

Crane Laura Dent

**The Automobile Girls at Palm
Beach: or, Proving Their Mettle
Under Southern Skies**



Laura Crane

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The Automobile Girls at Palm Beach; Or, Proving Their Mettle Under Southern Skies

CHAPTER I

THE LAND OF DREAMS

"I don't believe anything could be more lovely than this," exclaimed Mollie Thurston, leaning back in a wicker chair on the piazza of one of the largest hotels at Palm Beach.

"Right you are!" replied her friend, Ruth Stuart, as she gazed across the still blue waters of Lake Worth dotted with pleasure boats. "I can't decide whether I should like to ride in the automobile, or sail, or just sit in the cocoanut grove and listen to the music. Life seems so easy under a blue sky like this, and there are so many things to do that it is hard to make a choice."

"What do people usually do at this hour?" Grace Carter asked. "A woman I talked with on the train told me there was a programme of amusements for every hour at Palm Beach."

"Well, my dear, you have only to gaze about you and see for yourself. It is now high noon," answered Ruth, consulting her watch.

Grace glanced quickly about her. All along the broad piazza, and under awnings on the lawn, a gay company of men, women and young people were sipping delicious iced fruit drinks in tall, thin glasses.

"It is undoubtedly the witching hour for pineapple lemonades," said Ruth. "And we must be in the fashion immediately. Papa," she called to her father, who was immersed in the pages of a New York newspaper several days old, "you are not doing your duty by us. We are getting awfully thirsty."

Mr. Stuart, clad in white, and looking the picture of comfort, smiled lazily over his paper at his daughter. "Order what you like, my dear. Am I not always at the command of the 'Automobile Girls'? What do you wish, little lady?" he asked, turning to Barbara Thurston, who had been lost in a day-dream and had heard nothing of the conversation.

"I haven't any wish," responded Barbara. "I am too happy to be troubled with wishes."

"Then suppose I wish for you, Bab?" suggested Ruth. "Go back to your own sweet dreams. I'll wake you when the wish comes true."

Presently the four girls were sipping their fruit lemonades like the rest of the world at Palm Beach. On the breeze the sound of music was wafted to them from a morning concert in the distance.

"Where is Aunt Sallie?" Ruth suddenly asked, again interrupting her father's reading. "This place has bewitched me so that I have forgotten even my beloved aunt. This is the land of dreams, I do believe. We are all spirits from some happy world."

"Here comes your spirit aunt," returned Mr. Stuart, smiling. "She has evidently been spirited away by some other friendly spirits."

The girls laughed as they saw the substantial figure of Miss Sallie Stuart strolling down the piazza. She was walking between two other persons, one a tall, middle-aged man with dark hair slightly tinged with gray, the other a young woman. They were all three talking animatedly.

"Girls, look!" exclaimed Ruth, in suppressed excitement. "Aunt Sallie is with that Maud Warren. You remember we met her at Lenox, Bab, and she tried to ride you down in the famous race. Delightful creature – to keep away from." Ruth gave a contemptuous sniff, then added. "That nice looking man must be her father."

"She looks as haughty as ever, and then some more," said Mollie aggressively.

The girls giggled softly, then straightened their faces for the trio was almost upon them, and it was not safe to indulge in further conversation.

After seeing that his charges were supplied with lemonade, Mr. Stuart had returned to his paper.

“Robert,” broke in Miss Sallie’s dignified voice, “this is Mr. Warren and his daughter Miss Warren. They – ”

But at the first word Mr. Stuart had risen and the two men were enthusiastically shaking hands.

“Why, Warren,” exclaimed Mr. Stuart, “I had no idea that you were in this part of the world. The last time I saw you, you were ranching out in Idaho.”

“Quite true,” replied Mr. Warren, smiling, “but that was ten years ago. A great many things have happened since then.” He sighed and looked out over the blue lake. “Mrs. Warren died the next year,” he said slowly. “Maud and I are alone.”

“I am deeply sorry to hear of your great loss,” sympathized Mr. Stuart and his fine face saddened. He too had known that loss.

Turning to Maud who had been exchanging rather distant greetings with the four girls, he said pleasantly. “So this is Maud. She was a little girl in short dresses when last I saw her. How these children do grow up.”

Maud smiled frigidly and for the fraction of a second allowed her hand to touch that of Mr. Stuart. “One must grow up some time, you know,” she murmured.

“I should like to stay eighteen forever,” exclaimed Ruth, with enthusiasm.

“Would you indeed?” remarked Maud Warren, raising her eyebrows. “How odd!”

There was a brief silence. The four girls stared straight ahead and tried to control their desire to laugh. During their stay at Lenox the year before the circumstances of which having been fully told in the “Automobile Girls in the Berkshires,” they had not been impressed with Maud Warren, on account of her disagreeable and overbearing manner. But the blasé air that she now affected, was in their candid eyes extremely ridiculous, and her remark to Ruth had filled them all with unseemly mirth.

Maud Warren, however, serenely unconscious of what was passing through their minds, sank into a wicker chair, and deliberately turning her back upon the “Automobile Girls,” began a conversation with Miss Sallie.

The “Automobile Girls” dated their organization back to almost two years before, when Barbara Thurston had bravely stopped a runaway team of horses driven by Ruth Stuart, a rich western girl, summering in Kingsbridge, the home town of the Thurstons.

A warm friendship had sprung up between Ruth Stuart, Barbara and Mollie Thurston, that resulted in a journey to Newport in Ruth’s red motor car, familiarly known as Mr. A. Bubble. Grace Carter, a Kingsbridge girl, had been asked to complete the quartette of adventurous damsels, while Miss Sallie Stuart, Ruth’s aunt had gone along as chaperon.

After a series of remarkable events their trip ended with the capture of a society “cracksman,” known to the police as the “Boy Raffles.” The “Automobile Girls” then returned to Kingsbridge, where several weeks later, Mr. A. Bubble once more bore them away to the heart of the Berkshires. There they spent a delightful month, in a little log cabin, roughing it. In “The Automobile Girls in the Berkshires,” the story of the little Indian “ghost” that haunted “Lost Man’s Trail,” and who afterwards turned out to be an Indian princess is charmingly related.

After a winter of hard study, the “Automobile Girls” were again reunited, and in “The Automobile Girls Along the Hudson,” their journey through the beautiful Sleepy Hollow Country is narrated. The eventful weeks spent in the ancestral home of Major Ten Eyck, an old friend of Miss Sallie Stuart’s, ending with their brave fight to save the beautiful old house from destruction by forest fires, made the “Automobile Girls” stand out as true heroines.

The best work since their initial adventure, however, had been done in Chicago, and the record of it, set down in “The Automobile Girls at Chicago,” was not yet three months old. While on a holiday visit to Ruth, at her Chicago home, they had been the guests of the Presbys, relatives of

the Stuarts, at their country place "Treasureholme." Owing to imprudent speculation in wheat, both Mr. Stuart and Mr. Presby had become heavily involved and were facing financial ruin. Through the efforts of Barbara Thurston, aided by the other "Automobile Girls" the rich treasure, buried by one of the ancestors, was discovered in time to save the Presby estate.

Before leaving Chicago, Mr. Stuart had promised his daughter and her friends a sojourn at Palm Beach during the month of March. Now the "Automobile Girls" had actually arrived in the "Land of Flowers" eager for any pleasure that sunny Florida might yield them.

The four young girls were unusually quiet as they sat idly looking out over the water. Maud Warren's arrival had cast a chill over them.

It had been an enchanted land, Barbara reflected rather resentfully, now the enchantment was broken.

Ruth sat covertly taking stock of Miss Warren's elaborate white lace gown and wondering why young girls ever insisted on aping so called "society" fashions. While Mollie and Grace speculated as to how long a call the Warrens were going to make.

Maud, totally oblivious that she had been weighed in the balance by four stern young judges, and found wanting, languidly conversed with Miss Stuart, in her most grown-up manner.

"Have you met the De Lancey Smythes, Miss Stuart?" she drawled. "They are too utterly charming. Mrs. De Lancey Smythe belongs to an old, old Southern family. She is a widow, with one daughter, Marian, a most delightful young woman. It was only through them that I was persuaded to come here."

"Indeed," replied Miss Sallie. "We arrived yesterday. Therefore we have met no one, as yet."

"Of course not," agreed Maud. "You really must meet them!"

"I should be pleased to meet any friends of yours, Miss Warren," replied Miss Stuart courteously.

"By the way, Stuart," said Mr. Warren, "what do you say to a sail in my launch, this afternoon? I should like to entertain some one besides the De Lancey Smythes. They are too fine for me. I am just a plain blunt man, and can't stand too many extra frills. Maud, see to it that you don't invite them. I absolutely refuse to be bothered with them, to-day."

Maud flushed hotly at her father's contemptuous allusion to the De Lancey Smythes. But restraining her feelings she turned to Miss Stuart with a forced attempt at graciousness.

"Won't you come for a sail? It will be awfully good of you."

"We should be delighted, I am sure," replied Mr. Stuart, looking gravely at Maud. He then turned a compassionate gaze toward his friend, Mr. Warren. "That is, I mean we shall go with you, provided my sister has made no other plans."

"Are you sure your launch won't pitch, Mr. Warren?" inquired Miss Stuart.

"I am perfectly certain, Miss Stuart," replied the millionaire. "The lake is like a mill pond to-day. There is not a ripple on it."

While they had been making their plans for the afternoon, a man had been leaning idly against the railing of the piazza. He now strolled quietly away, without having appeared to notice any one of them, or to have overheard any of their conversation.

But Barbara had observed him. She had an unquenchable curiosity concerning faces. And this man appeared indefinably interesting.

Was it the foreign cut of his dark suit, conspicuous among the crowds of white ones worn by most of the men at Palm Beach? Or was it his strong, clean-shaven face with its rather heavy bulldog jaw, its square chin, and keen gray eyes, a little too narrow for Bab's taste? Bab did not know, then. But she took in the man's whole expression, and the adverse opinion she silently formed, at that time, she never had occasion to change.

As the party was about to separate for luncheon two women appeared in a nearby doorway and stood looking up and down the piazza.

“Oh, there are dear Marian and her mother!” cried Maud, hurrying over to greet her friends.

“Dear Mrs. De Lancey Smythe,” exclaimed Maud, with a defiant look toward her father, “I do so want you to go out with us in our launch this afternoon. Won’t you let me introduce some new friends to you, who are going to sail with us?”

Mr. Warren turned red. A look of disappointment, verging on anger crept into his good-natured brown eyes as his daughter deliberately defied him.

The De Lancey Smythes glanced toward the Stuart party, with bored indifference.

Mrs. De Lancey Smythe made some low-voiced remark to Maud who nodded her head slightly. Whereupon mother and daughter moved toward Miss Stuart with an air of haughty condescension.

Mrs. De Lancey Smythe might have been anywhere from thirty-five to forty-five. She was tall, well-proportioned and a decided brunette. At a glance one would have decided her to be very handsome, but close observers would have noted a hard expression about the eyes and mouth that completely destroyed the effect of beauty. As for her daughter, Marian, she was a small, slender insignificant young woman who seemed entirely overshadowed by her mother’s personality.

Both mother and daughter were dressed perhaps a shade too elaborately for good taste, and there was something about them that immediately aroused a sense of vague disapproval in the minds of the Stuart party.

“Maud is always so thoughtful of her friends,” murmured Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, turning to Miss Sallie with well simulated appreciation. “She knows how fond we are of sailing.”

Miss Sallie looked sharply at the speaker. The De Lancey Smythes were evidently unaware of Mr. Warren’s animosity toward them. She was about to frame some polite excuse for not going on the launch, hoping to thus nip in the bud the proposed sail, when suddenly meeting Mr. Warren’s eyes, she saw an expression of entreaty in them that made her hesitate.

“I hope you and your ‘Automobile Girls’ will not disappoint me,” he said pleadingly.

“Thank you,” responded Miss Stuart. “We shall be pleased to go.”

With a formal bow to Mrs. De Lancey Smythe and her daughter, Miss Sallie marshaled her little force and left the piazza.

“Very charming people,” remarked Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, to Maud Warren, after they had disappeared. But there was an unpleasant light in her eyes, and a certain tightening of her lips that showed resentment at the manner of her reception by the Stuart party.

“We shall be obliged to play our cards very carefully,” she warned Marian, when in the privacy of their own apartment. “That Miss Stuart seems already inclined to be hostile. As for those girls – ”

“I think they’re the nicest looking girls I’ve seen for a long time. Ever so much nicer than Maud Warren,” exclaimed Marian.

“Hold your tongue,” commanded her mother angrily. “Don’t let me hear any more remarks of that kind, or you’ll have cause to regret them.”

Marian relapsed into sulky silence. She knew her mother only too well. Nevertheless she made up her mind to try honestly to make a good impression upon the first girls with whom she had ever wished to be friends.

Mr. Stuart and Mr. Warren did not at once follow their respective charges in to luncheon, but sat down on a wide settee in one corner of the piazza for a long talk. One topic of conversation followed another, until at last Mr. Warren lowered his voice and said:

“Stuart, I am going to ask a favor of you because I need your help more than I can say. You see,” he went on, his face flushing painfully with embarrassment, “I have tried to give my daughter the proper sort of care. I have certainly spared no money in the effort. But what can money, alone, do for a motherless girl?” His voice choked a little. “Perhaps I should have married again, if only on Maud’s account. But I tell you, Bob, I couldn’t. My wife’s memory is still too dear to me. No other woman has ever interested me.” He paused a moment, then looked away, while Mr. Stuart patted his shoulder sympathetically.

“And now,” went on poor Mr. Warren, shaking his head sadly, “my girl has fallen in with a lot of society people who are doing her more harm than good – for instance, these people you have just seen are among the number. You wonder, perhaps, why I don’t like the De Lancey Smythes. No one can deny that they make a good appearance but there’s something about the mother that I distrust. She’s not genuine, and although she tries to conceal it she’s not well-bred. Maud won’t believe it, and can’t be made to see it. But I can. Now I believe, if she goes about with your four nice, wholesome girls and a fine woman like Miss Stuart, she’ll open her eyes a trifle. And I want to ask you, old man, to stand by me and help me out. Ask your girls to help me save my girl from her own foolishness and the influence of just such people as these De Lancey Smythes. Will you help me Stuart, for ‘auld lang syne’?”

“Why of course I will, Tom,” replied good-natured Mr. Stuart warmly, grasping Mr. Warren’s hand. “I’ll tell my sister, Sallie, too. She’ll know just what to do with Maud.”

“But you understand, Bob, we shall be obliged to go at this business tactfully,” protested poor Mr. Warren. “I am afraid my daughter is a difficult proposition at times, poor child. But she’ll come through all right. She is only nineteen. There’s a lot of time yet.”

“Oh, Sallie will manage. Trust Maud to her, my friend. And now, let’s go in to luncheon,” returned Mr. Stuart.

At luncheon, Mr. Stuart repeated his conversation with Mr. Warren to Miss Sallie and the “Automobile Girls.”

“I am afraid Maud will be exceedingly difficult to manage,” Miss Sallie demurred. “She is a law unto herself. As for those De Lancey Smythes, I shall endeavor to find out something about their social position.” Miss Sallie looked about her with the air of a duchess. “But, since you have given your promise to your friend, we will do what we can for Maud.”

The girls also promised their aid. And so, for the time being, the matter was settled.

CHAPTER II

A WEST INDIAN SQUALL

By half past two that afternoon Mr. Warren's launch with its party of pleasure seekers was well under way.

The "Automobile Girls" had gathered in one end, and were enthusiastically commenting on the beauty of the scenery. Miss Sallie had been conscientiously trying to cultivate Maud Warren, and rather than antagonize her in the beginning had exerted herself to be agreeable to the De Lancey Smythes. Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, however, had other views afoot than the cultivation of Miss Sallie, and had immediately engaged in conversation with Mr. Stuart. Hardly had the launch put out from shore, before she beckoned him to one side of the little deck, and complacently kept him there until Ruth, far from pleased with this turn of affairs, called to her father to join them. But Mrs. De Lancey Smythe proved equal to the occasion, for rising gracefully, she calmly strolled by Mr. Stuart's side to the end of the launch where the four girls were seated. Here they were joined by Miss Sallie, who had been watching the manœuvres of the other woman with well-veiled contempt, and the conversation became general.

"Do you know many people here, Mrs. Smythe?" asked Miss Sallie, turning to the other woman.

"Only a few," replied Mrs. De Lancey Smythe indifferently. "Most of the people I know have been abroad all winter. Many of my dearest friends are among the peerage. Two people I know well, arrived to-day, however. The young Count de Sonde and his friend, Monsieur Duval."

She pronounced the two names with a faultless accent that was not lost upon the practised ears of Ruth, who had spoken French fluently since she was a child and had had a French nursery governess for years. Whatever were her shortcomings, Mrs. De Lancey Smythe could at least speak French.

"A real count!" exclaimed Mollie. "How interesting!"

"Oh, we know lots of titled people," Marian interposed. "There were two countesses and a marquis at our hotel in Newport last summer."

"Isn't all this lovely?" cried Barbara. She was not interested in counts and titles. She was keenly alive to the beauty of the scenery about them. "I can't decide which out-blues the other, the lake or the sky."

"But aren't there a great many clouds in the sky?" questioned Ruth. "See how they have piled up over there? Do you suppose, by any chance, that we shall have rain? We were told that it never rained down here. It simply isn't tolerated."

The launch was now running far out from the shore, which was lined with pretty villas, set here and there in the midst of cocoanut palms and oleander trees. Following the boat's path of rippling waves came another launch much smaller than Mr. Warren's. It was manned by two men who had apparently not observed them. The men were deep in earnest conversation.

"Oh, Marian, there is the Count de Sonde with his friend!" exclaimed her mother. "How fortunate that we should run across them, just now."

"Which one is the count?" asked Maud Warren. She had taken very little interest in anything before. "I hope he is not the older man."

"No; he is the slender, dark-haired one," returned Mrs. Smythe. "He is dressed in white."

In the meantime Mr. Stuart had changed his seat. He had come to Palm Beach to enjoy his four "Automobile Girls." No fascinating widow should swerve him from his original plans. Like most hard-working successful men he loved a holiday like a schoolboy and resented deeply any interference with his pleasure.

"Are my girls having a good time?" he queried, smiling into four charming faces.

"Yes, indeed!" exclaimed four voices in chorus.

"We thought the scenery beautiful in the Berkshires and along the Hudson river, Mr. Stuart. But this is the most beautiful of all!" cried Mollie, clasping her small hands ecstatically.

"Do you suppose people ever really work here?" inquired Grace. "It is like fairy land. Everything happens by magic."

"You are right, Grace. This is a land of pleasure," returned Mr. Stuart. "The only people who work are the employés in the hotels and the servants in the cottages."

"Palm Beach is dedicated to pleasure," explained Ruth, "because it was by accident that it came to be here at all. So it can just as well be spared for an earthly paradise."

"Why is Palm Beach an accident?" queried Mollie.

"Years ago this was just a wild, desolate coast," Ruth went on. "Even now the wilderness is only a mile away. There was a wreck out there, somewhere, on the other side of the peninsula," she pointed toward the ocean. "A ship was loaded with cocoanuts, which were washed ashore. By and by the cocoanuts sprouted and grew into tall palm trees. So this barren shore was transformed into one of the most beautiful palm groves in the world."

Mr. Stuart pinched his daughter's cheek. "You've been stealing a march on us, Mistress Ruth," he said. "You have been reading a guide book."

Just then a shadow clouded the brilliant sunshine. The engineer of the launch glanced up uneasily.

"You don't think it is going to rain, do you?" asked Mr. Warren.

"It would be a very unusual thing if it did, sir," replied the man, without committing himself.

A fresh wind had come up, bearing with it the fragrance of many flowers. It seemed to have blown over miles of lily beds and orange groves. Barbara closed her eyes as she breathed in the warm, scented air. "How easy to forget all responsibilities, in an enchanted place like this!" she thought. "How easy just to drift along."

"Papa, do tell the man to turn back," said Maud in a voice that broke unpleasantly into Bab's reflections. "It's getting a little chilly. And besides, we must have tea this afternoon in the coconut grove."

"Very well, my dear," replied her father, turning to give his order to the engineer.

The launch swung around. Immediately the whole party spied another boat bobbing helplessly on the water. One of the men in it was leaning over examining the machinery of the frail craft. The other one, in white, stood at the side of the boat, scanning the water.

No other launches were in sight. The many pleasure boats which had dotted the lake with flecks of white, only a few minutes before, had now put in to shore. A black cloud had spread itself over the whole sky, casting a dark and ominous shadow over the lake.

As all the world knows – at least the part of the world which lives on pleasure waters – a strict etiquette prevails among these small boats. One boat always helps another in distress.

The engineer of Mr. Warren's launch did not wait for orders. He turned at once toward the drifting craft.

"Is your engine broken?" he asked, as the boats touched sides.

The young man in white was the Count de Sonde himself. He looked decidedly relieved at the appearance of the rescuers. He removed his Panama hat with a flourish and bowed low to the women. The other man answered the boatman.

"We are quite helpless, you see," the count ejaculated, shrugging his shoulders and raising his eyebrows at the same time. "My friend can do nothing."

In the meantime the friend had arisen from the engine. He was examining the boatload of people with guarded interest.

"How do you do, Count? How are you, Monsieur Duval?" called Mrs. De Lancey Smythe.

It was not a time for conventional introductions. The boatman made a line fast from the small craft to the larger one. He meant to tow the smaller launch toward home.

But Mrs. De Lancey Smythe persisted. Mr. Warren and his friends must meet the Count de Sonde and Monsieur Duval.

Suddenly the heavens were shaken by a terrific clap of thunder.

Mrs. Smythe gave a little scream. "I am always frightened during a storm," she averred. "Mr. Stuart, would it be too much to ask you to assist me into the cabin?"

Miss Sallie glanced rather contemptuously at the other woman, and wondered if her fright were real. Mr. Stuart rose and courteously assisted Mrs. De Lancey Smythe into the tiny cabin, just as a driving sheet of rain bore down upon them.

The "Automobile Girls" crouched in the centre of the boat. Maud and Marian followed Mrs. Smythe.

"Make for the nearest boathouse!" called Mr. Warren to his engineer. "We can't get back to the hotel in such a storm as this."

The storm now burst in all its West Indian fury. The waters were churned into foam. The wind whistled and roared. The two small boats tossed about on the water like chips.

"We are just in time!" exclaimed Mr. Warren, as they at last reached the boathouse. "In another five minutes I believe we should have been swamped." He helped the women from the boat to the pier.

"What an escape!" gasped Mrs. Smythe. "Marian, my darling, are you all right?"

"Perfectly, Mama," replied her daughter rather scornfully. It was plain to the four "Automobile Girls" that Marian did not entirely approve of her mother's display of fear, and the tone in which she had answered told its own story.

The little company sought the shelter of the boathouse. The two foreigners went with them. In one of the men, Bab recognized the stranger she had noticed that morning on the hotel piazza. Mrs. De Lancey Smythe introduced him as Monsieur Duval.

"We were very lucky to have met you, sir," Mr. Duval said to Mr. Stuart. Bab noticed that he spoke very good English, with only a slight foreign accent. "I am afraid our boat would have sunk if you had not come to our rescue."

Mr. Stuart bowed politely, but coldly. He was wondering if his girls and Miss Sallie would have bad colds from their wetting. They were standing apart from the others, laughing at their plight.

The young Count de Sonde had joined Marian and her mother, as soon as he entered the boathouse, but Maud was with them. It was upon Maud that the count immediately bestowed his attention. He smiled upon her, until Maud's foolish head began to flutter. Just think of capturing the attentions of a real count so quickly! Mr. Warren saw his daughter's delight and frowned slightly. Maud must not get any foolish ideas about foreigners in her head. He would put an end to that nonsense. He was about to stride over and take charge of affairs when a man servant in plain livery appeared on the path near the boathouse door. He had come from the pretty villa, which was only a hundred yards back from the boathouse, set in a thick grove of palms. The man carried a large bundle of wraps and umbrellas. He paused respectfully when he reached the steps leading to the pavilion.

"My lady would be glad if you would seek shelter from the storm in her house," he said in broken English to Mr. Warren.

It was great fun to scamper through the pouring rain to the pretty villa. The foreign coats and capes kept everyone dry. Now that they were on land Mr. Warren's boat party had begun to regard their adventure somewhat lightly.

Once on the porch of the villa they were ushered into a large, low-ceilinged room at one end of which a fire of pine knots was burning brightly. The room was empty. The newcomers clustered about the blaze to dry their soaked shoes.

The room held very little furniture. Yet it appeared to Bab as one of the most beautiful rooms she had ever seen. A grand piano stood at one end, and a few graceful wicker chairs were scattered about the apartment. The room had an indescribable look of elegance. Was it the bare highly polished floor, with only the Persian rug to break its shining surface? Or was it the enormous bunch of daffodils

in a cut glass bowl on the table that lent the place its charm? Bab did not know. On the mantelpiece between two tall brass candle-sticks stood a beautiful marble bust. Barbara afterwards learned that it was known as "The Head of an Unknown Lady."

A handsome leather writing-case lay open on the table. It displayed on the inner side a large crest picked out in dull gold. The firelight shone on the gold outlines and threw them into dull relief.

Bab saw the Frenchman, Monsieur Duval, walk over to this table. He examined the crest intently for a moment, then turned away.

At this instant two women came in through the open door. The one, who was quite old, supported herself with a gold-headed mahogany cane. The other was young and very beautiful.

The older woman was rather terrifying in aspect. She had a hooked nose and her bright, beady little eyes regarded the company with a look of amused tolerance.

The younger woman came forward to meet her unknown guests without the slightest embarrassment or affectation. The "Automobile Girls" held their breath. Surely she was the most exquisite creature they had ever beheld.

CHAPTER III

THE FAIR UNKNOWN

"I am afraid you must be very cold and wet," the young woman said, in a clear sweet voice, with an accent that the girls had never heard before. She was graceful with an elegance of manner that to imaginative Bab seemed almost regal.

Mr. Stuart went forward. "It is most kind and hospitable of you to take us in like this," he declared. "We would certainly have been very uncomfortable if we had stayed in the boathouse for such a length of time. We are deeply grateful to you."

"Do sit down," the young woman answered. "And won't you have some tea? It may warm you." She pressed an electric bell in the wall. A man servant appeared, and she gave him her orders in German.

The "Automobile Girls" clustered together in the window seat. Their unknown hostess sank into a low chair near them. Miss Sallie and Mrs. De Lancey Smythe were left to the mercy of the old lady with the beaked nose. Maud and the count withdrew to one corner of the room, where they chatted softly, the latter bent on displaying all his powers of fascination.

"Are these your four daughters?" asked the young mistress of the villa, turning to Mr. Stuart, after a friendly glance at the "Automobile Girls."

"No," Mr. Stuart replied, laughing and shaking his head. "I am sorry to say I can boast of only one daughter. The three other girls are her friends. But they are all my girls. At least I call them my 'Automobile Girls'!"

"Ah," replied the young woman apparently puzzled. "How is it that you call them the 'Automobile Girls'? Do young girls run motor cars in your country? Their independence is quite wonderful, I think."

"Ruth is our chauffeur," explained Bab, who was looking closely at the beautiful face of her hostess. The latter's dark brown hair was arranged in a braid and wound about her head like a coronet but it broke into little soft curls around her face. She had a small straight nose and the curve of her red lips was perfect. The contour of her face was oval and her large dark eyes were touched with an undefinable sadness. She was tall and slender, and she wore a plain, white woolen frock that emphasized the lines of her graceful figure. The simplicity of her costume was not marred by a single ornament. Even her long, slender fingers were bare of rings.

She turned to pretty Mollie, taking one of her small hands in her own cool fingers. "Do these little hands also run a motor car?" the hostess asked.

Mollie looked long into the beautiful face. Somehow its hidden sadness touched her. Mollie's blue eyes filled with tears. She felt strangely timid.

"Why, you must not be afraid of me, dear one," said the young woman. She gazed into Mollie's blue eyes appealingly, and softly pressed her hand. "I'm a girl like yourself, only I am much older. But I love younger girls very dearly. You must let me be your friend." To the amazement of the other girls this exquisite stranger bent over and kissed Mollie on the lips.

"I should be very happy to have you for my friend," returned Mollie, a smile quivering through her tears. "And I wasn't the least bit frightened. I think perhaps it was the storm that made me so silly. Bab sometimes calls me a cry baby."

"Which one of you is Bab? And what a pretty name that is!" exclaimed the young hostess.

Barbara stepped forward with a friendly smile. Mr. Stuart then presented Grace and Ruth.

But still their new friend did not reveal her identity.

She was a foreigner. There was no doubt of that. She had spoken in German to her servant. Perhaps she was German? She confessed that this was her first visit to America. The climate of New York had driven her south. Yet she did not mention her name or her country.

Presently the man servant returned to the room carrying a tea service. He was followed by a comely German maid, who carried a tray laden with buttered toast and a large dish of German cookies.

The man lit the candles and a lamp covered with a yellow shade.

A soft, mellow glow pervaded the beautiful room. There was a pleasant silence and all eyes were turned to their lovely young hostess, whose slender white hands busied themselves with the tea things.

"A friendly cup of tea on a day like this, makes the whole world kin," she said, smiling brightly at her guests. "It banishes sad thoughts and one grows cheerful, even though the weather behaves itself so badly."

"We have a proverb," laughed Ruth, "that says 'it's an ill wind that blows no one good.' We should really thank the weather for misbehaving."

"Ah, that is broad flattery," cried their hostess with a silvery laugh. "But oh so charming."

"Do you not find it dull staying at an out-of-the-way place like this?" broke in Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, looking about her with a patronizing air. "I am quite sure I have never seen you at the Beach."

The "Automobile Girls" exchanged lightning glances. Mrs. Smythe's abrupt remark jarred upon them, and simultaneously it occurred to them that she was distinctly underbred.

Marian's face flushed, and she bit her lip. "I think this quiet place must be enchanting," she said almost defiantly. "I hate hotels."

"Really, Marian," said her mother coldly. "Your opinion has not been solicited."

"They're going to quarrel," thought Barbara. "How disagreeable that woman is. She is so snippy, and calculating and deceitful. I rather like Marian, though."

But their hostess averted any domestic altercation by saying sweetly. "I am indeed a stranger, here, but I came for rest and quiet, therefore I have little desire to frequent the Beach or its hotels."

"Quite true," responded Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, and hastily turning her attention to the imposing looking old woman with the gold headed cane she said, "You are German, I presume."

"Why German?" replied the old lady, observing her questioner with a dangerous glitter in her small black eyes.

Mrs. De Lancey Smythe showed signs of confusion.

"I thought you were Germans because you spoke German to your servant," she said, trying to look haughty and thus carry off what promised to be an unpleasant situation.

"Ah, yes," returned her antagonist. "But does it follow that one is of the same country as one's servants? We have also employed both French and English maids."

Mrs. De Lancey Smythe did not deem it wise to continue the conversation. She therefore turned her attention to Mr. Duval who had been listening to the conversation with a curious smile on his clever face.

Miss Sallie was delighted with the strange old woman. Her abruptness was amusing. Miss Stuart began discussing a number of current topics with her in an impersonal, well-bred manner, neither woman showing the slightest curiosity about the other's personal affairs.

"Count de Sonde!" called Mrs. De Lancey Smythe suddenly.

There was an immediate lull in the conversation.

The young mistress of the villa stared at the "Automobile Girls." Her face turned pale. She leaned back in her chair. "Count de Sonde!" she whispered to herself.

Mollie was at her new friend's side in an instant. "I am afraid you are ill," she suggested. "Can I do anything for you?"

"No, no, dear child," replied the other. "It was only a momentary faintness. But did I not hear some one call the Count de Sonde? Is he here?"

“Oh, yes,” returned Mollie politely. “He is that young man in white, who is now talking with Mrs. De Lancey Smythe.”

Her hostess turned quickly. She looked a long time at the young count. “Who is the other man near him?” she next asked.

Mollie was again her informant. “He is a Mr. Duval,” she explained. “He and the Count de Sonde are at the same hotel together.”

At this moment, Maud Warren, who had noted her father’s displeased look, decided to join the “Automobile Girls,” who were grouped around their hostess.

“Do you know,” she said with an air of triumph, “the Count de Sonde has invited Papa and me and the De Lancey Smythes to visit him at his chateau in France next summer?”

The tea-cup of their hostess crashed to the floor. It broke into small pieces.

“Don’t trouble to pick up the pieces,” she protested to Mr. Stuart. “Johann will do it. I am very careless. So you expect to visit France next summer?” she continued, turning her attention to Maud.

“Yes, Papa and I shall go,” Maud replied. “It would be quite novel to visit a chateau.”

“Delightful. But where is the chateau of the De Sonde family?” inquired the other young woman.

Maud hesitated. “I am not sure that I know,” she replied. “I believe the count said it was in Brittany. The count’s family is one of the oldest in France.”

“I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting the count,” suggested Maud’s hostess. “Perhaps you will present him to me.”

In a few moments the young count was leaning gracefully against the mantelpiece. He was talking with the beautiful stranger, whose name was still withheld from her visitors. A little later Monsieur Duval joined them.

“Oh, yes, I hasten to assure you, it is quite, quite old,” the count explained. He was talking of his family in Brittany.

“How far back does your family go?” went on his unknown questioner.

The count cleared his throat and choked over his fresh cup of tea.

“My friend’s family goes back to the eleventh century,” answered Duval quietly. The count was still coughing violently.

“And you are the last of your line?” continued his hostess. She was addressing the count. “It is a pity for such an illustrious race to die out. I suppose you will marry?”

She looked at the young man with such grave sweetness that he smiled uneasily and shifted his gaze.

“I hope to marry some day, Mademoiselle,” he mumbled.

“You have some very old families in Germany also, have you not?” inquired Monsieur Duval, looking searchingly at the young woman.

Did she pause a moment before she answered? Bab and Ruth both thought so.

“In what European country are there not old families, Monsieur?” she replied courteously. “In Italy the old families trace their lineage to the gods of mythology. But I am interested in a young country like this America.”

“Then you should go to Chicago, if you wish to see a really American city,” cried Ruth. “Of course, Aunt Sallie and Father and I think our Chicago is greater than New York, because it is our home.”

“De Lancey Hall, in Virginia, is my family home,” drawled Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, with a little insolent air of pride. “The De Lanceys were a titled French family before they came to this country.”

“How very interesting!” exclaimed the youthful hostess, in an enigmatic tone. “Do people drop their titles in this great free country of yours? It is much better, I think. Titles mean but little anywhere.” She ended her words with a little, serious frown.

“The best heritage that I can lay claim to is that of being an American,” exclaimed Ruth, with enthusiasm. “America for the Americans! Three cheers for the red, white and blue!”

“You are a true patriot. Is it not so?” laughed the hostess, patting Ruth’s shoulder. “Your great free country is so wonderful. Its liberty is boundless.” She sighed, and for a moment seemed wrapped in thought. Then turning to Mr. Stuart and Mr. Warren asked if they would have more tea.

“No thank you,” replied Mr. Stuart. “In fact I believe we had better begin to think about getting back to our hotel. The rain has stopped, and we need trespass upon your hospitality no further.”

“It has been a pleasure to meet you and your ‘Automobile Girls,’” the young woman replied. Then she added very softly so that Mr. Stuart and Mollie who stood with her hand clasped in that of the stranger, alone, heard: “Won’t you bring them to see me in the near future?”

“Oh how lovely!” breathed Mollie.

“We shall be very happy, indeed to come,” Mr. Stuart replied.

“I thank you for your charming hospitality, Mademoiselle,” broke in the suave tones of Mr. Duval, who with the count at his heels had stepped unnoticed to the young woman’s side. “Am I presumptuous in venturing to ask if it is your pleasure that we should know to whom we are indebted?”

“Ah to be sure. I have been what you call, very stupid,” laughed the unknown. “Pray pardon me.” Gliding over to the side of the stern old woman, she took her hand. “Permit me to present my very dear friend, Madame de Villiers. I am the Countess Sophia von Stolberg.”

CHAPTER IV

THE COMPACT

"Girls!" exclaimed Ruth, who lay curled up on the foot of her bed in a pale blue silk kimono. "I feel like offering a libation to the Storm King to-night for sending us that squall."

"Why?" inquired Grace, who was not gifted with an Oriental imagination.

"Because, if there had been no storm, there would have been no Countess Sophia," replied her friend.

"She is hard to understand, but she is so beautiful, so gentle and so noble," observed Barbara.

"And she kissed me!" cried Mollie.

"As, yes, Mollie darling, she had a fearful crush on you," laughed Ruth. "We are already green with jealousy. It's those golden baby curls of yours that do the business, I suppose. First, it was the lovely Mrs. Cartwright you won from us at Newport. Now your cerulean eyes have hypnotized the Countess Sophia. What shall we do to her, girls?"

"Destroy her beauty!" cried Barbara. "Cut off her curls and give her two black eyes."

The three girls pounced on Mollie. There was a real tom-boy romp which ended in a burst of joyous laughter. For Miss Sallie's familiar rap-tap was heard on the door. Her voice was raised in mild protest:

"Children, remember that this is a hotel."

The girls subsided.

"Do you suppose it would be good form to call on the countess to-morrow, when we met her only this afternoon?" asked Ruth, as soon as she had regained her breath.

"It would be rather rushing things," answered Barbara.

"If you will be good, and promise not to lay violent hands on me again, I will tell you something," Mollie volunteered.

"We promise," cried three voices in unison.

"The countess is going to ask us to luncheon to-morrow. She whispered it to me just before we left her villa this afternoon."

"Oh, joy!" exclaimed Ruth. "Do you mean that she intends to invite the entire party – the De Lancey Smythes and all that aggregation?"

"No," Mollie declared, answering Ruth's previous question. "The countess intends to invite only Miss Sallie, Mr. Stuart and the 'Automobile Girls.'"

"But what are we to do about Maud Warren?" queried Ruth. "Father has promised Mr. Warren we would help him out with Maud. Here we are already trying to shake her off. If we are going to see a great deal of the countess, how shall we manage? I am sure the stern old dowager would never endure Maud's grown up manner for a moment. And Maud won't give up those De Lancey Smythes."

"I think it would be a good idea to take the Countess Sophia into our confidence, if we have an opportunity," suggested Barbara. "It would not be a betrayal of trust. Because what we wish to accomplish is to persuade Maud Warren to see the difference between really well-bred people like the countess and those who pretend to be. I think the Smythes are pretenders, the mother at least. She seems to be continually on the alert. I watched her yesterday, and that high and mighty air that she assumes is a cloak to hide her real character. It seems to me that she and that Duval man have some sort of secret understanding. I think –" Barbara paused.

"Well, Sherlock, what do you think?" queried Ruth impertinently. "And when you unearth her family skeleton may I go along and play Doctor Watson?"

"How ridiculous you are, Ruth," returned Barbara, laughing. "I suppose I deserve to be teased. I'm always suspecting people's motives. But really I do believe that that Mrs. Smythe has a hurtful

influence over Maud. Mr. Warren doesn't like to have Maud with her, either. You heard the way he spoke this morning."

"Yes," exclaimed Ruth. "We also heard Miss Maud defy him. She is dreadfully spoiled, and we shall be obliged to handle her very carefully. If she even suspects we are trying to reform her, she will shun our beneficial society as she would the plague."

"I believe I could bear that misfortune," sighed Mollie.

But Barbara was serious. "I am truly sorry for Maud Warren," she declared. "I think she is just like a blind person. She can't see anything that is good and true. She thinks of nothing but money, titles and sham society. I don't see how we can do her any good."

"Well, her father thinks we can," Grace added. "He told me on our way back from the launch party, that he hoped we would be friends with Maud, for she needed the companionship of sensible girls. He said that he hoped she would take more interest in outdoor sports, and drop some of the newfangled society ideas she has adopted."

"I'll tell you a secret," said Barbara slowly. "I think that Maud was impressed with the Count de Sonde, or rather his title."

"And the count seemed to be equally impressed with Maud," interposed Ruth. "I believe he is one of those foreigners with no money, and plenty of title that one reads about in the Sunday papers."

"Some of them don't have even the title," said Mollie with a worldly air that contrasted oddly with her baby face. "They are just waiters who pretend that they are real counts."

"Hear, hear," cried Ruth, "Mollie the worldly wise is holding forth!"

"Well, you needn't make fun of me, Ruth," said Mollie stoutly. "It's all true. I read about one last week who married a rich American girl. She fell in love with his title. After she had married him she found out that his name was Jean, something or other, that he had been a waiter, and was wanted by the police for forgery. Just think girls how dreadfully she must have felt!"

"I should say so," averred Grace, who always championed Mollie's cause.

"What's your opinion of the Count de Sonde, Barbara?" asked Ruth.

"He didn't impress me favorably," replied Bab. "He's too artificial, and too conceited. He reminds me of a comic opera Frenchman. He looks as though he were ready to run about on his toes and shrug his shoulders at the slightest pretext."

"That exactly describes him," Ruth agreed. "I imagine him trilling a silly French song:

"Bonjour, mesdames! bonjour, messieurs!
Je suis le Comte de Sonde!"

Ruth bowed low, first to Mollie and then to Grace. She shrugged her dainty shoulders in a perfect imitation of the count.

"But what about Monsieur Duval?" queried Mollie.

"He's the backbone of the little count," said Barbara. "He's the brains and strength of the company. If there is any little game to be played at Palm Beach – look out for Mr. Duval!"

"But do you suppose they really have a game to play?" persisted Ruth.

Bab shook her head. "I don't know. I suppose I am only joking," she answered. "But did you notice how often Mr. Duval came to the count's rescue? He helped him out of a number of tight places. Of course it is ridiculous to suppose those men have any scheme afoot. They are certainly not thieves, like Harry Townsend at Newport. I wonder what they are after?"

"Oh, nothing, Bab. You are too mysterious," protested Mollie. "I thought we were talking about Maud Warren and how we could best make friends with her."

"Girls, let's enter into a solemn compact," Ruth suggested, lowering her voice to a whisper in order to persuade the other girls to listen.

"What kind of compact, child?" Bab demanded.

“A compact to do our best for Maud Warren,” said conscientious Ruth. “I tell you, girls, it won’t be easy, for Maud isn’t our kind. And you know how we like to keep together and don’t care much for any outside girl. I know we shall have to make a good many sacrifices. But Maud must not run around with the Smythes and that little French count all the time. Let’s make a compact to do our best for Maud. Come, join hands.”

The four girls clasped hands. They could not foresee into what difficulties this compact would lead them.

Tap! tap! Miss Sallie knocked again at the door.

“Go to bed at once; it is very late,” she ordered.

Ruth dreamed that night that the four girls were sitting in a circle with the Countess Sophia von Stolberg. They had hold of one another’s hands. They were repeating their vow about Maud. Suddenly they were interrupted. Monsieur Duval appeared in their midst. The Countess Sophia saw the Frenchman. She gave a cry of terror and fainted.

Ruth awakened with a start. The night was still. The moon shone brightly through the open windows and the air was filled with the perfume of magnolia blossoms.

“I wonder what the Countess Sophia’s history is?” thought Ruth sleepily, as she dropped into slumber once more.

At her villa, looking across the moonlit lake, the beautiful young countess was at that moment writing a letter. It was a long letter, penned in close fine handwriting. When she had finished she slipped the letter into an envelope, which she addressed carefully to “M. Le Comte Frederic de Sonde.”

CHAPTER V

THE DAUGHTER OF MRS. DE LANCEY SMYTHE

Breakfast was hardly over next morning before a note on thin foreign paper was handed to Miss Sallie Stuart. She read it aloud: it asked for the pleasure of their company at luncheon. It was signed "Sophia von Stolberg." The messenger would wait for the answer. Mr. Stuart was included in the invitation.

"There's only one answer to that note," laughed Mr. Stuart, scanning the four eager faces of the "Automobile Girls." "Shall I translate your expressions into a single word? It is 'yes,' my hearties."

"Did you think they would fail to accept?" teased Miss Sallie. "Look at the foolish young things! They have all fallen in love with the countess at first sight, and can hardly wait for one o'clock to arrive. But I will send our acceptance at once, so as not to keep the man waiting." Miss Stuart hurried off to the writing room of the hotel.

So the girls were alone when they were joined on the piazza by Mrs. De Lancey Smythe and Marian.

"Good morning, my dears," said Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, with an attempt at affability. "Isn't it delightful after the storm?"

"Very," answered Ruth, rather shortly.

"Have you seen dear Maud and her father this morning?" pursued Mrs. Smythe, ignoring Ruth's lack of cordiality.

"No," replied Ruth. "Have you?"

"I saw them a few minutes ago, and they were engaged in a family discussion," replied the older woman. "Such discussions are most disagreeable to me. Marian and I never have them. For some stupid reason, Mr. Warren is opposed to his daughter's receiving attentions from the Count de Sonde. I have assured him that I know the count well. He belongs to an old and illustrious family. But tell me, what is your opinion of the Countess Sophia von Stolberg? Do you think she is an impostor?"

"An impostor!" exclaimed Ruth indignantly. "I think she is simply perfect. I never met any one in my life who impressed me so much."

"Beware, my dear, that your feelings do not run away with you," warned Mrs. De Lancey Smythe with asperity. "I have heard rumors, since I saw you last night. There are suspicious circumstances connected with this countess. She may very possibly be an impostor."

"Who told you such a dreadful falsehood?" demanded Ruth. She was almost choking with anger. But Barbara had joined her. Bab's firm fingers on Ruth's arm warned her to be careful.

"The man who told me is in a position to know the truth. He is a clever man of the world, a foreigner himself," replied Mrs. Smythe triumphantly.

"I am afraid I cannot credit his story," replied Ruth, with more composure. "I cannot forget that we accepted the countess's hospitality yesterday and we are to have the pleasure of accepting more of it to-day. My father and Aunt Sallie, and we four girls, are to have luncheon with the Countess von Stolberg and Madame de Villiers."

Ruth drew Barbara's arm through hers. They moved away from Mrs. De Lancey Smythe.

But Mrs. De Lancey Smythe had said her say and left a sting, and she smiled maliciously as the two girls walked away.

"I can't endure that woman, Barbara," exclaimed Ruth. "I'll lose my head completely if she attacks our beautiful countess again."

"She is too disagreeable to notice," answered Bab vehemently. "Here comes Maud Warren. Shall we ask her to take a walk with us along the Beach?"

"I suppose so," assented Ruth, whose enthusiasm had somewhat cooled over night. "I don't want her. But we ought to be polite."

The two girls greeted Maud Warren cordially. There was a discontented line across that young woman's brow, and an angry look in her pale blue eyes.

"I am looking for the count," she declared defiantly.

The girls instinctively knew that Maud was disobeying her father. Mr. Warren had just finished lecturing Maud and had commanded that she cut the count's acquaintance.

"I saw the count a few minutes ago. He was starting off with his friend for a walk," explained Bab gently. "Won't you take a stroll on the beach with us, Maud? It is such a perfect morning."

"Oh, do come, Maud," begged Ruth, with a charming, cordial smile. Ruth's sweet nature was again asserting itself.

"Yes, do," cried Mollie and Grace, who had just joined the little group of girls.

Maud's face softened. "You are awfully nice," she said. Maud was a little taken aback by so much friendliness. She had been spoiled all her life, and had never had real friends among young girls. People had thought her disagreeable and overbearing, and she had held herself aloof, displaying a degree of hauteur that admitted of no friendship.

"Let's get our hats and go immediately. It will soon be time to go in bathing," suggested Bab. Barbara never missed a swim if she could help it.

"All right, old water dog," Ruth agreed. "Meet us on the piazza looking toward the ocean, Maud. We will be back in ten minutes."

The girls were back on the piazza at the appointed time. Maud was there. But with her were Marian De Lancey Smythe, and the Count de Sonde.

"What a nuisance!" exclaimed Ruth under her breath. But there was nothing to be done; therefore the girls decided to accept this undesired addition to their number with the best possible grace.

The entire party started down the avenue of palms toward the ocean.

The "Automobile Girls" were thrilled with the beauty of the great stretch of blue water. Marian De Lancey Smythe, too, had a soul stirring within her. It had been choked by the false principles and ostentations that her mother had taught her. But Marian was not a stupid girl. Her wits had been sharpened by years of managing and deceit. She had the sense to see the difference between herself and the four sweet, unaffected "Automobile Girls," and she knew the difference was in their favor.

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