

Richards Laura Elizabeth Howe

Quicksilver Sue



Laura Richards

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Laura Elizabeth Howe Richards

Quicksilver Sue

CHAPTER I

SOMETHING EXCITING

Mother! Mother! he has a daughter! Isn't that perfectly fine?"

Mrs. Penrose looked up wearily; her head ached, and Sue was so noisy!

"Who has a daughter?" she asked. "Can't you speak a little lower, Sue? Your voice goes through my head like a needle. Who is it that has a daughter?"

Sue's bright face fell for an instant, and she swung her sunbonnet impatiently; but the next moment she started again at full speed.

"The new agent for the Pashmet Mills, Mother. Everybody is talking about it. They are going to live at the hotel. They have taken the best rooms, and Mr. Binns has had them all painted and papered, – the rooms, I mean, of course, – and new curtains, and everything. Her name is Clarice, and she is fifteen, and very pretty; and he is real rich – "

"Very rich," corrected her mother, with a little frown of pain.

"Very rich," Sue went on; "and her clothes are simply fine; and – and – oh, Mother, isn't it elegant?"

"Sue, where have you been?" asked her mother, rousing herself. (Bad English was one of the few things that did rouse Mrs. Penrose.) "Whom have you been talking with, child? I am sure you never hear Mary Hart say 'isn't it elegant'!"

"Oh! Mary is a schoolma'am, Mother. But I never did say it before, and I won't again – truly I won't. Annie Rooney told me, and she said it, and so I didn't think. Annie is going to be waitress at the hotel, you know, and she's just as excited as I am about it."

"Annie Rooney is not a suitable companion for you, my daughter, and I am not interested in hotel gossip. Besides, my head aches too much to talk any more."

"I'll go and tell Mary!" said Sue.

"Will you hand me my medicine before you go, Sue?"

But Sue was already gone. The door banged, and the mother sank back with a weary, fretful sigh. Why was Sue so impetuous, so unguided? Why was she not thoughtful and considerate, like Mary Hart?

Sue whirled upstairs like a breeze, and rushed into her own room. The room, a pleasant, sunny one, looked as if a breeze were blowing in it all day long. A jacket was tossed on one chair, a dress on another. The dressing-table was a cheerful litter of ribbons, photographs, books, papers, and hats. (This made it hard to find one's brush and comb sometimes; but then, it was convenient to have the other things where one could get at them.) There was a writing-table, but the squirrel lived on that; it was the best place to put the cage, because he liked the sun. (Sue never would have thought of moving the table somewhere else and leaving the space for the cage.) And the closet was entirely full and running over. The walls were covered with pictures of every variety, from the Sistine Madonna down to a splendid four-in-hand cut out of the "Graphic." Most of them had something hanging on the frame – a bird's nest, or a branch of barberries, or a tangle of gray moss. Sometimes the picture could still be seen; again, it could not, except when the wind blew the adornment aside. Altogether, the room looked as if some one had a good time in it, and as if that some one were always in a hurry; and this was the case.

"Shall I telephone," said Sue, "or shall I send a pigeon? Oh, I can't stop to go out to the dove-cote; I'll telephone."

She ran to the window, where there was a curious arrangement of wires running across the street to the opposite house. She rang a bell and pulled a wire, and another bell jingled in the distance. Then she took up an object which looked like (and indeed was) the half of a pair of opera-glasses with the glass taken out. Holding this to her mouth, she roared softly: "Hallo, Central! Hallo!"

There was a pause; then a voice across the street replied in muffled tones: "Hallo! What number?"

"Number five hundred and seven. Miss Mary Hart."

Immediately a girl appeared at the opposite window, holding the other barrel of the opera-glass to her lips.

"Hallo!" she shouted. "What do you want?"

"Oh, Mary, have you heard?"

"No. What?"

"Why, there 's a girl coming to live at the hotel – coming to stay all summer! Her father is agent of the Pashmet Mills. She is two years older than we are. Isn't that perfectly fine, Mary? I'm just as excited as I can be about it. I can't stand still a minute."

"So I see," said Mary Hart, who had a round, rosy, sensible face, and quiet blue eyes. "But do try to stand still, Sue! People don't jump up and down when they are telephoning, you know."

"Oh! I can't help it, Mary. My feet just seem to go of themselves. Isn't it perfectly splendid, Mary? You don't seem to care one bit. I'm sorry I told you, Mary Hart."

"Oh, no, you're not!" said Mary, good-naturedly. "But how can I tell whether it is splendid or not, Sue, before I have seen the girl? What is her name?"

"Oh! didn't I tell you? Clarice Packard. Isn't that a perfectly lovely name? Oh, Mary, I just can't wait to see her; can you? It's so exciting! I thought there was never going to be anything exciting again, and now just see! Don't you hope she will know how to act, and dress up, and things? I do."

"Suppose you come over and tell me more about it," Mary suggested. "I must shell the peas now, and I'll bring them out on the door-step; then we can sit and shell them together while you tell me."

"All right; I'll come right over."

Sue turned quickly, prepared to dash out of the room as she had dashed into it, but caught her foot in a loop of the wire that she had forgotten to hang up, and fell headlong over a chair. The chair and Sue came heavily against the squirrel's cage, sending the door, which was insecurely fastened, flying open. Before Sue could pick herself up, Mister Cracker was out, frisking about on the dressing-table, and dangerously near the open window.

"Oh! what shall I do?" cried Sue. "That horrid old wire! Cracker, now be good, that's a dear fellow! Here, I know! I had some nuts somewhere – I know I had! Wait, Cracker, do wait!"

But Cracker was not inclined to wait, and while Sue was rummaging various pockets which she thought might contain the nuts, he slipped quietly out of the window and scuttled up the nearest tree, chattering triumphantly. Sue emerged from the closet, very red in the face, and inclined to be angry at the ingratitude of her pet. "After all the trouble I have had teaching him to eat all kinds of things he didn't like!" she exclaimed. "Well, at any rate, I sha'n't have any more eggs to boil hard, and Katy said I couldn't have any more, anyhow, because I cracked the saucepans when I forgot them. And, anyhow, he wasn't very happy, and I know I should just hate to live in a cage, even with a whirligig – though it must be fun at first."

Consoling herself in this wise, Sue flashed down the stairs, and almost ran over her little sister Lily, who was coming up.

"Oh, Susie," said Lily, "will you help me with my dolly's dress? I have done all I can without some one to show me, and Mamma's head aches so she can't, and Katy is ironing."

"Not now, Lily; don't you see I am in a terrible hurry? Go and play, like a good little girl!"

"But I've no one to play with, Susie," said the child, piteously.

"Find some one, then, and don't bother! Perhaps I'll show you about the dress after dinner, if I have time."

Never stopping to look at the little face clouded with disappointment, Sue ran on. There was no cloud on her own face. She was a vision of sunshine as she ran across the street, her fair hair flying, her hazel eyes shining, her brown holland dress fluttering in the wind.

The opposite house looked pleasant and cheerful. The door stood open, and one could look through the long, narrow hall and into the garden beyond, where the tall purple phlox seemed to be nodding to the tiger-lilies that peeped round the edge of the front door. The door was painted green, and had a bright brass knocker; and the broad stone step made a delightful seat when warmed through and through by the sun, as it was now. The great horse-chestnut trees in front of the house made just enough shade to keep one's eyes from being dazzled, but not enough to shut out the sunbeams which twinkled down in green and gold, and made the front dooryard almost a fairy place.

Mary came out, bringing a basket of peas and a shining tin dish; she sat down, and made room for Sue beside her with a smile.

"This is more satisfactory than telephoning," she said. "Now, Sue, take a long breath and tell me all about it."

Sue breathed deep, and began again the wonderful tale:

"Why, I met Annie Rooney this morning, when I went down for the mail. You remember Annie, who used to live with us? Mamma doesn't like her much, but she was always nice to me, and she always likes to stop and talk when I meet her. Well! and so she told me. They may be here any day now, Mr. Packard and his daughter. Her name is Clarice – oh! I told you that, didn't I? Don't you think it 's a perfectly lovely name, Mary? It sounds like a book, you know, with long, golden hair, and deep, unfathomable eyes, and – "

"I never saw a book with golden hair," said Mary, "to say nothing of unfathomable eyes."

"Mary, now stop teasing me! You know perfectly well what I mean. I am sure she must be beautiful with a name like that. Oh, dear! I wish I had a name like that, instead of this stupid one. Susan! I don't see how any one could possibly be so cruel as to name a child Susan. When I grow up, Mary, do you know what I am going to do? I made up my mind as soon as I heard about Clarice Packard. I'm going to appear before the President and ask him to change my name."

"Sue, what do you mean?"

"My dear, it's true! It's what they do. I've read about it somewhere. It has to be done by act of legislature, and of course the President tells Congress, and they see about it. I should *like* to have that same name – Clarice. It's the prettiest name I ever heard of; don't you think so, Mary? But of course I can't be a copy-cat, so I am going to have it Faeroline – you remember that story about Faeroline? Faeroline Medora, or else Medora Faeroline. Which do you think would be prettiest, Mary?"

"I like Sue better than either!" said Mary, stoutly.

"Oh, Mary, you do discourage me sometimes! Well, where was I?"

"You had got as far as her name," said Mary.

"Oh, yes. Well, and her father is rich. I should think he must be enormously rich. And she must be beautiful, – I am quite sure she must; and – she dresses splendidly, Annie says; and – and they are coming to live at the hotel; and she is fifteen – I told you that? And – well, I suppose that is all I really know just yet, Mary; but I *feel* a great, *great* deal more. I feel, somehow, that this is a very serious event in my life, Mary. You know how I have been longing for something exciting to happen. Only yesterday, don't you remember, I was saying that I didn't believe anything would ever happen, now that we had finished 'Ivanhoe'; and now just see!"

"I should think they would try to get a house, if they are well off," said practical Mary. "It must be horrid, living at a hotel."

"Oh, Mary, you have *no* imagination! I think it would be perfectly delightful to stay at a hotel. I've always just longed to; it has been one of my dreams that some day we might give up housekeeping and live at the hotel; but of course we never shall."

"For pity's sake! I should hope not, Sue, with a good home of your own! Why, what would there be to like about it?"

"Oh, it would be so exciting! People coming and going all the time, and bells ringing, and looking-glasses everywhere, and – and never knowing what one is going to have for dinner, and all kinds of good things in little covered dishes, just like 'Little Kid Milk, table appear!' Don't you remember? And – it would be so exciting! You know I love excitement, Mary, and I just hate to know what I am going to have for dinner."

"I know I am going to have peas for dinner," said Mary, – "at least, I want them. Sue, you haven't shelled a dozen peas; I shall have to go and get Bridget to help me."

"Oh, no; I will, I truly will!" cried Sue; and she shelled with ardor for a few minutes, the pods flying open and the peas rattling merrily into the tin basin.

"Do you remember the three peas in the Andersen story?" she said presently. "I always used to wish I had been one of those – the one that grew up, you know, and made a little garden for the sick girl. Wouldn't it be lovely, Mary, to come up out of the ground, and find you could grow, and put out leaves, and then have flowers? Only, I would be sweet peas, – not this kind, – and look so lovely, just like sunset wings, and smell sweet for sick people, and – Mary! Mary Hart! who is that?"

Sue was looking down the street eagerly. Mary looked too, and saw a carriage coming toward them with two people in it.

"No one we know, I think," said Mary.

"They are strangers!" cried Sue, in great excitement, – "a man and a girl. Mary Hart, I do believe it is Mr. Packard and Clarice! It must be. They are strangers, I tell you! I never saw either of them in my life. And look at her hat! Mary, *will* you look at her hat?"

"I *am* looking at it!" said Mary. "Yes, Sue; I shouldn't wonder if you were right. Where are you going?"

"Indoors, so that I can stare. You wouldn't be so rude, Mary, as to stare at her where she can see you? You aren't going to stare at all! Oh, Mary, what's the use of not being *human*? You are too poky for anything. A stranger, – and that girl, of all the world, – and not have a good look at her? Mary, I do find you trying sometimes. Well, I am going. Good-by."

And Sue flew into the house, and flattened herself behind the window-curtain, where she could see without being seen. Mary was provoked for a moment, but her vexation passed with the cracking of a dozen pods. It was impossible to be long vexed with Sue.

As the gay carriage passed, she looked up quietly for a moment, to meet the unwinking stare of a pair of pale blue eyes, which seemed to be studying her as a new species in creation. A slender girl, with very light hair and eyebrows, a pale skin, and a thin, set mouth – not pretty, Mary thought, but with an "air," as Sue would say, and very showily dressed. The blouse of bright changeable silk, with numberless lace ruffles, the vast hat, like a flower-garden and bird-shop in one, the gold chain and lace parasol, shone strangely in the peaceful village street.

Mary returned the stare with a quiet look, then looked down at her peas again.

"What, oh, what shall we do,"

she said to herself, quoting a rhyme her father had once made, —

"What, oh, what shall we do
With our poor little Quicksilver Sue?"

CHAPTER II

THE NEW-COMER

Sue Penrose went home that day feeling, as she had said to Mary, that something serious had happened. The advent of a stranger, and that stranger a girl not very far from her own and Mary's age, was indeed a wonderful thing. Hilton was a quiet village, and it happened that she and Mary had few friends of their own age. They had never felt the need of any, being always together from babyhood. Mary would never, it might be, feel the need; but Sue was always a dreamer of dreams, and always longed for something new, something different from every-day pleasures and cares. When the schooners came up the river, in summer, to load with ice from Mr. Hart's great ice-houses, Sue always longed to go with them when they sailed. There were little girls on them sometimes; she had seen them. She had gone so far as to beg Mr. Hart to let her go as stewardess on board the "Rosy Dawn." She felt that a voyage on a vessel with such a name must be joy indeed. But Mr. Hart always laughed at her so, it would have been hard to have patience with him if he were not so dear and good. She longed to go away on the trains, too, or to have the pair of cream-colored horses that were the pride of the livery-stable – to take them and the buckboard, and drive away, quite away, to new places, where people didn't have their dresses made over every year, and where they had new things every day in the shop-windows. Her dreams always took her away from Hilton; for it seemed impossible that anything new or strange should ever come there to the sleepy home village. She and Mary had always made their plays out of books, and so had plenty of excitement in that way; but Hilton itself was asleep, – her mother said so, – and it would never wake up. And now, all in a moment, the scene was changed. Here, into the very village street, had come a stranger – a wonderful girl looking like a princess, with jewels and gold chains and shimmering silk; and this girl was going to lead a kind of fairy life at a marvelous place called a hotel, where the walls were frescoed, and you could make up stories about them all the time you were eating your dinner; and the dinner itself was as different as possible from a plain brown leg of mutton, which Katy would always do over three times in just the same order: first a pie, then a fricassee, then mincemeat. Katy was so tiresome! But this girl with the fair hair and the beautiful name would have surprises three times a day, surprises with silver covers, – at least, they looked like silver, – and have four kinds of pie to choose from. And she came from New York! That was perhaps the most wonderful part of all. Sue sat down on her window-seat, gave a long sigh, and fell into a dream of New York.

They drove curricles there, glittering curricles like those in books. (Sue was very fond of books, provided they were "exciting.")

And the houses – well, she knew something about those, of course; she had heard them described; and of course it was stupid to have them all alike outside, row upon row of brownstone; but, on the other hand, perhaps it made the mystery of the inside all the more amazing. To go in at a plain brown door in a plain brown house, and find – find – oh! what would not one find? There would be curtains of filmy lace – lace was always filmy when it was not rich and creamy; well, on the whole, she would have the curtains rich and creamy, and keep the filmy kind for something else. And the carpets were crimson, of course, and so thick your feet sank quite out of sight in them. ("I don't see how you could run," Sue admitted to herself; "but no matter.") The walls were "hung," not papered – hung with satin and damask, or else with Spanish leather, gilded, like those in the Hans Andersen story. Sue had begged piteously, when her room was done over last year, to have it hung with gilded Spanish leather. She had quoted to her mother the song the old hangings sang after they had been there for ages and ages:

"The gilding decays,

But hog's leather stays."

But it made no difference; the room was papered. Sue had chosen the paper, to be sure, and it was certainly pretty; but – she sighed as she looked around and fancied the Spanish leather creaking in the wind; then sank into her dream again.

The rooms, downstairs, at least, were in suites, opening out of each other in long vistas ("vista" was a lovely word! there were no houses in Hilton big enough to have vistas, but probably they would have them at the hotel), with long French windows opening on to velvet lawns – No! Sue shook herself severely. That was the other kind of house – the kind that was embosomed in trees, in Miss Yonge's stories. Of course they wouldn't have French windows in New York; the burglars could get in. An adventure with a burglar would be terribly exciting, though! There might be just one French window. Sue's mind hovered for a moment, tempted to wander into a dream of burglary; but she rejected it, and went on with the house. The furniture would be just perfectly fine – rosewood and satinwood, and one room all ebony and pale yellow satin. You wore a yellow crape dress when you sat there, with – yes; now came in the filmy lace, lots and lots of it round your snowy neck, that rose out of it like a dove, – no, like a swan, or a pillar, or something. Then, upstairs – oh! she hadn't got to upstairs yet, but she must just take a peep and see the silver bedstead, all hung with pale blue velvet. Oh, how lovely! And – why, yes, it might be – in the bed there would be a maiden sleeping, more beautiful than the day. Her long, fair hair was spread out on the pillow (when Sue was grown up she was never, never going to braid her hair at night; she was always going to spread it out), and her nightgown was all lace, every bit, and the sheets were fine as a cambric handkerchief, and her eyelashes were black, and so long that they reached half-way down her nose, like that paper doll Mrs. Hart made. Well, and Sue would go up and look at her. Oh! if she herself were only a fairy prince in green and gold, or could change into one just for a little while! But, anyhow, she would look at the lovely maiden and say:

"Love, if thy tresses be so dark, —

But these tresses were fair! Well, never mind; she could change that:

"Love, if thy tresses be so fair,
How bright those hidden eyes must be!"

That was really almost as good as the real way. It would be just lovely to be a poet, and say that kind of thing all the time! Sue wondered how one began to be a poet; she thought she would try, when she got through with this. And then the maiden would wake up and say: "Hallo!" and Sue would say: "Hallo! what's your name?" and she would say, soft and low, like the wind of the western sea:

"Clarice!" And then they would be friends for life, the dearest friends in the world – except Mary, of course. But then, Mary was different. She was the dearest girl that ever was, but there was nothing romantic about her. Clarice! It was a pity the other name was Packard! It ought to have been Atherton, or Beadesert. Clarice Beadesert! That was splendid. But Mr. Packard didn't look as if he belonged to that kind of people. Well, then, when Clarice grew up she would have to marry some one called Beadesert – or Clifford. Clarice Clifford was beautiful! And he would be a lord, of course, because there was the good Lord Clifford, you know. And – and – well, anyhow, Clarice would get up, and would thrust her tiny feet into blue velvet slippers embroidered with pearls (if there had really been fairies, the very first thing Sue would have asked for would have been small feet, instead of these great things half a yard long), and throw round her (they always threw things round them in books, instead of putting them on) a – let me see – a long robe of pale blue velvet, to match the bed, and lined with ermine all through; and then she would take Sue round and show her the rest of the house. That would be perfectly lovely! And they would tell each other the books they liked best; and perhaps Clarice would ask her to stay to tea, and then they would sit down to a small round ebony table, with a snowy cloth, – no; bare would be finer if it was real ebony, – and glittering with crystal and silver (they always do that), and with rose-colored candle-shades, and – and —

Tinkle, tinkle! went the dinner-bell. "Oh, dear!" said Sue. "Just as I was going to have such a delightful feast! And it's mincemeat day, too. I hate mincemeat day!"

When she was not dreaming, Sue was planning how she could make the much-desired acquaintance of the new-comer. Mary advised waiting a little, and said her father was going to call on Mr. Packard, and the meeting might perhaps come about naturally in that way. But this was altogether too prosaic for Sue. She must find a way that was not just plain being introduced; that was stupid and grown-up. She must find a way of her own, that should belong entirely to her.

Of course, the best thing, the right and proper and story-book thing, would be for Mr. Packard's horse to run away when only Clarice was in the carriage. Then Sue could fling herself in the path of the infuriated animal, and check him in mid-career by the power of her eye – no; it was lions you did that to. But, anyhow, she could catch him by the bridle, and hang on, and stop him that way. It didn't sound so well, but it was more likely. Or if Clarice should fall into the river, Sue could plunge in and rescue her, swimming with one hand and upholding the fainting form of the lovely maiden with the other, till, half-unconscious herself, the youthful heroine reached the bank, and placed her lovely – no; said that before! – her beauteous burden in the arms of her distracted parent. Oh, dear, how exciting that would be! But nobody ever did fall into the river in Hilton, and the horses never ran away, so it was not to be expected. But there must be some way; there should be!

So it came to pass that on the Sunday after the Packards' arrival, Miss Clarice Packard, rustling into her father's pew in all the conscious glory of a flowered organdie muslin and the biggest hat in town, found in the corner of the pew something that made her open her pale blue eyes wider than usual. It was a large heart of red sugar, tied round with a true-lover's knot of white satin ribbon. Looking round, she became aware of a pair of eyes fixed eagerly on her, the brightest eyes she had ever seen. They belonged to a little girl – well, not so very little, either; rather a tall girl, on the whole, but evidently very young – sitting across the aisle. This girl was ridiculously dressed, Miss Packard thought, with no style at all about her; and yet, somehow – well, she was pretty, certainly. It seemed to be one of the best pews in the church. Her mother – that must be her mother – was "real stylish," certainly, though her gown was too plain; and, after all, the girl had style, too, in her way. It would be nice to have some one to speak to in this dreadful, poky little place that "Puppa" would insist on bringing her to. The idea of his not trusting her to stay alone at the boarding-house! Clarice had wept tears of vexation at being "cruelly forced," as she said, to come with her father to Hilton. She had called it a hole, and a desert, and everything else that her rather scanty vocabulary could afford. But now, here was a pretty little girl, who looked as if she were somebody, evidently courting her acquaintance. There was no mistaking the eager, imploring gaze of the clear hazel eyes. Clarice nodded slightly, and smiled. The younger girl flushed all over, and her face seemed to quiver with light in a way different from anything Clarice had ever seen. There might be some fun here, after all, if she had a nice little friend who would adore her, and listen to all her stories, which the other girls were sometimes disagreeable about.

Two people in church, that Sunday, heard little of the excellent sermon. Sue could not even take her usual interest in the great east window, which was generally her mainstay through the parts of the sermon she could not follow. To begin with, there were the figures that made the story; but these were so clear and simple that they really said less, when once one knew the story by heart, than some other features. There were the eight blue scrolls that looked almost exactly like knights' helmets; and when you looked at them the right way, the round blue dots underneath made the knights' eyes; and there you had them, all ready for tournaments or anything. Scruples of conscience obliged Sue to have them always Templars or Knights of Malta, and they only fought against infidels. One of the knights had lost an eye; and the number of ways and places in which he had lost it was amazing: Saladin had run a lance into it at Acre; he had been tilting, just for fun, with Tancred, and Tancred hit him by mistake and put his eye out; and so on and so on. Then, there were the jewels, high up in the window; the small, splendid spots of ruby and violet and gold, which Sue was in the habit of taking

out and making into jewels for her own adornment. The tiara of rubies, the long, dangling ear-rings of crystal set in gold, the necklace of sapphires – how often had she worn them to heart's content! And to-day she did, indeed, make use of them, but it was to adorn her new beauty, her new friend. She would bring them all to Clarice! She would put the tiara on her head, and clasp the necklace round her slender neck, and say, "All is yours!" And then she, Sue, would go by dale and would go by down with a single rose in her hair, just like Lady Clare; but Clarice would call her back and say: "Beloved, let us share our jewels and our joys!"

Oh! Sue quivered at the thought, and looked so brightly and earnestly at the minister that the good old man was surprised and pleased, and said to himself that he should hardly have supposed his comments on Ezra would so impress even the young and, comparatively speaking, thoughtless!

When Clarice Packard came out of church, she found her would-be acquaintance dimpling and quivering on the door-step.

"Hallo!" said Clarice, with kind condescension, just exactly as she had done when Sue waked her up, in the dream!

"Hallo!" whispered Sue, in a rapturous whisper. This, she told herself, was the great moment of her life. Till now she had been a child; now she was – she did not stop to explain what, and it might have been difficult.

"Did you put this in my pew?" the new-comer went on, secretly displaying the sugar heart. Sue nodded, but could not trust herself to speak.

"It was just perfectly sweet of you!" said Clarice. "I'm real glad to have somebody to speak to; I was feeling real homesick."

Sue was dimly conscious that it was not good English to say "real" in that way; but perhaps people did say it in New York; and in any case, she could not stop to think of such trifles. She was in a glow of delight; and when Clarice asked her to walk down the street with her, the cup of happiness seemed brimming over. She, Sue Penrose, who had never in her life been out of Hilton, except now and then to go to Chester, the neighboring town – she was the one chosen by this wonderful stranger, this glittering princess from afar, to walk with her.

Sue did not see Mary at first. At length she became aware of her, gazing in wonder, and she gave a little quick, rapturous nod. There was no time to explain. She could only catch Mary's hand, in passing, and give it a squeeze, accompanied by a look of intense, dramatic significance. Mary would see, would understand.

Of course Mary would share her treasure, her new joy, sooner or later; but just now she could not surrender it to any one, not even to Mary. As Clarice passed her arm through hers, Sue straightened her slight figure, and looked as if the world were at her feet. And so they passed down the street; and Mary, left alone for the first time since she could remember, stood in the church porch and looked after them.

CHAPTER III

MARY'S VIEW

Mammy, I have seen her!"

"Well, Mary dear?"

"Oh, Mammy, it isn't well! It isn't a bit well; it 's just horrid! I don't like her a bit, and I never shall like her, I know."

Mrs. Hart made room beside her on the wide sofa in the corner of which she sat knitting. "Come and tell me, dear!" she said comfortably. "Let us take the trouble out and look at it; it may be smaller than you think. Tell Mammy all about it!"

Mary drew a long breath, and rubbed her head against her mother's arm. "Oh, Mammy, you do smooth me out so!" she said. "I feel better already; perhaps it isn't quite so bad as it seems to me, but I'm afraid it is. Well, I told you how they made friends?"

"Yes; Sue put a red sugar heart in the corner of the Packard pew, and she and the little girl – she isn't little? well, then, the big girl – made eyes at each other all through the service, and fell upon each other's neck afterward. My dear, it wasn't the thing to do, of course; but Sue meant no harm, and it was a truly Susannic proceeding. What came next?"

"You know I was busy all day Monday, helping you with the strawberry-jam. Well, they were together all day; and yesterday, when I went over to see Sue, she was at the hotel with Clarice, and had been invited to stay to dinner. I stayed and played with Lily, who seemed pretty forlorn; and I kept hoping Sue would come back; but she didn't. Mammy!"

"Yes, dear."

"I *do* think Lily has a forlorn time! You spoke to me about it once, and I said then I didn't think so. I – I think it was just that I didn't see, then; now I do!"

Mrs. Hart patted Mary's arm, but said nothing; and the girl went on:

"Well, then, this morning, about an hour ago, Sue came flying over in the wildest excitement. Clarice Packard was there at her house, and I must come over that very minute. She was the dearest and loveliest creature in the world; and we must love each other, too; and we should be three hearts that beat as one; and she never was so happy in her life! You must have heard her, Mammy; all this was in the front entry, and she was swinging on the door all the time she was talking; she hadn't time to let go the handle, she said."

"Yes, I heard; but I was busy, and did not notice much. She seemed to be rather unusually 'quicksilvery,' I thought. And did you fly over with her?"

"Why, no; I was just going to feed the dogs, – I promised the boys I would, because they wanted to go fishing early, – and I had the chickens to see to, and I couldn't go that minute. I oughtn't to have gone at all, Mammy, for you needed me, though you would say you didn't. Well, Sue went off quite huffy; but when I did go over, she forgot all about it, and was all beaming and rippling. She *is* a darling, if she does provoke me sometimes! She flew downstairs to meet me, and hugged me till I had no breath left, and almost dragged me upstairs to her room. She was out of breath as well as I, and she could only say: 'Oh, Clarice, this is Mary! Mary, this is Clarice Packard, my new friend. She doesn't care a bit about being two years older than we are! And now we shall all three be friends, like – like the Dauntless Three, don't you know? Oh, isn't this splendid! Oh, I never was so happy in my life!'

"Mammy, Clarice Packard didn't look as if she had ever heard of the Dauntless Three! but she smiled a little, thin smile, and opened her eyes at me, and said, 'So glad!' I shook hands, of course, and her hand just flopped into mine, all limp and froggy. I gave it a good squeeze, and she made a face as if I had broken her bones."

"You have a powerful grip, you know, Mary! Everybody isn't used to wrestling with boys; you probably did hurt her."

"I know, Mammy; I suppose I did squeeze too hard. Well! Sue had been showing her everything – all *our* things, that we play with together. She didn't say much, – well, perhaps she could not have said very much, for Sue was talking all the time, – but I felt – Mammy, I felt sure that she didn't really care about any of them. I know she laughed at the telephone, because I saw her.

"I have a real telephone in my room at home,' she said, 'a long-distance one. My dearest friend lives in Brooklyn, and we have a line all to ourselves. Puppa is one of the directors, you know, and I told him I couldn't have other people listening to what Leonie and I said to each other, so he gave us a private line.' Mammy, do you believe that? I don't!"

"I cannot say, my dear!" said Mrs. Hart, cautiously. "It sounds unlikely, but I cannot say it is not true. Go on."

"I think Sue had been showing Clarice her dresses before I came, for the closet door was open, and her pink gingham was on the bed; and presently Clarice said: 'Have you any jewelry?'

"Sue ran and brought her box, and took out all her pretty little things. You know what pretty things Sue has, Mammy! You remember the blue mosaic cross her godmother sent her from Italy, with the white dove on it, and the rainbow-shell necklace, and that lovely enameled rose-leaf pin with the pearl in the middle?"

"Yes; Sue has some very pretty trinkets, simple and tasteful, as a child's should be. Mrs. Penrose has excellent taste in all such matters. Sue must have enjoyed showing them to a new person."

"Dear Sue! she was so pleased and happy, she never noticed; but I could see that that girl was just laughing at the things. Of course none of them are showy – I should hope not! – but you would have thought they were nothing but make-believe, the way she looked at them. She kept saying, 'Oh, very pretty! quite sweet!' and then she would open her eyes wide and smile; and Sue just quivered with delight every time she did it. Sue thinks it is perfectly beautiful; she says it is Clarice's soul overflowing at her eyes. *I* want to shake her every time she does it. Well, then she said in a sort of silky voice she has – Sue calls it 'silken,' and I call it 'silky'; and I think, somehow, Mammy, that shows partly the way she strikes us both, don't you? – she said in that soft, silky way, 'Any diamonds, dear?' Of course she knew Sue had no diamonds! The idea! I never heard anything so ridiculous. And when Sue said no, she said: "I wish I had brought my chain; I should like to show it to you. Puppa thought it hardly safe for me to bring it down here into the backwoods, he said. It goes all round my neck, you know, and reaches down to my belt. It cost a thousand dollars.' Mammy, do you believe that?"

"I don't think it at all likely, my dear! I am afraid Clarice is given to romancing. But of course she may have a good deal of jewelry. Some very rich people who have not just our ideas about such matters often wear a great many jewels – more than we should like to wear, even if we had the means. But people of good taste would never allow a young girl to wear diamonds."

"I should think not, Mammy! Clarice Packard had no diamonds on, but her hands were just covered with rings – rather cheap, showy rings, too. There was one pretty one, though, that took Sue's fancy greatly, and mine too, for that matter. It was a ring of gold wire, with a tiny gold mouse running loose round it – just loose, Mammy, holding on by its four little feet. Oh, such a pretty thing! Sue was perfectly enchanted with it, and could not give over admiring it; and at last Clarice took it off, and put it on Sue's finger, and said she must wear it a little while for her sake. I wish, somehow, Sue had said no; but she was so happy, and 'quicksilvered' all over so, it was pretty to see her. She threw her arms round Clarice's neck, and told her she was a dear, beautiful, royal darling. Then Clarice whispered something in Sue's ear, and looked at me out of the corner of her eye, and Sue colored and looked distressed; and – and so I came away, Mammy dear, and here I am!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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