

Edholm Lizette M.

The Merriweather Girls and the Mystery of the Queen's Fan



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CHAPTER I

PRIVATE PROPERTY

The broad Hudson shimmered gaily in the sunshine of late summer, tiny rippling splashes of white dotted its surface and some of the joy of the day was reflected in the faces of the three girls who sat on the hillside far above the river bank, each intent on her own thoughts.

For a long time no one had spoken. Bet Baxter was watching a seagull rising, wheeling, soaring and settling again on the water, her blue eyes glowing as she followed the long sweeping lines of its flight and the tilt of its wings.

Joy Evans watched the gull with a different feeling. The thrill of its motion set every nerve in her body tingling with a desire to dance and skip or shout or laugh, while the quiet Shirley Williams did not see it at this moment; she was gazing into the finder of her camera as she pointed it toward the distant view of the Palisades.

The girls were often to be found here under the big elm tree. It was their favorite spot in all that wide expanse of lawn and woodland that made up the Merriweather Estate, the home of Colonel Baxter. And here it was that they always brought their picnic feast, and today the basket reposed near by filled with surprises that Auntie Gibbs, the Baxter housekeeper loved to prepare for Bet and her friends.

These girls had the run of the grounds, for Uncle Nat, the old gardener was as indulgent with this motherless girl as her easy-going father. What Bet wanted, she usually got, for no one could quite resist the charm of her smile, least of all her two chums, Shirley Williams and Joy Evans.

They made a lovely picture as they sat there with the sunlight pouring down upon them. Bet's golden hair was ruffled by the wind – but then Bet's hair was mostly ruffled for one reason or another. Her face was flushed, her eyes bright – just because she was happy and enjoyed life.

Shirley's head was bent over her camera. She was the serious one of the group. Shirley could enter into the good times as well as the others, but her smile came less quickly. And there were days, like the present, when her face would wrinkle with a frown as she tried to work out some problem in photography. Picture-taking was her hobby, and when the other girls skipped and danced about, Shirley would often trudge along burdened with a camera and tripod.

Joy was all sunshine. It was just as impossible for her to keep still as it would be for a dancing sunbeam to become motionless. Now, as she watched the gull, she suddenly jumped to her feet, and poising on tiptoe, swayed her slender body in rhythm with the flight of the gull.

Abruptly, a rustling sound, the breaking of a twig, disturbed the quiet and Bet sat erect with a gasp of surprise. She caught Joy by the arm. "S-sh! Keep quiet!"

For a tall girl, slightly older than the three, had appeared on top of the stone wall that enclosed the estate and with a quick jump had straddled it. Whipping off her cap she twirled it around her head. "Whoopee!" she shouted, and her curly black locks bobbed in the breeze. Then beating her cap against the wall at her side she cried: "Go it Powder! Let's race! Faster! Faster! Good old pony!"

Bet and her friends might have laughed at this strange sight if the play had continued a moment longer, but in the next second the girl had thrown herself flat on the wall and had burst into tears.

Bet reached her first, "What's the matter, dear?" she called. "Are you hurt? Let us help you!"

But the stranger had disappeared on the other side of the wall, or partly disappeared, for her heavy skirt had caught on a barbed wire that ran along the fence and held her suspended, head down.

With a spring Bet was on the wall. Letting herself drop to the other side, she caught the stranger's head in her arms and eased the fall, as the dress ripped and gave way.

The young girl's tears had vanished by the time she was once more in a standing position. Her face was red with embarrassment.

"I'm so sorry. – I'm terribly ashamed. – I didn't know anyone was around here. I thought I was miles in the country." She hesitated a second then added: "Did you see my exciting horseback ride?"

"Yes, we saw it!" laughed Bet, but it was such a hearty, friendly laugh that the stranger could not be hurt by it. In fact she had to laugh herself and was warmly drawn toward the girls as they pressed about her, brushing the dust off her dress, rescuing her cap, and even pinning the torn skirt.

Then the newcomer started to explain things, hesitated and grew confused, but Bet exclaimed: "Who are you and where did you come from? I thought I knew everybody in Lynnwood."

"I only came yesterday. I'm from Arizona and my name is Kit Patten."

"Oh, you're the girl Mrs. Stacey phoned me about. I told her I would be over to see you when you came. But this is a much better way of getting acquainted, isn't it?"

"I didn't know how far away this place was from Arizona or I don't believe I would ever have had the courage to come. I'm just plain homesick!" and another burst of tears threatened to overflow.

"You won't have a chance to be lonesome here," exclaimed Bet impulsively. "Will she, girls?"

"I should say not!" chirruped Joy. "But did you say you came from Arizona? Oh I'd just love to live in Arizona, and I don't blame you one bit for being lonesome. Arizona must be simply grand. I think cowboys are swell! I saw one in the movies the other night, and oh, he was handsome. Are all cowboys handsome?"

"Well no, not exactly!" laughed Kit. " – That is, I don't think so, I don't believe I ever saw a real handsome cowboy."

"You should go to the movies then. The one I saw the other day had the loveliest voice. Oh, I'd love to go to Arizona."

"And do people go around shooting all the time?" asked Bet. "Do tell us about it."

"Of course they don't shoot *all* the time. But there's nothing a cowboy likes better than to hear the noise of a gun, I do believe."

"And are you a cowgirl?" asked Joy. "I'd love to be a cowgirl and swing a rope around my head. Kit, won't you teach me how to throw a rope?"

Kit laughed in some confusion. The tears were not very far away. As she looked around her she said suddenly, "Well perhaps in time I'll get used to this."

"Used to what?" asked Bet puzzled.

"The houses and stores and no place big enough to stretch in! It's horrible!"

The girls looked at each other in surprise. They did not know what she was trying to say. Evidently Lynnwood did not please her. Indignation was not far away from Bet, who thought her home town was the best place in all the world.

Feeling that some explanation was necessary, Kit said: "I thought I'd choke down there with all those houses around, then I came up here where I could breathe, and I bumped into that "Private Property" sign – and, oh, I'll never get used to it. Never! I want to go home."

Bet's arm was around her. "Don't you mind, honey! You have us, and we'll make up to you for a lot of things, ponies and everything."

"Aw come on, cheer up!" sang Joy Evans. "It isn't so bad here as you may think. As long as Bet and Shirley and I are around and take you under our wings, you'll never miss what you left behind, because I'll tell you right now, we're a lively bunch."

"Oh I know," agreed Kit. "It's just because I'm disappointed in the place. Mrs. Stacey, who is a girlhood friend of mother's, wrote that she had a lovely big yard for me to play in. And it is the

biggest yard on that street, but after the desert and the mountains that go on for miles and miles, why this is just nothing at all, and I feel as if I were a wild bronco put out on a hobble."

At which everybody laughed heartily and the ice was forever broken.

"Come over on the other side of the wall," invited Bet, and seeing the girl hesitate with a glance at the sign she added: "Oh don't mind that sign. That's only for tramps. This is my home, I'm Bet Baxter and these are my two chums, Shirley Williams and Joy Evans."

Kit hesitated once more. "Were you having a picnic or something? Perhaps I'm not wanted."

"It's a picnic and you *are* wanted," cried Bet. "We all want her, don't we girls? All right, give her the welcome!"

Instantly the girls raised a chorus:

"Do we want her!

Do we want her!

Yes, we do, do, do!"

This cheering call echoed through the woods and it filled the heart of the little mountain girl with happiness.

It seemed to be Kit's unlucky day, for as she climbed down the wall her skirt caught once more on the wire and completed its destruction.

"Now that dress is done for! What a clumsy colt I am! You'd think I'd never been broken to saddle!" exclaimed Kit as her brown eyes snapped. "Don't I look a sight?"

The three girls were fascinated by the stranger. She walked with long swinging strides that she had learned in climbing hills from babyhood. Even the way she expressed herself was different from the girls in the village.

"What a pity you've spoiled your dress," said Bet. "I'll have that wire taken off immediately!" she exclaimed in indignation. "That's for tramps too, but I've told Dad more than once that the wire must go. Now I'll just have to insist."

It was Kit's turn to stare in amazement, for Bet's face was stern and reproving as she spoke of her father, much as if he were a small boy who had to be punished.

"Now where I come from, fathers say what's what, and not daughters," laughed Kit. Dad Patten was a pleasant man, quiet and given to few words, but he was the one who ruled, and no one else gave orders.

"Bet is a lucky girl, Kit. She's an only child and I'll tell you a secret, she's frightfully spoiled. She does just as she pleases all the time." This was from Shirley, who had scarcely spoken before. She was not less friendly than the others but found it harder to express herself freely.

"Don't believe her, Kit," laughed Bet Baxter. "There are lots of things I'm not allowed to do. Dad is one of the best and most understanding Dads but I always do exactly as he tells me."

"That's the joke," laughed Shirley. "Her father never tells her to do *anything!*"

CHAPTER II

THE PICNIC

"Let's eat!" exclaimed Joy. "I'm almost starved!" She was twirling on tiptoe on the top of a flat stone. "Do let's unpack the basket!"

"And I must go. I told Mrs. Stacey I'd be back soon. If you'll just tell me which way to start out. I'm lost!" laughed Kit.

"Oh you can't get lost in Lynnwood if you'd try. All roads lead to Main Street," declared Bet.

"Or away from Main Street, as I've found out this morning!"

"Oh but you must stay for the picnic; we wouldn't enjoy it now without you," urged Joy.

"But Mrs. Stacey might worry. No, I won't start in by causing her trouble. That wouldn't be right."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," exclaimed Bet. "You girls arrange the lunch under that tree and I'll run home and telephone Mrs. Stacey. She'll say yes, I know she will."

Without waiting for Kit's assent, Bet raced up the path, her hair flying in disorder, then she disappeared in the shrubbery. In a short time she returned with the good news that Kit was to spend the afternoon and evening with the girls. Mrs. Stacey was more than delighted that her young charge had found so congenial a group of friends. Not having children of her own, she hardly knew what to do with Kit. And when Bet promised to look after her, she was greatly relieved, for everyone in Lynnwood knew the bright little daughter of Colonel Baxter and trusted her.

When Bet returned with the good news, the lunch was already spread.

"Why this isn't a lunch at all!" exclaimed Joy with enthusiasm. "It's a banquet. And one of Auntie Gibbs' special ones. Isn't she a dear! She remembered that *I* liked devilled eggs."

"How you flatter yourself! Don't imagine for a minute that she made those for you. They were for her own little angel, Bet," said Shirley with a quiet laugh.

"An angel is the last thing she'd call *me*, Shirley. I know I've been frightfully contrary lately and I'm not in Auntie Gibbs' good graces. She said the other day she wished I had come a boy; that boys were lots nicer."

"The very idea!" cried the girls together. "Boys better than girls! That's silly!"

"Well if it's boys she likes, you certainly do your best to make her happy, for you look like a boy – and act like one most of the time," teased Joy.

"Thanks for the flattery!" Bet tossed her head with a pretended air of superiority. "I'd love to be a boy!"

"What would you do?" asked Joy.

"I'd run away to sea!"

"Old stuff! Take a big jump and get up to date!" Joy came back at her with a snap.

"Why be so old fashioned?" laughed Shirley. "Do something modern!"

"Maybe I'd stow away on an airplane then, going to China."

"That's more like you, Bet Baxter. That sea stuff never appealed to me. They always were made to work. And there isn't much work on an airplane," said Joy helping herself to another devilled egg.

"Do unwrap that package there," cried Shirley. "Let's see what Auntie Gibbs made for *me*. Chicken sandwiches, oh boy! And Auntie Gibbs' chicken sandwiches are the best ever, aren't they?"

"We ought to know," laughed Bet. "We've eaten about a ton of them. – Here Kit, do help yourself. Have another egg."

Kit had never tasted such a lunch. And it was all put up in such an appetizing way, it seemed a pity to disturb it. Everything was wrapped in wax paper or put up in small jars. There was actually a dish of crisp salad. There were stuffed olives and Bet grasped the jar with a little cry:

"Let's see if it is Auntie Gibbs' special. Oh girls, it is, it is! Auntie Gibbs' stuffed olives!"

"Well she *has* outdone herself!" Joy was munching an olive as she showered praise on the old housekeeper at the Manor.

"You know, Kit," explained Bet, "these stuffed olives are Auntie Gibbs' own invention and what goes into the filling of them, no one knows but herself. It's her secret!"

"And it's a secret to the death!" laughed Shirley. "She says she'll never tell and when she dies she will bequeath the recipe to her best friend. Won't that sound funny in a will?"

Kit laughed heartily at these new friends and Bet continued: "Oh yes, Auntie Gibbs makes a sort of religion out of her cooking. And when she hits upon something especially good, she guards the recipe as if it were a treasure and freezes up hard if anyone asks her how she made it."

"I wonder why?" ventured Kit.

"She says if everybody makes the same thing, it's no treat."

"This is very different from an Arizona picnic, girls," exclaimed Kit suddenly.

"Do tell us about it, Kit. What did you eat?"

"We mostly had Arizona strawberries and mountain trout," chuckled Kit and was pleased to see Bet's face express disbelief.

"Why, I didn't know you had strawberries in Arizona."

"And where do you get trout in that hot desert country, when the streams all go dry half the time?" asked Shirley.

Kit laughed with all her might. "There I knew I'd get caught at that old joke. Well you see it's this way. Arizona strawberries are the little red Mexican beans, which we pretty nearly live on out there. And the mountain trout are the strips of bacon that are fried to go with them."

"Oh you mean thing, trying to fool us like that!" shouted Joy, who had been sitting still so long that she had grown tired. Now she danced away down the path with a sandwich held above her head.

"What else would you have for a lunch?" asked Shirley.

"Oh like as not we'd take a Dutch oven along and bake biscuit – and make coffee. They are great on coffee in the desert. Sometimes we have great big picnics when people for miles around come."

"And are there lots of cowboys there?" asked Joy. "Now I'm getting interested. Imagine a picnic with lots of handsome cowboys. Oh, Kit you should have seen the show the other night. It was simply grand!"

"Oh, Joy, do keep quiet! Kit was telling us about the big picnic. What do they have at that?" Bet was interested in the description of the country that was unknown to her.

"That's when they have a barbecue."

"What in the world is that?" demanded Joy.

"The men dig great holes in the ground, and make a fire in it, and when there is a good bed of coals they hang a whole steer in it until it is roasted."

"I don't see how they can do it," said Bet.

"Of course the men have to dig the big trench and get the fire going the night before in order to get the bed of coals. Then they put in the sides of beef on iron rods, and cover it all over with green boughs. – And when that meat is roasted, you never tasted anything so good."

"It must be nice to live out there," mused Joy.

"I'd like to go and take pictures sometime," said Shirley.

"Maybe you can someday. Wouldn't I love to show you my mountains and desert!"

"And would you let me ride Powder?" asked Bet.

"Yes, that is if you *wanted* to after you'd see him buck. That horse is a rascal. And how he bucks! Even I have to hold on for dear life."

The picnic lunch ended with iced orangeade and little tarts filled with raspberries.

"Those must have been cooked for you, Kit, for we've never had any of them before," laughed Bet. "And one thing sure, if Auntie Gibbs had known that there was to be a new girl with us, she would have made her something special. She's a dear!"

"This lunch was simply perfect, Bet. I've eaten too much, as usual. I'm a little piggy. But oh how happy I am!" sang Joy.

Shirley had finished some time before and was setting the camera in place for a picture, arranging the attachment that enabled her to be in the group.

"What's she doing?" asked Kit as Shirley announced that everything was ready.

"It's this way," replied the girl. "I'm the only one who knows how to take a decent picture, so I have always had to be left out. I got tired of it and bought an attachment so I can snap the thing and be in it at the same time."

"That's clever! I've read about it, but I've never seen it worked."

Joy, who had been dancing around on one foot, suddenly came to a stop, munched the last of a raspberry tart and exclaimed: "Girls, I've got an idea!"

"Hooray!" cried Bet. "Joy has an idea, the first one today! Speak, child!"

"Wait a minute, girls, – now keep still just a second! There, okay! The picture is taken!" announced Shirley.

"Now for that idea, Joy. Let's hear it." The girls selected a shady spot and seated themselves while Joy continued:

"Wouldn't it be nice to form a club of some sort and meet every Saturday?"

"And as many times during the week as possible," readily agreed Bet. "What fun we can have!"

"But if we are a club, we should have a serious purpose. All clubs do," said Shirley.

"We might even do things for other people, like the Camp Fire Girls or the Girl Scouts," suggested Kit.

"Of course we wouldn't want to be selfish and think only of ourselves. We must stand for something. Honor, Loyalty and Friendship!" prompted Shirley again.

"Oh isn't that a good idea!" exclaimed Bet. "Let's do it."

"And we must have a name for our club," said Joy. "Bet, you think of something nice."

Bet buried her face in her two hands to shut out all the disturbing things about her, the trees, the blue sky and the big dark cloud in the distance. Usually she had ideas at the tip of her tongue, but it was the quiet Shirley who had an inspiration.

"Let's call ourselves the Merriweather Girls! I do love the name of Colonel Baxter's estate. Merriweather Manor!"

"How lovely!" exclaimed Kit. "Merriweather, what a pretty name! I'd love to be called a Merriweather Girl. – And wouldn't Mother be proud!"

"And we can take as our ideal the lovely Lady Betty Merriweather, the Lady of the Manor," said Bet thoughtfully.

"Oh tell me about her!" begged Kit.

"It's too long a story, Kit. When Bet gets talking about Lady Betty of the Manor, she keeps it up for the whole afternoon. Some rainy day when we have to stay in, she'll tell you the story," replied Shirley.

"Anyway now, we want to get this club started properly," cried Joy. "Come on and join hands!" The girls formed a circle, pressed their hands in a warm clasp and thus their club was formed and plans begun for helpfulness, friendship and fun.

They had hardly more than finished their lunch when the first cloud came over their friendship, but as it was a cloud laden with rain, appearing just over the top of the Palisades, it did not hurt the girls. With merry laughter they packed the basket, scattering crumbs and crusts over the grassy bank for the birds and squirrels.

"We'll have to hurry and get home, it's going to rain!" urged Bet. "We'll continue the first meeting of our club in my room."

"Oh I don't want to go to the Manor today, girls. My dress isn't presentable! I'll come some other time."

"Indeed you won't; you'll come now. We'll fix you up with another dress, so don't worry!" promised Bet.

Bet gave a loud, shrill whistle and stood waiting. Kit wondered what was coming now. Bet seemed to be waiting like a magician. Having whistled, it was time for the trick to appear.

Something did come with a rush. A big brown animal, as big as a mountain lion, leaped through the woods and rushed toward them. Although Kit was used to life in the open, she gasped for a moment, expecting to see the big creature spring upon them.

It was Bet's big collie dog. She threw both arms around his neck as he ran to her. "Come on Smiley Jim! You're a good boy! You did it just right that time, Smiley!" Then she turned to Kit and continued: "You can't imagine what a time I've had trying to teach that pup to obey."

"He seems to be well trained now. I never saw an order obeyed any quicker than that," laughed Kit.

"Smiley Jim, listen to me. This is our new chum, Kit Patten. I want you to be nice to her and welcome her in your best style!"

As if the dog understood what his mistress was saying, he gave a bound toward Kit, almost upsetting her, as he jumped with extended tongue. His lips were drawn back over his teeth in a broad grin.

"Shake hands, Smiley Jim," called Bet.

The dog put up his paw and Kit took it in her hand.

"Well, that's the first time I ever saw a dog smile," she exclaimed in astonishment. "Our mountain dogs are nothing much to look at. Dad calls them curs, but I like any kind of a dog. And this one is a beauty, I love him already!"

Smiley Jim felt that he had been given charge of Kit, for he stayed near her and pawed at her dress, demanding attention.

Shirley and Joy now finished the packing of the basket and were covering it as if it were to be sent on a long journey, but the reason was soon apparent when Smiley Jim started toward it, and took the handle in his mouth. He dropped it suddenly and gave several loud barks, making sure that everyone had seen his deed of helpfulness, then started toward the Manor.

"You see," laughed Shirley. "Even Smiley Jim wants to join our club and help others."

"And he wants the whole world to know that he's doing something noble. – But I don't blame him for that," bubbled Joy.

"That dog is strong for flattery," laughed Bet. "He just eats it up. Scold him and he'll pout like a wee child; praise him and he thrills."

"He's exactly like a human being, isn't he Bet?" remarked Shirley with a smile.

"Half the time I pretend he is human. I tell him all my secrets and all my happy surprises and even my troubles. And when I'm blue, he does my howling for me. Truly he does. He can't bear to see me sad."

"He's a wise dog. No one should be sad. I'm glad I'm alive! Right now I want to dance and shout, I'm so happy!"

"Go to it, Joy!" laughed Bet. "No one will stop you!"

The girl worked off her enthusiasm with a few well executed handsprings and cartwheels. "I'd better get rid of some of this energy or I may wreck the Manor!"

As they came in sight of the Manor, Auntie Gibbs, the housekeeper, was looking anxiously from the kitchen door, for the cloud that had been threatening, now opened with a deluge of rain and peal after peal of thunder sent the girls scurrying toward the side entrance.

Smiley Jim was already on the veranda, having deposited his burden, he was now barking excitedly, demanding the attention that he felt he merited.

CHAPTER III

THE MERRIWEATHER MANOR

Merriweather Manor dominated the hill, it occupied the very highest point of the estate and from its walls the ground sloped away, at one side, straight down to the high bank above the river. Century-old elms overshadowed the house and half hid the fine lines of the famous Colonial structure.

The Manor had been built by Lord Cecil Merriweather before the Revolution and had been kept up without being remodelled. It almost seemed as if its old timbers had retained the gay atmosphere that Lord Cecil and his lady had bequeathed it.

The front of the house stood out boldly with its great pillars. Along the side, double verandas ran the length of the house. These were the delight of Bet, for they had been her playground since babyhood.

The interior was no less attractive. Colonel Baxter was a collector of Colonial antiques and knick-knacks and the house was furnished with genuine old furniture that delighted his heart and kept the spirit of Colonial times in the mansion.

If Bet had been given her way she might have chosen for her own suite of rooms, something more modern, but even she had never dared to mention such a thing to the Colonel.

But if Colonel Baxter leaned toward the old fashions in his furnishing of a home, his methods in training a daughter were modern to an extreme. Auntie Gibbs declared it was without "rhyme or reason." "Letting a girl do as she pleases isn't bringing up at all. That child should have a strong hand to guide her. Every child should. And me, who could do it, ain't allowed no say-so."

"Well, Bet's all right, isn't she?" replied Uncle Nat to his wife's complaints. "She's a wise little thing and never goes far wrong." Uncle Nat had been gardener on the estate before Bet was born. He and his wife had known and loved the young wife of Colonel Baxter, and after her death had taken charge of the household, caring for and loving the motherless little girl as if she were their own.

"You're always taking her part," exclaimed Auntie Gibbs. "It isn't his training that makes Bet do the right thing. It's just because she's so much like her father. As I've told him lots of times, with any other girl it would be all wrong."

"So as it doesn't change Bet, I have nothing to say." The old man rubbed his hands together over the kitchen stove. Although autumn had hardly begun, there was a hint of chill in the air.

"Now, what are you doing, Nat Gibbs? Making a fire at this time of year! You aren't cold, are you? Lots of time to shiver and shake over a fire when the first snow comes."

"I'm just burning a few papers and trash to get them out of the way," said Uncle Nat quietly, with an elaborate wink at the ceiling.

Auntie Gibbs was a manager by nature, and to rule over a house and yet not have the final word in everything was very trying to her soul. She began to scold again:

"And now she's brought a new girl home with her today. And heaven only knows who or what she is!"

"She looks all right," said Nat.

"Looks are very deceiving, as you ought to know at your time of life. Bet says she comes from Arizona, one of them half-civilized places like they have in the movies. She doesn't like houses and yards and towns. Who ever heard of such a thing? Bet found her crying because she didn't have room enough to breathe. Mark my words, she's not very bright. Something very queer about a girl who thinks like that. 'Tisn't natural. I really shouldn't allow her to stay and associate with Bet."

"We'll leave that to Colonel Baxter, he'll know what to do."

"Him? He'll shake hands with that girl as if she were the Queen of Sheba or that Mary Antynetty he talks about. And after that she can have the run of the house."

"That's so, that's so!" agreed Nat Gibbs from long habit of agreeing with his wife. But while Auntie Gibbs stormed, and at times, raged over the way the Colonel was training his daughter, she never did try to take matters into her own hands, as she often threatened to do.

"Tain't his system that's working, let me tell you. It just happens."

Then after having had her say, the old woman dropped the subject to bustle about her kitchen and prepare a special supper for Bet and her chums, a thing she loved to do.

When Kit was led into the great entrance hall, she could only stare in amazement. It was as grand as she had imagined the palace of a king might be. The stained-glass windows that usually sent shafts of colored light across the floor, now gave a somber effect as of a dimly-lighted cathedral. A broad, winding stairway led to the floor above.

Kit stood in the center of the hall transfixed by what she saw. It was not the statue of Youth that held her attention. From a golden frame on the wall a face smiled down upon her and it was hard for the girl to believe that it was only a portrait. A fleeting smile seemed to play about the mouth, the delicately curved lips almost quivered and the brown eyes sparkled with joy.

Kit's hands instinctively went out toward the beautiful woman. She stood there smiling up at the portrait, and forgot the girls as they chattered about her.

Bet, who had been watching her closely, ran impulsively to her and threw both arms around the girl's neck.

"Oh you dear, darling thing! I knew you would! You love her already just the same as Shirley and Joy and I do."

"Who is she?" Kit's voice was hardly more than a whisper, she acted as if she had suddenly been brought back to earth after a flight in the clouds.

"It's our Lady of the Manor, Lady Betty Merriweather!"

"O – oh!" gasped Kit, without taking her eyes from the smiling eyes in the picture.

"Come along upstairs, Kit," called Joy as she took the steps two at a time. But the stranger felt that she was on sacred ground and could not have romped as Joy did. She lingered, looking up into the beautiful face.

"I feel just as if she wanted to say something to me," Kit said, as she reluctantly followed Bet.

"I think she does, probably. I know she tells *me* things sometimes," replied Bet seriously. "I love to lie on that divan in the hall and watch her. And she tells me all about the good times they used to have in these very rooms." Bet had dreamed so often beneath the vivacious, smiling face that she had come to believe that Lady Betty really did talk to her.

"It almost seems wicked to live in these rooms after her," murmured Kit, as the two girls went up the stairs slowly, their arms around each others' waists.

"I used to think that, too, until she laughed at me and said, 'Don't be silly, Bet.'"

Shirley and Joy's laughter floated down the stairway. "She really believes all that, Kit. She thinks that Lady Betty comes alive and talks to her."

"Well, I used to think that when I was a little, little girl," laughed Bet.

"And do you remember the day you told me she had called you Betty, and you didn't know whether to be angry or not?" asked Joy.

Bet turned to Kit. "You see I don't like to be called Betty. That name doesn't suit me at all. It's a lovely name for her, but for me it's ridiculous."

"And you'd better remember that, Kit Patten, for she gets angry if anyone calls her that," said the quiet Shirley.

"There's one girl who does it, and she's no friend of Bet's," laughed Joy.

"Oh, that Edith Whalen! She's always horrid, I wish she wouldn't call me anything. I get angry – so angry that I –"

"Ssh! I'll tell you what she does," whispered Joy. "She scratches!"

"I really don't, but I'd like to."

When the new friend was introduced to Auntie Gibbs she made such a good impression that the old lady's heart opened at once and took her in. But she wouldn't have told Uncle Nat or Bet that for the world.

"Can't we help?" asked Kit.

Bet was about to object but the old woman spoke up quickly. "Of course you can all help. Bet, you and your new friend set the table. And I'll find something for Shirley and Joy to do." Auntie Gibbs was never so happy as she was at times when she had several people to keep busy.

Kit was afraid to touch the exquisite glassware and silver and beautiful dishes that Bet handled with unconcern.

"Aren't you afraid you'll break them, Bet?" asked the girl.

"I used to be terribly afraid, but now I am used to them and I'm very careful. I just keep my mind on them until I get them on the table. Dad doesn't like to have anything broken, for all this table stuff is very old."

"Aren't the lights beautiful?" exclaimed Kit gazing up at the old candelabra.

"These lights are the pride of Dad's heart. I have never seen a more beautiful specimen."

"Are they very old?" asked Kit.

"As old as this house and then some, I guess. You see they used to have candles in them for lighting and Dad had electric lights made to look like the candles. I love them. Look at the ones on the walls. Those are old sconces. They match the chandelier."

Kit looked at the wall brackets as Bet switched on the lights.

"Oh, Bet, I've never seen anything so beautiful. See how that little light is reflected in the mirror behind it."

Bet suddenly rushed to the door. "Oh, Auntie Gibbs," she called. "Has Dad telephoned today?"

"No, not a word."

"Good! That means he'll come home to dinner. I just can't wait another week to have him see Kit."

"And I was mean enough to wish that he would be detained in the city. My dress looks so badly, I don't like to meet anyone."

"Now never you mind, Kit, my Dad wouldn't care at all," asserted Bet.

"Isn't there a dress of yours she can wear?" asked Auntie Gibbs.

"No, we've tried everything, she's about an inch broader than I am, and she can't get into anything except my bathrobe. Her own dress will look better than that, especially as Dad doesn't like to see girls sitting around in bath robes."

"Oh that Dad of yours! If he had his way, women would always be dressed up in those crazy Colonial things he has."

"That's a good idea! Kit, we're going to give you a gown from a hundred years ago and Dad will think you're marvelous." Bet ran to a large closet under the stairs and from an old chest brought out an armful of dresses of antique pattern. "Come on, girls, help me get Kit fixed up before Dad comes."

Kit's face was full of perplexity as the girls dragged her up the stairs and got her into a costume of pale yellow satin that set off her dark hair. It trailed behind her in a long sweeping train.

"You look as if you had just stepped out of a picture frame, Kit Patten!" exclaimed Joy with a curtsy.

"I've never seen anything as lovely as this!" gasped Kit as she fingered the heavy silk.

"Pooh! That's just one of the common dresses," laughed Shirley. "You should see some of his real elaborate costumes in the attic. One day he showed them to us. They're wonderful!"

"What does he do with all of them?" asked the puzzled Kit.

"Oh, Dad's a collector. Didn't you ever collect anything, Kit?"

"Oh, sure. I have a lot of birds' eggs and arrowheads and Indian baskets. I have heaps of baskets at home."

"Well, Dad collects Colonial dresses and everything else from that period. Some of the gowns came from Europe at about that time and are of gold cloth."

"Are they very valuable?" asked Kit.

"Some are, and then others are not so costly. This one isn't. He told us we could sometimes play with it. Probably it belonged to an ordinary person.

"How can he tell whether they are valuable or not, is what I'd like to know," said Shirley. "If I were going to buy anything, I'm sure I'd get cheated."

"Well the best of them get fooled once in a while. Daddy bought an imitation once. Can you imagine that? But only once, for my Dad is pretty smart."

When Kit was arrayed in the satin gown she looked quite stately and the girls escorted her down the winding stairs to the drawing room with great ceremony. By this time Kit was in a daze from all the unusual and extravagant things about her. She scarcely saw the furniture in the drawing room, for at that moment Colonel Baxter arrived and was being greeted by the girls.

Kit's eyes rested on the man who had just opened the door. Bet's father! He was tall and slender, with hair that had just begun to turn gray. His large hazel eyes were gentle and intense in their interest.

There was something very boyish in the face that lit up with pleasure at sight of Bet and her chums, and his quick glance around seemed to take in everything.

Kit saw the look of amused surprise on his face as he beheld her, but in a moment the amusement had been replaced by a very formal smile of welcome as Bet introduced her new friend. The stately bow as he kissed her finger tips quite startled Kit and made her flush with embarrassment. But this quickly passed as the girls laughed heartily and gathered about him, treating him as if he were their own age.

"Oh, what do you think, Dad! Kit has come all the way from Arizona. – And she has a cowpony."

"And oh, Colonel Baxter, just think," exclaimed Joy. "She knows a lot of cowboys and she can rope a wild steer just like they do in the movies! Don't you think she's wonderful!"

"Well that *is* wonderful, Miss Kit. When I saw you I thought you had come straight from the 18th Century, and here you are quite modern and thrilling."

The Colonel led the way again into the drawing room, placed a chair for Kit and in a few moments her embarrassment was gone and she was talking to him about her home in Arizona as if she had always known him. He seemed interested in every detail of her life in the mountains and would exclaim with pleasure over some of the commonplace things that she related, just as Bet and her chums had done.

The three girls had left her alone with Colonel Baxter while they went to help Auntie Gibbs, for the Manor was not over supplied with servants. Auntie Gibbs found it hard to get along with anyone and preferred to do most of the work herself, having extra help come in as needed.

At dinner Kit would have felt out of place if Bet's father had not kept her talking about her life in Arizona. Kit's home had been one of makeshifts and to be seated at a table where the stateliness and formality of the old Colonial days was being retained, made her uneasy and anxious for fear she might make some blunder.

But Bet and her father took her attention away from such details.

"Are there any Indians left in your part of the country, Miss Kit?" the Colonel asked graciously.

"Not very many. They have died out pretty fast in the last fifty years. They are mostly on reservations."

"What is the tribe called?" questioned Bet.

"The Apaches live up in the hills and then down nearer the towns there are Papagos. The latter have always been peaceful Indians and lived by farming."

"Ugh! I'd be frightened of an Indian. Aren't you, Kit?" asked Joy.

"No, not a bit. They are perfectly friendly. Most of them are too easy-going to do any harm."

"But I thought all Apaches were cruel."

"Indeed they're not!" exclaimed Kit indignantly. "My father has had old Apache Joe working for him ever since I can remember. He and his squaw, Mary, pretty nearly brought me up. I love them both, and Indian Mary is the kindest old thing in the world. Why Pa and Ma couldn't get along without them!"

"Are there any other Indians near them?" asked Shirley.

"No. They have company from the Reservation sometimes, but they seem perfectly happy with us."

Kit could not help but notice how different this dinner was from her hastily-eaten meals in Arizona. Here there was no hurry, the dessert had been finished for some time, yet the Colonel lingered and chatted. In her own home, as soon as the last bite had been swallowed, they all arose and began to clear away. Kit liked the leisurely way in which things were done; it gave a peaceful atmosphere to the meal.

At last the Colonel rose, and Bet and her chums followed him to the drawing room.

CHAPTER IV

THE QUEEN'S FAN

As Colonel Baxter led the way to the drawing room, he said: "Now girls, have you been real good, today?"

"Of course we have!" the girls exclaimed together.

"We're always good!" said Joy.

"All right then, I'll show you something nice."

"What is it?" cried Bet clapping her hands. "Don't tell me it's an old musket or sword or anything warlike. I'm fed up on guns!"

"No, I think this treasure will bring a response from your hearts, if you are as feminine as I think you are."

"It must be a ring!" exclaimed Joy.

"Something far more exciting!" laughed Colonel Baxter.

"Another gown!" suggested Shirley.

"Never. He has too many of them already. It must be something very special, for Dad's so excited. Has it jewels and everything?" laughed Bet.

"Guess!"

"Jewelled slippers?" said Kit.

"That's old stuff. He has three pair of those already. I know Dad wouldn't enthuse over slippers."

"What can it be? I'll guess that it's a necklace."

"No, Kit, it's still more interesting than a necklace," answered the Colonel.

"Oh, I know," suddenly cried Shirley. "A musical snuff box!"

"He had several of those once, I know he wouldn't make a fuss over them, they're not so valuable."

"Then what is it? Tell us quickly," pleaded Joy who never did like to play the game of guessing.

"Do you give up?"

"No, no, not yet!" pleaded Bet. "One more try."

"All right, but only one more, remember," laughed the Colonel.

"I'll guess that it's one of those crystal flasks for smelling salts."

"What were smelling salts for?" asked Kit.

"Well, you see in those days it was the fashion for young ladies to be frail and delicate and the least noise was apt to startle them and make them faint."

"Oh ho, I see," shouted Kit, "so they carried their restoratives around with them. Some idea!"

"Think of it," said Bet contemptuously. "Wanting to faint in order to look interesting."

"And is it a crystal flask?" asked Kit.

"No. Come on upstairs and I'll show you what it is."

They followed, laughing and chatting as they went. Kit had some difficulty in handling her long skirts. Bet watched her with amusement.

"Those gowns may be beautiful to look at, but for comfort, give me my short dress with no flounces or trains."

"That's what I say, too, Bet, but what can you expect from ladies who liked to faint?" laughed Kit.

"Did you ever think about it, Kit, how lucky we are to be born in this age? Girls have such a good time."

Their conversation was interrupted by Colonel Baxter calling, "Come along, girls!"

As they entered the room he sat at his desk holding a small package in his hand.

"This is something I bought a few months ago, and I took it out of the vault to have a photograph made of it. I am not quite *sure* that it is worth a lot of money, but I think it is. Here we are."

The Colonel unfolded a piece of silk and placed the treasure on it.

"A fan!" exclaimed Bet. "Oh, Daddy, what a beauty!" She held out her hand as if to take it, then hesitated. It seemed too pretty to touch.

The sticks and guards of the fan were of ivory, elaborately carved and pierced. The raised figures and designs were gilded. The mount of the fan was of parchment, painted with a scene of the Luxembourg gardens in which a fête was taking place. Young lovers in the dim sunlight under the trees, paid court to their ladies. There was flirting and teasing and romping play. Though gaiety and frivolity were expressed yet there was a certain wistfulness as well, a little heart-throb of haunting regret.

"It seems as if the artist had told a whole story in that tiny picture," said Kit quietly.

"That's it, exactly," exclaimed Colonel Baxter, bestowing a smile on Kit. This young girl had caught the idea of the painting at a glance.

"How can you tell whether it is valuable or not?" asked Shirley.

"We know it is worth a lot of money, for Watteau, a famous painter of the 18th Century did this work. But there is another detail to be decided before we can say how valuable it is."

The four girls, sensing a romance, looked on with interest and pleasure. Colonel Baxter fingered the fan with the touch of one who loved beautiful things. His hand caressed the carved ivory.

"Whose was it, Dad?" begged Bet. "It couldn't have been an ordinary person's fan."

"Of course it wasn't!" said Kit emphatically.

"Did it belong to Martha Washington?" asked Bet suddenly.

"We seem to be doing a lot of guessing today."

"No, it did not belong to Martha Washington. A lot more interesting than that!"

"Lady Betty Merriweather! I'm sure it was hers," exclaimed Kit.

"Wrong again! No, the fan once belonged to a queen, a beautiful, light-hearted queen of France, who came to a tragic end."

"Marie Antoinette!" gasped Bet. "Oh, Daddy, think of it!"

"Yes. When she first came to France as the bride of the Dauphin, Louis XV admired her for her great beauty and showered her with gifts. And we believe this fan was given to her by the king. As soon as I hear from an expert who is working on the case, I will know for sure."

"A queen's fan!" exclaimed Kit. "Doesn't it sound romantic?"

"And she would use it like this!" And Bet took the fan from her father, flourished it back and forth coquettishly with a flippant smile, half hidden by the fan.

A chorus of laughter greeted Bet's imitation of a flirt.

"Where did my daughter learn all those arts?" asked her father.

"She didn't have to learn them. They came natural," sang Joy, as she danced out of the room.

"Ladies used their fans to send messages to the lovers they preferred and to tease them with arch glances at other suitors," explained Bet. "It was a gay life at Court!"

"And I can imagine that Marie Antoinette knew how to flirt with her fan. She was so gay and lighthearted," mused Kit.

"Poor Marie Antoinette! I've always pitied her, even if she was thoughtless and spoiled. She didn't deserve to be punished as she was!" Shirley said pensively.

"I always like to think of her at Little Trianon, where she used to play at being a farm girl and churn, and feed the chickens. She was just a child. – I do hope the fan was hers," said Kit.

"And I hope so for many reasons," smiled Colonel Baxter. "It will be worth three times as much money if she owned it."

"Wouldn't old Peter Gruff open his eyes wide if he could see it?" exclaimed Bet. "How that man loves antiques!"

Peter Gruff was a second-hand dealer in Lynnwood whose hobby was picking up antiques at a ridiculously low price and selling them at fabulous sums. In a trade, he could stand watching.

As the Colonel folded up the fan carefully and put it away, Bet exclaimed: "Come on, girls, there's something in my room that I'd like to show you."

"Wait a minute, Shirley," called the Colonel. "Do you want to take a picture of the queen's fan for me?"

"Oh, Colonel Baxter, do you suppose I can do it?"

"Certainly, there's no trick about it. Bring your camera the next time you come up."

"That will be on Monday morning."

"Good! I'll be home until noon."

Half an hour later the toot of an auto horn sounded from the driveway.

"Aw, that's Bob coming to take me home," pouted Joy. "Wish he'd wait until I telephone. He always comes before I'm half ready."

The Colonel was at the door before the young man could ring the bell. Bob Evans and Phil Gordon were two boys that the Colonel admired and was always glad to welcome to the Manor.

Like his sister, Bob was light-hearted. Yet he could be serious at times, and it is well that that was the case, for Joy's mother was a gay, frivolous young woman, who loved to go to parties and there were times when Joy might have been neglected had it not been for her brother's care.

He was a slightly built boy with a head of curly blond locks that were the envy of Joy, for her hair was neither blond nor dark and had no sign of curl.

Phil was the opposite. He was almost as dark as Kit, a tall, handsome fellow whose dark eyes were sombre and gave the impression that he was brooding.

Bob seemed to bring the breeze from outside in with him as he smiled and held out his hand to Colonel Baxter.

"Joy would never come home if I didn't drag her away, Colonel."

"That's because we are never quite willing to give up our little sprite," replied the Colonel with Old World courtesy. "We couldn't get along without Joy's laughter."

"Giggles, you mean," answered her brother playfully.

"Sounds just like a brother!" laughed Joy, looking up at the pleasant-faced boy beside her.

Bob and Phil were introduced to Kit and were quite startled at the vision of the Colonial maid.

"Having a masquerade?" asked Phil.

"Nothing like that," answered Bet. "Lady Betty Merriweather decided to come out of her frame, and here she is."

"She's much better looking than Lady Betty, if you ask me," exclaimed Bob, but if Kit liked the compliment she didn't show it. Lady Betty was perfect and no one could outdo her in anything.

"Come on, Joy, hurry up. Let's get started!" said Bob suddenly.

"But we'll have to wait for Kit to get out of that dress and change to her own."

"So Lady Merriweather isn't going to step back into the frame? Too bad!" laughed Phil. "It was very becoming!"

The girl who appeared a few moments later in torn skirt was no less attractive than the Colonial maid. To the eyes of the modern young people, she seemed far more human and companionable.

As the automobile carried them away. Bet turned to her father:

"Did you ever see anyone who could choose such good friends as I can?"

"Never in this world, Bet!" laughed the Colonel as he pinched her cheek.

CHAPTER V

ACROSS THE HUDSON

Before saying goodnight to her chums, Bet had made a plan for them to come back early on Monday for another picnic.

"When we get to studying, we just drop swimming and everything else."

"I'll be most afraid to swim in a big river like the Hudson," said Kit with a shiver. "I learned to swim in a water hole in Indian Creek, and it wasn't much more than just deep enough to cover me."

"You'll love the Hudson!" declared Joy. "At high tide it's great!"

"I didn't know that a river had a tide."

"Close to the sea they do. The Hudson has, as you'll soon learn. It has a tide and even a good strong undertow in places. – Well, you just have to know the Hudson to appreciate all its fine points," Bet exclaimed with enthusiasm.

"Be sure and bring your camera, Miss Fixit, and take that picture of the queen's fan. I'll be home all morning." Because Shirley was always tinkering with her camera, the Colonel had playfully given her the name of Miss Fixit.

So the girls had agreed to come early and have a long day at the beach that belonged to the Merriweather estate.

"I don't hear any invitations for us to come along. Don't you think boys enjoy picnics as well as girls?" protested Bob Evans.

"Boys spoil all the fun," said Joy contemptuously, but with mischief in her eyes.

"No, they don't, Joy!" Bet disagreed. "Sometimes they are very useful. – To build picnic fires and keep them going."

"Oh, yes, you're always glad to make use of us. But you never invite us to any of your good times. Never!"

"If big brothers wouldn't tease so much, they might get invited once in a while," laughed Joy as she looked up at her tall brother, who had always been her protector and hero as long as she could remember.

"Do come," shouted Bet as they got into the car. "Even if we didn't think to invite you, we'll be mighty glad to see you when you get there." As she turned and linked her arm in her father's, she little dreamed that her last remark would be remembered by all four girls as a strange prophecy.

The girls saw each other only for a moment at church the next day. Bet left immediately after the service, as the Colonel was expecting guests for dinner. She gave her friends a smile, a wave of the hand and a funny pantomime which they understood. They were to be at the Manor the next morning, early.

And early it was. Bet had been up for hours but Colonel Baxter had not finished his breakfast when the girls came in like shafts of sunlight through shutters.

Shirley was loaded down with two cameras and a tripod, her face glowing with the pleasure she felt in being able to do a favor for Bet's father.

Shirley was the only one of the group whose parents were not well off financially. She was the oldest of four children and lived in a small house on the main street of the village. She had done all sorts of odd jobs in order to earn her longed-for cameras, and had studied them well.

Sometimes when the girls talked of the future when they would go to college, Shirley's face became clouded, for her father's poor health made it impossible for him to be steadily employed. Shirley's chances of college seemed very slim. The Colonel often called upon Shirley to take pictures of Bet on the grounds of the estate, as an excuse to give the girl a chance to earn a few dollars.

"Do hurry, Dad, and finish your breakfast! We're anxious to be off. Couldn't the pictures wait?"

"No, Bet, I want to take them now," replied Shirley. "You can go along if you want to and I'll come later."

"We'll wait," answered Bet cheerfully.

The Colonel rose and saluted, "I am at your service!"

Shirley arranged the lighting like an expert and took several poses of the little fan against a background of black velvet, placing it in different degrees of light. The other girls were not particularly interested. Shirley's hobby was all right, when she took pictures of them, but just now they were impatient to be off.

Then Shirley had to waste more time showing the Colonel about the latest self-photography attachment that she had recently bought.

"I got tired always being left out of the group. And the other girls can't take pictures to suit me."

"Is this the same idea that is used in photographing wild animals?" asked Colonel Baxter.

"It's the same principle, but a little wire or spring is touched by the animal and this releases the shutter and for night pictures sets off a flash powder as well. I'm going to get one of those attachments by winter time, as the camera company has offered a prize for wild animal pictures."

"Aw, come on, Shirley," called Joy. "You're an old slow poke. You finished that picture long ago."

But Shirley delayed still longer to put her large camera carefully away. The small one she tucked under her arm to take with her to the river.

It was Kit's first trip to the little beach belonging to Bet's father. The bath house with its tiny dressing rooms pleased her immensely. "Imagine," she exclaimed, "building a house to dress and undress in. A clump of mesquite bushes always served my purpose."

Kit could not pretend to be other than she was. Fearing that these girls, whose homes were so elegant, might look down upon her, she had planned to keep her affairs to herself, but whenever anything unusual came up, she was startled by the contrast and blurted out the queer makeshifts that they had in her crude home in the desert.

She had no need to fear. The girls were as interested in Kit's description of her home life as they were in the exploits of the cowboys that she loved to talk about.

"I'd just love to eat out under a cotton-wood tree by the stream. That must be a lovely way to live," exclaimed Bet.

"I don't think you'd enjoy it for long, after what you're used to. You'd want to get back to all that lovely glassware and beautiful dishes. You'd miss your Manor."

"Of course I'd miss the Manor if I was away from it, but I'd love the other, too, I know I would."

They had just come in sight of the broad Hudson and Kit stopped short to gaze upon that wide flow of water.

"And oh, look at that lovely boat out there! Whose is it?"

"That's Dad's motor boat. I'm not allowed to run it, although I know I could just as well as not. Dad seems to think I'm still a baby and a girl baby at that."

They had reached the beach and Bet was opening the door of the boat house as she spoke and when Kit saw the little green canoe, she was speechless. She looked at it with glowing eyes.

"Isn't it a dear? It's mine!" said Bet.

"Can you go out with it whenever you want to?"

"Yes, any time."

"I've never been in a boat in my life!" Kit's breath came in excited little gasps. "Could we go out in it today?"

"Never had a boat ride!" exclaimed Joy. "How funny! What did you do with yourself?"

"Well, mostly I rode Powder, my cowpony. That was fun. Horseback riding is great sport!"

"You're the lucky one! I've never had a horseback ride in my life."

"What!" cried Kit. "Never had a horseback ride? How funny!"

And everybody laughed, for what was a common-place happening for one was in the nature of an adventure for the other.

"After lunch we'll go out in the canoe!" declared Bet. "I'll be mighty proud to give you your first boat ride."

Kit looked at the brightly-painted little canoe many times before the lunch was finished and Bet declared herself ready to go.

The egg sandwiches and stuffed olives were eaten without much thought by Kit. Apple turnovers and fudge slipped down as if she were in a dream, for Kit's mind was racing ahead to the thrill of getting out on the Hudson in a boat.

The girls helped Bet to drag the canoe out of the boat house and to the edge of the water. Joy and Shirley decided not to go. Shirley was trying to get some good pictures of the gulls today and Joy wasn't in the mood.

"Anyway," laughed Joy, "in a canoe, two is company, three's a crowd. Trot along and enjoy yourselves."

Kit took her place in the boat and Bet shoved it off the sandy beach with her paddle, and in a moment Kit felt it bobbing on the water. Living up to its name, "*The Arrow*," it shot gracefully out to the stream, guided by Bet's capable hands.

Kit held on to both sides of the boat at first. She felt quivery and half frightened.

Bet was using the paddle vigorously. She wore no hat and her blond hair was tousled as usual. It seemed impossible for Bet to keep her unruly locks in order at any time, but now as the breeze ruffled it, she looked like some half-wild elfin creature.

She was tall for her age but slender and her pink and white coloring gave her an appearance of frailty, but when she used her paddle, Kit was fascinated to watch the swelling of the muscles of her arms. She seemed made of springs as she plied the paddle first at one side then the other, with quick, sure, strokes.

"Have you ever been across the Hudson?" asked Kit. "Across the Hudson! Doesn't that sound romantic? It's a long way, isn't it?"

"Only about a mile, I think."

"And have you ever paddled over there?"

"Heaps of times! We've been everywhere on this river. We used to go out and get in the wash of the river steamers. That was lots of fun. Once we almost got upset and Dad made me promise I'd never do that again."

"Well, if you don't mind, Bet, you can dispense with all the extra thrills today. For this is giving me heart trouble as it is."

"Why, what's the matter? You're not frightened, are you?"

"Of course I'm frightened. Scared stiff!"

Bet stopped paddling to laugh at her friend. "Kit Patten, you're the funniest girl I've ever seen."

Then with long sweeping strokes, *The Arrow* shot out into the channel, sending sparkling drops into the air as it cut its way through the current.

Kit's brown eyes were shining with excitement and the sense of danger that she imagined was there. "Why, Bet Baxter, this is the most thrilling thing I've ever done in my life. It's more fun than horseback riding. It's a perfect day. It was good of you to take me."

The canoe was now headed toward the beach, having reached the quieter waters of the farther shore, and as soon as the boat touched the sand, Bet sprang out and with practised hand drew the bow up on the beach.

"Here you are, Kit. Now you've been across the Hudson. It's not often a person has a chance to have her wishes granted so quickly."

"Isn't it wonderful!" gasped Kit. "I've never had such a gorgeous time in my life."

The girls stretched themselves out on the sand for a few minutes.

"Doesn't Lynnwood look beautiful over there? And just see how very romantic the Manor is from here."

"I think we'd better start back at once," exclaimed Bet suddenly. "It's getting cloudy over that way again, and as we've had a thunder storm every day for a week, we may have another this afternoon."

They lost no time in getting into the boat, for already there was a distant peal of thunder. It was miles and miles away, but Bet didn't intend to take chances. Her hand worked in a steady rhythm that sent the boat ahead like a flat stone skimming the water.

But as they reached the middle of the river, the wind struck them suddenly and with violence. It seemed to the girls as if the canoe had been lifted and turned over. Kit gave a little cry of terror, but Bet's look of reproach was sufficient. At a signal from Bet, the girl slid to the bottom of the boat, and remained still.

The storm was upon them. A fierce wind shook the little craft as if a hand had clutched it.

Bet kept the bow of the boat head-on to the heavy rollers that threatened to capsize it. The quiet river had suddenly become a regular sea, choppy and vicious, and Bet strained at the paddle, her face white and tense.

Kit crouched in the bottom of the boat. She was anxious to help but did not know what to do. During a little lull she cried: "Oh, Bet, can't I help? You must be tired. Let me try to paddle, I think I can."

"No," screamed Bet to make herself heard. "Just keep still and don't even speak to me. I need every breath to work with."

The boat tossed and plunged. "It acts like a bucking horse when they put on a saddle for the first time," thought Kit. The bow of the canoe was lifted straight up and then lowered on a wave. For a second it rested only to meet another swell.

Sometimes Bet raised her eyes and looked anxiously down the river. The squall was coming straight toward them; travelling with the wind, it was racing over the water.

The little boat rolled and plunged as the blinding sheet of rain enveloped it, shutting out for a moment the shore on both sides of the river.

Spray broke over the sides and soaked the girls to the skin.

"There's a can there, Kit. Try to keep the water baled out." It was all she could do to make Kit hear, even when she screamed with all her might.

Bet's arms were aching, her eyes strained with the nerve tension and the strength that she was giving out to keep the boat from being engulfed.

While Kit would have gladly relieved her, she had never handled a paddle in her life and now was not the time to experiment.

"It can't be far now," muttered Bet between her clenched teeth. It seemed to the girl that she had been paddling for hours.

Bet spoke again: "Scream for help, Kit! Someone may hear, but it's not likely. Scream anyway!"

And Kit shouted until she was hoarse but the wind stopped the sound. Even Bet, close beside her, could hardly hear and made a sign for her to stop.

"If I can only get across the channel," thought Bet, as she struggled to keep the canoe balanced.

But all her efforts seemed not to send the canoe ahead even a foot. Buffeted by the angry waves, it was all she could do to keep it afloat.

"Hold on to it, Bet! That's it! Keep it up!" cried Kit. "I think I see a boat coming!"

For a brief moment darkness settled down upon Bet. Her head swam. Her strength was about gone.

There was a violent jar on the canoe that brought her back to her senses. If they were to be saved, she must keep on.

Another wave dashed over them, and Kit's arm was kept busy scooping up the water and throwing it back to the river. Never had she worked so desperately in her life.

At intervals she glanced up at Bet, but the girl's white face was no comfort to her.

Her eyes searched the river again. "It is a boat, Bet! Help is coming!" and as another dash of water struck them she screamed: "Hold it, Bet! Don't let go!"

CHAPTER VI

THE RESCUE

After the canoe had started on its voyage that was to prove so terrifying to the girls, Joy had stretched herself at full length in the sand preparing for a lazy afternoon. She was content just to let the sand sift through her fingers. Mostly she liked to dance or sing, but today she was too indolent. Shirley busied herself as usual, directing her camera this time toward some gulls that flew above her head.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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