard to think of her as the mother of two nearly grown-up daughters. “I expect,” he continued, “that that rainbow holds most of our promise of sunshine.”

They were still watching the car!

Down to the gate, at the furthest end of the road, a baby boy, chubby and fat, had crawled on two round, turned-in legs. There was something unusual going on down the street. He could hear strange noises, but, though he stuck his small nose through the fence, he was still unable to see. Just as Ruth’s car was almost in front of the house, open flew the stubborn old gate, and the child flung himself out in the middle of the road, just in front of the wonderful red thing he could see flying toward him. The baby was too young to understand the danger.

From the watchers at Mrs. Thurston’s came a cry of horror. A thrill of terror passed through the occupants of the car. Ruth’s face turned white. Like a flash, she slowed a little, turned her steering wheel and with a wide sweep drove her motor to the far side of the road, then straight on out of the path of the wondering baby.

Mr. Stuart’s, “Bravo, daughter!” was lost in his throat. But the little group of waiting friends gave three cheers for the girl chauffeur, which Ruth heard even at such a distance. Truly “The Automobile Girls” were fairly started on their adventures.

CHAPTER VI – WHAT HAPPENED THE FIRST DAY

The car flew along by sunny meadows and farms. New York was the first day's goal.

"Barbara," Ruth said to her next-door neighbor, "you are hereby appointed royal geographer and guide-extraordinary to this party! Here is the route-book. It will be up to you to show us which roads we are to take. It is a pretty hard job, as I well know from experience; but then, honors come hard. You don't need to worry to-day. I know this coast trip into New York as well as I know my A.B.C.'s. I have often come along this way with father. Let's have a perfectly beautiful time in New York. We'll make Aunt Sallie chaperon us while we do the town, or, at least, a part of it. Have you ever been to a roof garden?"

Barbara's eyes danced. It didn't sound quite right somehow – a roof garden – but then they were out for experiences, and Miss Sallie wouldn't let them do anything really wrong.

Ruth glanced out of the corner of her eye at Barbara. Miss Stuart was a good little chauffeur who never allowed her attention to be distracted from running her car, no matter what was being talked of around her, nor how much she was interested, but she couldn't help laughing at Barbara's expression; it told so plainly all that was going on inside her head.

"I do assure you, Miss Barbara Thurston, that a roof garden may be a fairly respectable thing, quite well suited to entertaining, without shocking either Miss Sallie Stuart or her four charming protégées." Ruth called back: "Aunt Sallie, will you take us up on the Waldorf roof to-night? You know we are going to stay at the Waldorf Hotel, girls. Father said we might enjoy the experience, and it would be all right with Aunt Sallie for chaperon."

Grace pinched Mollie's arm to express her rapture, and that little maiden simply gasped with delight. It was Mollie, not Barbara, of the two sisters, who had the greatest yearning for wealth and society, and the beautiful clothes and wonderful people that she believed went along with it. Barbara was an out-door girl, who loved tennis and all the sports, and could swim like a fish. An artist who spent his summers at Kingsbridge, once called her a brown sea-gull, when he saw her lithe brown body dart off the great pier to dive deep into the water.

Aunt Sallie had been taking a brief cat-nap, before Ruth's question, and awakened in high good humor. "Why, yes, children," she answered, "it will be very pleasant to go up on the roof to-night, after we have had our baths and our dinners. I am quite disposed to let you do just what you like, so long as you behave yourselves."

Grace Carter pressed Aunt Sallie's fat hand, as a message of thanks. Grace was Aunt Sallie's favorite among Ruth's friends. "She is a quiet, lady-like girl, who does not do unexpected things that get on one's nerves," Miss Sallie had once explained to Ruth. "Now, Aunt Sallie," Ruth had protested, "I know I do get on your nerves sometimes, but you know you need me to stir you up. Think how dull you would be without me!" And Aunt Sallie had answered, with unexpected feeling: "I would be very dull, indeed, my dear."

The girls were full of their plans for the evening.

"That is why Ruth told us each to put a muslin dress in our suit cases! Ruth, are you going to think up a fresh surprise every day! It's just too splendid!" Mollie spoke in a tone of such fervent emotion that everyone in the car laughed.

"I don't suppose I can manage a surprise every day, Molliekins," Ruth called back over her shoulder, "but I mean to think up as many as I possibly can. We are going to have the time of our lives, you know, and something must happen to make it."

All this time the car had been flying faster than the girls could talk. "This is 'going some,'" commented Ruth, laughing.

When they came into Lakewood Ruth slowed up, as she had promised her father not to go any faster than the law allowed. "I cross my heart and body, Dad," she had said. "Think of four lovely

maidens and their handsome duenna languishing in jail instead of flying along the road to Newport. Honest Injun! father, I'll read every automobile sign from here to Jehosaphat, if we ever decide to travel that way."

In Lakewood, Ruth drove her car around the wonderful pine shaded lake.

"It's a winter resort," she explained to her companions. "Nearly all the cottages and hotels are closed in the summer, but I wanted you to have a smell of the pines. It will give you strength for the rest of the trip."

Silence fell on the party as they skimmed out of Lakewood. After so much excitement it was pleasant to look at things without having to talk.

Mollie had begun, once in a while, to tap the lunch basket with her foot. The fresh air and the long ride had made her desperately hungry. She really couldn't remember having eaten any breakfast in the excitement of getting off. But nobody said f-o-o-d! She felt she was the youngest member of the party and should not make suggestions before Miss Sallie.

Ruth turned into a narrow lane; a sign post pointed the way to a deserted village.

"Oh, dear me!" sighed Mollie to herself. "Why are we going to a deserted village, just as we are dying of hunger!"

Ruth said never a word. She passed some tumble-down old cottages of a century ago, then an old iron foundry, and drew up with a great flourish before an old stone house, green with moss and ivy and fragrant with a "lovely" odor of cooking! There were little tables set out on the lawn and on the old-fashioned veranda, and soon the party was reveling in lunch.

"I didn't know food could be so heavenly," whispered Mollie in Bab's ear, when they were back in the car, for Grace had begged for a seat by the chauffeur for the afternoon trip.

Soon Ruth left the country behind, and came out on the sea-coast road that ran through Long Branch, Deal Beach, Monmouth and Seabright.

From carriages and other automobiles, and along the promenades, everyone smiled at the crimson car full of happy, laughing girls.

Ruth was driving in her best fashion, making all the speed she could, with the thought of town fifty miles or more ahead. "It is a sight to see," quoth Barbara, "the way the fairy princess handles her chariot of fire."

It was a little after four o'clock when the car boarded the Staten Island ferry and finally crossed to the New York shore.

"You see, Bab," Mollie said, trying to stuff her curls under her motor cap and to rub the dust from her rosy cheeks with a tiny pocket handkerchief as they sped up Broadway, "I might be dreadfully embarrassed arriving at the Waldorf looking the way I do, if I were not in a motor car, but riding in an automobile makes one feel so awfully swell that nothing matters. Isn't it lovely just to feel important for once? You know it is, Bab, and you needn't say no! It's silly to pretend."

Miss Sallie was again on the border of slumberland, so that Mollie and Barbara could have their low-voiced talk.

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