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Barbara Ladd



Charles Roberts

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CHAPTER I

She knew very well that she should have started earlier; but if there was one thing that could daunt her wayward and daring little spirit, it was the dark. Now, as she stood, wide-eyed and breathless with suspense, beside her open window, the face of the dark began to change. A gray pallor came over it, and on a sudden she was aware of a black horizon line, ghostly, lonely beyond words, far to the eastward over the yet invisible tree-tops. With this pallor came a chill which Barbara felt on her little, trembling hands, on her eyes, and in her heart: as if the night, in going, had laid aside its benignity and touched the world in farewell with a cold hand of warning and menace. Then, here and there a leaf stood out, palely distinct, upon the thick frondage of the apple-tree whose nearest branches crowded the roof of the porch below her window. There was a faint chirping from the heart of the syringa thicket; and Barbara's ears were so attentive that she caught the drowsy, awakening flutter of small wings down below in the dewy gloom. With the sound came a cool and delicate pungency from the wet currant bushes, puffed upward to her as if the garden world beneath the leaves had drawn a long breath in getting ready to awake. This tonic scent, which nostrils less keen than Barbara's would scarcely have discerned, came to the child as a signal for action. Peculiarly sensitive to the message and influence of odours, she felt this sudden fragrance in her nerves as a summons, a promise, and a challenge, all in one. Noiselessly she pushed the two diamond-paned leaves of her window open to their widest. How the grayness was spreading! A pang of apprehension seized her, lest she had delayed too long. She turned impulsively, and stepped into the darkness of her room.

In a moment her slim little figure reappeared at the window, this time heavily encumbered. In one hand was a round, soft bundle, in the other a square wicker basket with a white cloth tied over the top. The white cloth glimmered conspicuously, but the light was not yet strong enough to reveal the colour of the bundle. Setting both the burdens out upon the roof of the porch, she turned, glanced in at the window, and said, softly:

"Good-bye, little room! I haven't been happy with you. But I hope you won't be lonely when I'm gone!"

Leaning over the edge of the porch, she dropped the bundle soundlessly into a bed of marigolds. The basket, on the other hand, she took up with care. Thrusting her left arm through the handle, she swung herself nimbly into the apple-tree, and thence to the ground; while the basket tipped and slewed as if it were alive.

"Be still, my babies!" she whispered; and then, picking up the bundle from the crushed marigolds, and never turning her head to look up at the stately old house which she was leaving, she fled down the walk between the currant and gooseberry bushes, the thyme, the sage, and summer savoury beds, – through a narrow wicket gate half-hidden in larkspur and honeysuckle, – along the foot-path through the rank and dripping burdocks back of the barn, where she felt a little qualm of homesickness at the sound of her dear horses breathing deeply and contentedly in the stalls, – and thence, letting down one of the bars and crawling through with her burdens, out into the graying, hillocky open of the cow-pasture.

By this time a cool and luminous wave of pink, changing to pale saffron at its northeastern edges, had crept up over the far-off hilltops. Faint tinges of colour, of a strange and unusual transparency, began to reveal themselves all over the expanse of pasture. As the miracle of dawn thus overtook her, a sense of unreality came upon Barbara's soul. She felt as if this were not she, this little girl so adventurously running away – but rather some impossible child in a story-book, who had

so engaged her sympathies for the moment that she could not be sure which was make-believe and which herself. With a chill of lonesome dread she slipped a hand under the cloth and into the basket. The touch of warm, live, cuddling fur reassured her, and brought her back to her own identity. But stranger and stranger grew the mystical transparency, only made the more startling by a fleece of vapour here and there curling up from between the hillocks. Stumps, weed-tops, patches of juniper, tufts of blueberry bush, wisps of coarse grass left uncropped, seemed to detach themselves, lift, and float in the solvent clarity of that new-born air, that new-born light. Surely, this was not her old, familiar world! Barbara stood still, her great eyes dilating, her lips parted in a kind of ecstasy, as sense and spirit alike drank in the marvel of the dawn. It seemed to her as if she discovered, in that moment, that the world was made anew with every morning, – and with the discovery she became aware, dimly but securely, that she was herself a part of the imperishable, ever-renewing life.

She was brought back to more instant considerations by the sudden appearance of a red-and-white cow, which got up with a great, windy, grunting breath, and came toward her out of a misty hollow. With all the cows of the herd Barbara was in high favour, but just now the sight alarmed her.

"Gracious!" she exclaimed to herself, "Abby will be out to milk in another minute!" – and she broke into a run at the best speed that her burdens would permit, making for the maple woods which lay to the north of the pasture. The cow looked and moored after her wistfully, wondering at her flight, and aching for the relief of the milker's hand. But Barbara paid no heed to her, nor to the others of the herd, who now came into view from corners of the pasture as the enchanted light grew and spread. She darted on, vanishing in the hollows, flitting over the hillocks, fleetly threading the crooked and slender path, – a wisp-like, dark little figure. Her bundle, now seen to be tied up in a silk shawl of flamelike scarlet, and the snow-white covering of her basket, flickered across the mystical transparency of the landscape like bubbles of intense light blown far in advance of the morning.

Not till she came to the other side of the pasture and plunged into the obscurity of the woods did Barbara check her speed. Here the dawn was but beginning to penetrate, thrusting thin shafts of pink-amber light here and there through the leafage, and touching the eastward sides of trunk and branch with elusive glories. Breathing quickly, Barbara set down the bundle and the precious basket; but she snatched them up again as she caught a sound of panting and running behind her. On the instant, however, the alarm faded from her face.

"Down, Keep!" she commanded, sharply, as the gaunt gray form of a mastiff leaped upon her, almost carrying her off her feet. Fawning, and giving little yelps of joy, the huge animal crouched before her, pounding the sward with ecstatic tail, and implored to lick her hands. She threw both arms about the dog's head, murmuring to him, poignantly impetuous, her voice tearful with self-reproach:

"Was his best friend going away, without ever saying good-bye to him? Well, she was bad, she was very, very bad!" And she wiped away several large, surreptitious tears upon the furry folds of his neck. Then she sprang up and renewed her journey resolutely; while the mastiff, bounding in front of her, showed his plain conviction that some fine, audacious adventure was afoot, and that it would be his great luck to have a part in it.

For more than a mile Barbara followed the wood-path, the fresh, wet gloom lightening about her as she went. Where the maples thinned away, and the slenderer ash and birch took their place, she got glimpses of a pale sky overhead, dappled with streamers of a fiery violet. Here and there a dripping leaf had caught the colours from above and flashed elusive jewels upon her vision. Here and there the dewy thickets of witch-hazel and viburnum crowded so close about the path that her skirts and shoulders were drenched with their scented largess. Here and there in her path rose suddenly a cluster of night-born toadstools – squat, yellow, and fat-fleshed, or tall, shadowy-hooded, and whitely venomous – over which she stepped with wary aversion. And once, eager as was her haste, she stopped to pick a great, lucent, yellow orchid, which seemed to beam like a sacred lamp in its dark green shrine beneath the alders.

At length the path dipped sharply between rocks overgrown with poison ivy. Then the trees thinned away before her, and the day grew at once full of light; and the mirror-surface of a little lake, shining with palest crocus-tint and violet and silvery rose, obscured with patches of dissolving mist, flashed upon her eyes. She ran down to the very edge, where the water seemed to breathe among its fringing pebbles, and there set down the bundle and the basket; while the dog, yelping joyously, bounded and splashed in the shallows.

When, however, Barbara stepped up the bank to a thicket of Indian willow, and proceeded, by dint of carefully calculated lifting and pulling, to drag forth from its hiding-place a ruddy canoe of birch-bark, the dog's spirits and his flaunting tail fell together. If Barbara's venture was to be in the canoe, he knew he should have no part in it; and his big, doggish heart was dejected. With his tongue hanging from his jaws, he sat up on his brindled haunches and looked on, while slowly and laboriously Barbara worked the frail craft down to the water. When it was afloat, and the resined prow pulled up into a tuft of weeds to keep it from drifting away, Barbara fetched two paddles from the same hiding-place. In the bow of the canoe she stowed her bundle and her basket. In the stern she arranged a pile of ferns as a cushion for her knees. Once more she flung her arms around Keep's massive neck, kissed his silky ears, wept violently for the smallest fraction of a minute; and then, stepping into the canoe with the light precision of one skilled with the birch-bark, she pushed off, and with quick, vigorous strokes headed straight across the lake. The dog ran uneasily up and down the water's edge, whining and fretting after her. When she was a little way out he made a sudden resolution, plunged into the water, and swam eagerly after the fugitive. But Barbara heard the splash, and understood. She realised that he would surely upset the canoe in trying to get into it, and this was the time when she must seem hard, however her heart was melting. She looked back over her shoulder.

"Go home, Keep! Go home!" she commanded.

The dog turned obediently and made for shore. And Barbara, her lips set and the big tears rolling down her cheeks, continued her journey out across the lake.

CHAPTER II

It was now clear day. The ample spaces of blue between the thin clouds overhead grew pure, as if new bathed. The sun was not yet visible over the woods, but sent level shafts of radiance through the sparser leafage. Barbara's face was westward, and her prow, as the nervous cunning of her paddle urged it forward, threw off the water on either side in long, polished, fluted furrows, dazzlingly bright at the top of the curve and steel-dark in the depression. Child as she was, and of a fairy slightness, Barbara's wrists were strong and she was master of her paddle. Her tears presently dried themselves as she noted with exultation, by the growing depth and abruptness of these furrows from her prow, that she was making a speed that did credit to her canoe-craft. In a few minutes her parting pangs were all forgotten, and she was absorbed in racing, as it were, against herself. She knelt low, working her shoulders freely like a squaw, and bent every energy to making the passage of the open before a wind out of the morning should awake to hinder her progress.

A low, green point, deep-plumed with sedge, thrust out from the nearing shore to meet her. At its tip, motionless, and eloquent of ancient mystery, poised the dream-like shape of a blue heron. Nearer and nearer slipped the canoe, till Barbara could discern the round, unwinking jewel of the great bird's eye, watching her inscrutably. Then, with leisurely spread of spacious wings, it rose and flapped away, to renew its not wholly disinterested contemplations in a further reed-bed.

Behind the point of sedges Barbara swept the canoe on a fine curve, and into the channel of a little river, the quiet outlet of the lake. Alders, osiers, and thick-starred draperies of clematis came down over either bank. The stream was not twenty paces wide, and its deep current was so gentle that the long weeds on the bottom were hardly under compulsion to show which way it flowed.

The ancient wood at this place gave back several hundred yards from the lake, save for scattered outposts and thickets. Rounding the first curve of the stream, – which, indeed, seemed all curves in its reluctance to forsake the parent water, – the canoe ran into a flock of gray-and-white geese dabbling along the weedy margin. The birds were not alarmed, but they lifted their heads and clamoured a sonorous warning; and straightway from behind the screen of leafage came a quacking of ducks, a cackling of hens, and the excited barking of a puppy. Then a cock crowed shrilly. The stream rounded to a wider stretch, and its western bank, flooded with sunshine, showed a grassy clearing of perhaps two acres in extent, at the back of which, close against the primeval trees, huddled a low, gray cabin, with wide eaves and a red door. A hop-vine covered one end of the cabin and sprawled over the roof. Along the base ran a "banking" about two feet high, of rough boards with the bark on, supported by stakes and filled in with earth – a protection to the cellar against winter frosts. Leaned up to the sun, along the banking, stood wooden tubs and an iron pot; and on a bench beside the door another tub. In front of the door was a space of chips, littered with axe, buck-saw, feed-troughs, parts of a broken hand-sled, a large wicker basket with the bottom gone, and indeterminate waifs and strays of human use. From this space of débris a foot-path ran down through short grass to the waterside, where a clumsy punt was hauled up. The place was alive with ducks and chickens; and as Barbara came in view a stately turkey-cock swelled, strutted, and gobbled defiance to her intrusion.

Sitting on the door-step in the sun was a sturdy old woman in greenish homespun petticoat and bodice, with a dull red kerchief crossed upon her shoulders and a cap of greenish-yellow linen on her head, – the soft dye of the "yaller-weed" juice. She was busy cutting coloured rags into strips for mat-hooking. At her side sat a small yellow puppy, with head cocked and one ear alertly lifted, curious but doubtful as to the visitor.

Barbara turned her birchen prow to the landing-place, and ran it gently ashore in the soft mud beside the punt. At the same moment Mrs. Deborah Blue – known to Barbara and to all the village of Second Westings as 'old Debby' – dropped her knitting on the stoop, snatched up a stout stick that

leaned against the door-post, and hobbled with a heavy briskness down the path to meet the visitor. The yellow pup frisked interestedly at her heels.

Barbara had indeed run her prow ashore, but that was for the sake of stability merely. She was in haste, and had no idea of stopping now to indulge her inclination for a gossip with old Debby. She rested in silence, one brown hand on the gunwale of the punt, her full, young, wilful lips very scarlet, her gray-green eyes asparkle with mystery and excitement, as the old woman hobbled down to greet her.

"Ain't ye comin' in to set awhile, an' eat a cooky, Miss Barby?" inquired Mrs. Blue, wondering at the child's inscrutable look. The old dame's face was red and harsh and strongly lined. Her chin was square and thrust forward aggressively, with a gray-bristled wart at one side of its obtrusive vigour. A lean and iron-gray wisp of hair, escaped from under her hat, straggled down upon her red neck. But her shrewd, hard, pale-blue, dauntless old eyes beamed upon the child with unfeigned welcome. She spoke a little wheezingly, being out of breath from haste; and Barbara was the only soul in all the township of Second Westings for whom old Debby would condescend to hasten.

"No, Debby dear, I can't stop one minute. I'm not coming ashore. I'm running away from Aunt Hitty, and I'm going down the river to Uncle Bob. I just stopped to say good-bye to you, you old dear, and to ask you to take this letter for me to Aunt Hitty. I didn't dare to leave it in my room, for fear she'd find it and know where I'd gone, and send after me before I'd got a good start. I don't like Aunt Hitty, you know, Debby, but she's been good to me in her way, and I don't want her to be worrying!" She held out a folded paper for the old dame to take; but she held it tentatively, as if she did not want to surrender it at once.

Knowing Barbara as no one else in the township of Second Westings knew her, old Debby betrayed neither surprise nor disapproval. She nodded several times, as if running away were the most reasonable, and indeed the most ordinary, thing in the world for a little girl of fourteen years to do when she found aunts and environments uncongenial. Old Debby's smile, at this moment, had just the right degree of sympathy. Had ever so little of amusement glimmered through its weather-beaten creases, she knew that the sensitive and wilful girl before her would have been off in a second with her venture all unexplained.

"I'd take it fer ye, my sweeting, ef I'd got to crawl on my knees all the way 'round the lake," the old dame answered promptly; but at the same time, scheming to prolong the interview, and knowing that if once Barbara started off again there would be no such thing as luring her back, she kept both hands clasped on top of her stick and made no move to accept the missive.

"Ain't ye goin' to read it to me?" she went on, coaxingly. "I'd give a sight to hear what ye're sayin' to yer Aunt Hitty."

Now this was just what Barbara wanted, in spite of her haste. She wanted to hear how her letter would sound. She wanted to try it on old Debby, in whom she felt sure of a eulogistic critic. Without a word she untied the yellow ribbon, opened the packet, and began to read, with a weighty impressiveness in her childish voice:

"MY DEAR AUNT HITTY: – This is to say farewell for ever, for I have run away. I do not think it would be good for me to live with you any longer, so I am going to Uncle Bob. He loves me, and does not think I am bad. And I think he needs me, too, because I understand him. I know I have often been bad, and have made you unhappy very often, Aunt Hitty. But I don't think you ever understand me – and I don't understand you – and so we cannot be happy together. But don't be worried about me, for I will be all right. And I thank you for all the trouble you have taken about me. I don't want any of my old clothes except what I have brought with me, so please give them to Mercy Chapman, because she is poor and just about my size, and always kind to animals, and I like her. I have taken your nice basket you got from the squaw last Saturday, to carry my kittens in; but I know you won't mind, because you offered to give it to me when I did not know I was going to need it. I have taken the canoe, too, but I want to pay for it, of course, Aunt Hitty. Please keep enough

to get a new one, and paddles, out of the money you are taking care of for me, and send the rest right away to Uncle Bob, because I'll need some new frocks when I get to the city, and I don't know whether Uncle Bob has any money or not. Good-bye, Aunt Hitty, and I am so sorry that we could not understand each other.

"Your niece,

"BARBARA LADD."

She looked up, proud, but a little anxious, and eager for commendation. Old Debby rose to the circumstances.

"Law, how you kin write, Miss Barby," she said, with a nod and chuckle. "The parson nor Doctor Jim couldn't 'a' done no better. I reckon Aunt Hitty'll understand ye now, a sight better'n she's given to understand folks as don't jest think as she do. Give me the letter!"

Barbara's face flashed radiantly. With a sudden impulse she sprang up, skipped ashore, thrust the letter into the old woman's hand, and cried in a high key:

"Oh, I'm so hungry, Debby! I can't stop a minute, but do give me some breakfast, there's a dear. I was too excited to eat before I left. And do give my kittens a drop of milk. I've got nothing but cold meat for them to eat on the journey, poor babies!"

Without waiting for a reply, she skipped back to the canoe, grabbed up the covered basket, and flew up the path to the cottage; while the old woman limped after her with astonishing speed, chuckling and wheezing out a disjointed invitation. She followed Barbara into the cabin, shutting the door to keep out the puppy, who whined in an injured voice upon the stoop. Then, thinking of the kittens first, – and thereby showing her deep knowledge of the kittens' mistress, – she set down a bowl of milk in the middle of the floor; and Barbara, uncovering the basket, lovingly lifted out three plump, moon-faced little cats, a yellow-and-white, a black-and-white, and a gray-and-white. While the three, with happy tails erect, lapped at the milk, Barbara made haste to devour thick slices of brown bread and butter, spread to a luscious depth with moist, sweet-scented maple sugar. She had no time to talk. She sat on the edge of the big four-post bed, swinging her slim legs, and kicking her heels against the dingy, gay patchwork quilt whose ample folds hung to the floor. The hidden space under the bed was a place of piquant mystery to Barbara, containing, as it did, boxes on boxes of many-coloured rags, out of which, earlier in the season, old Debby would bring forth precious goose-eggs, duck-eggs, turkey-eggs, and the specially prized eggs of certain pet and prolific hens, gathered against the time of setting. While Barbara broke her fast, old Debby refrained from questions, having shrewdly grasped the whole situation. She knew that Mr. Robert Glenowen, Barbara's uncle, had lately come north on an errand which nobody seemed to understand, and had taken a house at Stratford. Of a nomadic spirit in her younger days, Debby had moved much here and there throughout her native Connecticut, and over the bordering counties of New York and Massachusetts; and she had not only a rough idea of the distance from Second Westings to Stratford, but a very vivid realisation of the perils of the journey which Barbara, in her innocence, had so confidently undertaken. Till she saw that the appetites of Barbara and the kittens were nearing satisfaction, she talked with a sort of casual enthusiasm of her luck with the chickens, the goslings, the young turkeys, and depicted the prowess of an old speckled hen which had engaged and defeated a marauding hawk. Then, when at last Barbara sprang up, bundled the satiated kittens into the basket, and turned to her for a fond and final good-bye, the crafty old dame broke into passionate farewells. She kissed the child, and even wept over her, till Barbara's self-centred exaltation was very near collapse.

"*You* love me, don't you, Debby dear?" she exclaimed, with a wistfulness in her voice, searching the old woman's face with her great, eager, strangely alien eyes. Barbara was one of those who colour the moods of others by their own, and who are therefore apt to be at fault in their interpretation of another's motives. This gave her, even in childhood, a strangeness, an aloneness of personality, which she, as well as those who loved her, could seldom break down. It was with a kind of heart-break that

she now and again, for an instant, became dimly aware of this alien fibre in her temperament. It made her both misunderstanding and misunderstood.

"I can trust you, can't I?" she went on, leaning childishly for a moment upon the old woman's comfortable breast.

"Trust old Debby, my sweeting!" cried the old dame, in tones which carried conviction. "Ye hain't got no lovinger nor faithfuller friend alive than me. Don't ye never forgit that, Miss Barby."

For answer Barbara clutched her fiercely around the neck, sobbed and clung to her for a moment, cried extravagantly, "Yes, you are the best friend I've got in all the world!" then gathered up her basket of kittens and fled wildly down the path to the canoe. Impetuously she pushed off, the world a golden blur before her eyes; and without once looking back, she disappeared around the next winding of the stream. Old Debby stood for some minutes gazing after this meteor-like – and very Barbara-like – exit. There was amusement now, unhindered, on her hard old face, but a kind of fierce devotion withal. When the stern of the canoe had vanished behind the leafage, she muttered to herself: "Well! Well! Well! was ever sech a child! When ye set yer finger onto her, she ain't there! I reckon that mincing-mouthed Aunt Kitty's hed her bad times, too. But the sooner I git 'round to see Doctor Jim the better it's goin' to be fer the little wild witch. Land's sakes alive! But 'twon't be 'Debby dear' to me agin fer awhile. How them eyes'll blaze! I'll not go nigh her till she's hed time to git over it an' to know who's really her friends. No, Pippin, ye can't come with me! Go 'way!"

Turning into the long lean-to of a shed which stretched behind the cabin, she brought out two stumpy oars. These under her left arm, her stalwart stick in her right hand, she limped with massive alertness down to the waterside, shoved off the punt, climbed into it with a nicety of balance remarkable in one of her weight, clicked the oars into the rowlocks, and pulled up-stream toward the lake whence Barbara had come.

CHAPTER III

The child who set forth so fearlessly, on so audacious and ill-regulated a venture, that midsummer morning of the year 1769, – in a time when audacity on the part of small girls was apt to meet the discouragement of a peculiarly strenuous discipline, – was an accident in her period, an irreconcilable alien to her environment. In her intense individuality, and in the confident freedom with which she claimed the right to express that individuality, she belonged to an earlier or a later day, but not to a New England of the eighteenth century. Two years before, at the age of twelve, an age when other children's personalities were colourless to the eyes of their elders, she had been projected into the tranquil routine of the little world of Second Westings. It was an established, crystallised, unchanging life there in the back country of Connecticut, where hours, seasons, actions, habits, revolved in so orderly a fashion as to have worn themselves grooves out of which they could hardly even look, still less achieve to deviate. Into this rigid placidity the dark child came like a grain of ferment; and presently, no one could tell just how, the mass began to work. Barbara was everywhere discussed. She was rather unanimously disapproved of. And, nevertheless, as it were in the teeth of all probability, she won to herself here and there a friend.

At the time of Barbara's transplanting from the cordial soil of Maryland to the austere uplands of Connecticut, her father, the Reverend Winthrop Hopkins Ladd, clergyman of the Established Church, had been dead over two years, and the child's hurt, as such things will, had outwardly healed; though the hidden wounds would agonise in her heart at unexpected times, set vibrating to some poignant touch of scent or sound or colour. The child had adored her father with a tempestuous and jealous devotion, which, however, had not prevented her waywardness from diversifying his repose with many a wakeful night. Her mother, who had died when Barbara was scarce out of arms, had been a bewildering birth from the kiss of North Wales on the warm south of Spanish passion. The son of an old Welsh family, adventuring to the New World to capture himself a fortune, had captured himself also a wife to beggar envy. Where or how he got the fortune, no man knew and few presumed to wonder; but where and how he got the wife was matter of noonday knowledge. He saw her at church in New Orleans. There were looks that burn and live. Through that emotional spring Glenowen sniffed the incense of more masses than he had thought to attend in a lifetime. Once there was a stolen word behind a pillar, eyes warily averted. Twice notes passed from hand to hand. Then a girl, the daughter of one of the haughtiest houses of Colonial Spain, was audaciously carried off by night from a convent school in the safe heart of the city. When next seen of the world, she was Glenowen's wife, most radiantly and graciously dispensing an accepted hospitality in Baltimore.

The result that in particular pertains to this history was a small, flame-like, imperious girl, one Mistress Mercedes Glenowen, who, from the night of ceremony when she first made her bow to the governor and joyously turned her disastrous eyes upon the society of Baltimore, for the space of some three years dispersed vain heartache throughout the colony. Into the remotest plantations went the name of her and the fame of her – and too often, also, the sickness of a hopeless desire of her. There were duels, too, discreetly laid to other cause; and old friendships changed to hate; and wild oaths made perjury. But the heart of Mistress Mercedes went free. A quiet young clergyman, a kinsman to the governor, came to Baltimore from Boston, on his way to a country parish on the Pawtuxet, to which he had just been appointed. Dining at Government House, he met Mistress Mercedes, but his eyes, being at that moment immersed in dreams, looked not upon but through and beyond her. Mercedes could not rest an instant until those far-wandering, Northern eyes were ensnared, imprisoned, and denied a range beyond the boundaries of her heart. But the capture was not a quick one, and in the interest of it she had the accident to become herself entangled, to such a degree that she had no longer any use for freedom. And so it came about, to the wrathful amaze of her retinue, but the unspeakable

content of the Reverend Winthrop Ladd, that the dark rose of Maryland was on a sudden removed from Baltimore to bloom on a churchly plantation by the pale waters of the Pawtuxet.

Mr. Ladd, though a dreamer so far as consisted with outdoor life and sanity of brain and muscle, was a strong man, one of those who have the force to rule when they must, and the gentleness to yield when they may. In the passionate completeness of her love, Mercedes sloughed the caprices that would have pained and puzzled him, forgot the very echoes of the acclamations of her court, and lived in the sanctuary of her husband's devotion. For nearly three years the strangely assorted lovers dwelt in their dream, while the world passed by them like a pageant viewed through a glory of coloured glass. Then a sudden sickness tore them apart; and when the dazed man came slowly back to the realisation that he had been left to live, all his love, with all the illusion of it, centred itself fixedly upon the little one, Barbara, whom Mercedes had left to him.

As Barbara grew more and more like her mother, her ascendancy over her father grew more and more complete. Tenderly but firmly he ruled his parish and his plantation. But he gradually forgot to rule Barbara. Too nearly did she represent to him all that he had lost in his worshipped Mercedes; and he could not bring himself to see anything but freshness of character and vigour of personality in the child's very faults. Hence he evolved, to suit her particular case, a theory very much out of harmony with his time, to the effect that a child – or rather, perhaps, such a child as this of Mercedes – should not be governed or disciplined, but guided merely, and fostered in the finding of her own untrammelled individuality. This plan worked, for the time, to Barbara's unqualified approval, but she was destined to pay for it, in later years, a heavy price in tears, and misunderstandings, and repentance. With the growth of her intense and confident personality there grew no balancing strength of self-control. Unacquainted with discipline, she was without the safeguard of self-discipline. Before she was eight years old she held sway over every one on the plantation but herself, – and her rule, though pretty and bewitching, was not invariably gentle. As for her father, though ostensibly her comrade and mentor, he was by this time in reality her slave. He rode with her; he read with her; he taught her, – but such studies only as ensnared her wayward inclination, and with such regularity only as fell in with her variable mood. The hour for a lesson on the spinet would go by unheeded, if Barbara chanced to be interested in the more absorbing occupation of climbing a tree; and the time for reciting Latin syntax was lightly forgotten if berries were a-ripening in the pasture. Under such auspices, however, Barbara did assuredly grow straight-limbed and active, slight and small indeed, by heritage from her mother, but strong and of marvellous endurance, with the clear blood red under her dark skin, her great gray-green eyes luminous with health. Her father devoted to her every hour of the day that he could spare from the claims of his parish. In a sunny and sandy cove near the house he taught her to swim. Rowing and canoeing on the Pawtuxet were mysteries of outdoor craft into which he initiated her as soon as her little hands could pull an oar or swing a paddle. A certain strain of wildness in her temperament attuned her to a peculiar sympathy with the canoe, and won her a swift mastery of its furtive spirit. In the woods, and in the seclusion of remote creeks and backwaters, her waywardness would vanish till she became silent and elusive as the wild things whose confidence she was for ever striving to gain. Her advances being suspiciously repelled by the squirrels, the 'coons, and the chipmunks, her passion was fain to expend itself upon the domestic animals of the plantation. The horses, cattle, dogs, and cats, all loved her, and she understood them as she never understood the nearest and best-beloved of her own kind. With the animals her patience was untiring, her gentleness unflinching, while her thoughtless selfishness melted into a devotion for which no sacrifice seemed too great.

The negroes of the plantation, who seemed to Barbara akin to the animals, came next to these in her regard, and indeed were treated with an indulgence which made them almost literally lay their black necks in the dust for her little feet to step on. But with people of her own class she was apt to be hasty and ungracious. *Their* feelings were of small account in her eyes – certainly not to be weighed for a moment against those of a colt or a kitten. There was one sweet-eyed and lumbering half-grown puppy which Barbara's father – not for an instant, indeed, believing anything of the sort – used to

declare was more precious to her than himself. But her old black "Mammy" 'Lize used to vow there was more truth than he guessed in "Marse Ladd's foolin'."

However, when a fever snatched the gentle priest away from the scene of his love and kindly ministrations, the child's true self emerged through its crust of whim and extravagance. Stricken beyond a child's usual capacity to feel or realise such a blow, she was herself seized with a serious illness, after which she fell into a dejection which lasted for the better part of a year. In her desolation she turned to her animals rather than to her human companions, and found the more of healing in their wordless sympathy.

At last, youth and health asserted themselves, and once more Barbara rode, paddled, swam, tyrannised, and ran wild over the plantation, while relatives from Maine to Maryland wrangled over her future.

There was one young uncle, her mother's only brother, whom Barbara decided to adopt as her sole guardian. But other guardians came to another decision. Uncle Bob Glenowen was an uncle after Barbara's own heart, but a little more disciplined and reasonable than herself. The two would have got on delightfully together – together careering over the country on high-mettled horses, together swimming and canoeing at the most irregular hours, together lauding and loving their four-foot kindred and laughing to scorn the general stupidity of mankind. But Uncle Glenowen had little of gold or gear, and his local habitation was mutable. He loved Barbara too well not to recognise that she should grow up under the guidance of steadier hands than his. It was finally settled – Barbara's fiery indignation being quite disregarded – that she should go to her father's younger sister, Mistress Mehitable Ladd, in Second Westings.

Mistress Ladd was a self-possessed, fair-faced, aristocratic little lady, with large blue eyes and a very firm, small mouth. She was conscientious to a point that was wont to bring her kindness, at times, into painful conflict with her sense of duty. The Puritan fibre ran in unimpaired vitality through the texture of her being, with the result that whenever her heart was so rash as to join issue with her conscience, then prompt and disastrous overthrow was the least her heart could expect for such presumption. In the matter of Barbara's future, however, Distress Mehitable felt that duty and inclination ran together. She had loved her brother Winthrop with unselfish and admiring devotion, and had grieved in secret for years over his defection from the austere fold of the Congregationalists to what she regarded as the perilously carnal form and ceremony of the Church of England. Her hampered spirit, her uncompleted womanhood, yearned toward Barbara, and she shuddered at the idea of Winthrop's child growing up untaught, unmothered, uncontrolled. She made up her mind that Barbara should come to Second Westings, become a daughter to her, and be reared in the purity of unsullied Congregationalism. With a sigh of concordant relief it was recognised by the other relatives that Mehitable was right. They washed their hands of the child, and forgot her, and were thankful – all but Uncle Bob. And so Barbara went to Second Westings.

CHAPTER IV

Little enough, indeed, would Second Westings ever have seen of the heartsore and rebellious child, but for this Uncle Bob. Searching his own spirit, he understood hers; and maintaining a discreet silence as to the chief points of his discovery, he set himself the duty of accompanying Barbara on the long, complicated journey to Connecticut. Not content with delivering his charge into the hands of Mistress Mehitable, – whom he liked despite her uneasy half-disapproval of himself, – he stayed long summer weeks at Second Westings, thus bridging over for Barbara the terrible chasm between the old life and the new, and by his tactful conciliation on every side making the new life look a little less hatefully alien to her. He took her riding all over the township; he took her canoeing on the lake, and down the outlet to its junction with the river; and so not only won her a freedom of movement hitherto unheard-of among the maidens of Second Westings, but also showed her that the solace of wild woods and sweet waters was to be found no less in Connecticut than in her longed-for Maryland. Moreover, Uncle Bob had "a presence." Second Westings scrutinised him severely, all ready to condemn the stranger folk to whom Winthrop Ladd had turned in his marrying. But Second Westings felt constrained to acknowledge at once that Winthrop Ladd had married within his class. To high and low alike – and the line between high and low was sharply drawn at Second Westings – it was obvious that the sister of Mr. Robert Glenowen must have been gently born. Those who would not let themselves be warmed by Uncle Bob's bright heartsomeness were unable to withhold acknowledgment of his good breeding. Mistress Mehitable, though antagonised by vague gossip as to his "wildness," nevertheless recognised with serious relief that no common blood had been suffered to obscure the clear blue stream whose purity the Ladds held precious. "Light, I fear – if not, in other surroundings, ungodly; but beyond all cavil a gentleman!" pronounced the Reverend Jonathan Sawyer, flicking snuff from his sleeve with white, scholarly fingers. He was not so innocent as to attach too much importance to Uncle Bob's devout attitude through those interminable services which made a weekly nightmare of the Connecticut Sabbath; but he had found a reserved satisfaction in the young man's company over a seemly glass and a pipe of bright Virginia. He had a feeling that the visitor's charm was more or less subversive of discipline, and that it would be, on the whole, for the spiritual welfare of Second Westings if the visit should be brief; but meanwhile he took what he could of Uncle Bob's society. Class against creed, and a fair field, and it's long odds on class.

But in the minds of Doctor John and Doctor Jim Pigeon – physicians, brothers, comrades, fierce professional rivals, justices of the peace, and divinely self-appointed guardians of the sanctity of caste for all the neighbourhood – there were no misgivings. Their instincts accepted Bob Glenowen at first glance. Their great, rugged faces and mighty shoulders towering over him, – and Uncle Bob himself was nowise scant of stature, – they looked at him and then into each other's eyes; and agreed, as they did on most subjects outside the theory and practice of medicine.

"You are right welcome to Second Westings, Mr. Glenowen!" exclaimed Doctor Jim, in a big, impetuous voice, grasping his hand heartily.

"And we trust that you may be slow to leave us, Mr. Glenowen!" added Doctor John, in a voice which any competent jury, blindfolded, would have pronounced identical.

Recognising the true fibre and the fineness of these two big, gentle autocrats, Uncle Bob made a special point of commending Barbara to their hearts – in which commending he so well sped, and indeed was so well seconded by Barbara herself, who loved them from the moment when her eyes first fell upon them, that they presently constituted themselves special guardians to the little maid, and indulgent mitigators of Mistress Mehitable's conscience. The manner in which they fulfilled the sometimes conflicting duties of these offices will appear pretty persistently in the sequel.

It was to Uncle Bob, also, that Barbara owed the somewhat disreputable friendship of old Debby. The very first day that he and Barbara went canoeing on the lake, they explored the outlet,

discovered old Debby's cabin, paid an uninvited call, and captivated the old dame's crusty heart. Glenowen knew human nature. He had the knack of going straight to the quintessential core of it, and pinning his faith to that in spite of all unpromising externals. He decided at once that Debby would be a good diversion for Barbara after he was gone; and when, later in the day, he learned that the old woman was universally but vaguely reprobated by the prim folk of Second Westings, he was more than ever assured that she would be a comfort to Barbara through many a dark hour of strangerhood and virtuous misunderstanding.

But Uncle Bob's visit had to end. He went away with misgivings, leaving Barbara to pit her careless candour, her thoughtless self-absorption, her scorn of all opinions that differed from her own, her caprices, her passionate enthusiasms, her fierce intolerance of criticism or control, against the granitic conventions of an old New England village. The half guilty, half amused support of Doctor John and Doctor Jim gave importance to her revolt, and so lightened the rod of Aunt Kitty's discipline as to save Barbara from the more ignominious of the penalties which her impetuous wilfulness would otherwise have incurred. The complete, though forbidden, sympathy of old Debby, affording the one safe outlet to her tumultuous resentments and passionate despairs, saved the child from brain-sickness; and once, indeed, on a particularly black day of humiliation, from suicide. Barbara had shaken the very foundations of law, order, and religion, by riding at a wild gallop, one Sunday afternoon, down the wide main street of Second Westings just as the good folk were coming out of meeting. Her rebellious waves of dark hair streamed out behind her little head. Her white teeth flashed wickedly between her parted scarlet lips, her big eyes flamed with the intoxication of liberty and protest – to these good folk it seemed an unholy light. Barbara ought to have been at meeting, but had been left at home, reluctantly, by Aunt Hitty, because she had seemed too sick to get out of bed. In very truth she had been sick beyond all feigning. Then one of those violent reactions of recovery which sometimes cause the nervous temperament to be miserably misunderstood had seized her at an inauspicious moment. As the tide of young vitality surged back to brain and vein and nerve, she had felt that she must let herself loose in wild action, or die. All unrealising the enormity of the offence, she had flung down her mad defiance to the sanctified and iron-bound repose of the New England Sabbath.

Such a sacrilege could not be overlooked or condoned. The congregation was appalled. Long upper lips were drawn down ominously, as austere eyes followed the vision of the fleeing child on the great black horse. Could it be that she was possessed of a devil? Pitying eyes were turned upon Aunt Hitty; and triumphant eyes of gratified grudge, moreover, for Aunt Hitty was proud, and had virtuous ill-wishers in the village. But Mistress Mehitable Ladd was equal to the occasion. With a level stare of her blue eyes, a cold tranquillity upon her small, fine mouth, she froze comment and forestalled suggestion. The feeling went abroad, in a subtle way, that the case would be dealt with and the piety of Second Westings vindicated in the eyes of Heaven. Doctor John and Doctor Jim looked grave, and said not a word. This was a time when Mistress Mehitable, they well knew, would brook no interference.

Of course there could be no question of such correction as would have fallen to the lot of any ordinary offender. There could be no such thing as putting a *Ladd* in the stocks. The regular machinery of village law rested quiescent. Equally of course, Mistress Mehitable would do nothing in anger. She was humiliated before the whole village, in a manner that could never be forgotten or wiped out. But her first feeling and her last feeling were alike of sorrow only. She would do her duty because Winthrop's child must be saved. But she had no proud consciousness of virtue in doing it. First, she attempted to explain to Barbara the depth, quality, and significance of her sin, its possible influence upon the ethics of Second Westings if allowed to go unpunished, the special variety of inherited evil which it revealed in her nature, and her stupendous need of having this evil eradicated by devotedly merciless correction. After the first few words of this exhortation, Barbara heard no more. She was at all times fiercely impatient of criticism, and now, being determined not to fly into a fury and further complicate her predicament, she shut her eyes, inwardly closed her ears, and concentrated

her imagination on memories of the longed-for plantation by the Pawtuxet. This concentration gave her vivid little face an air of quietude, subjection, and voiceless sorrow, which Aunt Hitty was glad to construe as repentance. But it earned no mitigation of punishment. For one whole week Barbara was a prisoner in her room, eating her heart out in hatred of the stupidity and injustice of life. Then came around, at last, another Sabbath. Barbara was taken to church. There her proud soul was affronted by a public rebuke from the pastor, who exhorted her from the pulpit, contented the congregation by a rehearsal of her punishment, and held her up as an example to the other children of the village. Barbara listened with shut eyes and white lips, her heart bursting with rage. She ached to kill him, to kill her aunt, to annihilate Second Westings – saving only the animals, old Debby, Mercy Chapman, Doctor John and Doctor Jim. But when the good divine went on to say that her discipline would be concluded with a wholesome chastisement on the morrow, in the privacy of the house to which her sinful conduct had brought grief, – then, indeed, her heart stood still. She felt a great calmness come over her. She made up her mind to escape by her window that very evening and drown herself in the lake. If life contained such horrors she would have done with it.

She did not go that night, however, because she feared the dark. It was gray dawn when she climbed from her window. Blind, resolved, swift-footed, she fled through the woods. Old Debby, resting in her punt by the lake's edge, not far from the Ladd landing-place, was pulling some sweet-rooted water-plants of a virtue known only to herself, when she was startled by a heavy splash and a little gasping cry which came from the other side of a steep point some four or five rods distant. Her vigorous old arms drove the punt through the water in mad haste – for there was something in the cry that wrenched at her heart. Rounding the point, she stood close in to the foot of a rock which jutted out into five or six feet of water. Peering down over the side of the punt, she saw lying on the bottom a slim, small body. A groan burst from her lips, for Barbara's face was half visible; and the old woman understood at once. She had heard the village gossip, and she had feared a tragedy. She knew that Barbara could swim, – but there was her long scarf of red silk twisted about the little arms lest resolution should falter in the face of the last great demand.

For a second old Debby was at fault. She could not swim. Then her brain worked. Reaching down with one of the oars, she twisted the blade tightly into the skirt of the child's gown, pulled her up, and snatched her into the boat. Experienced and ready in emergency, the old woman thrust ashore, laid the moveless little figure down upon a mossy hillock, and in a very few minutes succeeded in bringing it back to conscious life. She asked no questions, while Barbara clung to her, sobbing spasmodically at long intervals. She murmured pet names to her, caressed and soothed her, told her she was safe and no one should abuse her, and finally, lifting her into the punt and laying her gently on an armful of sweet bracken in the stern, rowed over the lake to her cabin. Throughout the journey Barbara lay with closed eyes, while the young life, slowly but obstinately reasserting itself, brought back the colour to cheeks and lips. Only once did she speak. Lifting her lids, she gazed fixedly at the hard-lined old face that bent over the swaying oars.

"Oh, why did you do it, Debby dear?" she asked, weakly. "If you knew how I hate to live!"

"Tut! tut! honey!" answered the old woman, with a cheerful positiveness that made her despair suddenly seem to Barbara unreasonable and unreal. "Ye don't want to die yet awhile. An' whatever ye want, ye cain't die yet awhile, fer I've seen it in yer blessed little hands that ye've got a long life afore ye. Moresoever, I read it that life's got a heap of happiness in store fer ye. So you be brave, Miss Barby, an' think how Uncle Bob would 'a' broke his poor heart if ye'd got yer own way an' drowned yerself."

"Yes," murmured Barbara, drowsily, sinking away into peace after her long pain, "Uncle Bob would have been sorry!" Then, after a pause, she added softly under her breath: "I'll run away and go to Uncle Bob some day!"

Old Debby heard the words, but made no comment. She stored them in her memory, and afterward kept crafty watch whenever she saw, by Barbara's mood, that a crisis was on at Aunt Kitty's.

For the time, however, she felt no great anxiety, it being very plain to her that this present crisis was past, and that Barbara was no longer strung up to the pitch of violent action or any course that would require initiative. Nerve and will alike relaxed, the child was submissive through exhaustion. At the cabin Debby first made her eat some breakfast, and then got her interested in a brood of chickens just one day out of the shell. The mother hen ruffled her feathers, scolded in shrill protest, and pecked angrily, but Barbara reached under the brooding wings and drew out a bead-eyed, golden-yellow, downy ball. Her face lightened tenderly as she felt the tiny bill and fragile baby claws snuggling against her enclosing palms.

"She's all right now!" said old Debby to herself, nodding her head in satisfaction. Aloud she said, – as she got a clean white sunbonnet out of the chest, adjusted it on her sparse locks, and tied its strings beneath her grim chin, – "I'm goin' to leave ye a bit, honey, to mind the chickens fer me an' look after the place while I go in to Second Westings to hev a bit o' talk with Doctor Jim. Promise me not to quit the place while I'm gone?"

"I'll take good care of everything till you get back, Debby," answered Barbara, abstractedly, without turning her head. She had relinquished the downy chicken, and was busy conciliating the ruffled hen with crumbs.

CHAPTER V

It was without misgiving that old Debby left the child to the healing of the solitude and the sun, the little wholesome responsibility, the unexacting companionship of the cat and the fowls. (This was before the day of the yellow pup, which did not come upon the scene until the following summer.) She had already learned that Barbara's promise was a thing to depend upon; and she felt that Barbara's heart would now be medicined more sweetly by silence than by words.

The problem to whose solution the dauntless old woman had set herself was that of getting Barbara back to her aunt's house on terms that should ward off any further discipline. With this end in view she turned, as a matter of course, to Doctor Jim Pigeon. Debby's position in Second Westings was theoretically that of an outlaw. She had a mysterious past. She was obstinately refractory about going to meeting. Without actually defying the authorities, she would quietly and unobtrusively go her own way in regard to many matters which Second Westings accounted momentous. Moreover, she was lamentably lacking in that subservience to her betters which the aristocracy of Second Westings held becoming. And she had knowledge that savoured of witchcraft. She would certainly have felt the heavy hand of correction more than once, and probably have been driven to seek a more humane environment, but for the staunch befriending of Doctor Jim. Something in the old woman's fearless independence appealed to both the big, loud-voiced, soft-hearted brothers – but to Doctor Jim in particular. He in particular came to perceive her clear common sense, to appreciate the loyal and humane heart that lurked within her acrid personality. He openly showed his favour, and stood between her and persecution, till Second Westings taught itself to regard her offences as privileged. So, though an outlaw, she became a useful and tolerated one. She served surpassingly to point a moral in family admonitions. She was much in favour as a bogey to frighten crying children into silence. And furthermore, when deadly sickness chanced to fall upon a household, and skilled help was lacking, and self-righteous prejudice melted away in the crucible of anguish, then old Debby was wont to appear unsummoned and work marvels by the magic of her nursing. Doctor Jim had been known to declare defiantly that Debby Blue's nursing had saved patients whom all his medicines could not cure, – whereto Doctor John had retorted, with brotherly sarcasm, "In spite of your medicines, Jim – in spite of them! Debby is the shield and buckler of your medical reputation."

So it was of course that the old woman turned to Doctor Jim in her difficulty. She knew that both brothers loved Barbara, and that both, individually and collectively, had more influence with Mistress Mehitable Ladd than any other living mortal could boast. She would talk to Doctor Jim. Doctor Jim would talk to Doctor John. Doctor John and Doctor Jim would together talk to Mistress Mehitable. And Barbara would be taken back without penalty of further exhortation or discipline. If not – well, old Debby's mind was made up as to what she would do in such a distressing contingency. She would herself run away with Barbara that same night, in cunning disguise and by devious ways, and travel to find Uncle Bob.

But there was to be no need of such audacious adventuring. When Doctor Jim heard what Barbara had done, he was sorely wrought up. He glared fiercely and wonderingly; his shaggy eyebrows knitted and knotted as he listened; he dashed his hands through his hair till the well dressed locks were sadly disarranged. When Debby ceased speaking he sprang up with an inarticulate roar, knocking over two chairs and one of the andirons.

"They have gone too far with the child," he cried out at last, mastering his ebullient emotions. "She is too high-strung for our rude handling. I swear she shall not be persecuted any longer – not if I have to take her away myself. No – not a word, not a word, Debby! Not another word! I'll just step across the yard and speak to Doctor John. Be good enough to wait here till I return."

Without hat or stick he ramped tempestuously across to his brother's office, in the opposite wing of the big, white-porticoed, red-doored house which they occupied together. He left old Debby

well content with the first step in her undertaking. She had but a little to wait ere he returned, noisy, hurried, and decisive.

"Now, my good Debby," he shouted, "I'm ready to accompany you. I will fetch Barbara myself. Doctor John is going over to lay our views before Mistress Ladd, and I'll warrant that wise and gentle lady will see the matter clearly, just as we do. Yes, yes, my good Debby, we have all been forgetting that the little wild rose of Maryland cannot be at once inured to the rigours of our New England air. Eh, what?"

When Doctor Jim and the old woman reached the cabin they found Barbara sound asleep, curled up in the sun beside the stoop, one arm around the gray-and-white cat, which lay, fast asleep also, against her breast. There was a darkness about her eyes, a hurt droop at the corners of her full red mouth, but the colour came wholesomely under the transparent tan of her cheeks. The picture stirred a great ache in Doctor Jim's childless heart, and with a tender growl he strode forward to snatch her up from her hard couch.

"S't! Don't ye frighten the poor baby!" said old Debby. Whereupon Doctor Jim went softly, mincing his big steps, and knelt down, and gathered the little figure in his arms. Waking slowly, Barbara slipped her arms around his neck, thrust her face under his chin, drew a long sigh of satisfaction; and so, the revolt and cruel indignation for the time all quenched in her wild spirit, she was carried down to the punt. Everything seemed settled without explanation or argument or promise. The trouble was all shifted to Doctor Jim's broad shoulders.

"Good-bye, Debby dear!" she murmured to the old woman, reaching down a caressing hand; "I'll come to see you in a few days, as soon as Aunt Hitty will let me!"

During the journey homeward Barbara threw off her languor, and became animated as the punt surged ahead under Doctor Jim's huge strokes. The conversation grew brisk, touching briefly such diverse topics as the new bay mare which the doctor had just purchased from Squire Hopgood of Westings Centre, and the latest point of exasperation between the merchants of Boston and the officers of the king's customs at that unruly port. This latter subject was one on which Doctor Jim and Barbara had already learned to disagree with a kind of affectionate ferocity. The child was a rebel in every fibre, while Doctor Jim had a vigorous Tory prejudice which kept his power of polemic well occupied in Second Westings. The two were presently so absorbed in controversy that the rocky point of the morning's attempted tragedy was passed without the tribute of a shudder or even a recognition. At last, with a mighty, half wrathful surge upon the oars, Doctor Jim beached the punt at the landing-place. As the distracted wave of his violence seethed hissing up the gravel and set the neighbour sedges a-swinging, he leaned forward and fixed the eager girl with a glare from under the penthouse of his eyebrows. Open-mouthed and intent, Barbara waited for his pronouncement.

"Child!" said he, waving a large, but white and fine forefinger for emphasis, "Don't you let that amiable and disreputable old vagabond, Debby Blue, or that pestilent rebel, Doctor John Pigeon, stuff your little head with notions. It's *your* place to stand by the *Crown*, right or wrong. Remember your blood. You know right well which side your father would have stood upon! Eh, what?"

The disputatious confidence died out of Barbara's face. For a moment her head drooped, for she knew in her heart how thoroughly that worshipped father would have identified himself with the king's party as soon as occasion arose. Then she looked up, and a mocking light danced in her gray eyes, while her mouth drew itself into lines of solemnity.

"I promise," she exclaimed, leaning forward and laying a thin little gipsy hand on Doctor Jim's knee, as if registering a vow, "that I won't harm your dear King George!"

"Baggage!" shouted Doctor Jim, snatching her from her seat and stalking up the beach with her.

Arriving at the Ladd place from the rear, by way of the pasture and the barnyard, they found Doctor John awaiting them. He was leaning over the little wicket gate at the back of the garden, eating a handful of plump gooseberries. With affected sternness he eyed their approach, not uttering a word till Barbara violently pushed the gate open and rushed at him. Then, straightening himself

to his full height, – he had a half-head to the good of even the towering Doctor Jim, – he extended his hand to her, and said, civilly:

"Do have a gooseberry!"

At this Barbara shrieked with laughter. Doctor John always seemed to her the very funniest thing in the world, and his humour, in season and out of season, quite irresistible. At the same time she pounded him impatiently with her fists, and tried to pull him down to her.

"I don't want a gooseberry," she cried. "I want you to kiss me. I haven't seen you for more than a week, and you go and act just as if I had seen you every day!"

Doctor John stooped, but held her at arm's length, and gazed at her with preternatural gravity.

"Tell me one thing," he said.

"What?" whispered Barbara, impressed.

"Have you been taking any of Jim Pigeon's physic since I saw you?"

"No!" shrieked Barbara, with another wild peal of laughter. "Doctor Jim's a Tory. He might poison me!"

"Then you shall have one kiss – no, two!" said Doctor John, picking her up.

"Ten – twenty – a hundred!" insisted the child, hugging him violently.

"There! there! Enough is as good as a feast!" interrupted Doctor John, presently, untwining her arms and setting her down. Then, Doctor Jim holding one of her hands and Doctor John the other, she skipped gaily up the path toward the house, like a wisp of light dancing between their giant bulks.

At this moment the figure of Mistress Mehitable appeared on the porch; and Barbara felt suddenly abashed. A realisation of all that had occurred, all she had done, all she had suffered, rushed over her. Her little fingers shut like steel upon the great, comforting hands that held them, and the colour for a moment faded out of her cheeks. Doctor John and Doctor Jim both felt the pang of emotion that darted through her. She felt, rather than saw, that their big faces leaned above her tenderly. But she did not want them to speak. She was afraid they might not say the right thing. She felt that *she* must say something at once, to divert their attention from her plight. She looked around desperately and caught sight, in the barnyard behind her, of the hired man milking the vicious red 'mooley' cow that would not let Abby milk her.

"Why!" she exclaimed, with a vast show of interest and surprise, "there's Amos milking Mooley!"

On the instant she recognised the bald irrelevancy of the remark, and wished she had not spoken. But Doctor John turned his head, eyed Amos with critical consideration, and said:

"Goodness gracious! why, so it is! Now, do you know, *I* should have expected to see the parson, or Squire Gillig, milking Mooley. Dear me, dear me!"

At this, though the deeper half of her heart was sick with apprehensive emotion, the other half was irresistibly titillated, and she laughed hysterically; while Doctor Jim emitted a vast, appreciative guffaw. Before anything more could be said, the voice of Mistress Mehitable came from the porch, kindly sweet, familiar, and cadenced as if no cataclysms whatever had lately shaken the world.

"Supper is waiting," she said, and smiled upon them gently as they approached.

"We come, fair mistress!" responded Doctor Jim, modulating his voice to a deferential softness.

"We come – and here we are," broke out Doctor John, snatching up Barbara, dashing forward, and thrusting her into her aunt's not unwilling arms.

It was a wise device to surmount the difficulty of the meeting.

"I am truly most glad to see you, my dear child," said Mistress Mehitable, earnestly, pressing Barbara to her heart and kissing her on the forehead. Barbara looked up, searched her aunt's face piercingly for a second, saw that the gentle blue eyes were something red and swollen with weeping, and impulsively lifted her lips to be kissed.

"I am sorry I grieved you, Aunt Hitty," she whispered, "I'll try hard not to."

Mistress Mehitable kissed her again, almost impetuously, gave her a squeeze of understanding, and with her arm over the child's shoulder led the way in to supper.

CHAPTER VI

After this upheaval there was better understanding for a time between Barbara and Mistress Mehitable. The lady made an honest effort to allow for some of the differences in the point of view of a child brought up on a Maryland plantation, under another creed, and spoiled from the cradle. She tried, also, to allow for the volcanic and alien strain which mingled in Barbara's veins with the well-ordered blood of the Ladds. But this alien strain was something she instinctively resented and instinctively longed to subdue. Moreover, she lacked imagination; and therefore, with the most sincere good purpose on both sides, the peace between herself and Barbara was but superficial, demanding the price of ceaseless vigilance. Barbara, on her part, strove to be more diligent with her tasks, and greatly conciliated Mistress Mehitable by her swift progress in plain sewing, penmanship, and playing on the harpsichord; and she quickly learned to read aloud with a charm and a justness of emphasis which her aunt never wearied of commending. But with the elaborate Dresden embroidery and intricate lace-making, and the flummery art of "papyrotamia" – a cutting of paper flowers – which then occupied the leisure of young maids of gentle breeding, Barbara had no patience at all. She scorned and hated them – and she purchased her release from them by electing rather the rigid and exacting pursuit of Latin grammar, which only masculine intellects were considered competent to acquire. In this she had had some grounding from her father; and now, under the sympathetic tuition of Doctor John, she found its strenuous intricacies a satisfaction to her restless brain, and made such progress as to compel the reluctant commendation of the Reverend Jonathan Sawyer himself.

Meanwhile, seeing the restraint under which the child was holding herself, Mistress Mehitable tried to moderate to some degree her disapproval of Barbara's vagaries and impetuositities, so that sometimes her wild rides, her canoeings at unseemly hours, her consortings with old Debby, her incorrigible absences from the noonday board, were suffered to go almost unrebuked. But it was a perennial vexation to Mistress Mehitable to observe Barbara's haughty indifference to the other young girls of her own class in the township, who were her fitting associates and might have redeemed her from her wildness; while, on the other hand, she insisted on making an intimate of Mercy Chapman, the daughter of Doctor John's hired man. Barbara found all the girls whom her aunt approved hopelessly uninteresting – prim, docile, pious, uninformed, addicted to tatting, excited over feather-work. But Mercy Chapman was fearless, adventurous within her limits, protectingly acquainted with all the birds' nests in the neighbourhood, and passionately fond of animals, especially horses and cats. Mercy Chapman, therefore, was admitted very cordially to certain outer chambers of Barbara's heart; while the daughters of Squire Grannis and Lawyer Perley were treated to a blank indifference which amounted to incivility, and excited the excoriating comment of their mammas.

Another severe trial to Mistress Mehitable's patience was Barbara's unhousewifely aversion to the kitchen. She vowed she could not abide the smell of cooking in her hair, averring that all cooks carried the savour of the frying-pan. When her aunt pointed out how humiliated she would be when she came to have a house of her own, she declared there would be time enough to learn when that day threatened; and she stoutly asseverated, moreover, that she could cook without learning. Upon this rash claim Mistress Mehitable pinned her to a test, being minded to abase her for her soul's good; but she emerged from the trial with vast accession of prestige, doing up sundry tasty desserts with a readiness born of past interest in the arcana of her father's kitchen by the Pawtuxet. But for all her aunt's exhortations she would explore no further in the domain of bake-pan and skillet. There was antagonism, moreover, between Barbara and Abby, to the point that if Mistress Mehitable had prevailed with her niece in this matter, she would have found herself obliged to change her cook.

There was one department of the household economy, however, in which Barbara was ever ready to meet her aunt half-way. It furnished a common ground, whereon many a threatened rupture was averted, or at least postponed. This was the still-room.

Barbara adored cleanliness and sweet smells. The clean, fragrant place, wherein bundles of herbs whose odours spoke to her of the South, and of strange lands, and of longed-for, half-forgotten dreams, and of desires which she could not understand, was to her a temple of enchanting mysteries.

Now Mistress Mehitable was a cunning distiller of the waters of bergamot, rosemary, mint, thyme, and egrimony; but Barbara developed a subtlety in the combining of herbs and simples which resulted in perfumes hitherto unknown. One essence, indeed, which she compounded, proved so penetrating, lasting, and exquisite, that her aunt, in a burst of staid enthusiasm, suggested that she should name it and write down the formula for security. This was done, to Barbara's great pride; and thereafter the "Water of Maryland Memories" became the proper thing to use in Second Westings. Nothing, perhaps, did more to make Barbara a personage in the township than this highly approved "Water of Maryland Memories."

In this way the days passed, so that at times Mistress Mehitable had hopes that the child was going to assimilate herself, and cease to pine for her plantation in the South. In reality, the rebellion in Barbara's soul but grew the stronger as her nature deepened and matured. Throughout her second spring at Second Westings, – when the mounting sap set her veins athrill in unison, and she saw the violets come back to the greening meadows, the quaker-ladies and the windflowers to the little glades of the wood; and the wild ducks returned from the south to nest by the lake, and the blackbirds chirred again in the swaying tops of the pine-trees, – her spirit chafed more fiercely at every bar. The maddest rides over upland field and pasture lot at dawn, the fiercest paddlings up and down the lake when the wind was driving and the chop sea tried her skill, were insufficient vent to her restlessness. Her thoughts kept reverting, in spite of herself, to the idea of seeking her uncle. Misunderstandings with Mistress Mehitable grew more frequent and more perilous. But just as she was beginning to feel that something desperate must happen at once, there came to her a responsibility which for a time diverted her thoughts.

The kitchen cat presented the household with four kittens. Having a well-grounded suspicion that kittens were a superfluity in Second Westings, the mother hid her furry miracles in the recesses of a loft in the barn. Not until their eyes were well open were they discovered; and it was Barbara who discovered them. With joyous indiscretion, all undreaming of the consequences, she proclaimed her discovery in the house. Then the customary stern decree went forth – but in this case tempered with fractional mercy, seeing that Mistress Mehitable was a just woman. One was spared to console the mother, and three were doomed to death.

Barbara, all undreaming of the decree, chanced to come upon Amos in the cow-shed, standing over a tub of water. She saw him drop a kitten into the tub, and pick up the next. She heard the faint mewling of the victims. For one instant her heart stood still with pain and fury. Then, speechless, but with face and eyes ablaze, she swooped down and sprang upon him with such impetuous violence that, bending over as he was, he lost his balance and sprawled headlong, upsetting the tub as he fell. As the flood went all abroad, sousing Amos effectually, Barbara snatched up the dripping and struggling mewer, clutched it to her bosom, seized the basket containing the other two, burst into wild tears, fled to the house, and shut herself into her room with her treasures. Straightway realising, however, that they would not be safe even there, she darted forth again, defying her aunt's efforts to stop her, ran to the woods, and hid them in the secret hollow of an old tree. Knowing that Amos would never have committed the enormity at his own instance, she hastened to make her peace with him, – which was easy, Amos being at heart her slave, – with a view to getting plenty of milk for the tiny prisoners; but against Mistress Mehitable her wrath burned hotly. She stayed out till long past supper, and crept to bed without speaking to any one – hungry save for warm milk supplied by Amos.

This was an open subversion of authority, and Mistress Mehitable was moved. In the morning she demanded the surrender of the kittens. Barbara fiercely refused. Then discipline was threatened – a whipping, perhaps, since duty must be done, however hard – or imprisonment in her room for a week. Barbara had a vision of the kittens slowly starving in their hollow tree, and her face set itself

in a way that gave Mistress Mehitable pause, suggesting tragedies. The next moment Barbara rushed from the room, flew bareheaded down the street, burst into Doctor Jim's office, and announced that she would kill herself rather than go back to her Aunt Hitty. Past events precluding the possibility of this being disregarded as an idle threat, it was perforce taken seriously. Doctor John was summoned. The situation was thrashed out in all its bearings; and finally, while Barbara curled herself up in a tired heap on the lounge and went to sleep, her two champions went to confer with Mistress Mehitable. Hard in this case was the task, for the little lady considered a principle at stake; but they came back at last triumphant. Barbara was to be allowed to retain the kittens, on the pledge that she would keep them from becoming in any way a nuisance to the rest of the house, and that she would, as soon as possible, find homes elsewhere for at least two of them. This last condition might have troubled her, but that Doctor John and Doctor Jim both winked as they announced it, which she properly interpreted to mean that they, being catless and mouse-ridden, would help her.

So Barbara went back to Aunt Hitty – who received her gravely; and the kittens came back from their hollow tree; and the shock of clashing spheres was averted. But the peace was a hollow and precarious one – an armistice, rather than a peace. For about a week Barbara's heart and hands were pretty well occupied by her little charges, and Mistress Mehitable found her conciliatory. But one day there came a letter from Uncle Bob, accompanied by a box which contained macaroons and marchpanes, candied angelica, a brooch of garnets, and a piece of watchet-blue paduasoy sufficient to make Barbara a dress. The letter announced that Uncle Bob was at Bridgeport, and about to sojourn for a time at the adjoining village of Stratford. Why, Stratford was in Connecticut – it could not be very far from Second Westings! Barbara's heart throbbed with excitement. The very next day she made excuse to visit Lawyer Perley, and consult a map of the Connecticut colony which she had once observed in his office. She noted the way the rivers ran – and her heart beat more wildly than ever. Just at this point conscience awoke. She put the dangerous thought away vehemently, and for a whole week was most studious to please. But Mistress Mehitable was still austere, still troubled in her heart as to whether she had done right about the kittens. One morning just after breakfast Barbara was set to hemming a fine linen napkin, at a time when she was in haste to be at something else more interesting. She scamped the uncongenial task – in very truth, the stitches were shocking. Hence came an unpleasantness. Barbara was sent to her room to meditate for an hour. She was now all on fire with revolt. Escape seemed within reach. She meditated to such purpose that when her hour was past she came forth smiling, and went about her affairs with gay diligence.

It was on the following morning that, when the first pallor of dawn touched the tree-tops, she climbed out of the window, down the apple-tree, and fled with her bundle and her kittens.

CHAPTER VII

After her breakfast at old Debby's, Barbara urged forward her canoe with keen exhilaration. Now was she really free, really advanced in her great adventure. A load of anxiety was lifted from her mind. She had succeeded in arranging so that the letter would be delivered to her aunt – a matter which had been fretting at her conscience. Moreover, old Debby had shown no surprise or disapproval on hearing of her rash venture. It nettled Barbara, indeed, to have so heroic an enterprise taken so lightly; but she augured therefrom that it was more feasible than she had dared to hope, and already she saw herself installed as mistress of Uncle Bob's home in Stratford.

"He'll love us, my babies!" she cried to the kittens in the basket, and forthwith plied her paddle so feverishly that in a few minutes she had to stop and take breath.

The river at this point wound through low meadows, sparsely treed with the towering, majestic water poplar, sycamore, and arching elm, with here and there a graceful river birch leaning pensively to contemplate its reflection in the stream. The trees and flowers were personal to Barbara, her quick senses differentiating them unerringly. The low meadow, swampy in spots, was a mass of herbs, shrubs, and rank grasses, for the most part now in full flower; and the sun was busy distilling from them all their perfumes, which came to Barbara's nostrils in warm, fitful, varying puffs. She noted the tenderly flushing feathery masses of meadowsweet, which she could never quite forgive for its lack of the perfume promised by its name. From the dry knolls came the heavy scent of the tall, bold umbels of the wild parsnip, at which she sniffed with passing resentment. Another breath of wind, and a turn of the stream into a somewhat less open neighbourhood, brought her a sweet and well-loved savour, and she half rose in her place to greet the presence of a thicket of swamp honeysuckle. She noted, as she went, pale crimson colonies of the swamp rose, hummed over softly by the bees and flies. Purple Jacob's-ladder draped the bushes luxuriantly, with wild clematis in lavish banks, and aerial stretches of the roseate monkey-flower on its almost invisible stems. Her heart went out to a cluster of scented snakemouth under the rim of the bank. She was about to turn her prow shoreward and gather the modest pinkish blossoms for their enchanting fragrance, when she observed leaning above them her mortal enemy among the tree-folk, the virulent poison sumac. She swerved sharply to the other side of the stream to avoid its hostile exhalations.

The little river now widened out and became still more sluggish. A narrow meadow island in mid-stream intoxicated Barbara's eyes with colour, being fringed with rank on rank of purple flag-flower, and its grassy heart flame-spotted with the blooms of the wild lily. The still water along the shores was crowded with floating-heart, and pale-blossomed arrowhead, and blue, rank pickerel-weed; and Barbara, who did not mind the heat, but revelled in the carnival of colour, drew a deep breath and declared to herself (giving the flat lie to ten thousand former assertions of the like intimacy) that the world was a beautiful place to live in. No sooner had she said it than her heart sank under a flood of bitter memories. She seemed once more to feel the water singing in her ears, to see its golden blur filling her eyes, as on that morning when she lay drowning in the lake. The glory of the summer day lost something of its brightness, and she paddled on doggedly, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left.

But this was a mood that could not long hold dominion over Barbara's spirit on this day of days, when she was journeying to freedom. It took no more than the scarlet flash of a tanager across her bow, the flapping of a startled brood of ducks from their covert in the sedge, to lure her back to gladness and the seeing eye. At last the river carried her into quite different surroundings. Still slow, and smooth, and deep, it entered the neighbourhood of great trees growing close, the ancient and unviolated forest. The day grew cool and solemn, the diffused light floating hushed under the great arches of brown and gray and green. By contrast it seemed dark, but the air was of a wonderful transparency, and Barbara's eyes, opening wide in delicious awe, saw everything more distinctly than

in the open. She whispered to the yellow birch, the paper birch, the beech, the maple, and the chestnut, each by name lovingly, as she slipped past their soaring trunks, knowing them by the texture and the features of their bark though their leaves hung far overhead. Her paddle dipped without noise, lest the mysteries of the forest conclave should be disturbed by her intrusion. So keen and so initiated were her young eyes that she discerned the sleeping nighthawk on his branch, where his likeness to a knotted excrescence of the bark made him feel secure from the most discriminating vision. Passing a dead pine with a small, neatly rounded hole about ten feet up the trunk, she heard, or thought she heard, the safe conferring of the nest full of young woodpeckers in its hollow depth – which, indeed, was probably but the stirring of her own blood-currents within her over-attentive little ears. Suddenly the vast stillness appeared to close down upon her, not with oppression, but with a calm that was half fearful, half delicious; and it seemed as if the fever of her veins was being slowly drawn away. The mystic shores slipped by with speed, though she hardly knew she was paddling. And when, suddenly, a great brown owl dropped from a beech limb and went winnowing soundlessly down the stream ahead of her, she caught her breath, feeling as if the soul of the silence had taken palpable shape before her eyes.

Now, as it seemed to Barbara, life and movement began to appear, at the summons of those shadowy wings. A little troop of pale-winged moths drifted, circling lightly, over the stream; and a fly-catcher, with thin, cheeping cries, dropped some twenty feet straight downward from an overhanging limb, fluttered and zigzagged for a moment in mid-air, capturing some small insect darters which Barbara could not see, then shot back into the leafage. Then upon a massive, sloping maple-branch close to the bank, she saw a stocky black-and-white shape slowly crawling. The head was small and flattened, the bright little eyes glittered upon her in defiance, and a formidable ridge of pointed quills erected itself angrily along the back. The animal uttered a low, squeaking grunt, and Barbara, with prompt discretion, steered as close as possible to the opposite bank, glancing apprehensively over her shoulder as she passed. She was strongly inclined to like the porcupine; but his ill-temper was manifest, and she had faith in the superstition that he could shoot his needle-like quills to a distance and pierce the object of his dislike. Barbara could not contemplate the possibility of appearing before her uncle like a pin-cushion, stuck full of porcupine quills.

Barely had she left the resentful porcupine behind, safely out of quill-flinging distance, when she observed a small, ruddy head cleaving the water in mid-channel. A pair of prominent eyes met hers apprehensively. Two smooth ripples curved away from the throat of the small swimmer. It was a red squirrel whom unwonted affairs had summoned to the other side of the river. Whatever the affairs, Barbara was determined to expedite them as far as she could. Overtaking the swimmer with a couple of smart strokes, she politely held out to him the blade of the paddle. The invitation was not to be resisted. With a scramble and a leap he came aboard, skipped along the gunwale, and perched himself, jaunty and chipper for all his bedraggled tail, on the extreme tip of the bow. There he twitched and chattered eagerly, while Barbara headed toward the shore where he would be. While he was yet a wide space distant from it, he sprang into the air. Barbara held her breath – but the little traveller knew his powers. He landed safely on a projecting root, flicked off behind a tree, and was gone. In a few seconds there came echoing from a tree-top far back in the shadows a loud, shrill chattering, which Barbara took for an expression of either gratitude or impudence. Caring not which it was, she smiled indulgently and paddled on.

And now to her sensitive nostrils there came suddenly an elusive wafture of wintergreen, and she looked around for the gray birch whose message she recognised. The homely, familiar smell reclaimed her from her mood of exaltation, and she realised that she was hungry. Just ahead was a grassy glade, whereinto the sun streamed broadly. She saw that it was far past noon. With a leap of the heart she realised that she must be nearing the point where the stream would join the great river which was to bear her, her kittens, and her fortunes, down to the sea and Uncle Bob. Yes, she recognised this same open glade, with the giant willow projecting over the water at its farther end.

She and Uncle Bob had both remarked upon its fairy beauty as they passed it going and coming, when they had explored the stream. She had but two or three miles farther to go, and her paddle would greet the waters of the great river. This was fitting place to halt and renew her strength.

Pulling up the prow of the canoe upon a tuft of sedge, she took out the basket and the bundle. From the heart of the bundle she drew a small leather bag, containing barley cakes, gingerbread, a tiny parcel of cold meat done up in oiled paper, a wooden saucer, and a little wooden bottle which she had filled with fresh milk at old Debby's. Having poured some of the milk into the saucer, and laid three or four shreds of the meat around its edges, she released the kittens from their basket. For two or three minutes, glad of freedom, the fat, furry things frisked and stretched and tumbled hither and thither, while Barbara kept watch upon them with solicitous eyes. But soon they grew afraid of the great spaces and the woods, being accustomed to an environment more straitened. They came back mewling to Barbara's feet, and she turned their attention to their dinner. While they lapped the milk, and daintily chewed the unaccustomed meat, she dined heartily but abstractedly on the barley cakes and gingerbread. Then, having satisfied her thirst by lying flat on the wet, grassy brink of the stream and lowering her lips to the water, she decided to rest a few minutes before resuming her voyage. Close by was a beech-tree, around whose trunk the moss looked tempting. Seating herself with her back against the tree, and the kittens curled up in her lap, she looked out dreamily over the hot grasses – and presently fell asleep.

She had slept perhaps half an hour when a crow, alighting on a low branch some half score paces distant, peered into the shade of the beech-tree and discovered the sweet picture. To him it was not sweet in the least, but indubitably interesting. "Cah – ah!" he exclaimed loudly, hopping up and down in his astonishment. The sharp voice awoke Barbara, and she rubbed her eyes.

"Gracious!" she exclaimed to the kittens, "what sleepyheads we are! Come, come, we must hurry up, or we'll never get to Uncle Bob!"

Before she was really well awake, the kittens were in the basket, the canoe was loaded and shoved off, and the adventurers were once more afloat upon their quest. Then only did Barbara give herself time to stretch and rub her eyes. After a few strokes she let the canoe drift with the current, while she laid down the paddle, and cooled her wrists and refreshed her face with handfuls of water.

As she straightened her brave little shoulders again to her labour, she was arrested by a strange sound as of the ripping of bark. It was an ominous kind of noise in the lonely stillness, and apprehensively she peered in the direction whence it came. Then she grew afraid. On the other shore, about a couple of rods back from the water, she saw a large black bear sitting upon its haunches beside a fallen and rotten tree. As she stared, wide-eyed and trembling, he lifted his great paw and laid hold of the dead bark. Again came the ripping, tearing noise, and off peeled a huge brown slab. To the exposed surface he applied a nimble tongue – and Barbara's terror subsided. She saw that he was quite too absorbed in the delights of an ant-log to pay any attention to a mere girl; and she remembered, too, that the black bear was a rather inoffensive soul so long as he was not treated contumeliously. For all this, however, she made as much haste from the spot as was consistent with a noiseless paddle – and kept furtive watch over her shoulder until she had put a good half-mile between the canoe and the ant-log.

By the time her concern about the bear had begun to flag she found that the current was quickening its pace. The trees slipped by more swiftly, and the shores grew bolder. A mellow, roaring clamour came to her ears, and with delicious trepidation she remembered a little rapid through which she must pass. Around a turn of the stream it came into view, its small waves sparkling where the forest gave back and admitted the afternoon sun. Her experience in running rapids had been slight, but she remembered the course which Uncle Bob had taken, between two large rocks where the water ran deep and smooth; and she called to mind, the further to brace her confidence, that Uncle Bob had stigmatised this particular rapid as mere child's play. Her heart beat rather wildly as she entered the broken water, and the currents gripped her, and the banks began to flee upward past her view.

But her eye held true and her wrist firm. The clamour filled her ears, but she laid her course with precision and fetched the very centre of the channel between the big rocks. From that point all was clear. The canoe went racing through the last ripple, which splashed her lightly as she passed; and in a reach of quiet water, foam-flecked and shining, she drew a deep breath of triumph. This, indeed, was to live. Never had she experienced a keener consciousness of power. She felt her enterprise already successful. The ancient woods, with their bears, their porcupines, their wide-winged brown owls, lay behind her. Second Westings was incalculably far away. There in plain view, rising over its comfortable orchard trees, not half a mile distant, were the roofs and chimneys of Gault House, overlooking, as she had heard, the waters of the great river. And beyond the next turn, as she thought with a thrill, she would see the great river itself.

CHAPTER VIII

Barbara rounded the next turn. There before her, widely gleaming, spread the waters of the great river itself. She cried out in her joy, and paddled madly – then paused, abashed, perceiving that she was the object of a critical but frankly admiring scrutiny. Her attention was diverted from the great river. Here was a tall boy – of her own caste unmistakably – poling himself out on a precarious little raft to meet her. Her flush of confusion passed as quickly as it had come, and laying her paddle across the gunwale, she waited with interest to discover what he might have to say.

Barbara had met but few boys of her own class, and those few had seemed, under her merciless analysis, uniformly uninteresting. Their salient characteristics, to her mind, were freckles, rudeness, ignorance, and a disposition to tease cats. But this youth was obviously different. Apparently about seventeen years of age, he was tall and graceful, and the way the clumsy log-raft on which he stood surged forward under the thrusts of his pole revealed his strength. Barbara loved strength, so long as delicacy saved it from coarseness. The boy was in his shirt sleeves, which were of spotless cambric, and Barbara noted, with approbation, the ample ruffles turned back, for convenience, from his sinewy brown hands. She observed that his brown, long-fronted, flowered vest was of silk, and his lighter brown small-clothes of a fine cloth worn only by the gentry; that his stockings were of black silk, and his shoes, drenched most of the time in the water that lapped over the raft, were adorned with large buckles of silver. She admired the formal fashion in which his black hair was tied back in a small and very precise queue. But most of all she liked his face, which was even darker than her own – lean, somewhat square in the jaw, with a broad forehead, and gray-blue, thoughtful eyes, set wide apart.

Now, Barbara's fearless scorn of conventions was equalled only by her ignorance of them. This boy pleased her, so why should she hesitate to show it? When the raft ranged up alongside the canoe, she laid hold upon it for anchorage and the greater convenience in conversation, and flashed upon the stranger the full dazzle of her scarlet lips, white teeth, and bewildering radiance of green eyes. The boy straightened himself from the pole in order to bow with the more ceremony – which he accomplished to Barbara's complete satisfaction in spite of the unsteadiness of the raft.

"What a nice-looking boy you are!" she said, frankly condescending. "What is your name?"

"Robert Gault, your very humble servant!" he replied, bowing again, and smiling. The smile was altogether to Barbara's fancy, and showed even, strong, white teeth, another most uncommon merit in a boy. "And I am sure," he went on, "that this is Mistress Barbara Ladd whom I have the honour to address."

"Why, how do you know me?" exclaimed Barbara, highly pleased. Then, quickly apprehensive, she added, "What makes you think I am Barbara Ladd?"

The boy noted the change in her countenance, and wondered at it. But he replied at once:

"Of course the name of Mistress Barbara Ladd, and her daring, and her canoe-craft, and her beauty" (this he added out of his own instant conviction), "have spread far down the river. When I came up here the other day to visit my grandmother" (he indicated slightly the distant roofs of Gault House), "I came with a great hope of being permitted to meet you!"

Evidently he knew nothing of her flight. Her uneasiness vanished. But she had never had a compliment before – a personal compliment, such as is dear to every wise feminine heart – and that word "beauty" was most melodious to her ears. As a matter of fact, she did not herself admire her own appearance at all, and even had an aversion to the mirror – but it occurred to her now, for the first time, that this was a point upon which it was not needful that every one should agree with her. It was practically her first real lesson in tolerance toward an opinion that differed from her own.

"I'll warrant you heard no good of that same Barbara Ladd, more's the pity!" she answered, coquettishly tossing her dark little head and shooting at him a distracting sidelong glance from narrowed lids. "Anyhow, if you are Lady Gault's grandson, I am most happy to meet you."

She stretched out to him her brown little hand, just now none too immaculate, indeed, but with breeding stamped on every slim line of it, and eloquent from the polished, well-trimmed, long, oval nails. Instantly, careless of the water and his fine cloth breeches, Robert went down upon one knee and gallantly kissed the proffered hand.

Barbara was just at an age when, for girls with Southern blood in their veins, womanhood and childhood lie so close entwined in their personalities that it is impossible to disentangle the golden and the silver threads. Never before had any one kissed her hand. She was surprised at the pleasant thrill it gave her; and she was surprised, too, at her sudden, inexplicable impulse to draw the hand away. It was a silly impulse, she told herself; so she controlled it, and accepted the kiss with the composure of a damsel well used to such ceremonious homage. But she did not like such a nice boy to be kneeling in the water.

"Why did you come out on that rickety thing?" she asked. "Why haven't you a boat or a canoe?"

"This was the only thing within reach," he explained, respectfully relinquishing her hand. "I saw you coming; and I knew it must be you, because no other girl could handle a canoe so beautifully; and I was afraid of losing you if I waited."

"That was civil of you. But aren't you getting very wet there? Won't you come into the canoe?"

"Really?" he exclaimed, lifting his chin with a quick gesture of eagerness. "Are you going to be so good to me? Then I must push this old raft ashore first and secure it. I don't know whom it belongs to."

As he poled to land in too much haste for any further conversation, Barbara paddled silently alongside and admired his skill. When the raft was tied up, and the pole tossed into the bushes, he took his place in the bow and knelt so as to face her.

"You must turn the other way," laughed Barbara.

"No, I was proposing, by your leave, to make this the stern, and ask you to let me paddle," he answered. "Won't you let me? You really look a little bit tired, and I want you to talk to me, if you will be so condescending. How can I turn my back to you?"

"I am not the least, leastest bit tired," protested Barbara, a little doubtfully. "But I don't mind letting you paddle for awhile, if you'll paddle hard and go the way I want you to." And with that she seated herself flat on the bottom of the canoe, with an air of relief that rather contradicted her protestation.

The boy laughed, as he turned the canoe with powerful, sweeping strokes.

"Surely I will paddle hard, and in whatsoever direction you command me. Am I not the most obedient of your slaves?"

This pleased Barbara. She loved slaves. She accepted his servitude at once and fully.

"Paddle straight out into the river, and then down!" she commanded.

At the imperious note in her voice, the boy looked both amused and pleased. Obeying without a word of question, he sent the canoe leaping forward under his deep, rhythmical strokes at a speed that filled Barbara with admiration.

"Oh, *how* strong you are and *how* well you paddle!" she cried, her eyes wide and sparkling, her lips parted, the crisp, rebellious curls blowing about her face. Never had Robert seen so bewitching a picture as this small figure curled up happily in the bow of the canoe, her little shoes of red leather and her black-stockinged ankles sticking out demurely from under her short blue striped skirt, her nut-brown, slender, finely modelled arms emerging from short loose sleeves. He was proud of her praise. He was partly engrossed in displaying his skill and strength to the very best advantage. But above all he was thinking of this picture, which was destined to flash back into his memory many a time in after days, with a poignancy of vividness that affected his action like a summons or an appeal.

In a few minutes the canoe was fairly out upon the bosom of the main stream, and headed downward with the strongly flowing current. Barbara clasped her hands with a movement which

expressed such rapture and relief that the boy's curiosity was excited. He began to feel that there was some mystery in the affair. Slackening his pace ever so slightly, he remarked:

"I suppose you are staying with friends somewhere in this neighbourhood. How fortunate I am – that is, if you will graciously permit me to go canoeing with you often while you are here."

But even as he spoke, his eyes took in, for the first time, the significance of the bundle and the basket, which he had been so far too occupied to notice. His wonder came forward and spoke plainly from his frank eyes, and Barbara was at a loss to explain.

"No," she said, "I am not staying anywhere in this neighbourhood. I don't know a soul in this neighbourhood but you."

"Then – you've come right from Second Westings!" he exclaimed.

"Right from Second Westings."

"All that distance since this morning?" he persisted.

She nodded impatiently.

"Through those woods – through the rapids – all alone?"

"Yes, all alone!" she answered, a little crisply. She was annoyed.

In his astonishment he laid down his paddle and leaned forward, scanning her face.

"But – " said he, embarrassed, "forgive me! I know it is none of my business, – but what does it mean?"

"Go on paddling," commanded Barbara. "Did you not promise you would obey me? *I* know what it means!" And she laughed, half maliciously. The boy looked worried, – and it was great fun to bring that worried look to his face.

He resumed his paddling, though much less vigorously, while she evaded his gaze, and a wilful smile clung about her lips. The current was swift, and they had soon left the imposing white columns of Gault House far behind. A tremendous sense of responsibility came over the boy, and again he stopped paddling.

"Oh, perhaps you are tired!" suggested Barbara, coolly. "Give me the paddle, and I'll set you ashore right here."

"I said just now it was none of my business," said he, gravely, appealingly, "but, do you know, I think perhaps it ought to be my business! I ought to ask!"

He retained the paddle, but turned the canoe's head up-stream and held it steady.

"What do you mean?" demanded Barbara, angrily. "Give me the paddle at once!"

Still he made no motion to obey.

"Do you realise," he asked, "that it's now near sundown, – that it will take till dark to work back against the current to where I met you, – that there's no place near here where a lady can rest for the night – "

"I don't care," interrupted Barbara hotly, ready to cry with anger and anxiety; "I'm going to travel all night. I'm going to the sea – to my uncle at Stratford! I just don't want you to interfere. Let me put you ashore at once!"

Robert was struck dumb with amazement. To the sea! This small girl, all alone! And evidently quite unacquainted with the perils of the river. It was superb pluck, – but it was wild, impossible folly. He did not know what to do. He turned the canoe toward shore, and presently found himself in quieter water, out of the current.

Observing his ready obedience, Barbara was mollified; but at the same time she was conscious of a sinking of the heart because he was going to leave her alone, when it would soon be dark. She had not considered, hitherto, this necessity of travelling in the dark. She made up her mind to tell the nice boy everything, and get him to advise her as to where she could stay for the night.

"I'm running away, you know, Master Gault," she said, sweetly, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world.

"Are you at all acquainted with the river?" he asked, gently, without a trace of resentment for the way she had spoken to him a moment before.

"No!" confessed Barbara, in a very small voice, deprecatingly.

"A few miles farther down there is a stretch of very bad water," said the boy. "Clever canoeist as you are, you would find it hard enough work going through in broad daylight. At night you would just be dashed to pieces in a minute."

"Oh, what shall I do?" cried Barbara, the perils of her adventure just beginning to touch her imagination.

"Let me take you to my grandmother's," he pleaded. "And we will paddle back to Second Westings to-morrow."

Barbara burst into a storm of tears.

"Never! never! never!" she sobbed. "I'll die in the rapids before I'll ever go back to Aunt Hitty! Oh, why did I like you? Why did I trust you? Oh, I don't know what to do!"

The boy's heart came into his throat and ached at the sight of her trouble. He longed desperately to help her. He had a wild impulse to swear that he would follow her and protect her, wherever she wanted to go, however impossible her undertaking. Instead of that, however, he kept silence and paddled forward resolutely for two or three minutes, while Barbara, her face buried in her hands, shook with sobs. At last he ran the canoe into a shadowy cove, where lily leaves floated on the unruffled water. Then he laid down his paddle.

"Tell me all about it, won't you, please?" he petitioned. "I do want so much to help you. And perhaps I can. And you *shall not* be sorry for trusting me!"

How very comforting his voice was! So tender, and kind, and with a faithful ring in its tenderness. Barbara suffered it to comfort her. Surely he would understand, if old Debby could! In a few moments she lifted her wet little face, flashed a smile at him through her tears, and said:

"How good and kind you are! Forgive me if I was bad to you. Yes, I'll tell you all about it, and then you can see for yourself why I had to come away."

Barbara's exposition was vivid and convincing. Her emotion, her utter sincerity, fused everything, and she had the gift of the telling phrase. What wonder if the serious, idealistic, chivalrous boy, upon whose nerves her fire and her alien, elusive beauty thrilled like wizard music, saw all the situation through her eyes. Her faults were invisible to him ere he had listened a minute to her narrative. She was right to run away. The venture, of course, was a mad one, but with his help it might well be carried through to success. As she talked on, an intoxication of enthusiasm and sympathy tingled along his blood and rose to his brain. Difficulties vanished, or displayed themselves to his deluded imagination only as obstacles which it would be splendid to overcome. In the ordinary affairs of life the boy was cool, judicious, reasonable, to a degree immeasurably beyond his years; but Barbara's strange magnetism had called forth the dreamer and the poet lurking at the foundations of his character; and his judgment, for the time, was overwhelmed. When Barbara's piercing eloquence ceased, and she paused breathless, eyes wide and lips parted in expectation, he said, solemnly:

"I will help you! To the utmost of my power I will help you!"

The words had the weight and significance of a consecration.

Barbara clapped her hands.

"Oh!" she cried, "How can I ever thank you for being so lovely to me? But I knew you were nice the moment I looked at you!" And a load rolled off her mind. With such a helper, already was her enterprise accomplished.

"I will try hard to be worthy of your favour," said Robert, with deep gravity, feeling that now indeed was boyhood put away and full manhood descended upon his shoulders. His brain was racked with the terrific problem of finding Barbara fit lodging for the night; but meantime he turned the canoe and paddled swiftly out into the current. Hardly had he changed his course when he noticed a light rowboat creeping up along the shore. But boats were no unusual sight on the river, and he paid

no heed to it. As for Barbara, she was so absorbed in watching his great strokes, and in thinking how delightful it was to have found such an ally, that the sound of the oars passed her ears unheeded, and she did not turn her head.

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