

TREASURE

for

DEBBY

AMY WENTWORTH STONE



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TREASURE FOR DEBBY



By AMY WENTWORTH STONE

P-PENNY AND HIS LITTLE RED CART
HERE'S JUGGINS
TREASURE FOR DEBBY



Margaret Ayer

"Why—yes," said Debby looking up in surprise.



Treasure for
Debby

AMY WENTWORTH STONE

Illustrated by
MARGARET AYER.

BOSTON
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To
the Members
of
Lucile Gulliver's
Monday Evening Class
in
Writing for Children
Who Were the Inspiration
for
Debby

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TREASURE FOR DEBBY



Chapter One

THE OLD HOUSE IS OPENED

DEBBY—oh—Debby,” came the shrill triumphant voice of little Polly Stebbins from the upper hall, “Aunt Nell asked Aunt Retta to let me wear Great-grandmother’s brooch, and I’ve got it on!”

Following the voice came Polly herself, sliding down the mahogany banister, and bouncing off the newel post at the bottom.

“Polly,” said Deborah severely, “you know Aunt Retta told you not to do that again. And now the whole house is dusted and fixed for the guests.”

“Well, I just gave it an extra dusting,” said Polly

calmly, adjusting her brooch. Then she looked up at her older sister, standing in the doorway in the old-fashioned dress. "Oh, Debby," she exclaimed, forgetting everything else, "you're wonderful! You look exactly like the portrait—only prettier," Polly added generously.

Polly herself was not in the least pretty. Her straight black hair stuck out around her dark, thin little face, and her nose tilted ridiculously. Debby was dark too, but her face was soft and oval, her hair fluffed out around it, and her nose was exactly right.

Both the girls glanced through the drawing-room door at the portrait of handsome Great-grandmother Stebbins in crimson gown, that hung over the mantelpiece. Debby, wearing this same gown, did look wonderfully like Great-grandmother, except for the tall comb at the back of Great-grandmother's hair, and the jeweled cross on a carved chain at her neck. Debby and Polly felt sure that this chain and cross must have come from some Spanish treasure house. For Great-grandfather Israel Stebbins had been captain of a splendid clipper ship, and had brought home his bride from the Spanish colonies far to the south. She was beautiful and mysterious, this great-grandmother of theirs—and tragic too, for five years after her marriage she had gone down with her husband in their ship at sea in a great storm, leaving three tiny children behind her at home in the old Stebbins mansion.

"I *wish* you had the chain to wear today, Debby," said Polly, looking at the portrait. "Then you'd be perfect. Did it *really* go down with the ship? If I had had anything like that, I shouldn't have taken it on a journey."

"They think that she took it," said Debby. "At least, nobody ever saw it again. And she took nearly all her fine clothes too, except this dress and the brooch, because she and Great-grandfather sometimes went to grand balls when they touched at foreign ports."

"I wish she was here today," sighed Polly. "She'd be ever so much nicer and prettier than Aunt Retta to shake hands at the door, and she'd love to have all the people coming in to see the beautiful old things that she had to leave behind her when she went on that dreadful journey."

"She wouldn't like that old pasteboard box you've left on the table there, Polly Stebbins," said Debby suddenly. "Don't you remember that Aunt Retta said you mustn't put anything down in the hall this afternoon. What's in it?" And Debby picked up the box.

"Don't you touch it!" cried Polly, jumping for the box, "It's mine and Zab's."

"Oh!" said Debby, with a little squeal, as she lifted the cover. "You dreadful child! It's full of daddy-long-legs."

"They've all lost one leg," said Polly, recovering

her box. "We're going to see if we can do something about them."

Polly intended to be a trained nurse when she grew up, and was already practising the art of healing on anything she could find. Little Zabdiel Eaton, who lived next door, practised the art of anything that Polly did.

"Well, you'd better do something about them right off," said Debby. "If Aunt Retta finds them, they'll lose more than one leg. This is the most important day in the whole year for this house."

It was, indeed, a great day for every house in the little Maine town of Bellport. All along its wide elm-shaded street the fine old mansions were standing with doors wide open in the August sunshine, waiting for the visitors who would soon come thronging in their cars, from far and near. It was Community Day, and any one who bought a ticket at the Academy at the head of the Green might wander at will in and out of the old houses, upstairs and down, among all the priceless things that they held. In order to raise money for the little Academy, the people of Bellport would for this one day show their treasures to the world. No other town in Maine could boast such Chippendales and Heppelwhites, such pewters and porcelains, such ivories and carvings and hangings, brought straight from the Orient in the clipper ships that long ago had crowded Bellport's wharves.

And of all the old houses, the richest in treasures

was perhaps the Stebbins mansion, standing stately and withdrawn, with its four great chimneys and its high white portico, on a little hill at the edge of the town. Only a few, even among the people of Bellport, knew the half of all the beautiful old things that it held, for Miss Henrietta and Miss Eleanor had lived, like their house, a little withdrawn from the life of the town. Some said that they were too proud to mix in community affairs, others that they were too poor—perhaps both poor and proud. For it was rumored that they had lately been obliged to sell one of their beautiful old highboys, in order to make ends meet. Nobody had seen the highboy go—it must have been taken away in the night—but the place where it had stood was empty.

The people in the other old Bellport houses asked one another how Miss Henrietta and Miss Eleanor could possibly get along at all, now that their brother's two grandchildren had come to live with them. Deborah, to be sure, was very talented, and had found a place to help in the drawing classes at the little Academy, but Deborah was only eighteen, and the Academy itself was poor, and could pay very little.

Perhaps it was because the Academy had been good to Debby that Miss Henrietta had consented at last to exhibit her treasures, for when Community Day arrived, she had not only opened wide her door under the high white portico, but she had dressed her pretty niece in Great-grandmother Stebbins' crimson gown,

and had set out her Paul Revere silver on the mahogany table in the dining-room. Miss Eleanor had made a trayful of thin delicate oatmeal wafers, and from four to five Debby was to serve tea in the old China cups. The Stebbins mansion, that in Captain Israel's day had kept open house to all who came, should offer a little hospitality again.

"There comes Aunt Retta now," exclaimed Polly, as there was a firm step on the stairs, and she hastily thrust the box of daddy-long-legs into the drawer of the mahogany table. "And there's a car parking just outside. Oh, goody, they're beginning to come. I shall stay right here in the hall, and take everybody in to see Great-grandmother's portrait."

"I'm going into the work-shop for a minute, before I put the kettle on," said Debby, all at once shy and self-conscious in her crimson gown, and she ran quickly through the door at the back of the hall, and out into the little room at the side of the house that opened on the garden. It was Debby's own little studio. In it she kept her drawing materials, and in it she dreamed her dreams of the art school where she, somehow or other, was some day going to study.

To learn to paint—*really* to paint, fine and beautiful things like Great-grandmother's portrait! It made her tingle to think of it. She had been working on a sketch of the portrait just within the last two weeks. It was lying now, almost finished, in her old sea chest. Sometimes Debby wondered whether, if she should

sell the chest, she would have money enough to go to Art School. She shivered a little whenever she thought of this possibility. For the old sea chest had been made by Captain Israel Stebbins himself, and seemed to Debby almost as much of an heirloom as the other beautiful old furniture in the mansion. Rough-hewn it was, with handles of knotted rope, but on top was a nice bit of home-made carving, and quaint letters intertwined:

“WHERE THY TREASURE—THERE
THY HEART”

The only treasure Debby had found in it were two or three old charts, but some day it should be filled with the drawings that would make her rich.

She rather wished that Polly would think of sending somebody in to see the old chest. It was funny, thought Debby, that Polly was not a bit shy with strangers. She was seven years younger than Debby, but Polly always knew what to say to people. *She* should have worn the crimson gown, since it was she who was helping Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell at the front of the house. Debby could hear Polly's high, cheerful voice in the distance, inviting people to go right upstairs and turn to the left, and directing others to the drawing-room and Great-grandmother's portrait.

Debby, lingering, looked out between the heavy red curtains of the window in the little work-shop, and

saw a stream of visitors coming up the hill toward the house. She really *must* go and put the kettle on, and set out Aunt Nell's oatmeal wafers in the dining-room. People would soon be wanting their tea. Was that Aunt Retta coming to find her now? She heard a firm step already just outside the door.

Debby turned and went quickly toward it. But it was not Aunt Retta. It was a tall, strange young man, who filled up the whole doorway. He was several years older than Debby, and rather grave, except for his eyes, which had a pleasant twinkle.

"There are no antiques in here," said Debby, in sudden confusion.

"No?" responded the young man. "Well, perhaps after all I am a little tired of antiques." And he smiled at Debby.

The quick color came into Debby's face, but she smiled back in spite of herself, for there was a pleasant friendliness about the young man that made her feel at ease with him at once.

"In fact," he added, "I prefer reproductions when they are as good as that," and he looked with frank admiration at Great-grandmother's crimson gown, and the dark hair piled high on the pretty head, so exactly like the portrait's. "You see, I deal mostly in reproductions myself," he added.

"Oh?" said Debby, her hands on the back of a chair behind her, as she looked up at him with questioning eyes.

"I'm connected with the Columbian Museum of

Fine Arts. I buy pictures for it," explained the young man. "My name is Eric Anderson. I suppose you are Miss Stebbins?"

"Yes," said Debby, all uncertainty gone from her face at the mention of the great museum. Her most precious day-dreams had to do with the beautiful pictures that filled it, and with its famous art school, where girls more fortunate than herself could learn to paint. She had been there once—had seen those happy girls, in painting smocks, standing before easels in the great corridors. And now here, before her, was somebody really connected with the museum. She forgot her shyness, forgot that Eric Anderson was still looking at her.

"How did you happen to come here?" she asked.

"I came because I'm most awfully interested in old treasures like the portrait in the other room—and this," said Eric Anderson, looking away from Debby at last to the old sea chest that stood against the wall.

He walked over to examine it more closely. He touched the weathered oak and the hand-wrought iron clasps. Then he stooped to read the carved words:

"WHERE THY TREASURE—THERE
THY HEART"

"That's a fine piece," he said. "Is it old?"

"My Great-grandfather made it," said Debby, who had followed Eric Anderson across the little room,

and stood beside the chest. "My aunt gave it to me. She doesn't consider it a real antique, but I like it best of all." Debby laid her hand lovingly upon it.

"Is there treasure in it?" Eric Anderson asked. "There ought to be, in chests like that, you know."

"Nothing but my old drawing papers," laughed Debby.

"Do you draw?" said Eric Anderson, looking down at her with fresh interest.

"A little," said Debby. "I help to teach drawing at the Academy, but really I need to be taught myself—if I could ever go to Art School!"

"Do you want to go?" asked Eric, his eyes still on Debby's eager face.

"More than anything in the world," said Debby, with an intensity that surprised him.

"Why don't you, then?" said Eric Anderson.

"Well—I suppose we can't afford it," replied Debby, with an embarrassed little laugh.

Then she bit her tongue. What *would* Aunt Retta think if she could hear her saying these personal things to a strange young man? But Debby had never met any one like Eric Anderson. Though she had known him but a few minutes, he seemed already an old friend.

"Won't you show me something you have done?" said Eric. Then, as Debby hesitated—"Please."

With an impulsive movement, she opened the chest, and took out a sheet of paper that lay on top of the

other drawings. It was the sketch, in color, of Great-grandmother's portrait.

"I don't really know much about doing faces," said Debby, holding out the sketch rather shyly for Eric Anderson to see, "but it's fascinating to try to work in flesh tints, and I love rich colors like this dress and the jeweled chain."

"So do I," said Eric, as he took the sketch.

For what seemed to Debby long minutes he studied it, examining it closely, then holding it at arm's length, but he made no comment. Of course, thought Debby, sitting on the chest, he must consider it crude and amateurish, and he was just racking his brain for something tactful to say. What a silly goose she had been to show it to him! Aunt Retta was right—she was altogether too impulsive, especially when she liked people.

"I think I made the sketch as much for the jeweled chain as anything else," said Debby hurriedly, to fill in the embarrassing silence. "You see, there has always been a mystery about it. It disappeared. That is, nobody knew what became of it after Great-grandmother was lost at sea. It was immensely valuable, and I—I thought I should rather like to have another exact picture of it for family records."

"That's interesting," said Eric Anderson, but his eyes were still on the sketch, as if he had not more than half heard what Debby had said. Then he looked up, and there was more interest than ever in his eyes.

"Would you be willing, Miss Stebbins, to let me borrow this sketch for a few days or a week?" said Eric. "Your aunt tells me that you do not know what artist painted the original portrait. There is somebody at our museum who knows a great deal about portraiture, and the styles of different artists. I think if he saw this sketch he might be able to help identify the artist who did it. He might know what marks to look for on the original. I would be very careful of it."

"Why—yes," said Debby, looking up at Eric Anderson in surprise. "Of course you may take it—that is—if you think it will really be of any use in finding out about the artist. But," she hesitated, "it's such an imperfect thing—I don't see how it can."

"It is wonderfully good," declared Eric Anderson. "You have caught the pose and spirit of the thing exactly. I mean you have conveyed the artist's own touch remarkably. Did you really do it quite by yourself—without any help or instruction?"

"Why—yes," said Debby again.

She did wish that she knew some way to keep the color from coming into her cheeks. It made one so utterly ridiculous to blush. Great-grandmother Stebbins probably blushed in *her* day, and no doubt Aunt Retta in hers—though it was hard for Debby to imagine Aunt Retta in any such predicament. But girls of to-day were not so foolish. Why couldn't she

be like Polly, whose cheeks never grew pink, except when she ran races. Polly could always look anybody in the eye and say, without changing color, just what was in her mind.

Debby, too, looked right at Eric Anderson as she spoke. In spite of that betraying color, there was always about Debby, when anything had to be faced, a certain clear directness, a dash of the same high spirit that had carried Great-grandmother Stebbins to sea in clipper ships.

"But if I am to take it away," ventured Eric Anderson, "you must let me make a deposit. I am sure you value it, and you don't know me at all, you see." And he put his hand in his pocket.

"Oh, no," said Debby, with unexpected decision, getting up from the chest, and taking the sketch from his hand. "I couldn't do that. It's not finished. Besides, I couldn't take money that way." And Eric Anderson, looking down at the slim, straight figure in the crimson gown, and those dark unwavering eyes, caught a glimpse of something unflinching.

"But I'll be glad to have you just—take it," said Debby relenting, and holding out the sketch, "if—if you really want it."

"Thank you, I *do* want it very much, and I promise that it shall come safely back," said Eric. And he took the picture, but he looked at Debby.

"Oh, *dear!*" she exclaimed suddenly in consternation, turning away from him. "It must be after four,

and I've forgotten the tea. Oh, poor Aunt Nell!" And she ran toward the door. It was only yesterday that Aunt Retta had reproved her again for being so irresponsible and day-dreaming, and now she had neglected her part on this day of days. What would Aunt Nell think of her?

"Please don't go. It's only five minutes of four," said Eric reassuringly, looking at his watch. "And nobody will think about tea for half an hour."

Debby turned in the doorway.

"It will be ready in five minutes," she said, with a little smile at the corners of her mouth, "and the dining-room is almost across the hall—if you would like any."

Then, with a rustle of the crimson dress, she was gone.

"Aunt Nell," came Polly's high little voice from somewhere, "Debby's been in the studio for half an hour with a strange, handsome young man, and she's never liked young men before!"

Eric Anderson smiled as he put the sketch carefully into his brief case. Then he went out into the hall—and turned toward the dining-room.

Chapter Two

THE LITTLE HOUSE AT THE FOOT OF THE GARDEN

DEBBY ran up the stairs to the attic, with Great-grandmother's crimson dress over her arm. It was so lovely, and such pleasant things had happened while Debby had had it on, that she wished she could keep it in her closet, but Community Day had come and gone, and Aunt Retta said that the old dress must be folded away again at once in its trunk.

The attic was in the fourth story of the high old Stebbins mansion, and the stairs were steep, so that Debby paused for a moment, a little breathless at the top, outside the attic door. From inside came a familiar sound—click-clack-clicketty-clack, click-clack-clicketty-clack. Debby knew that it was Polly, writing on the old typewriter in the little room at the end of the attic. Polly called this her office, and whenever she was missing it was the first place to be searched.

Debby opened the door and went in. She walked

across the great square attic, with the big brick chimneys in the shadowy corners, past the rows of trunks, the old churn and spinning-wheel, and a battered desk, full of charts and tarry string that smelt of the sea. She looked in through the doorway of the "office," and there, sure enough, was Polly, in her Scout uniform, sitting up very straight on a piano stool before the old typewriter, tapping it busily with one finger. Polly had only recently joined a Scout troop, and although she was not supposed to wear her uniform about the house, she put it on and came up into the "office" whenever she could.

The sun was pouring in through the one little square window, and the small room looked very bright and cheerful to Debby, after the dimness of the attic. There was nothing in it but the typewriter on a shaky table, the stool on which Polly sat, and an old broken-down armchair. All over the walls were pasted pictures of animals, which Polly had cut out of the newspapers and *Our Four-footed Friends*, and above the typewriter hung a worsted motto in a frame, unearthed from somewhere in the attic, reading "GOD BLESS OUR HOME."

"Are you doing some more on *Sylvia*?" asked Debby, with a smile. Polly had for some time been writing a novel, called *Sylvia Fisher, or the Adventures of a Trained Nurse*, of which Debby had one day found and read the first chapter. Polly was very

much in earnest about Sylvia Fisher, and she did not like the way Debby smiled.

"None of your business," said Polly, going right on with her typing.

"Do you think that's a very nice answer for a Girl Scout?" said Debby, looking severely at the uniform. "I thought Scouts were supposed to be courteous."

"It's Wednesday," said Polly, without looking up.

"What difference does *that* make?" said Debby.

"I'm courteous on Fridays," said Polly, raising her head, with more of a tilt to her nose than usual, "extra courteous, to make up for the rest of the time. It's easier to remember, if you put the things all in different days. On Wednesdays I'm cheerful."

"Oh," said Debby, trying not to look amused. "Well, what are you on Tuesdays?"

"I'm useful and a help to others," said Polly, without a moment's hesitation.

"I hadn't noticed it," said Debby. "What did you do to be helpful yesterday?"

"Heaps of things," said Polly indignantly. And she stopped typing, and quickly pulled the paper out of the machine. "You can just read them for yourself if you want," she added, thrusting the paper at Debby.

Debby took the yellow sheet, and this is what she read:

THE HELPFUL DEEDS OF PAULINA DE
CORDOVA STEBBINS
ON TUESDAY, AUGUST THE 15TH
IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD ONE THOU-
SAND NINE HUNDRED AND
THIRTY —————

1. I got up at six and let in Isaak Walton and gave him his fish because he was mewling at the door.

2. I made Aunt Retta's bed though she was perfectly horrid.

3. I told Aunt Nell she had a run in her stocking before she went down street.

4. I saved fifteen lame daddy-long-legs from certain death.

5. I dusted the south parlor for Community Day and I didn't shake the duster in the fireplace once.

6. I was a great help to Aunt Nell all the afternoon. P.S. She told me so herself.

7. I didn't tell Aunt Retta about Debby's boy friend.

"What do you mean, Polly Stebbins!" exclaimed Debby. "He's *not* my boy friend. I never saw him before."

"Well, I didn't tell Aunt Retta how long you talked to him anyway," said Polly airily, and she picked up the sheet of yellow paper, which Debby had put down on the table, and marched out of the "office" and through the attic. Polly always did have

a way of sailing out of things, thought Debby, looking after the Scout uniform, as it turned down the attic stairs, and smiling a little in spite of herself. Then she went back into the attic, and opened the old trunk to put away the crimson dress.

There were other things in the trunk—an old satin waistcoat that Aunt Nell said Great-grandfather had worn at his wedding, Great-grandmother's slippers with the little rosettes, and boxes full of smaller treasures. There were also several Paisley shawls, pungent with the camphor of many years. Debby loved the delicate smell of old camphor. There was something mysterious and haunting about it, just like the attic itself, and she always looked in the boxes to make sure that there were no treasures that she had not seen before. Always she hoped against hope that somewhere, in a forgotten corner, she might come upon Great-grandmother's beautiful carved chain, with the cross and the priceless jewels. Of course she never would, for the chain had been lost for more than sixty years, and was probably at the bottom of the sea. Besides, they had been all through the trunk ever so many times.

But today Debby did find something new in it, after all. Kneeling on the attic floor, she lifted the things out one by one and looked at them again. At the bottom of the trunk, under an uninteresting piece of old cloth, she came upon a little quaint pink cotton apron, that must have been Great-grandmother's

when she was a young girl, because on the tiny pocket were embroidered the letters *P. de C.* in faded coarse blue cotton—Paulina de Cordova. Polly was named after Great-grandmother. Debby held the little apron in her hand and looked at it intently. It made Great-grandmother seem suddenly so near and real—a young girl like herself. Debby stood up and put the apron over her own fresh pink dress, tying the faded strings behind. With her dark hair, she knew that pink and crimson were her colors, just as they had been Great-grandmother's. Then she put her hand into the little embroidered pocket, and, lo and behold, there was something in it! Debby's heart gave a little jump, for it felt like a necklace, and when she took it out, sure enough it was; no rich, carved chain with jeweled cross—the pocket was too small for that—just a gay little string of gold beads, which Great-grandmother had probably worn in the morning with the little apron, when she went singing about the big house as a young bride. Would Aunt Retta know anything about it, wondered Debby? Aunt Retta had been only four when her mother went to sea for the last time, and remembered her only very dimly.

Indeed, Debby knew that there was only one person in all Bellport old enough to remember the day when Great-grandfather had brought home his pretty Spanish bride. That was poor old Anthony Thorpe, who lived with his deaf and dumb niece, Minnie, in the tumble-down cottage at the foot of the Stebbins



Would Aunt Retta know anything about it?

garden. Old Anthony was the village half-wit, and although in his younger days, and before the illness which had still more addled his wits, he had, so the story went, been handy with tools about the ship-yards, and had even gone to sea and seen a bit of the world, by the time that Debby and Polly had come to live in Bellport, he was just a queer, doddering old man of ninety, who went mumbling about the village with his basket of eggs. He and his old niece kept a bedraggled flock of hens, that ran about the field behind the cottage. Sometimes the hens ran through the hedge into the Stebbins cottage, and then Aunt Retta vowed that she would have old Anthony moved out of the cottage at once.

"They should be in the poor-house," said Aunt Retta. "They are utterly shiftless, and they ought to be taken care of." Nevertheless, she sometimes bought old Anthony's eggs, for Aunt Retta had a kind heart, as well as a stern face and a sharp tongue—"Though I shouldn't buy anything else that came out of that dirty little house," declared Aunt Retta. "One would never be sure what might not be lurking in it."

Debby and Polly had been told that they must not go into old Anthony's cottage, and this, of course, was just enough to make it a place of fascination to Polly. She walked by the little house and looked through the fence whenever she could, and she felt dreadfully sorry for old Anthony's six or eight gaunt

cats, because they looked as if they did not have enough to eat.

Debby in the attic, thinking about old Anthony, wondered if he had ever seen Great-grandmother wearing this little string of gilt beads. She clasped them around her slim neck, and ran to look in the broken old mirror that hung by one of the attic windows. She had piled her hair on her head this morning again, just for fun. Perhaps, thought Debby, as she looked at the mirrored reflection of the quaint little apron, the dark head and the bright beads, perhaps Great-grandmother had really been like that seventy years ago. She smiled to herself—perhaps she *was* a good reproduction, just as Eric Anderson had said, only not so pretty of course. Eric Anderson! Polly was too silly. One could surely talk with a man, without having him called one's "boy friend" in that vulgar way. Polly must be spoken to. Why *any* one, even Aunt Retta, would have enjoyed talking to Eric—Eric Anderson. What made her keep thinking of him by his first name, when she had met him only once? Would he really show her sketch to his friend at the Columbian Museum? Oh, she hoped that he would! How long would he stay at Bellport Harbor? Debby, full of day-dreams, turned impulsively to the window and looked out.

Through the tree tops and across the meadow she could see the blue waters of Bellport River, really an

arm of the sea, which stretched between shores lined with dark little spruces, down to Bellport Harbor on the open ocean—where Eric Anderson was. It was up this great river that Great-grandfather's stately clipper ships had sailed home from foreign seas to the wharves of Bellport, and it might have been at this very window that Great-grandmother had sometimes stood, in the little apron, and watched for the first sight of the big ship coming around the green point far down the river.

Debby was recalled suddenly from clipper ships by the sound of Polly's high little voice outside, somewhere in the distance beyond the garden. Debby stepped closer to the window and looked through the trees. Yes, there was Polly, still in her Scout uniform, down on the road at the end of the garden, in front of old Anthony's cottage. Close beside her Debby could see the red head and blue blouse of little Zabdiel Eaton. Both the children were bending down and putting their hands through the picket fence. Even at this distance Debby could see the tiny shapes of old Anthony's cats jumping up against the other side of the fence. Though it was *not* Tuesday, Polly was evidently being helpful, for she and Zab seemed to be feeding the cats something through the fence—and Debby suspected that it was the sardines left from luncheon, which Aunt Retta had put away in the ice-box. Debby could also see old Minnie pinning towels on the rickety clothes line behind the cottage.

Just then, out of the corner of her eye, Debby noticed somebody coming in at their own gate below, and there was old Anthony himself, his basket of eggs on his arm, shuffling along the path toward the back door.

Debby turned and ran back across the attic. Quickly she untied the little apron, and laid it and the other things away in the trunk—all except the gold beads, which she kept around her throat. Then she ran as fast as she could down the three flights of stairs to the kitchen door. Old Anthony was sitting on the bottom step, getting his breath, after the steep climb up the hill from the cottage. Debby thought that she had never seen anything so old and shrunken and forlorn. The worn coat had faded on his bent shoulders to a dismal green, and his long, unkempt hair straggled out from under his misshapen felt hat.

“Have you some eggs for us to-day, Tony?” said Debby, coming out on the little porch.

Old Anthony struggled to his feet, and turned and looked up at Debby, slowly nodding his head.

“Wait,” she said, “I’ll get a bowl.” And she ran into the kitchen.

When she came back old Anthony was vaguely counting over his eggs. Standing on the top step, Debby held the bowl, while with fumbling, uncertain fingers he put the eggs, one by one, into it. Then he set down the basket, and mutely held open the pocket of his old coat, while Debby dropped the

coins into it. Just as he leaned to pick up his basket again—

“Tony,” said Debby impulsively, bending down toward the old man, “you knew my Great-grandfather, didn’t you, Captain Israel Stebbins? You worked for him once? Do you remember my Great-grandmother too, who went to sea with him, and was lost ever so long ago? Do you remember what she looked like when she first came to live here?”

Old Anthony put down his basket again, and looked up at the eager young face, with the dark hair piled high above it. He drew the sleeve of his coat across his watery little eyes, as if they could no longer bear anything bright and fresh. Then he slowly nodded his head, and looked at Debby again.

“She was like that,” he mumbled, jerking his thumb at Debby herself.

“Oh, *was* she!” cried Debby. “Was she *really* like me?” Then impulsively she put her hand to her throat.

“Tony,” she said earnestly, “did you ever see my Great-grandmother wear a necklace around her neck—like these beads?”

At the mention of the necklace old Anthony looked with his dull little eyes right into Debby’s bright ones again, and Debby thought, a little startled, that they no longer looked quite so dull. An odd, crafty look had come into old Anthony’s face. Still looking at her, he put a shaky finger to his lips.

"Sh—sh—h—don't tell—sh!" said old Anthony.

"What *do* you mean, Tony?" said Debby, astonished. "What is there to hush about?"

The old man slowly shook his head and put his finger on his lips again.

"Sh—sh—don't tell!" he said.

"Hello, Tony, *there* you are!" cried Polly, running in just then at the gate, with Zab at her heels. "We've been down at your house, and we've been feeding your cats some—"

But Polly did not finish her sentence, for at that moment Aunt Retta, tall and majestic in her black afternoon gown, appeared at the kitchen door.

"You would better go along now, Anthony," said Aunt Retta firmly to the old man. "Give him his basket, Polly. And then come in and take off your Scout uniform. Did Aunt Nell tell you you might put it on this afternoon? I'm sure I didn't. It is time for you to help her in the dining-room, and if you set the table nicely I shall let you give Isaak Walton the rest of the sardines for his supper."

Zab, who had just started down the path, turned with a scared look at Polly. But Polly seemed quite composed.

"Thank you," she said sweetly, as she followed Aunt Retta into the house, "but I *think* Isaak Walton would just as soon have milk."

Debby stood still on the porch, with the bowl of eggs in one hand, the other on the beads at her throat,

looking after old Anthony, as his bent figure shuffled off along the path between the canterbury bells.

“Come, Deborah, no more day-dreaming,” called Aunt Retta briskly from the kitchen.

Why, thought Debby, as she turned toward the door, had old Tony said “Sh—sh!” And what mustn’t one tell about the beads?



Chapter Three

DEBBY ASKS AUNT RETTA

DEBBY lay awake a long time that night after she went to bed, wondering what mysterious connection old Tony could have with the beads. There had been such a strange look in his blank old face the moment she had mentioned the little necklace, although he had hardly really looked at it at all. As she lay in the four-poster in the big square corner room, with the moonlight pouring in through the shadowy branches of the big elm outside, it all seemed more mysterious than ever. What could old Anthony have to do with anything belonging to the Stebbins?

Aunt Nell had once shown Debby some interesting old papers from Great-grandfather's desk, and among

them had been several quaint receipts from Tony Thorpe, indicating that Great-grandfather had from time to time paid the young man small sums of money for carpentry and odd jobs about the place. Debby remembered especially because Tony apparently had never been able to write, and had made a queer little cross on the paper instead of his name, while underneath, in Great-grandfather's firm, stately writing were the words: "Anthony Thorpe: His Mark." Debby remembered also that in the old captain's diary, which Aunt Nell had once let her read, there had been several allusions to young Tony. She recalled one of them almost word for word. "Have just been to see poor Anthony Thorpe," wrote Great-grandfather. "It is thought now that the lad will recover; but it is to be feared that his poor wits will be none the better for this grievous malady. We must do something for him, for he is a good lad, and faithful, though simple." Great-grandfather had evidently taken a real interest in the unfortunate young man. But that was more than seventy years ago, and surely ninety-year-old Tony no longer knew anything of the Stebbins' affairs. Debby, thinking of the sly, knowing look in his old face, shivered a little in the middle of the big four-poster, and drew the blanket a bit tighter about her in the moonlight. She had taken off the beads that afternoon, and slipped them into her pocket before she had come into the house. They were lying in her bureau drawer now.

Tomorrow morning, thought Debby, before she put them away in the attic again, she would ask Aunt Nell about them. Aunt Nell was ever so much easier to talk to about things than Aunt Retta.

And then before she went to sleep she thought again about Eric Anderson and her sketch of Great-grandmother's portrait. It was only last night at supper that she had screwed up her courage to the point of telling Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell what she had done. Aunt Retta was always annoyed when she thought that any one was trying to pry into their family affairs. But this time astonishment had overcome any annoyance.

"Thinks he can find out who painted the portrait after all these years?" Aunt Retta had exclaimed, her level brows raised. "I don't believe it!"

"He must really have thought your work very fine, my dear," Aunt Nell had said, smiling across the table at Debby. Aunt Nell always did say the comfortable thing.

"Then we could sell the portrait and be awfully rich," had said Polly.

Debby, as she turned over in the four-poster to go to sleep, smiled to herself when she remembered what this unfortunate remark had called down upon Polly's head!

As soon as she had dressed the next morning, Debby put the little golden necklace into her pocket again. But when she came downstairs, she found Aunt

Retta instead of Aunt Nell setting out the silver coffee urn, and Polly in the kitchen, struggling to make a piece of toast worthy of a Girl Scout. Aunt Nell was in bed with a headache.

All through breakfast Debby debated with herself as to whether or not she should ask Aunt Retta about the beads. Aunt Retta, it was true, knew more even than Aunt Nell about family affairs. Everything connected with the Stebbins name was of the deepest concern to Aunt Retta. Once, up at the Academy, Debby had overheard jovial old Dr. Hill telling somebody that Henrietta Stebbins had been a handsome young filly when she was a girl, but that she had never married because she had never found a man who was willing to take the Stebbins name! It was difficult for Debby to imagine Aunt Retta as "a young filly," but she was sure that she must have been very good-looking. Indeed, with her white hair, gray eyes under dark level brows, and distinguished, aquiline face, Henrietta Stebbins might still have been called handsome, but for the severe expression around the mouth.

Debby, looking across the breakfast table, thought that this expression was a little more severe than usual this morning. It always annoyed Aunt Retta to have Aunt Nell sick. For all Aunt Retta's assurance that she was the head of the house, things never did go so smoothly when gentle, efficient Aunt Nell was not downstairs.

As soon as breakfast was over, Debby took up Aunt Nell's tray, and sent Polly, on rather unwilling feet, to make all the beds.

"And remember," called Debby from the foot of the stairs, "that trained nurses always make nice square corners when they tuck in their sheets."

"Hospitals don't have four-posters with skirts and flounces and bolsters and pillow shams," retorted Polly from the upper hall, "or they *wouldn't!*"

When Debby was sure from the sounds above that Polly was really moving about in Aunt Retta's room, she went back into the kitchen and washed the breakfast things, as she always did. Before she had finished, she had made up her mind that she really must ask Aunt Retta about the golden beads. So when she had put the last cup away, and taken off her brown smock, she went down the hall, and through the door of the big drawing-room, which Aunt Retta always dusted herself every morning. Miss Henrietta did not like to have anybody else handle the beautiful frail Hepplewhite chairs, or the delicate Lowestoft and lustre ware that was set about on the tables and cabinets.

But today Aunt Retta was not dusting. She was sitting at the fine old secretary by the window, evidently struggling with her accounts, for papers and bills were spread out before her, and there were two deep, anxious lines above her level brows. The Stebbins' accounts were very troublesome things these

days. Debby saw at once that it was not a good moment to ask Aunt Retta about anything, and she was hastily turning away, when Miss Henrietta looked up.

"Well, Deborah?" she said, her pencil poised.

"Oh, excuse me, Aunt Retta," said Debby, "I didn't know you were busy. I—I just wanted to ask you something."

Aunt Retta made no reply, but continued to look at Debby with a questioning, preoccupied scowl.

"I—I happened to find these beads in the attic yesterday when I was putting the dress away," said Debby coming across the room, and holding out her hand, on which lay the necklace, "and I was—just curious to know about them."

"What!" cried Miss Henrietta as soon as she saw the beads, half rising from her chair, her look of pre-occupation gone in an instant. "Do you mean to tell me that you found those beads in *our* attic?"

"Why—yes," said Debby, a good deal startled. "Then—there *is* a mystery about them?"

"Mystery?" echoed Aunt Retta, taking the little golden beads from Debby's hand. "No, there's no mystery. They were Aunt Nell's. Only I supposed she had given them back forty years ago."

"Given them back?" echoed Debby. "Aunt Nell? Oh, I thought they were Great-grandmother's. Were they somebody else's?"

Aunt Retta seemed not to hear what Debby said.

She had regained her composure, and sat turning the beads over in her hand, evidently thinking of many things.

"She must have put them away where she thought nobody would find them, and she wouldn't have to see them again," said Aunt Retta, more to herself than to Debby.

Debby standing still by the old secretary, felt that she just must know more than this.

"Had somebody given them to Aunt Nell?" she ventured.

"Yes," said Aunt Retta, with a little hard line about her mouth, still as if scarcely aware of Debby's presence. "And a jilt he was if ever there lived one! Waiting until just three weeks before the wedding, and then writing that he thought they had made a mistake. How could she keep his beads, or anything that belonged to him! How *could* she!"

"Oh," said Debby. "He hurt her very much? Oh, poor Aunt Nell." And she looked at the golden beads in Aunt Retta's hand with a new and vivid interest.

"When we are young and foolish we trust too much," said Aunt Retta severely, looking at Debby, who stood before her with troubled face. "No man is to be wholly trusted."

"Oh, no, Aunt Retta," said Debby, in quick protest. "Surely some can be, like Father or Great-grandfather, or," she added, looking through the window

at the square, brown house across the way, "or the Judge."

Had not Aunt Retta trusted everything for years to the hands of Judge Parker, who lived just over the way, and knew almost more about the Stebbins' affairs than Aunt Retta herself? It was Judge Parker who had made all the arrangements when Debby and Polly had come to live in Bellport three years ago, and had gone west to bring them home after their father's funeral. The Judge was a little stiff and hard to talk to, but surely, surely he was a man to trust.

"That is different," replied Aunt Retta, rising briskly from her chair, and dismissing the subject, as one who has already said too much, but she still continued to hold the beads. "I think," she went on, "you will have to do the marketing this morning, Deborah. I will get Aunt Nell's list from the kitchen."

While Aunt Retta went to make up the order, Debby put on her pink canvas hat, that matched her cheeks as well as it did her cotton gown, and took the string bag from the hook in the hall closet. Debby liked to go marketing on clear, sunshiny days, when Bellport's main street was bright with the stands of plums and oranges and beets outside the small shops, and the river and meadows stretched away in a flash of blue and green at the end of the street beyond the wharves. Some day she would put all that gay, delightful color on canvas. It seemed to Debby that

wherever she turned there were beautiful things to paint. And there was always eagerness in her fingertips, if only she could learn and learn and learn.

But today as she went out the gate and down the hill, her mind was for once full of other things than line and color. She was thinking of what Aunt Retta had said. Little Aunt Nell in a romance! How strange and how exciting! What had the man been like? Had he been good-looking and friendly like—like Eric Anderson? And had Aunt Nell trusted him a lot? Of course you could trust *some* men. It was absurd of Aunt Retta to say you couldn't. Debby lifted her head as she went down the street toward the markets.

As soon as Aunt Retta had closed the screen door behind Debby and turned back into the house, she paused a moment in the hall and looked at the beads, which were still in her hand. Nell must not know anything about Debby's finding them. She would put them away herself in the trunk in the attic the next time she went upstairs. Meanwhile, until she was through with her business with the Judge, she would leave them in that drawer in the hall table. Miss Henrietta walked over and pulled out the drawer. There to her surprise she saw a small box with an elastic band around it, just the right size for the beads. Quickly she opened the little box.

"Ugh!" said Miss Henrietta, in horror.

It was full of daddy-long-legs. Polly must really be spoken to again about her dreadful creatures.

With a face of disgust, Miss Henrietta, holding the box at arm's length, opened the screen door and emptied the poor cripples into a flower bed. Then having tapped the box against the side of the door, to make sure that it was quite clean, she dropped the beads into it, and put it hastily back into the table drawer. At that moment she saw Judge Parker walking pompously up the gravel path, with his brief case under his arm. The Judge was coming by appointment to talk over with Miss Henrietta affairs connected with those business papers that were spread out upon the old secretary in the drawing-room. And so serious was their talk, and so grave did the affairs turn out to be, that Miss Henrietta never once thought of the beads again for days—not indeed, until another serious, but quite different, affair recalled them to her mind.

So absorbing, in fact, was Miss Henrietta's call from the Judge that she did not even hear Polly, who had finished the beds, coming down the stairs just outside the drawing-room door. Polly was not sliding down the banisters this time. She was coming very quietly and discreetly on the stairs themselves, with Debby's brown rain cape thrown around her bright blue dress, as a sort of camouflage. The hall wall-paper was also brown, and Polly hoped that the cape would make her less visible to Aunt Retta through

the open door of the drawing-room, when she slipped around the newel post at the bottom. Polly did not wish to be seen just now, because if she were, she felt sure that she would have to go into the kitchen and scrape the carrots for dinner, and this was not Polly's day for helpful deeds—at least not in the kitchen. She was on the way to her hospital, to feed her patients, and she had an appointment with Zab there immediately. Having slipped successfully around the newel post without catching Aunt Retta's eye, Polly tip-toed into the kitchen and over to the ice-box. She took from it a bottle with about an inch of milk in it, which she hid under the rain-cape. Then she opened the screen of the back door, and ran quickly down through the garden.

At the foot of the garden, in a clump of old lilacs, stood a decayed and weather-beaten summer house. It was close to the hedge that separated old Anthony Thorpe's field from the Stebbins place, and was also somewhat set in from the road. It was a long time since it had been used by any one but Polly, and hidden as it was from sight, it was one of those things which Miss Henrietta and Miss Eleanor had, in their financial straits, allowed to fall into disrepair. But to the children it was a delightful spot, and it was here that Polly had set up her hospital. The circular seat that ran around the inside of the summer house was rather shaky, and the spongy old roof was green with moss, but the neglected woodbine had grown so thick over

the openings between the pillars that there was always a dim, green coolness inside, even on the hottest days, and an almost complete shelter from summer rains. Polly had hung a long old strip of green calico across the middle of the summer house, dividing the hospital into two rooms. On it in large card-board letters was the caption: WARD A.

"Zab," called Polly, running up, a little breathless, to the door of the hospital. "Oh, Zab!"

She looked inside, but nobody was there, except the blue butterfly with a torn wing in a Mason jar on one side of the circular seat, and a faded goldfish swimming feebly in an old saucepan on the other. The goldfish's tail suggested that it had been in a losing fight. There was also a wooden box on end, containing a bottle of Pond's Extract, a roll of sterile gauze, a twisted tube of mentholated vaseline and two or three other remedies. Both the butterfly and the goldfish, however, looked as if they were beyond human aid.

"Oh, dear," said Polly aloud to herself, when she saw that Zab was not there. Zab had promised to bring something for the goldfish to eat, if he could coax it out of his siter Carol, who had a bowlful of fish herself. Polly pulled aside the curtain and went into the other ward of the hospital. Here there were a mangy kitten in an old bird cage, and a large, bulgy toad, sitting under a wire strainer, one of his front feet done up in a wisp of sterile gauze. Polly

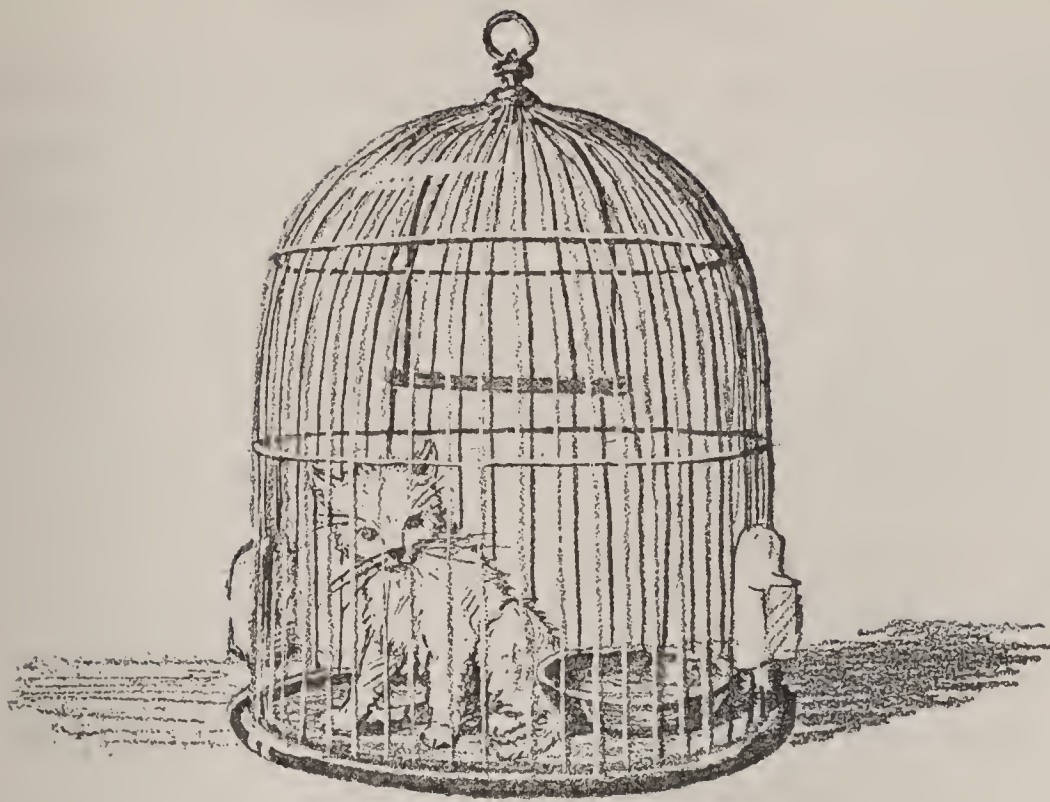
poured the milk from the bottle into a saucer and put it into the bird cage. Then she took a handkerchief out of the pocket of the rain-cape and untied a knot in the corner. Inside were six dead flies. She put them under the strainer for the toad, who blinked solemnly, and a little wearily, at Polly, and then closed his eyes again. The patient was apparently not doing well. Polly examined his foot, but she could not change the dressing without Zab to help, so she went outside to see if that delinquent was in sight. Zab was never on time. If he was late again, thought Polly, she should tell him that he could not be hospital orderly any longer.

Polly walked out of the lilacs and across the grass to the street, and looked up the hill toward the Stebins mansion. She could just see the chimneys of the Eaton house beyond, but there was no Zab. Then she looked down the street, in the other direction, toward the town. Zab might have had to go on an errand.

A little way down the street a car was parked by the roadside—a very snappy red and tan roadster. It was empty, but near it on the sidewalk, his back to Polly, stood a light-haired, broad-shouldered young man in white flannels. He was standing in a most extraordinary position, for one arm was thrown around a small tree, and the other hand was holding one of his feet, which he had raised from the ground. The young man did not appear to be happy at all.

“Oh, my!” said Polly out loud, in a tone of anticipation.

For the young man looked exactly as if he might be a new patient!



Chapter Four

POLLY'S PATIENT

POLLY walked along the grass-grown sidewalk toward the young man, who continued to stand in the same position, holding his ankle.

"Hello," she said, coming up behind him. "Did you hurt yourself?"

The young man let go his ankle and swung around, but he still held to the tree, and his face was twisted with pain.

"Oh," said Polly, as soon as he turned, "I know who *you* are— You're Debby's young man, but I've forgotten your name. What's the matter?"

He grinned faintly, in spite of his wry face.

"But I've not forgotten yours," he said. "You're Polly who showed me the portrait. I seem to have given this beastly ankle a wrench."

Eric Anderson put his foot gingerly down on the sidewalk, while Polly watched intently.

"Ouch!" he said, snatching the foot quickly up again, as soon as it touched the ground.

"How did you do it?" asked Polly, crouching down and looking at the ankle with professional interest.

"Must have stepped on a stone when I got out to look at the engine," said Eric, rubbing his ankle again. "Funny—I was just on the way to your house. Do you happen to know whether your sister is at home?"

"No, she isn't," said Polly, who had no interest in Debby at the present moment. "There's some Pond's Extract at the hospital. You'd better come and let me fix you. My hospital's right over there." And she got up and pointed to the clump of lilacs.

"The deuce it is!" said Eric, grinning faintly again. Once more he very carefully put down his foot, and this time it did not seem to hurt quite so much, for he left it there, although he did not yet bear any weight on it.

"If you put your hand on my shoulder," suggested Polly, "perhaps you could walk to the hospital. You could sort of hop, you know."

"Ouch!" said Eric again, trying to take a step, and

making a very wry face indeed. "Just lock the car for me please, will you?" he added.

Polly felt very important indeed as she turned the key in the dashboard of the red and tan roadster. Then Eric put his hand on Polly's shoulder, and somehow managed to hobble along to the summer-house, although not without stopping several times to hold his ankle and scowl at it.

"This is the Emergency Ward," said Polly, when Eric had at last hopped up the step and through the vine-hung door of the hospital.

"Gee-whiz! It seems to be!" said Eric, looking at the saucepan and its occupant.

"Oh, dear," said Polly in dismay, looking too. "And it never had its dinner."

The goldfish, it was clear, was beyond both anticipation and regret. It was floating on its side on top of the water, and was very pale indeed.

"I suppose it will have to be buried," sighed Polly. "And I shall make Zab do it," she added, her small mouth as straight and severe as Aunt Retta's.

But Polly was always more interested in new patients than in old, so in a moment she had told Eric where he must sit on the circular seat if he did not wish to break through. Then she went to her medicine shelf and took out her remedies. Kneeling on the floor of the summer-house in front of Eric, she rubbed the swollen ankle with the Pond's Extract, and strapped it with the pieces of adhesive tape. Last of all she cov-

ered it with a strip of sterile gauze. Eric, with amusement and surprise, wondered how such small fingers could be so deft. Polly was herself rather proud of her technique. She wanted to use the mentholated vaseline too—it was such fun putting things on—but Eric, looking at the vaseline and then at his excellent silk sock, decided against it.

As soon as Polly had finished, Eric stood up and tried his foot. With the help of the adhesive tape, he could now bear a little weight on it.

“Say, that’s great,” he said. “You’re a brick. I’m most awfully obliged.”

“You’re welcome,” said Polly, her round black eyes very bright, her dark, thin little face full of satisfaction. People did not always take Polly’s profession seriously.

Eric put his hand in his pocket, and took out his bill-fold. Polly saw his name on it in beautiful gold letters. “Oh, yes,” she said, half aloud. It was such a nice name that she did not see how she could have forgotten it. Eric opened the bill-fold.

“You must let me pay you for your services,” he said with a pleasant smile. “Even clinics charge a small fee, you know.”

“Oh, no,” said Polly decidedly, clasping her hands behind her, as she stood in front of him. “I couldn’t do that.” And for a moment Eric thought that her sharp little face looked just as Debby’s soft oval one had looked that day in the studio, when she had said

the very same words. There was certainly inborn pride in these Stebbins. They were quick to do a favor, but they would not take money for it.

"Well," said Eric, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll endow a bed at the hospital—for a patient who is not able to pay, you know. You must have one, haven't you?"

"Ye—es," said Polly, still doubtful, "the kitten." When there was no milk in Aunt Retta's ice-box, Polly sometimes had to spend a week's allowance to buy food for that forlorn patient.

"That's it," said Eric. "I'll endow the kitten," and he opened the bill-fold, and took out a crisp green dollar. Then as Polly still hesitated, "No hospital in the country ever refuses endowments, you know."

Polly was not sure just what an endowment was, but she took the dollar. Then she drew aside the green curtain and showed Eric *Ward A*. This was a great concession, for nobody but Zab and Polly herself had ever been admitted to *Ward A*.

"I shall name the kitten Eric," said Polly at once.

"Gee whiz!" said Eric again, looking at the bird cage.

After they had made the rounds of the hospital, he and Polly went out of the summer-house again toward the car. Eric could limp along quite comfortably now with Polly's help.

"I'll send the next accident case I run across right along here, you *bet*," said Eric, as he slid in behind his

wheel. Then, as he slammed the door, "By the way," he added, "would you mind taking a message to your sister? Please tell her I was most awfully sorry not to see her again, but that she will hear from me soon. I'm going back to town tomorrow."

"Oh, dear," said Polly, with frank regret. She thought that Eric Anderson was the nicest man she had ever met.

She stood on the sidewalk and waved her hand, as long as the red and tan roadster was in sight, and Eric waved back. When the car was lost to sight in the distant traffic of lower Main Street, Polly returned to the hospital to get the rain-cape. Then, with that garment over her arm, she walked slowly up the street toward the house, looking for Zab. She wondered what could have become of him, for he was now more than an hour late. When she had almost reached the top of the hill she suddenly saw him, beyond Judge Parker's big square brown house, climbing over the low stone wall that separated the Judge's corn-fields from the road. Zab apparently saw Polly at the same moment, for he stopped getting over the wall, and hastily slid down behind it again. Polly felt sure that Zab had been doing something that he ought not to have done.

"I see you, Zab Eaton," she called shrilly, "and there's no use trying to hide. Come here. I want to say something."

After a moment the red head and blue blouse ap-

peared above the wall again, and Zab began to climb slowly over. It was of no use to try to get away from Polly when she had once seen you.

"Where have you been?" she demanded, crossing the street, and walking up in front of Zab, who stood by the stone wall, his eyes intent upon the toe of his sneaker, which was burrowing in the dirt. Though he did not look up, Polly could see that there was a guilty look on his face. "And why didn't you come to the hospital?" she added.

"Carol wouldn't give me any goldfish food," said Zab, still intent upon his sneaker.

"The goldfish has passed away," said Polly severely. "You'll have to bury it. But why didn't you come and help me with Edwin?" Edwin was the toad with the bandaged foot.

"I went after a woodchuck," said Zab, who seemed to want to divert the conversation from the hospital. "I think there's a nest of young ones over there." And as he spoke, he raised his head at last, and pointed into the Judge's cornfield.

Polly, interested in spite of herself, looked in the direction of Zab's finger.

"The Judge wouldn't mind our getting them," she admitted. "He'd like to have them cleaned out."

"There's the Judge now," said Zab, looking over Polly's shoulder.

Polly turned, and there, sure enough, was Judge Parker, just coming out of the Stebbins' gate, with

his brief case under his arm. He was looking down at the road in front of him, and paid no attention whatever to the children. But somebody else was waving to them from the path through the field, on the other side of the Judge's house, and Polly saw at once by the pink dress that it was Debby. Leaving Zab standing by the wall, she went to meet her sister. Debby was taking the short cut home through the meadows, and was walking rather slowly, for the string bag was heavy with the marketing, and the day was warm. As she came nearer, Polly saw that her cheeks were pinker than ever, and that wisps of soft dark hair were straying from under the canvas hat. Polly sighed a little. Debby always kept on looking pretty, even when she was hot and tired and disordered. But Debby did not look in a very good humor.

"*What* are you doing with my best rain-cape, Polly Stebbins?" she said severely, as she came through the little stile from the field out upon the road.

"Oh," said Polly, who had entirely forgotten the rain-cape upon her arm, "I—I just wore it to the hospital in case it—it rained."

"There hasn't been a cloud in the sky all the morning," retorted Debby. "You were carrying some mess for the animals away under it—I know *that*. You're just to leave my good things alone after this. Do you hear me?"

"I don't want your rain-cape," said Polly, un-

daunted, putting it on top of the stile. "And you'd better not scold, or I shan't give you a nice message I've got for you."

"*What* message?" said Debby. "Something from Zab, I suppose."

"No," said Polly, turning away from the stile, and starting across the street, her provoking nose in the air, "it's a very special friend of yours, and I've just seen him and given him first aid."

"What *do* you mean, Polly Stebbins?" said Debby, picking up the rain-cape from the stile, and following Polly across the street. "I should think you might offer to carry a few of these things."

Polly was a good scout on the whole, and she really did want to tell Debby about Eric Anderson, so she turned at the gate, and took a bag of oranges out of Debby's string bag.

"Eric was on the way to see you," she said, "and he wanted me to tell you he was going home tomorrow, but you should hear from him soon."

"Where did you see him?" demanded Debby, her back against the gate. "And how did he know I was out?"

"I told him," said Polly. "He turned his ankle just outside the hospital, so I did it up for him. I like him just as much as you do."

"Well, suppose you call him 'Mr. Anderson,' young lady, not 'Eric,'" said Debby, still with some severity. But there was a smile about the corners of her mouth.

Then she opened the gate and the two girls went up the path between the mignonette and hearts-ease to the house. Polly turned under the portico and looked back at the street, but Zab had taken the opportunity to vanish. What, thought Polly, had he looked so guilty about?

The house seemed dim and cool, after the hot sunshine outside. Debby, coming home tired from busy days at the Academy, always felt this refreshing quiet when she came into the wide hall. Not even Polly's antics could disturb for more than a few minutes the peace of the old house. It was as if the many Stebbins' who had lived there in contentment and well-being still filled it with the sense of home that they had loved. And to Debby it seemed that it was Great-grandmother over the mantel-piece who was the real presence in the house, the source of all its friendliness and grace. She seldom passed the drawing-room door without looking in for at least a moment at the crimson gown, with the beautiful folds laid on by a master's brush, at the rich carved chain of mystery, and at the aristocratic head above them. In spite of the formality of the pose and of the little hands laid primly together in the crimson lap, Debby felt that something forever gay and bright was looking down upon the old room.

This morning, as the girls came in, the hall was full of fragrance from the bowl of Aunt Nell's spicy garden pinks on the table. At the end of the hall,

through the open door, Debby and Polly could see Jennie in the distance, rubbing up the silver cake basket. Jennie came in every day for several hours, to help with the dinner and to clean and polish. She was one of Polly's special friends, with a pleasant interest in the hospital, and as soon as Polly saw her sitting at the kitchen table, she ran down the hall with the oranges.

Debby, however, still holding the string bag, stopped for a moment at the drawing-room door. As she looked in, it was not the bright face over the mantel-piece that she saw first. Aunt Retta was sitting on the little old sofa with Aunt Nell, pale and evidently troubled, beside her. Debby was startled for a moment, as she saw how much the sisters resembled each other, for ordinarily she had not thought that they looked at all alike. Little Aunt Nell, to be sure, was typically a Stebbins, with aquiline features and level brows, but her face was softer and sweeter than Aunt Retta's, her eyes were always kind, and her mouth never fell into severe lines. It was the sort of face that had been pretty rather than handsome in its youth. But today it looked as sober and troubled as Aunt Retta's beside it, and one of Aunt Nell's slender, delicate hands was pressed against her forehead. Debby wondered if Aunt Retta *could* have said anything about the little gold beads.

"Oh," said Debby impulsively, "is your headache

worse, Aunt Nell?" There was always an instinctive sympathy between Aunt Nell and Debby. Then, as neither of her aunts spoke, but merely looked at her with solemn faces— "Is—is anything the matter?" she said.

Aunt Nell glanced at Aunt Retta.

"Close the door, please, Deborah," said Aunt Retta.

When Debby had done so, she came across the room toward her aunts with a questioning face.

"Since you have asked, I suppose we may as well tell you now, Deborah," said Aunt Retta. "You are a grown-up girl and sensible. I have just this morning had a long talk with Judge Parker about our affairs, and he tells me that a number of our investments have stopped payment, perhaps permanently, and that we shall have to cut down expenses substantially—*very* substantially. I don't know yet just what we can do, but it will mean the strictest economy, if we are to get on—here."

There was silence for a moment, while Debby looked at her aunts, as sober now as they.

"It doesn't mean, does it, that—we shall have to go somewhere else," she faltered.

"Oh, no," said Aunt Retta hastily, but not quite, Debby thought, with her usual firmness. "But we must look to every penny. The first thing we must do is to let Jennie go."

"Not have Jennie at all?" said Debby, with quick apprehension of what that would mean to her two

aunts in this high old house of great rooms and many stairs.

"No," said Aunt Retta. "We shall manage without her. You, Deborah, will be able to help on Saturdays, and it is time that Polly learned many things."

As she spoke, Aunt Retta got up from the sofa with her usual briskness, and took the string bag from Debby.

"We will talk more of this, Nell, when you are feeling better," she said. "You would better go back to bed now. And please close the secretary for me, Deborah. I shall go and give Jennie her week's notice now."

And with this Aunt Retta walked with firm step across the drawing-room, opened the door, and went off to the kitchen.

Debby sat suddenly down on the sofa beside Aunt Nell.

"Indeed, I am so sorry," she said, as she put her arm across Aunt Nell's shoulder, "so very sorry."

And Debby herself hardly knew whether it was most for the headache, or the worries—or the broken romance of long ago. As she thought of the man who had run away and left his golden beads behind him, Debby's mouth looked just a little like Aunt Retta's. Then, with a characteristic toss of her head—

"Come upstairs, Aunt Nelly dear," she said, "and I shall fix you all comfy."



Chapter Five

TO ACCEPT OR TO REFUSE?

THE days that followed were very busy ones indeed in the old Stebbins mansion. Aunt Retta liked nothing better than to organize a new situation, and once she had made up her mind to an era of drastic economies, she really seemed to enjoy seeing how well it could be managed and put systematically on its new basis. Debby was assigned to this task and Polly to that, everybody's wardrobe was examined, to see how it could be made over for the winter, and a period of canning set in that bid fair to stock the Stebbins shelves for months to come.

While Aunt Retta organized, Aunt Nell went quietly about the added work, her delicate cheeks pink from long hours over the preserving kettle, her deft, slender fingers cutting and stitching on made-over garments. Polly was to have had a new coat in

the fall, but now something must be managed out of Aunt Nell's old ulster. Polly did not mind about the new coat, but she thought it a waste of valuable time when she had to sit on a chair indoors, ripping the long dark seams of the ulster. But even this was better than scalding the garbage can on Saturday morning.

"I'm sorry," said Polly on the first Saturday without Jennie, looking up at Aunt Retta with her funny little tilted nose. Polly's unfortunate nose always made her seem saucy, even when she did not feel that way at all. "I'm sorry, Aunt Retta, but I have another engagement for today."

"What!" said Aunt Retta, looking straight at Polly, with brows very level.

"Yes," said Polly, swallowing just a little, but still unabashed. "Miss Hopkins said she'd give me fifty cents if I'd help her wait on counter Saturdays, and I thought you'd like me to be a bread winner just now." Miss Hopkins was a most respectable little person who kept a thread-and-needle shop on lower Main Street, and there was nothing to be said against her as a companion. "But," added Polly, as Aunt Retta continued to look severe, "I suppose I can give Zab five cents of it for doing the garbage can."

"Well, we'll see about that," said Aunt Retta, still outwardly stern, though inwardly pleased at Polly's enterprise. She was a real Stebbins, thought Miss Henrietta with satisfaction.

As a matter of fact, Polly was already almost as accomplished a manager as Aunt Retta herself.

"Now that Jennie isn't coming," said Debby to Polly, "you will have a chance to show how good a Scout you are. Even if you don't like kitchen work, we've just both *got* to help Aunt Nell."

"Oh, yes," agreed Polly, skipping off without a word to make the beds.

But as the days went on, it was noticeable that whenever there were potatoes to be peeled, Polly somehow managed to be very busy hunting joyously for beetles in a shady part of Aunt Nell's garden, and when there was a preserving kettle to be scoured, she was deeply engaged in putting away the laundry. Polly liked to put away the laundry. The linen sheets felt so nice and smooth, and smelled so pleasantly of hot irons.

She had almost finished putting it away one morning, and was going back and forth as slowly as possible between the clothes basket in the sewing room and the linen closet at the end of the hall, in order to make this pleasant duty last a long time, when Miss Henrietta opened the door of her room and came out. She looked toward the linen closet in surprise.

"Didn't I hear Aunt Nell call you, Polly," said Aunt Retta, "to go down and wash the spinach?"

"Yes," said Polly at once, with her rare and rather crooked little smile, "but—but you see I like to help *you* sometimes, too, Aunt Retta."

Miss Henrietta took her glasses out of their case and adjusted them to her nose. Then she came over to the linen closet.

"Are you sure, Polly, that you have put the fresh towels and pillow slips at the bottom of the piles?" she enquired, looking in.

"Well—some of them," replied Polly, who was always truthful.

"I think you would better take them out again, and put them in right," said Aunt Retta. "I hope, Polly, that I shall not have to remind you about that again. Where is Deborah?"

"I *think* she is down in the workshop," replied Polly, clasping a large pile of sheets to her flat little chest with one hand, while with the other she pushed the three fresh ones into the shelf.

"And as soon as you have finished, you are to go down to Aunt Nell," said Aunt Retta, as she stepped briskly down the hall.

When Miss Henrietta reached the foot of the stairs, she saw her older niece just coming in through the door that led to the back hall and the little workshop. Debby had a letter in her hand, and her dark eyes and sensitive face were excited. She stood still, however, when she saw her aunt.

"Aunt Retta," she said, hesitating a little, "I've just had such a surprising letter—from Mr. Anderson, who was here Community Day, you know, and took my sketch of Great-grandmother's portrait. He says

that he has shown it to several people, and they all think that I might be able to get a scholarship at the Art School!”

“*Really!*” exclaimed Miss Henrietta, taking the letter from Debby’s hand, that trembled a little, and reading it with swift eyes. “Why, Nell,” she said, turning to her sister, who at that moment came out of the drawing-room. “Here’s a letter saying very complimentary things about Deborah’s picture of Mother, and suggesting that she apply for a scholarship at the Columbian Museum of Fine Arts.”

Debby, her face full of color, her eyes very bright, looked over Aunt Nell’s shoulder at the letter.

“‘A number of people here at the Museum have seen your sketch,’ ” read Aunt Nell, “‘and they all agree with me that you have unusual talent. A new scholarship of \$400 has just been given to the Museum for next year, and I am writing at once to urge you to apply for it. This scholarship carries with it special work under Mr. Stephen Homans, one of the best of our younger portrait painters. The school begins November first, and continues through the middle of June. I am enclosing an application blank. If you decide to apply, as I earnestly hope you will, you should send me other samples of your work as soon as possible. The Museum also, as a matter of form, requires two references, and likes if possible a personal interview with candidates—but that can be ar-

ranged later. I cannot urge you too strongly to make this application. Perhaps I should not say it, but I think you would stand a very good chance. The tuition is \$300 for the year, and you will be able to find satisfactory living quarters near the school at a reasonable rate. I should be glad to be of any service I can.—And the Museum should thank its lucky stars that I was clever enough to find the sketch—and you!

“Faithfully yours,

“‘ERIC ANDERSON.’”

“Faithfully yours,” repeated Debby to herself.

“Why, child!” said Aunt Nell, her face as full of smiles as Debby’s own. “I had no idea that your work was so good. We’re proud of you. It’s a great museum, and this would be a splendid opportunity.” And she quickly put her hands on Debby’s shoulders and kissed her.

Miss Henrietta, however, continued to look soberly at her niece.

“Of course it would be an opportunity, and Deborah works hard and well,” she said. And Debby felt a little thrill, for Aunt Retta’s words of praise were few and far between. “But she must not set her heart on this thing yet. Even if she won the scholarship, four hundred dollars would not cover all her living expenses for the year, and the new clothes she would have to get, and I am sure I don’t see, as things

are now, where we could possibly raise the difference.”

“And it would mean that we shouldn’t have my salary from the Academy, wouldn’t it?” said Debby thoughtfully, the first flush of happiness gone from her face.

“We could manage without that,” said Aunt Nell quickly. “We did before you and Polly came. You must not think of that, Debby.”

“But you had more income then, and besides, you did not have Polly to take care of,” said Debby, with the clear look in her eyes that always came when she had something hard to face.

“You needn’t bother about me,” said a high voice above them. “I can get along all right. Miss Hopkins said I was smarter already than her other girl. And anyway, Zab and I are going to keep hens and sell eggs.”

And there at the top of the stairs was Polly, her nose more tilted than usual.

“Polly,” said Miss Henrietta, “how many more times shall I have to tell you that you must *not* be an eavesdropper.”

“But I think it’s fine about Debby,” said Polly, skipping down the stairs. “She’s my sister, and I want to know things.”

“There is nothing to know yet, Polly,” said Aunt Retta. “Not even whether it will seem best for Debby to apply. We must talk this all over later,

when I have had time to think about it." And with this, Miss Henrietta turned into the drawing-room, leaving the others still standing in the hall.

"And I probably shouldn't win, even if I tried," said Debby with a sigh, as if speaking to herself.

"We will do everything we can, my dear, to help you. I am sure you know that," said Aunt Nell, reading, with instant sympathy, all the bitter disappointment which Debby was trying so hard to keep out of her face.

"I'll let you have my fifty cents every Saturday," said Polly. "That is, if I don't have to pay it to Zab for doing the garbage can."

When Aunt Nell and Polly had gone off to the kitchen, Debby went back to her little studio, and stood by the red-curtained window, looking out into the garden, which was already bright with zinnias and the first fall asters. She still held Eric's letter in her hand, and her face was sober, but her mind was busy with plans. She simply could not give up this great opportunity. She must *try* for it anyway, and if she won surely somehow they could find a way to meet expenses. Of course she could not ask Aunt Retta for more money. She knew well enough that she had none to give. Already back in the spring the beautiful old high-boy had had to be sold, in order that some necessary repairs of long-standing might be made about the house.

Debby had never forgotten how Aunt Retta had

looked that evening when the high-boy had gone away. Aunt Nell and Debby had been alone in the drawing-room when the expressmen had come to the door, and Aunt Nell, opening it, had tried her best to get the high-boy quietly out of the house, and thus spare her sister its final going. Aunt Nell had loved it too, but it was Aunt Nell's way to face things quietly and by herself if she could. Aunt Retta's sharp ears had heard the truck, however, and she had come downstairs at once to superintend the moving of the crate, and to pay the expressmen. Debby could still see the stricken look on Aunt Retta's stern face, as if a member of the family were being borne away. When the door had been closed behind the expressmen, Aunt Retta had gone up the stairs without a word, and had shut herself into her own room for the night. No, thought Debby, not even for Art School could she let *that* happen again.

There by the window she re-read Eric Anderson's letter— “—I cannot urge you too strongly to make this application— I think you would stand a very good chance— I shall be glad to be of any service I can. And the Museum should thank its lucky stars that I was clever enough to find the sketch—and you!”

She smiled a little as she turned from the window. There was ever a buoyancy about Debby, part of her warm impulsive self, that made it impossible for her to feel for long the heavy weight of disappointment.

It was instinctive with Debby to believe that there must somehow be a way to happy things, and to find that way. "Dreams-come-true Debby," Aunt Nell often called her.

Debby knew Aunt Retta well enough to feel sure that she would not consent to any application for the scholarship until they knew where the necessary money was coming from. As she looked about the bare little studio, she wondered if there were anything of her own that she could sell. Before Debby and Polly had come to live in the old house, this had been a sort of store-room, where kitchen supplies were kept—the flour and sugar barrels, and the potato sacks against the walls, the fruit and preserves on the shelves in the corner. Debby had made it into a little work-shop for herself, by shoving the barrels into a corner, and bringing down a few pieces of dingy furniture from the attic, but it still looked poor and bare. A large drawing-table that stood beside Debby's easel by the window, two chairs and the old rep curtains were all that the room contained, except the fine old sea-chest that replaced the barrels against the wall, and the jellies that still lined the top shelf. Debby loved the jellies when the afternoon sun shone in from the garden. They seemed to her like a string of jewels along the shelf—ruby and amber, like Great-grandmother's mysterious chain.

Debby walked across the little studio, and sat down on the old sea-chest. Her forehead was puckered into

an anxious line, seldom seen on Debby's face, and her hands, spread out on either side, fingered restlessly the words of the old carving:

“WHERE THY TREASURE—”

What treasures had she, thought Debby. People sometimes sold jewels, she knew, when they had to have money for something right away, but she had no jewels—except the jellies in the afternoon sunshine. There was the cameo set, to be sure, that had come from her mother's family. That was not a Stebbins heirloom, and would, therefore, mean nothing to Aunt Retta, though she had once called it a “wonderfully beautiful thing.” But after all, Debby doubted whether cameos had much of any money value.

Suddenly she sat up very straight on the old chest. “Where thy treasure”—but of course, the chest itself was her one real treasure. Eric Anderson had called it a “fine piece.” Perhaps it was really valuable—perhaps it could be sold! And now Eric had offered to be of service to her—those were the very words in his letter, “I shall be glad to be of any service I can.” Would he, *could* he sell the sea-chest for her? Debby's heart skipped a beat as she thought of it. It seemed to her for a moment that she would sacrifice anything she had, even the chest, for the chance to go to Art School.

She got up quickly and turned searching, critical eyes on the old chest. As she looked at it now it seemed

to her more rough-hewn and unpolished than ever, though tanned and softened by the passing years. Probably Aunt Retta was right; there was not much real value to it. Great-grandfather's skilful hands had made many other finer things—like the ship model under its glass case in the dining-room, which Aunt Retta showed with pride to every visitor. But the carving on the top of the chest *was* beautiful, and different from anything Debby had ever seen. All at once she turned away from it. No, she could never sell it! It was Great-grandfather's, and she loved it too well. *Of course* she could not give it up. She must find some other way.

But what possible way was there? Even if she could somehow raise the money to go to the Museum, how could they ever manage now at home without the help of her salary from the Academy. She was to have had two dollars more a week this next year, and that would buy lots of things. Perhaps she could even put some of that extra money away toward her expenses at Art School—but that, of course, would mean going next year instead of this. It would be hard to wait, but one had to wait for lots of things, Debby knew. Somehow—some time, there *must* be a way. Standing still beside the old chest, she sighed a little.

Then suddenly she turned away from it with a little laugh. What a day-dreamer she was, to be sure! Why, she had not even applied for the scholarship

yet, and there might be dozens ahead of her. And even if she won it, perhaps it would not be available for her another year. With one of her quick impulses she ran out of the room and across the hall to the kitchen. She must ask Aunt Nell right away about this. She just could not wait to know if Aunt Nell thought that there would possibly be a chance another year.

But Aunt Nell was not in the kitchen. There was only Polly, in Debby's smock that came down to her heels, standing on a small stool in front of the sink, vigorously sloshing the spinach around in a pan of water. A sprig of that vegetable was stuck jauntily over each of her ears, and she was singing "A-wearin' of the green" at the top of her lungs. Her back was toward the door, but Polly always seemed to have eyes in the rear of her head, and she stopped singing at once and turned around.

"Hello," she said, as soon as she saw Debby in the doorway, "I know something. Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell are in the south parlor talking it all over, and I *think* Aunt Nell will make Aunt Retta sell another heirloom, because I heard Aunt Nell say they never used something and it was worth two hundred dollars."

"You were eavesdropping again, Polly Stebbins," said Debby severely.

"No, I wasn't," retorted Polly. "I just accidentally knocked the screen out of the pantry window, and I

had to go round and pick it up—and I could hear them just as plain inside.”

Dear little Aunt Nelly, thought Debby, as she turned back into the hall. She, too, was always trying to find a way to happy things.

“You can finish the spinach,” called Polly.

“No, I can’t,” said Debby. “I have some drawing sheets to fix.” The fall term at the Academy would indeed soon be opening.

Debby walked back into the little workshop, her mind still busily turning over every possibility connected with the scholarship. She went to the table by the window and opened the portfolio of drawing sheets. On top lay an unfinished charcoal sketch, on which she had been working last week. It should have been labelled “Youth and Age,” for side by side on the paper were two heads, roughly blocked in. That at the left was erect and youthful, set upon shoulders strong and broad. The face was still a blank, but Debby knew well enough whose face was to be filled in, if only she could draw it from memory. The other head drooped upon slouching shoulders, old and weary, and the face, already drawn with a few bold strokes, was unmistakably that of Anthony Thorpe. Debby held the sketch at arm’s length, and partly closed her eyes. Yes, she had really caught old Tony’s expression. Then for a moment even thoughts of the scholarship went out of her mind, and she opened her eyes wide and stared at the sketch she had made.

Why—she had somehow caught the very expression of sly mystery that Tony had had the day when he came with the eggs and saw the gold beads on her neck. She had forgotten the beads for the last few days, but now the question rushed back upon her. What *could* have made old Tony act so queer about them?

Chapter Six

DEBBY RECEIVES A CALL

THE next morning there was a family conference in the south parlor. Debby was rather sorry that it was not in the drawing-room, for then she could have sat and looked at Great-grandmother's portrait while Aunt Retta talked. There was something so serene and so far removed from the vexations of life in Great-grandmother's way of looking down upon her descendants, that Aunt Retta's decisions always seemed less irrevocable when they were given under those bright understanding eyes in the portrait.

But the south parlor was, after all, the most home-like and informal room in the house. It was directly across the hall from the drawing-room, and while it, like all the rest of the house, was furnished with beautiful old things, it had about it a cosy sense of being lived in, and of being as close to disorder as any Stebbins' room was ever likely to be. Aunt Nell's large open work-basket stood on a spindly little table in the side window, there was music scattered over the old grand piano in the corner, and Isaak Walton was

usually to be found curled up in the wing chair by the fireplace. It was the one spot in the house from which he was seldom driven. Even Aunt Retta had been known to take another chair rather than to disturb Isaak Walton.

On this particular morning he opened one eye as the family came walking in directly after breakfast, and surveyed them in evident surprise. As a rule, nobody had leisure at this time of the day to sit down in the wing chair. But as soon as he saw that they were really coming across the room, he tucked his nose still farther into his gray paws, and pretended to the deepest slumber. Such tactics were to-day, however, of no use at all. Isaak Walton was peremptorily pushed out of the wing chair by Aunt Retta, who sat down in it herself. Aunt Nell and Debby settled themselves on the little sofa on the opposite side of the fireplace, and Debby lifted the very ruffled Isaak into her lap.

“Aunt Nell and I have been talking this all over, Deborah,” began Aunt Retta, “and we do not see how we could possibly finance your expenses at the Art School for the present, unless we sold some more of our old furniture. We both feel that this might be a great opportunity for you, and that we should try to plan for you to take advantage of it. You seem to have real talent, and you have a right to share in what there is in this old house, because you are a Stebbins.”

Miss Henrietta paused for a moment, and Debby, though she did not look up from her lap, where Isaak Walton had gone to sleep again under soothing hands, knew that Aunt Retta was sitting up very straight and proud, as she always did when she talked about the Stebbins.

“But I do not feel that even Aunt Nell and I have the right to do as we please with what is here in the house,” continued Miss Henrietta. “I consider that in the main we are just custodians. These are *Stebbins* heirlooms, and they should go down in the family. We have already had to sell four or five pieces in the last two years, as you know, but they were all rather personal property, like Aunt Nell’s sewing table. I don’t think we should dispose of any more without taking your Aunt Martha’s children into account. They are both Stebbins’ too, although their name is Jones.” Aunt Retta’s tone implied that this was a calamity, but Aunt Retta was just, and “once a Stebbins always a Stebbins” was the rule that she lived by. She never forgot the claims of George and Althea Jones, although they lived in the West, and were being brought up in a Jones environment.

“I am sure I don’t want you to sell anything more, Aunt Retta,” said Debby, looking up at last with clear eyes, directly at Miss Henrietta.

“I have always felt that the old wardrobe in my room was a personal thing, too,” ventured Aunt Nell

quietly. "Aunt Sophie gave it to me herself, you know. I am perfectly willing to let that go for—for Debby."

"No, Nell," said Miss Henrietta, turning upon her sister with decision. "I do not feel that Aunt Sophie intended that as a personal gift at all. She meant you merely to have the use of it during your life-time. I remember distinctly reading a letter of hers among Father's papers, saying that as she had no children, she wanted all her valuable things to come to us, as *family* possessions. I have every reason to think that Aunt Sophie must have had unusually strong family feeling."

Miss Henrietta, very straight in the wing chair, looked more inflexible than Debby had ever seen her, and Aunt Nell said no more about the wardrobe.

"Please don't let's talk about the old furniture any more, Aunt Retta," said Debby in a low voice. "Probably it is not worth while for me to apply any way."

"Not at present, I believe," agreed Aunt Retta, in a tone of finality. "But Aunt Nell tells me that you have suggested putting off any plan for the Museum for a year. That really seems to me the only sensible way out of the dilemma. Now I have this proposal to make. If you will teach one more year at the Academy I think we can manage to let you put aside half your salary for your expenses in the city another season. You are young yet, and twelve months will

soon pass. Meanwhile you can make application for a year from this fall."

"But how could we get along even then here at home without my money?" said Debby, who was always ready to face realities, for all her day-dreaming.

"We shall contrive some way for that," said Miss Henrietta proudly. "One can always manage to save, if one is given a little time for it."

There was silence for a moment. Then—

"I suppose that is the only way," said Debby, a baffled look on her eager young face. It was hard, hard to wait, and to eighteen, a year is a very long time.

"I am sure," said Aunt Nell, her hand on Debby's on the sofa, "I am very sure, my dear, that you will stand an even better chance of winning a scholarship another year."

"Shall I go and write to Mr. Anderson now?" said Debby, setting Isaak Walton on the floor, and rising quickly from the sofa. Unpleasant things should be done at once and put behind one.

"I think that is the best plan," said Aunt Retta, rising also from the wing chair. "Come into the drawing-room, Deborah, and I will help you to compose a letter. I think I know better than you what should be said."

So Debby followed Miss Henrietta across the hall and stood by the old secretary, looking over Aunt

Retta's shoulder while the following was drafted, with a swift hand, on a pad of paper:

MY DEAR MR. ANDERSON,

Your kind letter has been received, and I am deeply grateful for your interest, and for the suggestion about the scholarship, which surprised us all greatly. I only wish that I might accept at once this unusual opportunity for study, but conditions at home make it impossible for me to leave at the present time. ("It is better taste, Deborah," said Miss Henrietta, pausing a moment and looking up, "not to speak of money matters to a stranger.") It might be (continued Aunt Retta's pencil) that another year I should be in a position to go to the Museum. May I take the liberty of asking if scholarships would still be available at that time?

With earnest appreciation of your interest,
Sincerely yours,

"Now Deborah," said Miss Henrietta, tearing the paper she had written from the pad, and handing it to Debby, "if you will copy and sign this, we can mail it at once. Mr. Anderson should have a prompt answer."

"Thank you, Aunt Retta," said Debby mechanically, and she took the paper and went off down the hall to her workshop. Even her little studio, when she came into it today, seemed to her as dismal as she felt. The sun never shone there until afternoon, even on the brightest days, and on this overcast

morning the scant furnishings looked more shabby and dull than ever, and there was dust on the jellies. Debby sat down at the table by the window, took pen and paper out of the drawer, and began her first letter to Eric.

DEAR MR. ANDERSON (she wrote),
Your kind letter has been received, and I am deeply grateful for your interest—

How exactly like Aunt Retta that sounded, thought Debby, looking at it, her pen poised above the paper. With a faint shrug of her shoulders, she went on, making the same sure strokes with her pen that she made with her brush—a real Stebbins hand, said Aunt Nell, like Great-grandfather's.

Debby finished copying the letter and signed it—“Very sincerely yours (not, just “sincerely”), Deborah Stebbins.” She was just on the point of sealing it into its envelope, when with a sudden impulse she unfolded it again. “Indeed,” she wrote at the bottom of the sheet, “I do thank you very, very much. D. S.”

Then quickly she put the letter into the envelope, stamped it and ran out to the mail box.

In the week that followed Debby watched for the mail man with an eagerness that almost surprised herself. She did not know just what it was she expected, but she hoped very much that Eric Anderson would answer the letter. From the window of her room

on the third floor she could see Henry Gill, the rural free delivery man, from the moment that his old Ford began to rattle up the hill toward the Stebbins mansion, and whenever she was at home at mail time Debby was there watching for him, so that she might go out at once to the gate. From the windows on the first floor she could not see so far down the hill—and besides, she did not want Polly to notice her interest in the mail box. One had to be very circumspect indeed, however, to escape that young person's sharp eyes.

"I'll bring you his letter as soon as it comes," said Polly to Debby toward the end of the week, "so you needn't watch where Aunt Retta won't see you."

"I don't know what you mean, Polly Stebbins!" said Debby, indignantly, if not quite truthfully. "I have nothing to conceal from anyone."

"Well, I'll bring it anyway, before they see it. It will count for a kind deed," said Polly, mindful of her Scout obligations. But the days went on and there was nothing interesting in the mail box for Polly to bring.

One afternoon when Debby was in her little studio, sorting drawing papers at the table by the window, there was a loud clang of the front door bell, that fairly echoed through the house. It was the ring of someone unused to the tempers of the old bell-pull, and it startled Debby. The door into the hall was open, and she listened intently to hear who should

speak when Polly opened the front door. There was silence for a few moments, then the jangly sound of the bell again in the kitchen. Suddenly Debby remembered that Polly had been sent on an errand, and that Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell had spoken of making a call that afternoon. She must be alone in the house.

Quickly Debby rose from her chair, and ran out into the hall, and past the stairs toward the front door. Through the ground glass of its upper lights she could see a waiting figure, broad-shouldered and tall. She opened the door. There on the other side of the screen stood Eric Anderson.

"Oh," said Debby, utterly astonished at this unexpected visitor, "it's you!" Then, ready to bite her tongue for being so inane, she turned the handle of the screen door. "Won't you come in?" she said.

There was on Eric's face as he came into the hall the same delightful mixture of gravity and gaiety that she remembered so well, and he smiled as if he were most awfully glad to see her. Debby was indeed very good to look at, in her brown frock, with the glowing cheeks and fluffy hair above it. Eric put his hat on the table.

"I began to think the house was empty," he said, "but luck was with me."

"My aunts are not in," explained Debby, as she led the way into the drawing-room.

"I'm sorry," said Eric Anderson politely, if not at all sincerely. "But, after all, I believe it's you I want

to see. Please don't tell me, Miss Stebbins," went on Eric, going characteristically straight to the point, "that you meant what you said in your letter."

Debby had sat down on the little sofa, expecting Eric to take the opposite chair, but he stood before her, with the expression of one who expects an answer, and Debby felt somewhat confused and at a disadvantage.

"I'm afraid I did," she said.

"But you mustn't," said Eric, looking down at her in great earnestness. "Don't you know what a gift you have?"

"It isn't that I—don't want to try for it," said Debby. "But—well, it seems best for me to stay at home this winter. Probably," she added, looking up with questioning eyes, "there will be scholarships another year?"

Eric Anderson hesitated in surprise.

"Of course," he said. "But indeed you must try for it now," he added almost imperatively. "This scholarship is designed especially for those interested in portrait work. It would give you just what you want. Please promise me that you will send in that application as soon as possible."

Debby was thrilled, but she felt strangely speechless. How *could* she tell Eric Anderson that they were too poor to pay even the cheapest board for her, or to buy the few clothes that she would need to go away from home. It suddenly came over her, as she

looked across the large, richly furnished room, that he must suppose that they were a well-to-do family. It seemed as if he read her thoughts.

“I am a very outspoken person, Miss Stebbins,” said Eric Anderson, “and you may not like what I am going to say, but it seems as if a great deal were at stake. Do you—won’t you tell me—is it a question of money?”

For a moment there was silence in the room. Debby sat very still, trying with all her might to keep that wretched color from coming into her face. She knew that she must say something, for she felt that Eric’s eyes were upon her, though she did not look up. But before she could think what she should say, he spoke again.

“I’m sorry,” said Eric gravely, “that is not my business, I know, but—well, it *is* my business to get you to the Art School. And—by George—I’m going to!”

At the unexpected determination in his voice Debby suddenly looked up and laughed.

“You’re a very managing person, Mr. Anderson,” she said. “I believe you could even give points to Aunt Retta!”

“See here,” said Eric, turning away from Debby, and walking toward the mantel-piece, “that’s only one of the things I came here for.”

“Yes,” said Debby, “how *did* you happen to come? I thought you were in the city.”

"I was," said Eric, "but my mother and sister are still at Bellport Harbor, you know, and I ran up for the week-end, to see them—and you and the portrait. For I think your sketch may have given us a possible clue to the painter. There is a line and pose in it that suggests just one man."

"Really?" said Debby, getting up from the sofa, and following Eric across the room, where he was already looking searchingly at Great-grandmother.

"Do you suppose you could get me a stool or an old chair that I could stand on," said Eric. "If this was done by Forsythe Brown, as we believe it was, we shall find a certain characteristic signature on it."

"There's the wood-box," said Debby, pointing to the little sea-chest, that in cold weather was full of logs.

Together they moved the chest to the hearth, directly under the portrait. Then Eric got up on it, and took a flashlight and a small magnifying glass out of his pocket. With the glass at his eye, and the flash making little circles of vivid crimson on Great-grandmother's gown, he went back and forth across the bottom of the portrait, examining every inch of it with the greatest care, while Debby below looked up and held her breath.

"If it's a real Forsythe Brown," said Eric, "we may find his identifying mark rather far up on the canvas. That is why it is so often missed."



Examining every inch of it with greatest care.

There was tense silence for a few minutes, while the spot of light crept along, almost up to Great-grandmother's folded hands. Suddenly Eric leaned forward, with his glass even closer to the canvas.

"We can't have a little more light, can we?" he said.

Debby quickly switched on the lights at either side of the mantel.

"There it is!" he cried. "As sure as I'm standing here, that's Forsythe Brown's mark, right there below the hands, in that dark fold of the gown—*F.B.*, with the periods like small crosses. From the floor it all melts into the portrait. By George! What a find! Get up here and let me show you."

Eric held out his hand, and Debby jumped quickly up on the wood-box beside him. With their heads close together they examined the precious mark. They were so excited and intent on what they were doing that they were quite unaware that Polly had come into the hall, until they heard her voice.

"It's only Debby's Mr. Anderson," called Polly to some friend outside. Then she looked in through the drawing-room door, and saw the two figures up on the wood-box. "What are you doing there?" said Polly, with eyes very wide.

"We're just looking at the signature on the portrait," said Debby, jumping down from the wood-box. But Eric turned from the canvas only long enough to wave to Polly.

“Hello, Florence Nightingale,” he said. “How’s my namesake getting along?”

“He’s almost well,” said Polly. Then she looked at Debby. “Do you want me to tell you when I see Aunt Retta coming home?” she asked.



Chapter Seven

NOT FOR SALE

WHEN Polly had gone off down the hall, Debby sat down on the wood-box.

“What does it mean?” she said, looking up at Eric, who stood before her. Her face was eager, and her hands were clasped tightly in her lap. “Is he a great painter?”

“Forsythe Brown was a pupil of Watts,” said Eric. “He was a very great painter indeed. Some say that if he had lived he might even have surpassed his master. But he died when he was twenty-five.”

“And he knew all that about color!” said Debby in wonder. “He could finish a portrait like that when he was only a little older than I am!”

"His finished works are very rare," said Eric. "He apparently had a way of beginning canvasses and then not finishing them, before he went on to something else—a restless sort of genius. If he had only stuck to his work, he would have been known around the world, even at twenty-five. That picture is probably only the second finished canvas of his in this country. The other is in the Metropolitan in New York."

"Oh," said Debby, under her breath, turning a little and looking up at Great-grandmother. But Eric continued to look at Debby, as if he found the real face the more interesting.

"Then—then I suppose it is very valuable," she said, turning back to Eric.

"Yes," said Eric gravely. "It is."

There was a moment's pause.

"Of 'course you understand, Miss Stebbins," he continued, "that I am in no position at present to tell you how valuable it is. Perhaps I should not say anything at all just now, but—well, I feel sure that you may count on the Columbian Museum making an offer for a genuine work of Forsythe Brown."

"You mean they will offer to buy the portrait?" said Debby, startled, her face all at once full of color.

"I shall be surprised if they do not," replied Eric Anderson.

Debby suddenly stood up.

"But we couldn't sell it—*ever!*" she said, almost fiercely, like a true Stebbins. "It's Great-grandmother. It's—it's the finest family thing we have."

"Sometimes things are so rare, aren't they, that they are more than family heirlooms," ventured Eric quietly. "What we call museum pieces."

"Oh, no," insisted Debby, standing tall and straight between Eric and the portrait, as if she would protect Great-grandmother from marauding hands. "It belongs to us. Aunt Retta wouldn't think of selling it—and *I* shouldn't either."

"Perhaps when I have had an opportunity of talking it over with your aunt—" began Eric.

"Oh, but you mustn't speak to Aunt Retta about it—not now," interrupted Debby. It suddenly came over her that perhaps Aunt Retta would suspect her of trying to sell the portrait, in order to go to Art School. "You mustn't offer her money for the portrait. Indeed you mustn't. It would upset her dreadfully."

Once more it seemed as if Eric Anderson read her thoughts.

"It might be more money than she would feel justified in refusing in—in these times," he said, looking searchingly at Debby.

"Great-grandmother is not for sale, Mr. Anderson," said Debby, with all the cool dignity of Aunt Retta, looking at him with clear eyes.

His grave young face broke suddenly into one of

the gay smiles that had surprised Debby on that first day when he had walked into her little studio.

"Let us sit down a minute," he said.

There was something so quietly commanding about Eric Anderson that Debby found herself sitting down on the wood-box again. Eric took the opposite chair.

"Won't you tell me about your great-grandmother?" he asked, leaning forward, his hands clasped loosely between his knees. "Was she really as beautiful as the portrait?"

"Oh, yes," said Debby. "At least, I think so. She used to go to grand parties with Great-grandfather when they touched at foreign ports, and in one of his old letters he calls her 'the belle of the ball.' Great-grandfather was captain of a big clipper ship," she added in explanation.

"I see," said Eric. "That's how she happened to be painted in London. Perhaps also that's how Forsythe Brown happened to finish this particular portrait. Your great-grandfather wanted to bring it back with him in the clipper ship."

Eric Anderson studied the beautiful face over the mantel, so strangely, he thought, like the young face opposite.

"There is so much gaiety, so much spirit in it," he said, "I can well believe that everybody adored her."

"Yes," said Debby, "I'm sure they did."

"Had you ever thought," suggested Eric after a minute, looking back at Debby, "that your great-

grandmother loved all that adoration. Every beautiful woman must. I daresay she dreaded sometimes the return voyage to the little Maine village."

"Perhaps she did," agreed Debby, with a flicker of a smile, wondering just where the conversation was leading. "Bellport *is* a little dull sometimes."

"You would feel sorry then, wouldn't you," said Eric, looking right into Debby's eyes, "to have one of the world's beauties condemned to spend the rest of her life in a little coast town."

"Why—yes," said Debby, a bit doubtfully.

"Then don't you see," said Eric with great earnestness, "that it would never be a question of 'selling Great-grandmother?' It is not really a money matter at all. If a great museum should offer her a place on its walls, you would just be giving her the opportunity to let the world adore her again. Here in Bellport only a very few people can ever see her face, but there she would be once more 'the belle of the ball.' She would just be going back into the world that she loved, and that I am sure she conquered. She would be safe forever from fire and every other disaster, and she would be so cherished that her beauty would never be lost, and generation after generation would walk by and think how lovely she was. Great-grandmother would simply be coming into her own at last."

While Eric was speaking Debby sat as if spell-bound on the wood-box. She had never heard any one talk just that way. There was a persuasiveness, a pleasant

reasonableness, about him that made one believe in spite of oneself.

"Perhaps," she said, as Eric paused. "But still, I *know* that Great-grandmother will never leave this house. And indeed you must promise me that you will not speak to Aunt Retta about it—just now."

"I am afraid that I cannot promise that," said Eric. "When I report that there is another genuine Forsythe Brown in this country, the matter will of course be in the hands of the museum."

Eric took out his watch and rose hastily.

"Mother and Edith are waiting for me at a place down the road," he said. "I shall have to run along now. But you will remember what I have tried to say, won't you," he added, looking earnestly at Debby, "and you will not give a final answer about the scholarship until you have thought it over a little longer? I shall be back at the Harbor next week-end with Mother. Will you let me come to see you again then?"

"I am afraid I should not have any different answer about the scholarship," said Debby evasively. For the moment it was fun not to let Eric Anderson know how much she hoped that he would come again.

Just then there was a prophetic voice from somewhere upstairs.

"There's Aunt Retta coming up the walk now," announced Polly, true to her word, "but I don't see Aunt Nell."

Debby, following Eric toward the hall, glanced

across the room at the front window. Aunt Retta was not visible, but there in the embrasure of the window, on the velvet of the very best Chippendale chair, Debby saw Isaak Walton, sound asleep. Isaak Walton was strictly forbidden to lie on that particular chair, and the last time that he had been found on it, Aunt Retta had declared that if he ever got up into it again, he should be permanently banished to the kitchen.

Now Isaak Walton was Debby's special pet, so she ran hastily down the long room, to pick him up before Aunt Retta should come in. As she turned toward the hall again, with the bunch of gray fluff under her arm, she saw that Aunt Retta had already opened the screen door and was looking in surprise at Eric, who had just picked up his hat from the hall table.

"Oh, Aunt Retta," said Debby, coming into the hall, and putting Isaak Walton on the floor. "This is Mr. Anderson—my aunt, Miss Stebbins. I am not sure whether you saw each other on Community Day."

"How do you do," said Aunt Retta, in her stiffest manner, not offering to shake hands with Eric, who bowed, also a little stiffly.

"Mr. Anderson came to look again at Great-grandmother's portrait, Aunt Retta," explained Debby, somewhat taken aback by Miss Henrietta's manner, "and he says that it was done by a famous painter, Forsythe Brown, and has real value."

"Brown?" said Miss Henrietta, her level brows rising

a little. "We have of course always known that the portrait was valuable."

There was a moment of embarrassing silence, during which Debby stared in astonishment at her aunt. Miss Henrietta continued to look coldly at Eric, who stood holding his hat.

"I must thank you, Mr. Anderson," she said in a cool voice, "for writing about the scholarship. I am sorry that my niece cannot take advantage of it. Good afternoon." And with these words, Aunt Retta walked into the drawing-room.

Debby followed Eric to the door.

"Goodbye," she said, almost without looking at him, her cheeks flaming. Aunt Retta was often stiff enough, but Debby had never known her to be downright rude, like this—and to Eric.

"May I come next week?" he asked again, a little doubtfully.

"Yes," said Debby, her eyes very bright. And she held out her hand to him. So angry was she with Aunt Retta, that she did not know at all how eager that *yes* had been.

As soon as she had closed the screen door behind Eric, Debby turned toward the stairs. She felt that she could not see Aunt Retta again just then. But before she could make her escape she heard Miss Henrietta's voice in the drawing-room.

"Deborah," called Aunt Retta. "Come here a

minute, please, and help me to move back this wood-box."

"I'm sorry," said Debby in a low voice, coming into the drawing-room, and taking hold of one of the handles of the box. "We forgot it."

"I'm sure I don't know why that young man should come snooping around here," said Miss Henrietta, as they set the box back where it belonged.

"Mr. Anderson was not snooping," said Debby, very erect before her aunt. "He came to look at the portrait because he is an expert. And besides, he wanted to tell me that he—was sorry about the scholarship."

"He could have done that quite as well by letter," said Aunt Retta. "I don't care to have young men that we don't know examining things in this house."

"But we *do* know him," said Debby with spirit. "He comes from a great museum."

"Well, I don't care for his type," said Aunt Retta.

"What do you mean, Aunt Retta?" said Debby, her hands clenched very tight behind her.

"We won't talk about it any more just now, Deborah," said Aunt Retta. "When you go into the kitchen, will you please see if Polly put the butter in the ice-box."

Debby walked very fast into the hall, but she did not go toward the kitchen. She felt as if she were going to cry, and Aunt Retta must not see her in tears. All her life it had been only anger that could

make Debby cry. Through the bumps and bruises of childhood people had looked at her rueful, tearless face, and said what a brave little girl she was. It was not the Stebbins tradition to cry when you were hurt. Even when her father died, Debby had looked out upon her changed world with eyes that were sad and startled, to be sure, but quite dry, though her father had been her dearest friend.

But her resentment flamed quickly at small injustices and cruelties. The hot, angry tears that sprang to her eyes at trivial misunderstandings often surprised even Debby herself. And it seemed to her that Aunt Retta could touch that sore spot within her with a surer hand than any one else she knew. Aunt Retta and Polly, on the other hand, got along famously together. Polly had no sore spots, and all Aunt Retta's rebuffs slipped from her as water from a duck's back. Aunt Retta, on her part, though she was often severe, rejoiced secretly in Polly's rebounding spirit, and thought sometimes that she would be the truest Stebbins of them all.

Debby, as she ran up the stairs struggling with her tears, felt very angry indeed. What right had Aunt Retta to speak to Eric Anderson in that way—and practically to dismiss him from the house, as if he had been a—a—book-agent? It was unbearable to have one's friends treated like that. Any one could see, just by looking at him, what Eric was like. But then Aunt Retta never did see the real point.

With a little sob, Debby stumbled over the top step, and ran down the hall to her room, blinded by the tears that would not be repressed. When she came to her own door, she was surprised to see through the door across the hall that Aunt Nell was sitting by her little sewing-table. When she had seen Eric's car outside, she must have come in by the side entrance through the studio, and gone up the back stairs. Aunt Nell was as shy at times about meeting people as Debby herself. They had much in common, these two, and in the summer they enjoyed being close together in the big airy front chambers on the third floor, although when winter came they moved down to the warmer second floor with Aunt Retta and Polly.

Aunt Nell looked up from her work when she heard the steps in the hall, as if she had been waiting for Debby's coming, but Debby, with averted head, walked directly into her own room, without a word. She had intended to fling herself down on the bed, and take what comfort she could in angry tears, but now she merely sat down by the open window. Throwing back her head to the breeze, she wiped her eyes and tried resolutely to compose her face. She was sure that very soon Aunt Nell would speak to her, and so it was.

"Debby," called the pleasant, soft voice from across the hall, "if you are not busy, will you come here a moment, please."

"In just a minute, Aunt Nell," Debby called back,

in a tone that she was afraid sounded queer and muffled.

She stood in front of the mirror, and dabbed her eyes with cold water from a glass on the bureau. Then she walked across the hall into Aunt Nell's room. Miss Eleanor, looking up, searched Debby's face for a moment in evident surprise. Aunt Nell must suppose that she had been crying about Art School, thought Debby with a little pang. And Aunt Nell's words confirmed her fears.

"Debby," she said, ignoring, however, all signs of tears, for Aunt Nell never probed sore spots, "I have been thinking over what we could possibly do about the scholarship. Aunt Retta is right, of course, about the family heirlooms—but I have something *quite* my own that I know is valuable. It has—nothing whatever to do with Aunt Retta or anybody else in the family, and I am very sure we can sell it."

"Oh, no, Aunt Nelly," said Debby. "I couldn't have you sell any treasures of your own. I just couldn't."

"I shall not sell anything that I care to keep, my dear," said Aunt Nell, with a little hesitation. "I shall never use it again, and I have kept it for many years—too many, I think. It will be much better to dispose of it—if it is worth what I am sure it must be."

How pretty she was, Aunt Nelly, thought Debby, sitting there in her lilac dress, her brown eyes and white hair and pink cheeks almost as fair as Debby's own. Debby hoped that she would look just like Aunt

Nelly when she should be sixty-five. Just now there was an odd expression, half determination, half regret on Miss Eleanor's gentle face.

"That's sweet of you, Aunt Nelly dear," said Debby, putting her hand affectionately on the shoulder of the lilac dress, "but indeed, you mustn't dispose of anything." Then as her mind went back to Aunt Retta, she added, with a flash in her brown eyes, "You have little enough to call your own, as it is."

Miss Eleanor got up quickly from the little sewing-chair.

"Come," she said, with a briskness that was unusual to her, "we will go and get it now. It is put away, but I know just where to find it."

And Debby, wondering and still protesting, followed Aunt Nell out into the hall, and up the steep, narrow stairs to the attic.



Chapter Eight

A TREASURE DISAPPEARS

AUNT NELL, on her knees in front of the trunk in the attic, took out the old Paisley shawls and laid them, with other treasures, carefully on the chair beside her.

"It is at the bottom of the trunk," she said, lifting out the precious crimson dress, which Debby had worn on Community Day.

"Oh!" said Debby, who stood beside the trunk. With a startled gesture she put her hand to her face. She had guessed what Aunt Nell was looking for. It was the golden beads—all that was left of the poor little romance of long ago. "Oh, no, Aunt Nelly, you mustn't sell them!" said Debby quickly.

But Aunt Nell, intent upon the trunk, did not seem to hear. She pulled aside the old cloth at the bottom, and picked up the little pink apron. Debby, feeling dumb and helpless, watched Aunt Nell rise from her knees, shake out the apron and put her hand into the pocket.

“Why, it’s not there!” she said, turning to Debby with a surprised face.

“Oh, Aunt Nell,” said Debby, hardly knowing in her confusion what to say, “I—I happened to find it one day, and I showed it to Aunt Retta and—and she took it.”

“Aunt Retta took the beads?” repeated Aunt Nell, as if she did not understand.

“Yes,” said Debby. “She—she said they were yours, and I thought she was going to put them back where I found them.”

Then stumblingly she told Aunt Nell what had happened—how she had taken the beads downstairs because she had thought that they were Great-grandmother’s. But although she did not repeat a word of what Aunt Retta had said of the old love affair, a spot of crimson came into each of Aunt Nell’s delicate cheeks as she listened, and Debby thought that she had never seen her gentle aunt so upset.

“We will go down and find Aunt Retta,” said Aunt Nell, as soon as Debby had finished.

In silence, Debby helped to lay the things back in the old trunk. Then miserably she followed Aunt Nell down the three long flights of stairs. Debby had no desire whatever just now for another interview in the drawing-room. She was sure that Aunt Retta was in no mood to talk over the sale of anything, even the gold beads. Besides, she would be sure to think that the suggestion had come from Debby herself, and it

was not easy, even at the best of times, to explain things satisfactorily to Aunt Retta.

They found her sitting at the secretary in the drawing-room. She looked up as they came hurrying into the room, evidently astonished to see her quiet sister in such agitation.

"Henrietta," said Aunt Nell, going directly to the point, "I cannot find my gold beads in the attic—the ones in the old trunk. Debby says that you took them. Did you put them somewhere else?"

It was now Aunt Retta's turn to be startled.

"Your gold beads?" she repeated, rising from her chair, and looking uncertainly at her sister.

Debby had never before seen Aunt Retta look uncertain, and she was a little shocked to find what a pleasant thrill it gave her. There was, indeed, both uncertainty and confusion on Aunt Retta's usually unmoved face, for it was many years since there had been any mention between them of anything connected with the old love affair. Aunt Retta looked at Debby, and then at Aunt Nell, and then back at Debby again, as if trying to recall something.

"You brought them in here, didn't you, Deborah?" she said at last, collecting herself. "Yes, I remember now. It was the morning the Judge came about our affairs, and I have never thought of the beads since. I put them in the drawer of the hall table in a little box, intending to take them upstairs later."

As she spoke, Aunt Retta went hastily across the

room into the hall, followed by Aunt Nell and Debby. They were just in time to see Polly's slim legs disappearing hastily around the curve of the stairs. Miss Henrietta pulled out the drawer, and they all peered eagerly in. It was quite empty, except for a small mud turtle, with a crushed foot, which in the sudden light scuttled as best it could toward the back of the drawer.

"Ugh!" said Aunt Retta, in disgust, "I simply will not stand any more of Polly's creatures around. Put it out, Deborah, please."

The turtle had for the moment broken the tension, and Debby, overwrought by all that had happened, hardly suppressed a hysterical laugh, as she opened the screen door, and dropped the turtle into the bushes. But when she turned back into the hall, the words that she heard made her instantly sober again.

"But what has become of the beads?" said Aunt Nell, blankly, still looking into the drawer.

"I cannot imagine," said Aunt Retta, her level brows drawn together, as she turned over in her mind the various possibilities. "Nobody has been in the house but ourselves for over a week, and the screen door is always hooked. Perhaps Polly knows something about it." Polly, she recalled, had been making a hasty exit when they came into the hall. But on the other hand, Polly was very honest, and never took things that did not belong to her—except occasionally to feed her animals. "Oh!" said Aunt Retta suddenly,

raising her brows, and turning to look at Debby. "That young man who was here this morning! He was in the hall by himself when I came in.—And Eleanor," continued Miss Henrietta, turning to her sister, "I remember now—he was shutting that table drawer in a hurry just as I walked in. I noticed it at the time, and I didn't like the looks of it. He seemed the sort of person who takes liberties with other people's property."

While Aunt Retta was speaking Debby had stood perfectly still and very straight, facing her aunts, her back against the banisters, her eyes dangerously bright.

"You mean, Aunt Retta," she said, "that you think Eric Anderson took those beads out of the drawer—that he is a thief?"

"I must say it looks to me very much like it," replied Aunt Retta. "Why should he be opening drawers in other people's houses unless he was looking for whatever he could find? I must say that after I had seen that, I was thankful when the screen door closed behind him."

There was a moment of silence, broken only by the sound of a creak on one of the upper stairs around the curve.

"Mr. Anderson is *not* a thief," said Debby, in a tense voice, looking straight at Aunt Retta. "And you have no right to call him that. He—he is one of the most honorable people I ever met."

"*Well*, Deborah," said Miss Henrietta, obviously taken aback by this unexpected burst of feeling, "I think you are forgetting yourself. I am sure I don't see why you should so rush to the defence of a total stranger. He may be all right, but what do *you* know about him? What do *any* of us know about him?"

"We know that he came from the Columbian Museum—one of the greatest in the country," said Debby in a low voice, biting her lip.

"I liked his appearance," said Aunt Nell, trying as usual to pour oil on troubled waters. "As Debby says, a representative from such a place would hardly be—a thief."

"I don't know about that," said Aunt Retta firmly. "There are crooks everywhere. And after all, how do we know that he *is* a representative of the Columbian Museum. He simply walked in here on Community Day and made himself at home. I never did believe it was a good plan to throw our houses open that way to every Tom, Dick and Harry. And I certainly don't trust *any* man," added Miss Henrietta with emphasis, looking at her sister and niece in turn.

"Aunt Retta," said Debby, in a muffled voice, "you're not fair, and you're not telling the truth. Mr. Anderson is no more a thief than you are—and—and I won't listen to you another minute." And turning, Debby fled up the stairs, almost falling in her blinding tears over Polly, who was sitting entranced on the top step.

Miss Henrietta and Miss Eleanor, still standing by the open drawer of the hall table, looked at each other.

"Deborah has never spoken to me like that before," said Miss Henrietta austerely. "I think she should apologize. I never knew a Stebbins with a violent temper except Cousin Jonathan. I hope that Deborah is not going to be another Jonathan."

"She has been greatly tried and disappointed about the scholarship, sister," suggested Miss Eleanor. "She will be sorry for her quick words. Debby is a dear child."

"She is a Stebbins," conceded Miss Henrietta, "but she has her mother's impulsiveness." Then she looked down at the open drawer, and her brows contracted again. "I feel perfectly sure that those beads are in the young man's pocket."

Miss Eleanor shook her head, "No, sister," she said, "I cannot believe that."

"Well, *I* can," said Miss Henrietta with decision. "Where else could they be? And I certainly propose to get them back!" As she spoke, she glanced up through the banisters. At the very top of the stairs a pair of sneakers was on the point of vanishing.

"Polly," called Miss Henrietta, in no uncertain voice, "come down here, please."

The sneakers paused, then turned, and Polly came down the stairs, not at her usual lively gait, but with lagging feet, a doubtful expression on her sharp little

face. Aunt Retta, however, made no reference to eaves-dropping. Instead, she said at once:

"Polly, do you know anything about any gold beads that were left in this drawer?"

"No, Aunt Retta," said Polly, with what sounded like a little sigh of relief.

"Are you perfectly sure?"

"Yes, Aunt Retta," said Polly demurely.

"Then, Polly," continued Miss Henrietta, "I wish to say something else. I will *not* have you put any more turtles, or other horrid creatures, in this drawer. Do you understand me?" And as she spoke, Aunt Retta turned and closed it with a firm snap.

"I didn't put any turtle in the drawer," said Polly.

"*What?*" said Aunt Retta, turning back to Polly.

"No, I didn't," repeated Polly, shaking her head.

"Polly," said Aunt Retta impressively, "I want you to look right at me. I don't care so much about the turtle, but I want you to tell me the truth. No Stebbins ever lies. It is not likely that Aunt Nell or Deborah or I put that turtle in the drawer. When did *you* do it?"

"I didn't put it in," repeated Polly, looking straight at Aunt Retta with her shoe-button eyes.

"I have never known Polly to say what wasn't true," said Aunt Nell quietly.

Miss Henrietta searched the small face before her. Polly was no longer looking at Aunt Retta. She was examining the Chinese brocade that hung above the

hall table, and for once Polly looked ill-at-ease, if not even a little guilty.

“I think you would better go upstairs to your room, Polly,” said Aunt Retta, “and think this thing over. When you are quite ready to tell the truth you may come down.”

“But I *am* telling the truth,” insisted Polly, and this time she looked right at her aunt—with real Stebbins spirit, thought Miss Henrietta, relenting a little.

Debby, meanwhile, lay in the middle of her big four-poster, her face buried deep in the pillow. Never had she felt so angry with Aunt Retta—angry and a little ashamed too, though she was not yet ready to acknowledge it. She had told Aunt Retta that she lied—And she had too, thought Debby fiercely, clenching her hands, as they lay against the counterpane on either side. To call Eric—Eric Anderson, a thief, after all his interest and all that he had done to try to help. It was just outrageous. Anybody but Aunt Retta would be able to see how fine he was. And *anybody* would “rush to his defence,” when such awful things were said about him. What was there peculiar about that? Did Aunt Retta expect her to stand there calmly, and hear a friend accused of being a robber. He *was* a friend, though—Debby faltered a little even to herself—though of course she had seen him only twice. But time didn’t count in friendship. If you liked people, you could like them a lot right away.—How

could Eric—Eric Anderson ever come again, after what had happened? Oh, she wished that she could go away—somewhere—to study and paint, where there were people who were fair and understood, and liked the same things. And Debby buried her face still deeper into the pillow, in a fresh burst of bitter tears.

After a few minutes, when the tears had spent themselves, she sat up in the middle of the bed and looked through the window at the sweet, calm summer day. How devastating it was to be angry, thought Debby, how it spoiled the world—but Aunt Retta was not to be borne. How had Aunt Nell ever stood it for all these years? Poor little Aunt Nelly, and now she had lost her beads. What could have become of them really? Who *had* taken them out of the drawer?

It occurred to Debby, now that she felt calmer and more like herself, that the best way to clear Eric was to find the real thief, if there was one. As she dried her eyes, she tried to think of all the people who had lately been to the house. Henry Gill, the mail-man, had come to the screen door one day with a registered package for Aunt Nell, but Henry was as honest as the day. Then there was the plumber, who had come to fix the faucet in the cellar—but Debby herself had let him in through the bulkhead, and Aunt Retta had been sitting in the south parlor, in full view of the hall table, all the time that he was working.

Suddenly she stopped drying her eyes. Old Tony Thorpe! The last time he had come with eggs, he had

wandered up to the front door, instead of the kitchen entrance where he usually came, and Debby had found him there, mumbling to himself, when she came down the stairs. Of course he could not have known that the beads were in the hall table—but nobody could say how long he had been standing there, and if the screen had happened to be unlocked—and Debby was almost sure that it had been—he might very well have wandered in and opened the table drawer to put the eggs in it. Debby remembered that once when the back door had been left unlocked, she had found Tony inside, by the kitchen dresser, counting out his eggs into a sauce-pan. Now Debby's mind went back also to the day when she had worn the beads, and old Anthony had been so queer and mysterious. What could it all mean? Tony *must* have something to do with the disappearance of the necklace. Her mind diverted from anger by these interesting thoughts, Debby was on the point of getting up from the bed, when she heard a step in the hall outside. Perhaps it was Aunt Nelly going to her room—if it was Aunt Retta, she just couldn't speak to her, yet, thought Debby, and she buried her face once more in the protecting pillow. But it was neither.

“Can I come in? It's me,” came a stage whisper from the hall, and the door opened a crack.

It was Polly, who was tired of thinking about the truth in her room at the back of the house, and who was on her way to the “office” in the attic, where there

was a more interesting outlook. Polly looked more sober and subdued than usual, but she marched straight across the room to the side of the bed, where Debby was now sitting up again.

“I think Aunt Retta was terrible,” said Polly stiffly, in her calm, thin voice. “And I don’t believe Eric Anderson ever, ever, *ever* took the beads.”

This was Polly’s tribute of loyalty to her sister. And Debby, leaning across the bed, put her arms around the wiry little figure, in a sudden hearty squeeze. But Polly, who did not care for any sort of an embrace, wriggled away as quickly as she could, and walked off again to the door. As she opened it, she turned.

“And I think Eric’s a—a *peach*,” she said.

Then she vanished.

Chapter Nine

POLLY PUTS THE KETTLE ON

POLLY sat at the old type-writer in the "office," writing a letter, with one finger, to her cousin Althea Jones. Polly liked any excuse for typing, and she and Althea kept up a vigorous correspondence. Althea and her brother George had spent the whole summer at the Stebbins mansion the year before, and the little girls had become great friends—although Althea was a quiet, timid child who thought it was fun to sit on the porch and knit doll's afghans. Polly really liked George, who was lively and jolly, a good deal better, but George was four years older than the girls, and inclined to be scornful of "kids." Polly and Althea, however, had the bond of authorship between them, as they were both writing novels.

DEAR ALTHEA, (began Polly)

How are you getting along with Inez? (The title of Althea's novel was "Inez Springer, Or the Adventures of a Movie Star") I'm stuck on Sylvia because I can't think what to do in the love seen. I hate love sees. Do you think it would be all right if I had Sylvia an old maid?

We are having an awful time here. Aunt Retta is mad with Debby because she stuck up for Eric Anderson. Eric Anderson is Debby's boy friend. He's great but Aunt Retta thinks he stole some beads and she thinks Debby ought to appol—apollo—appolijeyes but Debby wont and Aunt Retta had her breakfast upstairs two days and I had to take it up. It was Aunt Nell's beads they took but she's not mad. Praps I could have Sylvia fall in love with a robber and then I could have her mother say what Aunt Retta did and I wont have to think up conversation. I think conversation is the worst part of a novel dont you. If Eric Anderson comes again praps he and Debby will have a love seen and that would be all right for Sylvia. Write me the day you get this.

Your loving cousin,

PAULINA DE CORDOVA STEBBINS.

P.S. Tell George I can shin half way up Zab's flagpole, and that's pretty high.

Polly got up at this point from the piano stool, and went to see just how high the Eaton's flag-pole seemed from the attic window. But when she looked out she forgot the pole right away, for Zab himself was just turning in at the Stebbins' side gate. Polly had not seen Zab for some time. He had been away for more than a week on a visit with his mother, and before that he had seemed to be rather avoiding Polly, ever since the day, in fact, when she had caught him getting over the Judge's stone wall, and he had looked guilty.

But now he was actually running along the path to the back of the house.

Polly always missed Zab when he was not there, because it was fun to have somebody to give orders to. Besides, there was a radio at Zab's house, and although Aunt Retta said that no true Stebbins would ever care much for that sort of thing, Polly listened in whenever she could to the broadcasts of two or three continued stories. It helped a great deal with Sylvia Fisher. Polly was therefore genuinely glad to see that Zab was home again. She quickly pulled down the top of the attic window and stuck out her head.

"Zab," she called, "Zab, where you going?" Then, as Zab disappeared without a word around the corner of the house, "Wait for me," shouted Polly, "I'm coming down."

Abandoning her correspondence with Althea, Polly ran through the attic and down the stairs as fast as she could, using the banisters for the last flight, and bumping into Debby, who was just coming out of the little workshop into the hall. A moment later she had climbed over the railing of the back porch, and jumped down into the garden. Zab was peering in among the branches of a big syringa bush.

"There's something in there," he said.

Polly crouched down and looked in too.

"It's only one of Tony's cats," she said, "the old black and white one that fights all the time. Oh," she exclaimed with satisfaction, as the cat slunk out from

the other side of the bush, "it's got a torn ear. There's blood on it. Let's catch it and do it up."

But the cat had no idea of being done up. It had perhaps already had experience of Polly's clinics. At any rate, as soon as it saw that Polly and Zab were on its trail, it vanished under another and still larger bush. For at least fifteen minutes the children chased this unwilling patient about the garden, cornering it finally in the barberry hedge. Polly dragged the cat out by a hind leg, and carried it, struggling, toward the house.

"Why don't you take it to the hospital?" asked Zab, at her heels.

"I used up all the sterile gauze on Eric Anderson," replied Polly. "We can take it into Debby's studio. She's just gone upstairs, and I know she's got some gauze there. She uses it for paint brushes."

The little workshop conveniently had an entrance directly from the side path, and Polly and Zab, peering in through the partly open door, saw that it was indeed empty. They went in with the cat, and closed the door carefully behind them.

Polly looked all around over the table and shelves, but she could not see any gauze. She even poked about a bit among the drawings in the old chest, which was standing open, although she had strict orders from Debby never to touch it. This had given the chest a pleasant suggestion of mystery. The cat had by this time escaped from Polly's arms, and was slinking about the room, trying to find an exit.

"I tell you what," said Polly, "you stay here with the cat, and I'll go upstairs and get some gauze and some arnica. I know where they are."

"No," said Zab, asserting himself for once, "I'll go too." The truth was, Zab was always a little afraid of Aunt Retta, and never liked to be left alone in the Stebbins mansion. Polly stared at him in surprise.

"All right," she said, conceding the point. So the children slipped quickly through the door into the hall, and closed it behind them.

Polly led the way to the medicine closet on the second floor. They could hear Aunt Retta moving about in her room at the front of the house, and Debby and Aunt Nell talking together up still another flight, but they saw nobody, and they succeeded in tip-toeing quietly downstairs again, unnoticed, with their remedies. Polly was sure from what Aunt Retta had said about more "creatures," that Tony's cat would not be a welcome guest in the house. And suddenly Polly was more than ever glad that Aunt Retta was safely upstairs, for just as the children reached the lower hall again, they heard the most terrific yowling coming from the studio.

With all speed they ran to open the door, and there in the studio was a genuine patient awaiting them. For the cat, in an investigating frame of mind, had got into the open chest, and in some way had succeeded in knocking down the heavy lid, which had fallen upon one of its paws, holding it as in a trap.

“Oh, oh!” cried Polly in horror, rushing across the room, to release the poor victim. “Close the door, quick.”

For the cat, as soon as the heavy lid was lifted, leapt in terror for the door, holding up the injured paw, and yowling miserably, as it scuttled across the room.

“Oh, the poor thing!” said Polly, picking the cat up tenderly, and examining the paw. “I guess it crushed it pretty bad.”

“We’ll have to do that up first, won’t we?” said Zab, looking on with interest.

“Yes,” said Polly, sitting down in the chair beside the table, with the struggling animal on her lap. “Put the arnica and gauze over here, and then hold it tight by the legs—so—while I fix it—and don’t you *dare* let go once.”

Zab reluctantly did as he was told, and for a few minutes there was a lively scene in the workshop. Polly applied the arnica and gauze, while Zab’s freckled face became as red as his hair in his struggle not to let go. A great deal of arnica went on the floor instead of on the cat, and the workshop was so filled with cries of protest that Polly was sure they must reach even Aunt Retta’s ears. But the gauze was at last successfully knotted around the injured paw, and Polly even succeeded in tying a scrap of it on the torn ear.

“Now we must take it home,” she said, getting up from the chair.

"It's almost supper time," said Zab, who had had enough of the cat.

"You needn't come if you don't want to," said Polly indifferently, "but *I* shall carry it back to Tony's." And she marched out into the hall, opened the closet door and took down one of the string bags with which Aunt Nell went to market. With Zab's help, she put the cat into the bag, which fortunately was made of good stout cord. "Now it can't jump and hurt itself any more," said Polly with satisfaction. Then, firmly holding the bag, she ran through the kitchen and down the porch steps, followed by Zab, who had forgotten his supper in the interests of this new adventure.

The procession went swiftly down the garden path, and through the hole in the hedge that separated the Stebbins place from old Anthony's field. The cat had got its head through the string bag, and was howling dismally, but Polly made no move to let it out.

"Are you going to take it right up to the house?" asked Zab breathlessly, as they went across the field.

"Yes," replied Polly, who had always longed for an excuse to see the inside of that mysterious cottage. "We shall have to tell Tony what happened to his cat, and say we're sorry." And she walked right up on the forbidden door-stone in front of the house, and rapped on the door.

There was no response from inside, but the chil-

dren heard what sounded like a chair scraping on the floor, and Polly, remembering that old Minnie was deaf, lifted the latch and went in.

A strong smell of stale tobacco and long-cooked onions greeted the children as they stepped into the room. It seemed very dark, for the three windows were small, and little of the late afternoon light came through the dusty panes. They did not see old Minnie, but at the back of the room, by the big iron stove, they could make out the figure of old Anthony, sitting in a wooden armchair. The only other furniture in the room were two kitchen chairs, a table littered with unwashed dishes, and a broken-down couch in a corner, with a rumpled pillow and quilt on it. At the other end of the room was a sort of cupboard with a bunk built into it—where old Minnie probably slept, thought Polly. Through a partly open door at the back several chickens were going in and out. Strings of sliced apples, discolored by smoke, hung from the rafters above the stove, and the slim tails of three or four cats protruded from under it. Old Anthony leaned forward in his chair, peering toward the door in the dim light, and waving his hand before his face, in the weird gesture with which he greeted deaf and dumb Minnie.

“It’s only me, Tony,” said Polly, stepping forward into the scanty light from the window.

As quickly as she could she untied the string bag and took out the cat. Old Anthony gripped the arms

of his chair, and his dull watery eyes looked, uncomprehending, first at Polly and then at the cat. She went closer to the old man, and held out her still struggling patient.

"See, Tony," she explained. "It's your cat, and it got hurt—up at our house. We took it in to fix its ear, and it got into a chest and the lid fell on it. We're awfully sorry. It was a big heavy chest up at our house, you know, and I guess it hurt it, but we did it up the best we could, and I think it will be all right. See?" And Polly held out the paw tied up in the gauze.

But old Anthony paid no attention whatever to the cat. He was looking straight at Polly, and a sly gleam had come into his old eyes.

"The big chest," he murmured shakily. "The heavy chest. I made that."

"What, Tony?" said Polly, staring at the old man. "Great-grandfather Stebbins made our chest."

"I made the chest with the Captain," repeated old Anthony, wagging his unkempt head from side to side, and seeming to look right through Polly, with eyes that were suddenly bright.

"*You* made our old chest, Tony?" said Polly in astonishment, while the cat jumped unheeded out of her arms, and limped across the room to the stove.

Old Anthony continued to wag his head, this time up and down.



But it was not old Minnie at the door.

"Fine and strong, fine and strong," he said. "A precious thing. Sh—sh!" And the old man put his finger on his lips.

"And you really helped Great-grandfather?" said Polly, deeply interested, coming closer to the armchair. "Tell me about it, Tony."

The old head continued to nod up and down.

"Captain went away, but 'Tony,' says he, 'watch, *watch!*'" As he spoke, old Anthony raised a long trembling finger, and shook it close to Polly's face, "'Watch, Tony,' he says, 'if fire comes at the big house, run—run—the precious thing first—the precious thing first'— Sh—sh!" And he laid his finger again on his lips.

"What do you suppose he means?" said Polly, in a half whisper, turning to Zab, who stood behind her, trying to make himself as small as possible.

"Let's go now," said Zab, in a scared voice, tugging at the belt of Polly's Scout uniform. "It's ever so much past supper."

Polly turned back to the old man, but the momentary gleam had gone out of his face, and he seemed to have forgotten what he had said.

"Supper," he repeated after Zab, half raising himself from his chair. "Where's Min?"

"I don't know," said Polly. "She's not here. Do you want your supper, Tony?"

Old Anthony sank back in his armchair.

"Put the kettle on," he said querulously, nodding

his head, and pointing his shaky finger toward the stove.

Polly, by this time thoroughly thrilled with the adventure, shook Zab's hand from her belt, and walked over to the stove. Polly could never bear to let anything be hungry. She lifted one of the iron lids of the stove and peeked inside. The fire was low, so she dropped in several pieces of kindling from the wood-box, and put the old iron kettle over the hole. In a minute or two it began to sing. She looked into the rusty tea-pot on the stove, and seeing that there were already some soaked grounds in it, she poured in the boiling water from the kettle. Then she walked over to the table and cut three slices of bread from the crumbly loaf. She could see no butter anywhere among the litter on the table, but there was some doubtful jam in a saucer, and she spread this on the bread. Next she took down three cracked cups from a shelf and filled them with the brew from the tea-pot. The tea was a dark, cloudy maroon, and Polly, who had never been allowed to have any at home that was not the lightest straw-color, wondered in anticipation how this would taste.

During all these preparations old Anthony sat nodding his head, and following Polly intently with his little red eyes, as she went back and forth across the room. Zab, on the edge of a chair near the table, wished with all his heart that he dared to get up and

go, but more than anything else he dreaded to have Polly call him "Fraidy-cat."

When everything was ready Polly helped old Anthony to move up to a corner of the table, where she cleared a place for his tea and bread. She also gave Zab his. Then she took her own and sat down beside Zab, facing old Anthony, who began at once to munch his bread and wash it down with the tea. Polly, on one edge of the chair, sipped hers and made a very wry face. Then she remembered that it was real grown-up tea at last, so she put in a great deal of sugar from the bowl on the table, and went bravely on sipping. But Zab did not feel like eating. He just sat on the other edge of the chair, uncomfortably holding his cup, and wondering how Tony could eat so fast with so few teeth.

It was already dusk outside, and within the dim room it seemed to the children to get more shadowy every minute. They could see a faint glow from the stove across the kitchen, and the uncouth shape of old Anthony against the light of the window, as he gulped his tea. The warmth and comfort of it seemed to revive the old man, for after a few minutes he set down his cup and smacked his lips. Then, looking right at the children, his head wagging from side to side, he began to talk, mumblingly at first, of the long-ago days when he went to sea—of wind and storm and monstrous waves, of whales, harpoons and

kegs of rum. As he went on, the years seemed to drop away from old Anthony, and his voice was steadier and clearer than Polly had ever heard it. She and Zab sat on the edge of their chairs, their tea forgotten, as they listened entranced.

They did not even notice that there was almost complete darkness in the room, until suddenly there was a loud knock at the door. Both the children jumped, while old Anthony's voice trailed away querulously. Against the faint light of the window the children could see him peering over their heads toward the door, and making the weird gesture in front of his face which meant "Min." But it was not old Minnie at the door.

"Come in," mumbled old Anthony.

"Quick!" said Polly, clutching Zab, and pulling him toward the still half-open back door.

But before they reached it, the front door was pushed open, and a flashlight fell brightly on Polly and Zab in the middle of old Anthony's cottage. Polly looked over her shoulder.

"Oh!" she said, as she and Zab vanished through the back door into old Anthony's field.

For it was Debby!



Chapter Ten

ANOTHER TREASURE DISAPPEARS

MEANWHILE up at the Stebbins mansion, supper had been ready for twenty minutes, but there was no Polly.

“This is the third time this week that Polly has been late,” said Miss Henrietta, coming into the kitchen. “We will not wait any longer. The child deserves to miss her supper some night, and then perhaps she will remember. At any rate she shall eat it cold.”

So Aunt Nell carried the scallop into the dining-room, and the three sat down to a rather silent meal. Debby had as yet made no apology to Aunt Retta for her hasty words earlier in the week, and although family life went on much as usual, there was about it

the uncomfortable suggestion of an armed truce. "Don't you think you could tell Aunt Retta that you are sorry that you spoke quite as you did?" had suggested Aunt Nell on the morning after the scene in the hall.

"I will, if Aunt Retta will take back what she said about Eric," Debby had replied almost sullenly, quite unconscious in her recurrent flash of anger that she had called Eric Anderson by his first name. Debby and Aunt Retta continued to say as little as possible to each other, but Aunt Retta had the wisdom to make no further reference to the supposed theft. Debby, however, continued to think a great deal about the gold beads, and about old Anthony's connection with them. As soon as supper had been cleared away, she came to the door of the south parlor.

"I am going out for a little while," she said, speaking rather to Aunt Nell than to Aunt Retta, "and I will see if I can find Polly."

"I wish you would, Deborah," said Aunt Retta, who was standing by a window looking out into the garden, where it was already quite dark. "I cannot think where the child can be."

Debby, however, did not go into the garden. She went through the front gate, and along the grass-grown side-walk that led down the hill toward the town. As she went, she several times gave the peculiar whistle that she and Polly often used when they

wished to find each other, but there was no response from anywhere in the dusk of the summer evening. It *was* queer that Polly should stay out as late as this, thought Debby.

But her mind was not really very much upon Polly. Debby was on her way to see Anthony Thorpe, and to find out, if she could, what he knew about the gold beads. Aunt Retta, to be sure, had forbidden them to go to old Anthony's cottage, but that was three years ago, when she and Polly had first come to Bellport. She was eighteen now, and a teacher at the Academy, and why should Aunt Retta tell her where she should, or should not, go.

Debby pushed open the broken gate in front of old Anthony's, and walked through the ragged wet grass to the door. There was no light in the cottage, but through one of the windows Debby could hear the droning of old Anthony's voice inside—no doubt talking to himself, as he so often did, thought Debby, standing in a moment's hesitation on the door-stone. She did rather dislike to walk alone into that queer, dark house, but after all, she had her flashlight, and the poor old man was harmless enough. Now that she had at last made up her mind and was there, she must not go back.

So Debby snapped on her flash, and knocked on the door as loudly as she could. The talking inside the cottage stopped at once. Then she heard Tony's querulous old voice, saying "Come in." Debby lifted

the latch and walked in, flashing her light before her. It fell not on old Anthony, as she expected, but directly on Polly and Zab, who were making for the back door.

"Polly Stebbins," called Debby, as the children ran into the field outside, "*what* are you doing here?"

Polly made no reply, and Debby, forgetting for a moment in her surprise both old Anthony and her errand, stared out into the dusk of the night, where the children were disappearing across the field. She was recalled to her immediate surroundings by the sound of a grunt behind her, and turning, she saw old Anthony leaning forward in his chair toward her. He was making again the strange gesture for old Minnie, and the flashlight cast uncanny shadows of his bent, uncouth figure and his waving arm against the wall behind him. The miserable, disordered little room, with the old man sitting in it, seemed to Debby, in the unnatural light of the flash, like a veritable den. She shuddered a little, but she walked over to old Anthony.

"It's Debby Stebbins," she said, "from up at the big house. You remember me, don't you, Tony? You bring eggs to us, you know."

The old man, who had been indeed blinded by the flashlight, passed his hand across his red little eyes, and looked shakily up into Debby's face.

"Tony," she went on earnestly, "I've come to ask you something. Do you remember the beads, the

necklace, that you saw one day here?" And as she spoke, Debby put her hand to her throat.

At the mention of the necklace, the same sly look that Debby had noticed before came over old Anthony's wrinkled face, and he nodded his head slowly and knowingly.

"A precious thing—the precious thing first," he said, the words which he had spoken to Polly and Zab evidently lingering still in his feeble mind.

"Well, Tony," continued Debby, looking right at the old man, and speaking as impressively as she could, "I want you to tell me this. Do you know where the necklace is now?"

A look almost of fright came into old Anthony's face, and his trembling mouth moved convulsively, as he continued to nod his head.

"Oh, where is it, Tony?" said Debby eagerly. "You must tell me right away."

But old Anthony merely looked up at the young face above him, with craftiness mingled with the fright, and put his finger on his lips, as he had done before.

"Sh—sh," he said, "don't tell. Sh!"

There was something so weird about the whole scene, that when at that moment the latch rattled behind her, and the door was again pushed open, Debby all but screamed. But it was only old deaf and dumb Minnie, come home at last. She stood, gray and gaunt and bedraggled in her faded cotton dress, blinking into

Debby's flashlight, but her dull face showed neither interest nor surprise. She merely walked over to the table, and finding matches somewhere, lighted the kerosene lamp that stood among the unwashed dishes. When, after a moment, Debby turned back to Tony, the old man seemed to have forgotten her and all that she had said, in his interest in Min's homecoming. He was waving his arm, and pointing first at the loaf of bread, and then at the stove, evidently eager for more to eat.

"Where is it, the necklace, Tony? Tell me," said Debby, bending down once more toward the old man.

But it was impossible to capture his attention again. He could think of nothing but Min, and the supper which she was now stirring up in an iron pot on the stove. And as the odor of onion began to seep through the stuffy room, the old man smacked his lips, and moved restlessly in his chair. He seemed wholly unconscious of Debby's presence, and after a few minutes, seeing that it would be impossible to find out anything more from him just then, she lifted the latch, and slipped out through the door.

With a long breath, Debby drew in the sweet fragrance of the summer night. After the dirt and squalor of that room, even the dew upon her feet was refreshing. She walked slowly back up the hill, feeling more baffled than ever about the beads. And what could Polly have been doing in old Anthony's cottage? She must speak to her about it, for Aunt

Retta was right, Polly should not be going in and out of that horrid little house. But she would tell no one about the transgression. She was not ready to have her own visit to old Anthony known—and besides, Polly had been a dear about Eric. Turning it all over in her mind, Debby went up the walk between the mignonette and asters. How sweet it smelled in the soft dark. Aunt Retta was standing at the screen'door as she came up.

"Polly?" said Miss Henrietta, in an anxious voice, peering through the screen. "Oh, it's just you," she added, as Debby stepped into the light from the hall. "Then you didn't find her?"

"Not exactly," said Debby, hesitating. "I just saw her—running across the field—with—Zab—but she wouldn't answer!"

"What field?" said Aunt Retta, obviously relieved.

"Behind—old Anthony's cottage," replied Debby, coming into the hall.

"Behind Tony Thorpe's?" said Miss Henrietta, in a voice both puzzled and annoyed, staring at Debby. "What was Polly doing there at this time of night?"

"I don't know," replied Debby, with truth, if not quite with ease of mind. "I couldn't see just which way she went."

"You had your flashlight," observed Miss Henrietta, looking at Debby's hand. "That's certainly very strange." Then she went to the door of the south

parlor. "Nell," she said to her sister, "Deborah saw Polly running across old Tony's field. Why do you suppose she doesn't come home?"

"Perhaps she is coming up through the garden now," suggested Aunt Nell.

Aunt Retta walked quickly back into the hall, and out through the side door of Debby's workshop into the garden, followed by Aunt Nell.

"Polly," called Aunt Retta, in her strong, deep voice into the night, "Polly, where are you?"

Debby, standing in the doorway, whistled their own particular call over and over again, but there was no response.

"She can't be there," said Miss Henrietta, coming back into the house, "or she would have answered."

Debby noticed that lines of deep anxiety had come back to Aunt Retta's face.

"If Zab was with her," suggested Aunt Nell, "why can't Debby go over to the Eatons', sister, and see if he has come home."

"Yes," assented Miss Henrietta. "Please go at once, Deborah, and find out all you can."

While Debby ran out into the garden and around the corner of the house toward the Eatons', her two aunts went back into the south parlor. Miss Eleanor took some mending from her sewing basket, and tried to compose herself to a bit of work, but Miss Henrietta could not sit down. She paced restlessly from the window to the screen door and back to the window

again. After a few minutes Debby came running breathlessly in from the Eatons'.

"Well?" said Aunt Retta in a loud voice from the hall, as soon as she heard the step upon the porch.

"Zab came home ever so long ago," said Debby hurriedly. "He said he was running ahead of Polly, and when he got to the back of the Eatons' garden he looked back, but Polly wasn't anywhere in sight. They had come along by the River Road."

"The River Road!" exclaimed Miss Henrietta, her face going quite white. "Why, Nell, that's where they were searching yesterday for that escaped convict, the one that got away from Thomaston last week! Good heavens! We must get the Judge right away."

Within five minutes Judge Parker, cool and pompous, was in the Stebbins' hall, and as soon as he had heard the story of Polly's disappearance, he hurried back at once across the street, to get his car and begin a systematic search.

It was now eight o'clock. When Judge Parker had gone chugging off into the night in the direction of the River Road, Debby and Carol Eaton walked quickly down through the garden, taking Zab with them, so that he might point out the exact spot at which he had last seen Polly, while Aunt Nell, herself a little white, made another careful tour of the garden with Debby's flashlight. Aunt Retta, meanwhile, stood at the telephone in the back hall, nervously calling up, number after number, anybody and every-

body who might possibly know of Polly's whereabouts.

At nine o'clock Judge Parker telephoned to report that he had so far found no trace, and that he had notified Constable Gage. At half past nine he telephoned again that the Constable was getting together a posse of men to search the woods across from the River Road, and that the Constable wanted to know what Polly wore when she went away.

"Do you know what she had on, Deborah?" said Miss Henrietta, turning distractedly from the telephone to the others, who stood behind her. "Or you, Nell?"

Never, thought Debby, had she seen her stern, composed aunt so apparently on the brink of going to pieces. As she looked at the white, drawn face by the telephone, she suddenly knew that it was the face of one who thinks she has lost what is dearest to her in all the world.

"I—I—I'm not sure," said Debby. "Her Scout uniform, I think."

"Go upstairs and see if her uniform is in her room," commanded Miss Henrietta, tapping nervously with her fingers on the table, "Quickly! I am holding the line."

As fast as she could Debby raced up the long flight, while the others waited below in a silence broken at first only by the continued tapping of Aunt Retta's fingers on the telephone stand, then suddenly by the cry of Debby from the upper hall.

"She's *here!*—Aunt Retta—Aunt Nell—She's upstairs in her room, asleep!"

"*What!*" cried Miss Henrietta, dropping the telephone, and starting for the stairs, up which she ran almost as fast as Debby. And there was nobody to see that it was Aunt Nell who spoke the few necessary words into the telephone, and hung up the receiver.

For several moments the two aunts and Debby stood speechless by the little spool-bed, looking down at the slumbering figure under the candlewick spread. There was always something touching about Polly when she was asleep, and Debby saw Aunt Retta's stern face suddenly tremble and crumple, before it was hidden in the still shaking hands. The reaction of relief was more than even Miss Henrietta could bear.

"Oh Aunt Retta," said Debby, with a rush of warm feeling, laying her hand impulsively on the arm beside her, "I'm—I'm sorry." And thus did Debby make her apology.

In a moment Aunt Retta took her hands from her face, which had composed itself again.

"How *did* she get here?" she demanded. "Weren't you in the kitchen all the time before supper, Nell? She couldn't have come up the back stairs without your seeing her."

"No," said Aunt Nell, a puzzled look on her gentle face, "I'm sure she didn't."

Debby glanced around the room, which was unwontedly neat. The Scout uniform was laid smoothly

over the back of a chair, Polly's underclothes were folded discreetly on the foot of the bed, and there were even shoe-trees in the sneakers on the floor. But Debby noticed that the screen was not quite firmly in the back window, and that on the window sill there was a small footprint.

"I think," said Debby, "that she shinned up the waterpipe, and came in over the porch roof. I saw her half way up the Eatons' flag-pole yesterday."

"Why on earth should she do that?" said Aunt Retta, in quite her usual tone of voice. "Unless she has been doing something she is ashamed of. We shall have to look into it in the morning. Now we must go down and try to get in touch with the Judge."

With these words, Miss Henrietta led the way out of the room, and quietly closed Polly's door behind them.

As soon as the sound of footsteps on the stairs had died away, Polly suddenly sat up straight in the spool-bed, her black eyes very wide and bright. Old Anthony's tea had been potent, and Polly had only been playing possum! Listening carefully, she slipped over the edge of the bed. Tip-toeing across the room, she opened the closet door, and drew forth a paper bag from the bottom of the box where her best white hat reposed, in a nest of tissue paper. When she was safely back in bed with the bag, Polly opened it and took out a graham cracker. It was a little stale and crumbly, to be sure, but Polly, who had gone almost supperless

to bed, found it delicious. She ate six with great relish. Then she put the paper bag beneath her pillow, and snuggling down under the candlewick spread, she went, in spite of old Anthony's tea, peacefully to sleep.



Chapter Eleven

A LETTER COMES AND A LETTER GOES

POLLY came skipping up the front walk from the mail-box. She held one hand behind her, but in the other was an envelope which she was studying with great interest. In the left-hand corner were the words *The Columbian Museum*, in elegant raised letters.

"It's from Mr. Anderson," announced Polly to Aunt Retta, who was waiting at the screen door, "but it's for you, not Debby."

"For me—from Mr. Anderson?" said Aunt Retta, drawing her brows together. Then looking down over her glasses, "What have you in the other hand, Polly?"

"Only the string bag. It—it was left outside," replied Polly, reluctantly disclosing that article from behind her back.

As a matter of fact, Polly had just been to fetch the bag from old Anthony's, where it had been reposing, forgotten, for several days, ever since she and Zab had taken the cat home in it. It was most unfortunate that Aunt Retta should have happened to be at the door waiting, just at this moment. But Miss Henrietta was too much interested in the letter to do more than glance absently at the string bag, a little surprised that it was not the newspaper.

"Go out now, please, Polly," she said, "and bring in all the things that are hanging on the line."

Polly moved off very slowly in the direction of the kitchen, for she did want, most dreadfully, to know what was in that letter, and the clothes-line was entirely out of earshot.

"I cannot imagine what that young man can be writing to *me* about," said Miss Henrietta to Miss Eleanor, who at that moment came down the stairs. "Although I certainly have a few things to say to *him* the next time I see him," she added. "I am positive that I left the beads in that drawer. You haven't found any trace of them yet, have you, sister?"

"No," said Aunt Nell, a momentary look of trouble about her mouth. And Debby, arranging music on the piano in the south parlor, set her lips tight also, and tried to fight back the angry color that she felt again

in her cheeks, for she had heard Aunt Retta's words.

Miss Henrietta tore open the envelope, and glanced at the bottom of the sheet. The name there was not what she expected, for it was signed, "Basil Gregory, Curator of the Columbian Museum of Fine Arts." Still standing in the hall, with Miss Eleanor beside her, Miss Henrietta read the letter.

"What!" she exclaimed, as her eyes went swiftly down the page, "Why—I never heard of such a thing!—Why—what presumption!"

"What is it, sister?" said Aunt Nell, evidently startled by the deep flush on Miss Henrietta's face.

"Why, the Columbian Museum wants us to allow them to take Mother's portrait for further inspection. They actually suppose that we would allow it to go off among strangers, and they even hint that we might wish to sell it!" said Miss Henrietta, handing the letter to her sister.

Our representative reports (read Aunt Nell) that you have in your possession a portrait bearing the signature of Forsythe Brown. You are no doubt aware of the rarity of genuine works by this artist, and will understand our interest in the matter. We should consider it a favor if you would permit us to send experts to look at it again, and if possible to bring it temporarily to the Columbian Museum, in order that it may be more minutely examined with the Museum facilities. I can assure you that it will be fully protected from fire hazard, as every great work

of art should be. I might add that, should it prove to be really a work of Forsythe Brown, the Museum might be in a position to make you an offer for the portrait.

"I will not have them in the house," declared Miss Henrietta, in a voice that shook. "Do they suppose that we should for a minute consider taking money for the portrait, the Stebbins' most priceless heirloom. It's all of a piece—that young man's worming his way into our home to look over our personal property, and now this making a family portrait a matter of dollars and cents."

"Can we not come in here and talk it over, sister?" said Miss Eleanor quietly, stepping into the south parlor.

"I don't see that there is anything to talk over," said Miss Henrietta in her strong, positive voice, nevertheless following her sister into the room. It was a very unusual thing indeed, thought Debby, who was still standing by the piano, for Aunt Nell to be leading the way. "May we have this room for a few minutes, Deborah?" added Miss Henrietta, sitting down in the wing chair.

"I think Debby might stay, sister," said Aunt Nell, also taking a seat. "Perhaps this will prove to be a matter that concerns us all."

Miss Henrietta looked across at her sister in evident surprise.

"Very well," she said, a little stiffly. And Debby,

flushed and uncomfortable, sat down on the piano seat. "Now what is it you wish to say, Eleanor?" asked Miss Henrietta.

Miss Eleanor looked toward the piano, and when she spoke, it was to Debby. It was almost as if she were trying to gain time.

"Your Aunt Retta has just had a letter from the Columbian Museum," she explained, "Saying that they want to take Great-grandmother's portrait for further examination, and that it may be worth a good deal of money. It—it is rather upsetting."

Debby gripped the piano seat on either side. So Eric had been right!

"Now that the first surprise is over, I see no reason to be upset," said Aunt Retta. "I shall simply write this Mr. Basil—Whatever-his-name-is—that we cannot of course give his suggestion any consideration."

"It seems to me, sister," said Aunt Nell, hesitating a little, "that we ought at least to let them send their experts to look at it again."

"What reason is there for that," said Miss Henrietta, "since the portrait is not for sale?"

"But if—if the picture really proves to be very valuable oughtn't we to consider the fire hazard here—in this old house?"

"What on earth do you mean, Eleanor?" said Miss Henrietta, staring at her sister, her brows very level, her lips a thin tight line.

"Well—it speaks in the letter, you know, of the—

the importance of placing great works of art where they will be safe," replied Aunt Nell.

"You mean that you would be willing to see our mother's picture taken out of this house by strangers and sold?" demanded Aunt Retta.

"I certainly should not want to have it go," said little Miss Eleanor, and her face quivered, "but it seems to me—"

"It seems to you that money is worth more than family feeling," said Aunt Retta, as Aunt Nell hesitated for a word. "That we could even consider selling our mother at any price?"

Aunt Nell bit her lip.

"That is not just it, Henrietta," she said. "Perhaps we should *not* want to consider it—"

"Want to consider it!" interrupted Aunt Retta again, in a voice that sounded to Debby almost fierce.

"Please let me speak, Henrietta," said Miss Eleanor, holding up one of her delicate hands, and Debby from the other side of the room thought that Aunt Nell was very brave indeed. "I only mean that—I think we should look at this—this proposal from all sides. I care as much as you do for Mother's portrait, and I want it cherished always—somewhere. But—if it is really valuable, it might—it might educate Debby and Polly."

Aunt Retta sat very erect, a look of amazement on her face.

"Eleanor," she said, "I can hardly believe my ears.

Is it you—*you*, who are telling me that we should sell the most precious thing in the Stebbins family?"

"No, Henrietta," said Aunt Nell, with a sudden intensity that Debby had never before heard in that gentle voice, "the portrait is *not* the most precious thing in the family. Oh, we have always cared too much for *things*. We have been ready to sacrifice everything—everything, for tables and chairs and pictures and—and bric-a-brac. But they are not the most precious. It's Debby and Polly. They need schooling and opportunity and everything we cannot give them. Mother herself would want these things for them. She had them when she was young, and she would wish to give them to Debby and Polly, for they are Stebbins', and we have no right to deny them just to keep a few secretaries and portraits in this house, for our own pride."

And Aunt Nell suddenly bent her head, and put her hands over her flushed and trembling face. For a moment nobody spoke. Debby, on the piano seat, was trying to make it seem real that it was Aunt Nell who had just given voice to such passionate feeling. The repressions of years, it seemed, had found vent at last. As for Aunt Retta, she sat as if stunned, looking at the bowed figure on the opposite chair, the portrait apparently forgotten in astonishment at her sister.

"You are not yourself, Eleanor," she said, rising from the wing chair. And without further words, Miss Henrietta walked out of the room.

Debby, as soon as she heard Aunt Retta's footsteps on the stairs, jumped up from the piano seat, and ran quickly across the room, a strange conflict of feelings within her.

"Oh, Aunt Nelly," she said, crouching down by the chair, and putting her cheek against Aunt Nell's arm, "you *are* a dear! I *do* want to go to the Art School, oh so much, but—but I don't think I could ever bear to have Great-grandmother go—indeed I don't. She's just like a real person in there, isn't she? Oh, Aunt Nelly, say you think so too."

Aunt Nell took her hands from her face, on which there were still traces of intense feeling, and turned and kissed Debby.

"She was my mother," she said in her own quiet voice again, "and whatever happened, she could never really go away from this house."

Then she too rose, and held out her hand to Debby. But although they went together, arm in arm, up the stairs, Debby had for the first time a sense of not being quite near to Aunt Nell, and of having a strange momentary kinship with Aunt Retta. All the Stebbins, all the artist, in Debby cried out for the beautiful picture that was so much a part of their life.

When Debby had settled Aunt Nell on her couch, and drawn the shades and brought a cool moist handkerchief—for one of the severe headaches was already coming on—she walked across the hall to her own room, and drew a chair to the window. From it she

could see the automobiles that came from the village toward the Stebbins hill. Today, however, it was not Henry Gill's old Ford for which Debby was watching, but a red and tan roadster, with Eric Anderson at the wheel. For it was Saturday again, and she had told him last week that he might come. All day Debby had been torn between the hope that he would and the fear that he might. It seemed impossible that Aunt Retta would really speak to Eric about the disappearance of those wretched beads, but Aunt Retta's tongue was quick and her feelings strong, and Debby had decided that she could not risk having Eric in the house today. When she should see his car on the road, she would run down to meet him at the gate, and would take him into the garden. It was such a beautiful day that this would not seem an unnatural thing to do.

So she sat at her window, her eyes on the spot far down the road where cars came for a moment into the open, before disappearing among the elms of the Stebbins hill, her thoughts in a turmoil. Oh, they *couldn't* ever let Great-grandmother go, said Debby to herself, over and over, and yet and yet—money—Art School and opportunity—Eric had said that it would be best for Great-grandmother, too—that she would be cherished and adored for always—but the drawing-room, the place over the mantel that would be empty—the beautiful face gone, the friendliest thing in the whole house—that color never there

when you looked in— Oh, no, they mustn't even think of it— And yet—and yet—

As she sat there watching for Eric, her mind going round and round in a circle, Debby came to a sudden decision. She would try to sell the old sea-chest. It was her very own and she could. She would ask Eric Anderson today if he could help her to find a purchaser. If she could get enough for the chest to eke out the scholarship, she might apply for it now, without waiting for another year, and there need be no question about the portrait. For she knew well enough that it was Aunt Nelly's determination that she should have a chance to study that was responsible for the scene in the south parlor this afternoon. Much as she cared for the old sea-chest, it was not like Great-grandmother's portrait.

So Debby, by the window, waited eagerly for the moment when Eric's car should come in sight, but the afternoon wore on, and there was no sign of the red and tan roadster. The house was very still, except for the far-away sound of Polly, practising *The Carnival of Venice* on the piano in the south parlor. The autumn sun dipped lower and lower behind the elms, into a bank of dark clouds, and the beautiful afternoon bid fair to end dismally. At last it was after five, and Debby knew that Eric would not come that day. Perhaps he would not come again ever, and who could blame him, after the way he had been treated last week, thought Debby, a little bitterly, as she got up and

went to the mirror to smooth her hair. She must go down and prepare the supper to-night, as she always did when Aunt Nell had a headache.

In the hall she stopped a moment to look in at the other door, but Aunt Nell, who was still lying on the couch with the moist cloth over her eyes, did not speak. Debby went down the stairs feeling very low in her mind. As she tip-toed through the hall on the second floor, she heard Aunt Retta's voice from behind the partly closed door.

"Deborah," she called, "will you please tell Polly to stop drumming on the piano and go on with her practising." *The Carnival of Venice* had for the moment given away to *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, which Polly was apparently picking out with one finger. "And I shall not want anything to eat to-night," added Aunt Retta, as Debby went on down the hall.

Debby had made up her mind that since she could not see Eric Anderson, she would write to him about the sea-chest this very night, and as there would be almost no supper to get, with both her aunts upstairs, she would begin the letter at once, before she had time to change her mind. So she went directly to her workshop, without even looking into the south parlor. As soon as there had been approaching footsteps on the stairs, the strains of *The Carnival of Venice* had once more begun to drift through the house.

Debby sat down at the table in the studio, switched on the light, and took pen and paper from the drawer.

DEAR MR. ANDERSON (she wrote in her clear, round hand),

I have decided to try to sell my old sea-chest, the one you saw on Community Day, you know, and I am wondering if you could tell me how I should go about it, and about what it is worth. Thank you so much for all you have done. I hope that asking you to do something more will not be trespassing too much on your time—

Debby laid down her pen, and read over what she had written. She was not at all satisfied with it. There were too many “abouts,” and “trespassing” sounded exactly like Aunt Retta. But after all, what did it matter? She was nothing to Eric Anderson, very likely he had dismissed her from his mind, and she shouldn’t see him again. She did hope, though, that he would help her about the chest. Quickly she picked up her pen and signed the letter:

Very sincerely,
DEBORAH STEBBINS

And thus Debby wrote her second letter to Eric.

When she had sealed the envelope, she put it into the drawer of the table, and went out into the kitchen. Polly, who had finished her practising, was already there.

“Do you want me to mail your letter for you?” said Polly at once.

“No,” said Debby, with unnecessary emphasis.

Then she looked at Polly, standing in the middle of the big kitchen. Polly had a gift for knowing when

to look wistful. The afternoon *had* been lonesome and dull, and Debby's heart relented.

"Come on, Pollykins," she said. "We'll have crackers and milk out here. You can set the table, and I'll get some spiced peaches. Aunt Nelly won't mind."

"Oh, goody," said Polly, cheering up at once, for Aunt Nell's spiced peaches were the very best things that ever were tasted.

So Debby and Polly ate a cosy supper together at the kitchen table, and afterwards they played parchesi in the south parlor until Polly's bed-time. Just before she locked the front door for the night, Debby ran out through the rain, to put the letter to Eric in the mail-box, and then before she went upstairs she stood for several minutes in the drawing-room, looking at the bright, serene face over the mantel. "All will yet go well with the Stebbins," Great-grandmother seemed to say, and Debby, cheered as she always was when she felt that lovely presence in the room, turned and went hopefully upstairs.



Chapter Twelve

WHALES AND OTHER THINGS

DEBBY had need of all her natural hopefulness during the week that followed the receipt of the letter about Great-grandmother's portrait, for she thought it the most unpleasant week that she had ever lived through since she came to Bellport. In the first place, Aunt Nell's headache persisted for two whole days, and when Aunt Nell was upstairs, things always limped along dismally in the household, no matter how hard everybody tried to be helpful and efficient. The fish chowder boiled over on the stove, prunes burned dry in the sauce-pan, and Polly dropped

the lamb stew in the middle of the Persian rug in the dining-room.

Aunt Retta, moreover, was in an even more forbidding frame of mind than usual. She strode about the house with a critical eye for all that went wrong, and a tongue more ready and quick than ever. The truth was that poor Miss Henrietta was thoroughly upset. For almost the first time in her life she had misgivings about her own judgment, and to distrust herself was the most upsetting experience that could come to Miss Henrietta. She had been greatly shocked by Miss Eleanor's unexpected attitude about the portrait, but although she told herself over and over that Nell was utterly in the wrong, that what had been said under stress of emotion should be dismissed without further thought, that of course the portrait should never leave the house under any conditions, nevertheless, Miss Henrietta could not forget what her sister had said. "Oh, we have always cared too much for *things*, they are not the most precious, it's Debby and Polly. We have no right to deny them for our own pride."

The longer she thought about it, the more Miss Henrietta began to wonder, quite against her will, whether after all Nell might not be partly right. Miss Henrietta loved her nieces too, in her own way, especially Polly. They were Stebbins, and therefore very precious, as Nell had said. Their well-being was a matter which Miss Henrietta had indeed felt heavy

upon her, ever since the never-to-be-forgotten day when the Judge had driven up to the door of the Stebbins mansion, bringing the two orphan girls back to the old home which they had never seen. Were she and Nell indeed not doing their duty by these children? Duty had always been for Miss Henrietta a beacon light, duty to her family, to their possessions, to all that had made the Stebbins name honored and respected in Bellport for a hundred and fifty years and more. Was it really their duty to sacrifice the most beautiful thing from those Stebbins of the past, for these Stebbins of the present.

"Oh, no, no," said Miss Henrietta to herself, with a fresh revulsion of feeling, whenever her thoughts brought her back to this point of decision. The more she turned it all over in her mind, the more distracted she became, and the more uncertain grew her temper. When Miss Eleanor finally came, a little limply, downstairs at the end of the third day, she was shocked at the appearance of her sister.

"You are very tired, Henrietta," she said. "I think you should go to bed yourself."

"I am quite as usual," replied Miss Henrietta, with her customary briskness. "These warm days in the fall never suit me."

But no word was spoken of the portrait, and Debby felt sure, as the week drew to a close, that no answer had yet been written to the letter from the Columbian Museum. Nor had any letter come from Eric, in

regard to the old sea-chest. Probably, thought Debby, he had passed the Stebbins and all their affairs over to this other official of the museum. And yet, it was not like Eric not to answer in some way a personal request. More than once during that dismal week, Debby opened her table drawer, and took out and re-read Eric's first letter—"I shall be glad to be of any service I can."

But when Saturday came around again, and she had had no word, Debby began to feel sure that she should not hear from Eric again. Well, she must just put him and all the experiences of the last month out of her mind, and take up life afresh. The incident was closed, that was all. It was already the middle of September, and work at the Academy would soon begin. She would make all she could out of this winter, and perhaps next year she should somehow manage to go to the museum, if Eric—but she must not think of Eric any more.

So Debby went about her morning work with almost her old gaiety of spirit. It was easier to be cheerful, for the unseasonably muggy heat of the last few days had ended in a crisp frost the night before, and today was cool and delicious, with golden autumn sunshine flooding into the house through the wide old windows. Aunt Nell seemed quite herself again, and even Aunt Retta looked less grim, although there was still about her, as about the whole household, the constraint caused by a subject that was in everybody's mind, and yet was never mentioned.

When luncheon was over, Debby went into her workshop and packed the piles of drawing papers that lay sorted on the table into her brief case. She would take them up to the Academy this afternoon, and arrange them, all ready for the beginning of the fall term. Perhaps Miss Holmes, the head of her department, would be there, and they could go over some of the work together. It would be fun to get into the harness again, to be working with the children who loved to draw, instead of with those tiresome dishes and sauce-pans at home—although, poor Aunt Nell, it would mean just so much more work for her. Debby was actually humming to herself, as she went up the two long flights to her room.

The air coming in through the window was still crisp with the night's frost, so Debby dressed herself in the rose-color wool suit, which Aunt Nell had knit for her in the spring. She put on the jaunty wool cap that matched the suit, and on her arm, she drew a slender carved rose-color bracelet, a treasure for which she had spent Aunt Nell's birthday money, and which she valued far beyond its worth. It seemed to give the last touch to the costume, and Debby set forth into the keen, sweet autumn day, feeling altogether festive.

She walked down the hill under the elms, until she came to the road to the left, which led up another gentle slope to the Academy. As soon as she turned the corner, Debby could see the mellow old brick buildings rising above the sugar maples, which had already begun to flame with the brightness of autumn.

Across the road stretched fields still yellow with goldenrod, clear away to the blue of the sky. Debby drew a long breath for sheer happiness at the gorgeous color on every side.

As she began the ascent of the hill, she heard a car coming along behind her. She wondered who it could be, for except when the Academy was in session, there was little traffic on this side road. It certainly did not sound like Henry Gill's Ford. Probably it was the Judge, for he was a trustee of the Academy, and took a great interest in its affairs. If it were, he would surely stop and give her a lift, for the Judge and Debby were great friends. She did not look around, however, lest it should be somebody else, who might take her for a hitch-hiker. In a moment she heard the car slowing down and drawing up beside her, and she turned with a smile to greet Judge Parker. But it was not the Judge who received the smile.

"Well, if that wasn't a stroke of luck!" said Eric Anderson, jumping out of the red and tan roadster, and holding out his hand. "I just happened to glance up this road, to see whether I'd hit that cat that shot out from under my wheels and disappeared up here—and lo, here were *you!*"

Debby was quite unable to keep her pleasure out of her eyes. Eric had never looked to her so gay and friendly and broad-shouldered as he did today, straight and tall, with his bright hair gleaming in the sunshine.

"It wasn't a gray cat, was it?" said Debby, thinking fleetingly of Isaak Walton, who sometimes wandered far afield, but there was no real anxiety in her face.

"It was a very common cat," said Eric, his eyes on Debby. "I am sure it wasn't yours. Jump in, and let me give you a lift."

A moment later she was sitting beside him in the car.

"Did you think that I forgot about coming last week?" said Eric, as they sped up the hill in the fresh breeze. "Well, I didn't. I was just laid up. It was all beastly nonsense, but Mother came down from the Harbor, and made a great fuss and kept me in bed, so that I couldn't even answer your letter. I'm no end sorry."

"What a shame," said Debby, looking at him in quick sympathy. "Are you quite all right now?"

"Bounced up like a cork," said Eric. "And now they've given me until Wednesday off, and you better believe the first thing I did was to make a bee-line for you and the sea-chest. I'm sure I can help you about it."

"Oh, that would be wonderful," said Debby, as they drew up in front of the Academy building, and Eric opened the door for her.

"May I wait for you?" he said, as he handed her the brief case.

"Thank you lots," said Debby. "If you really can. I have only to leave these things."

She ran quickly up the old brown-stone steps and through the door. Over it, carved into the stone, were the words *Joseph Stebbins Hall*, in honor of Debby's great-great-grandfather, who had given the first money for the Academy. Debby was afraid now that she *should* meet Miss Holmes, and so be detained, but the dusty old corridor was quite empty, save for the janitor and his helpers, who were busy with mops and pails. There was fortunately nobody in the art room, and when she had left her papers, Debby went swiftly back down the hall, without so much as glancing into any of the other rooms.

"Now may we go and look at the chest again?" said Eric, as he slammed the door of the car and started the motor.

Debby, at a loss what to say, felt the ever-ready color coming into her face. How could she let Eric come to the house until she felt more sure of Aunt Retta.

"It's good of you," she said, with a little hesitation. "I do want to sell the chest, very much. But my aunts have not been quite well, so perhaps we would better not go to look at it today. Must—must you see it again?"

"Well, I should like to," said Eric, looking at her in some surprise. "But that's all right of course. I can see it another time."

There was silence for a moment or two, as the car slid down the road under the sugar maples.

"Will you let me off in the village, please. I have an errand to do before I go home," said Debby, feeling the brightness slipping out of the day.

"I'll take you on your errand," said Eric promptly, "And then we'll go for a ride—that is, unless you have something else to do."

"No," laughed Debby, "nothing as nice as that."

A few minutes later they were bowling along the road that led to Bellport Harbor.

"There has been a school of whales just off shore for a few days," said Eric. "They seem to be after the small fish that are running thick. So watching whales is the principal out-door sport at the Harbor just now. What do you say, shall we go to see them too?"

"Oh, that would be fun," said Debby, who felt that the brightness had all come back into the day.

It was indeed an afternoon of such clear beauty as only a Maine September can bring. The road ran at times close to the broad river, sparkling blue against its fringe of dark spruces; then inland again, to where the maples and sumach and blueberry bushes in the high pastures flamed out in the cool sunshine against the browns and dusty greens of the autumn landscape.

"Oh, it makes one simply ache to paint and paint," said Debby.

"And perhaps that is what you will be doing very soon," said Eric, "somewhere else—and things more lovely even than this."

"I don't think so," said Debby, her face clouding.

"But *I* do," said Eric. "For you are going to apply for that scholarship this year, you know. I just shan't let you tell me that you aren't. We are going to arrange it somehow. You're sure of that, aren't you?" And as he spoke, he took his eyes from the road a moment, and turned to Debby with a grave intensity that fairly startled her. As soon as he looked at her the gaiety came back into his face, "You said, you know, that I could 'give points to Aunt Retta!' Well, when you know me better, you will find that I can!"

Debby laughed. But she would not speak again of the museum. They talked of other things, and of themselves. Eric spoke of his work at the museum, and of his college days, now several years behind him. He must, thought Debby, making a swift calculation, be at least eight years older than she. Did he, she wondered, with a little sigh, think of her as a child, like Polly. Looking at the profile beside her, set already in firm lines of maturity, for all its fine sensitiveness, Debby hoped that Eric did not find her too young for friendship.

The miles ran swiftly from under the wheels of the roadster, and with every mile the fresh salt tang in the air grew stronger. Then at the crest of a hill, the open ocean came all at once into view, a long stretch of dazzling blue, dotted with green islands and snow-white sails. In a minute they had coasted down the last long slope to the harbor itself. There were no stately mansions here, or wharves where clipper ships had once

been moored. Bellport Harbor was only a cluster of poor fishermen's huts and gray old fish-houses along the quiet cove, with a picturesque inn on the slope above, and half a dozen summer cottages by the outer rocks at the mouth of the harbor.

Eric drove rapidly along the cove toward these rocks, where groups of people were standing and looking out to sea.

"There they are!" cried Debby suddenly, as the car came out on the bluff at the end of the road, in full view of the open sea. "The whales! See, right this side of the bell-buoy." And with one accord, she and Eric opened the doors of the car and jumped out.

Before them the surface of the ocean seemed to be strangely agitated, and even as they looked at it, an enormous dark slippery back appeared for a moment on top of the water, not five hundred yards from where they stood. There was an odd snorting sound, the momentary flourish of a huge fan-like tail, and the great hulk slid slowly under the surface again, only to reappear a moment later even nearer shore.

"If Jonah were only there it would be perfect!" said Debby.

"There he is now—two of him," said Eric, pointing to some small boys in a flat-bottom boat, who were rowing out of the harbor as fast as they could, directly toward the whales. "They go out every day to see if they can get swallowed, but apparently the up-to-date whale has lost the taste for Jonahs."

Debby now saw that two of the people on the rocks

below had detached themselves from the group, and were walking up the path to the top of the bluff.

"There are Mother and Edith," said Eric. "I want you to meet them."

"Oh," said Debby in surprise. She was always diffident about meeting strangers, and this possibility had not occurred to her.

But it was all pleasantly over in a moment. Mrs. Anderson came forward, hand outstretched, with the same friendliness that had made Debby feel at once at home with Eric. She was tall like her son, with the same strong, sensitive face, sweetened by the years and softened by her white hair.

"I am so glad to meet you," said Mrs. Anderson cordially. "Eric has told me that you may be interested in coming to our museum sometime. I am sure that you will find friends already waiting for you when you come to the city."

Then she introduced her daughter, a fair quiet girl, evidently somewhat older than Debby, though younger than Eric. Mrs. Anderson seemed to have a gift for making people comfortable. She sent Eric to get his coat from the car, for Debby to put over her shoulders in the cold wind, and began at once to tell of the many pleasant things about the school at the museum. In a few minutes Debby, shy as she was, found herself chatting with the Andersons as if she had known them all her life. Standing between Eric and Edith, with Eric's coat about her, and the

sharp delicious wind from the sea blowing in her face, Debby thought that she had never before been so happy.

When they had watched the whales long enough to be sure that the flat-bottom boat would make the harbor again safely, and that the two little Jonahs would not be swallowed that day, at least, Mrs. Anderson led the way back to the Inn. There, sitting at a table on the terrace, with the wide beauty of the ocean still before them, they had the jolliest kind of a party, with tea and toast and brownies, almost, Debby thought, better than Aunt Nelly's. Then before it was time to go Debby discovered that Edith Anderson was to begin lessons at the Museum School as soon as they went home.

"I hope that you two may have a chance to work together this year," said Mrs. Anderson, as they walked out to the car. It was funny, thought Debby, how they all assumed that she was of course going to the Art School. "And Eric must bring you down here again some day, my dear. Perhaps we can have a picnic on the rocks."

Then she and Edith waved a good-bye, and Debby and Eric drove away along the harbor road. What a contrast, said Debby to herself, with a pang, to the welcome which Eric had received at the Stebbins mansion.

Though they talked less on the way home than before, Debby felt that theirs was the quiet comradeship

of accepted friends. Once again the thought flitted across her mind that perhaps he thought her young and inexperienced, but almost immediately, as if he read her mind,

"I hope," he said, "that you and Edith *will* see something of each other at the school. She's a pretty good sport when you get to know her, and I'm sure you can help her a lot. She's interested in portraits too, but she's not as far ahead as you are, by a long shot."

"I should like to know her," said Debby, a little sorry that the subject of portraits had been broached. But Eric said no word about Great-grandmother, and Debby was silently grateful for his tact.

And so they rode along through the glow of the autumn sunset. Once they stopped by the side of the road, in order that they might hunt on the floor of the car for the rose-colored bracelet that had somehow slipped from Debby's arm. They did not find it, but the search added to their moments together.

"I'm awfully sorry about that," said Eric, as they took their seats again.

"It doesn't matter at all," said Debby, surprised to find how little she cared. "It was just a small thing that I bought in Bellport."

Ten minutes later their car drew up at the Stebbins mansion.

"May I come again some day before Wednesday," said Eric from the roadster, as Debby stood with her hand upon the gate. For the moment she forgot the

sea-chest, and the beads, and the portrait, and all the difficulties with Aunt Retta.

“Yes,” she said, her brown eyes very clear and bright. “And thank you for my afternoon.”

Then she turned and went quickly through the gate. But as she walked up the path, humming a happy tune, she did not guess how soon or where she should next see Eric.



Chapter Thirteen

POLLY TIES A HARD KNOT

ERIC ANDERSON drove swiftly down the hill from the Stebbins' mansion into the town, but when he came to lower Main Street he slackened speed, and began to look carefully at the signs above the row of shops. Then, with a sudden twist of his wheel, he ran the roadster in among the cars that were parked against the curb, and jumped out. Directly in front of him was a door, on the glass of which were painted the words:

MISS HOPKINS
THREAD-AND-NEEDLE SHOPPE
GIFTS AND SOUVENIRS

Eric opened the door and went in. It was a rather dark little shop in the late afternoon light, and at first he thought that there was nobody in it. Then all at once, to his astonishment, he saw Polly behind the counter at the rear, perched on a high stool, her head bent intently upon something in her lap. On the counter before her lay an open book, at which she glanced from moment to moment. So absorbed was Polly in what she was doing that she did not even notice the opening of the door.

"Hello, Florence Nightingale," said Eric.

"Oh!" said Polly, looking up with a start.

As soon as she saw who it was, her face was suddenly softened by a very wide smile. Had Eric only known how seldom Polly smiled like that, he would have felt highly complimented.

"Whatever are you doing here?" said Eric. "I thought your life was spent in errands of mercy. Are you in trade too?"

"Just on Saturdays," explained Polly. "Miss Hopkins has to go out in the afternoon, so I keep store for her. Can you tie a sheep-shank?" And Polly slipped off her stool, and held out the piece of rope in her hand. "It's ever so much harder than the other knots," she said. "There's a picture of it in the Scout book, but mine won't come out that way."

Eric picked up the book from the counter and studied the picture, while Polly looked at him hopefully.

"Let's see the rope," he said after a minute, putting down the book.

Polly handed him the piece of rope, and watched intently while the swift, sure fingers made the knot.

"You're smart, aren't you?" said Polly, in open admiration.

"Just been a sailor all my life," said Eric. "Now you try. We'll go slowly. See, you cross your hands and take hold of the rope like this."

And leaning over the counter, he directed the slim brown fingers in the way they should go. He remembered how skillful they had been on the day when he twisted his ankle, and it amused him to see with what deftness they now handled the rope. In a very few minutes Polly could tie a proper sheep-shank as unerringly as Eric himself.

"Thank you," she said. "It was lucky you came in."

Then, as Eric continued to stand by the counter, examining the things in the glass case, Polly remembered her duties as shop-keeper.

"Do you want to buy something?" she asked.

"I'm looking for a bracelet," said Eric, "carved wood and a pinkish color. Do you keep them in this shop?"

"Yes," said Polly at once, "like Debby's. She got hers here."

"That's it," said Eric.

"Oh," said Polly, in frank astonishment. She did wonder what Eric wanted a bracelet for. Could he

be buying one for another girl? Didn't he like Debby any more? Polly's face looked a little sharper than usual, as she stared at Eric from behind the counter. Then she recalled herself to her duties again, and quickly climbed the step-ladder beside her, and took a box from a high shelf.

"Do you want it exactly like Debby's?" asked Polly, as she set out the contents of the box on the counter.

"Yes," said Eric, looking the trinkets over.

Polly had hoped that there would not be one just like Debby's, for that other girl, but there was.

"Here it is," said Eric, picking up one of the bracelets. "It's the same size as your sister's, isn't it?"

Polly examined it,

"Yes," she said reluctantly.

"Good," said Eric. "I'll take it. How much is it?"

"Seventy-five cents," said Polly, stiffly.

She wrapped up the bracelet in a piece of white paper, and tied it carefully with a string.

"You needn't tie a sheep-shank," he said, with a smile.

Then he took a dollar out of his bill-fold, and laid it on the counter.

"Just keep the change," he said, "for the hospital endowment, you know," he added, as Polly looked doubtfully at the dollar. She was not at all sure that it would be loyal to Debby to accept that quarter.

A moment later, however, her doubts were resolved.

"Would you do me a favor?" said Eric. "Would

you mind taking the bracelet to your sister from me, in case we can't find the other one."

"Oh," said Polly, in a tone of relief. "Did Debby lose hers?"

"Yes," said Eric, "when we were out driving this afternoon." And although his mind was not very much on Polly, he did wonder absently at the wide smile with which she suddenly beamed upon him again, as she put the bracelet into the pocket of her Scout suit. "Well, good-bye, Florence Nightingale," he said, and he was just turning from the counter, when he suddenly paused. "By the way," he added, "I almost forgot. I have a bone to pick with *you*, young lady. What did you mean by putting that turtle in my hat?"

Polly giggled.

"It wasn't any worse than your putting it in the drawer," she retorted.

"Isn't that where you kept it?" said Eric. "The drawer was open. Didn't you find Mr. Turtle all right?"

"No," said Polly, "Aunt Retta did, when she went to look for the gold beads, and *was she hopping!*" Polly grinned at the remembrance. "But it was mostly because she thought the beads had been stolen," she added, as an after-thought, anxious to reassure Eric about the turtle. Then suddenly she felt a little scared, for she remembered that Aunt Retta had accused Eric himself.

He was staring down at her now from the other side of the counter. All at once Polly felt that Eric was looking right into her mind, and reading there the things that Aunt Retta had said. Polly had never seen such clear, searching eyes. It seemed to her that there was an accusing look in them too, as if Eric had guessed the truth from what she had just said. Polly caught her breath. Perhaps he thought that she believed, like Aunt Retta, that he was a thief. Oh, she could not bear to have him think that, for he was the very nicest man she had ever met. She wanted to have him smile and be friends again. It had been so jolly when he had first come into the shop, and helped her with the knot. With eyes more intensely black than usual, she looked up into his face.

"But *I* don't think you stole anything, *ever*," said Polly, carried away by her feelings.

"Stole? What?" said Eric, so sharply that Polly jumped.

"The gold beads—in the drawer," faltered Polly, almost against her will.

"You mean," said Eric quickly, "that they think I took something out of the drawer?" His face was graver than ever, and those gray eyes seemed to hold Polly's as in a vise, so that she could not look away.

"Ye—es," she said. "But *I* know you never did," she repeated helplessly.

Eric turned abruptly on his heel and strode without another word across the shop and out into the street.

Polly, dismayed at this unhappy ending to a pleasant afternoon, and a good deal scared at what had happened, ran around the counter to the door. By the time she reached it, however, Eric was already in the roadster and starting the engine. Polly ran out on the sidewalk.

"Debby doesn't think you stole them either," she shouted shrilly, feeling that some amends must be made.

Eric, however, paid no attention. Perhaps he did not hear her above the noise of the engine, for the car was now backing swiftly into the middle of the street. Polly saw that it was turning toward the hill that led to the Stebbins mansion. But suddenly it stopped, and Eric, a frown on his face that seemed to Polly at that distance very stern indeed, appeared for a moment to be considering. Then, with a quick twist of the wheel, he turned the car right about, and rolled away down the street in the direction of Bellport Harbor.

For once in her life Polly was really frightened at what she had done—frightened and very miserable. She stood in the middle of the sidewalk, her hands clenched at her sides, looking in despair after the red-and-tan roadster, until it disappeared into the covered bridge over Salt Creek. As she turned back to the shop, Miss Hopkins came hurrying up to the door, wind-blown and out of breath.

"I'm sorry I was late about getting back, Polly,"

she said. "You would better run along now, or your aunts will think something has happened to you."

As she spoke, Miss Hopkins fumbled for her purse among the parcels in her Boston bag, "Here's your money for today, Polly," she said, "and an extra nickel for over-time. Don't forget next Saturday."

"No," said Polly absently, taking the coins which Miss Hopkins held out to her, and she walked away up Main Street without further words.

It was not until she reached the foot of Stebbins hill, and stopped for a moment to count the money still clasped in her hand, that she remembered she had not thanked Miss Hopkins for the nickel, or even said goodnight. Polly enjoyed keeping store, and she did hope that Miss Hopkins would not be offended. Aunt Retta was particular about manners, and Polly was debating whether she ought to go back and thank Miss Hopkins now, or whether it would do to wait until after church to-morrow, when she suddenly saw Debby hurrying down the hill toward her.

"Do you know what time it is, Polly Stebbins?" said Debby, as she came up to the little figure loitering under the elms. "Supper has been ready for ten minutes, and Aunt Retta is very much annoyed again."

"I couldn't help it," said Polly, quite without her usual spirit. "Miss Hopkins didn't get back until late."

"Well, come on," said Debby, starting back up the

hill. "You can walk a little faster now, can't you?"

But Polly followed on lagging feet. After a few minutes, however, she caught up with her sister.

"Oh, Debby," she said, with a return of her usual gusto, "I've got something for you." And she took out of her pocket the little white parcel.

"What is it?" said Debby in surprise, standing still under the elms, while she quickly pulled off the string and paper.

"It's from Eric," said Polly. "He told me to give it to you, in case you don't find the other."

Even in the dusk of the fall evening Polly could make out the added color that came into Debby's cheeks, as she looked at Eric's bracelet in her hand. It seemed that for the moment Debby, too, had forgotten supper and Aunt Retta.

"Did he come into the shop? Did you wait on him?" she asked eagerly.

Polly nodded her head, but she would not talk any more about Eric, or about anything else. All the way up the hill Debby wondered what could be the matter. Although Polly no longer lagged behind, she walked beside her sister in silence—and, as Debby well knew, Polly was not often silent. Perhaps she was worried about being late again.

"I'll tell Aunt Retta that you couldn't help it," said Debby, wanting, in her own happiness, to have Polly happy too.

But the tumult in Polly's mind had nothing to do

with supper. Like Aunt Retta, she was feeling for almost the first time not quite self-sufficient, and it was very upsetting. It seemed to her that she must tell Debby or somebody right away about Eric, and ask them what to do. It was not, however, until she and Debby were actually at the front gate that Polly said, quite suddenly:

“I think Eric knows about it.”

“Knows about what?” asked Debby, pausing with her hand upon the gate.

“That—that—people think he stole the beads.”

“How could he?” said Debby, in utter astonishment. “Besides, ‘people’ *don’t* think so—only Aunt Retta, and he couldn’t possibly know that unless somebody told him.” Suddenly she bent forward. “Polly Stebbins,” she demanded, so sternly that it did not sound like Debby at all, “did you tell Eric Anderson that he was suspected of stealing those beads? The truth, now!”

“Well,” said Polly slowly, her hands clasped tightly behind her, her eyes avoiding Debby’s, “not exactly. He—he sort of—guessed it.”

“That’s nonsense,” said Debby, in a voice that choked a little. “He couldn’t have. You told him. And you’re a bad girl. I wouldn’t have believed a real sister could act like that!” And opening the gate, Debby ran up the path into the house, leaving Polly to confront Aunt Retta by herself.

It was a very dismal supper that evening at the Steb-

bins mansion. Polly's excuses, to be sure, were rather grudgingly accepted, but Aunt Retta was always a little stiff when supper was late, and as for Debby, she hardly looked up from her plate during the entire meal. Nor would she say a word afterwards, while she and Polly were doing the dishes together. With set face and eyes unnaturally bright, she moved about the kitchen quite as if Polly were not there at all, and as if the spoons and glasses were drying themselves, instead of with the help of Polly's ever-ready towel. As soon as the last dish had been put away, Debby slipped quietly up the back stairs, without even going in to say goodnight to her aunts. Polly followed her to the foot of the stairs.

"Debby," she called forlornly up into the darkness, "Debby, I want to say something."

But the answer from the upper hall was not encouraging.

"I don't want to speak to you, Polly," said Debby in a muffled voice, "or see you."

Then she was gone.

Long after her aunts had also gone up to their rooms for the night, Polly lay wide awake, curled up in a small miserable bunch in the middle of her spool-bed. Polly usually enjoyed her encounters with the world, and no tilt with Aunt Retta, or even with Eric Anderson, would have kept her staring wide-eyed into the darkness. But to have Debby really angry with

her brought Polly's world crashing about her ears. And never had she seen Debby so angry. Deep down in Polly's funny, perverse little heart was an immense well of devotion for her sister. Polly secretly thought Debby the most beautiful and charming person that had ever lived, and although Debby herself did not in the least suspect it, Polly was ever ready, at a moment's notice, to take sides with her sister against all the world. But now, thought Polly, writhing beneath her candlewick spread, she had driven Eric Anderson away, she had spoiled everything, and Debby would not even speak to her—all because she, Polly, had not been smart enough to keep a secret. Polly did not like not being smart, but she always told the truth to herself as well as to other people, and she had to admit, alone there in the dark, that for once she had been very, very foolish. This seemed to fill her cup of bitterness full to the brim.

Suddenly Polly was shaken by a big, unexpected sob. For a minute she was afraid that she was going to cry, and she hated crying. She sat up straight in bed and swallowed, and tried to think of some way to make up with Debby. After a moment she threw back the clothes and slid out of bed. Ever so softly she opened the door into the hall. The night-light was burning on the little table at the top of the stairs, where Aunt Retta always left it, and Polly stepping quietly into the hall in her bare feet, went as fast as

she could down the long stairs and through the still, shadowy house to the closet in the back hall. She groped around in it until she found a duster. Then she tip-toed across to Debby's work-shop, and slipped through the half-open door. She closed it carefully and switched on the light. It seemed cold and a bit spooky down there, quite by herself, in the middle of the night, and the dry branches of something outside made tiny, unpleasant, scrapy sounds against the window. Polly shivered a little in her blue cotton pajamas, but she set resolutely to work at once.

First she dusted the table thoroughly from top to bottom, and arranged all the papers on it in neat piles. Then she dusted the old chest and the chair, kneeling on the cold floor, and conscientiously going over all the rounds. Next, she stood up on the chair and wiped all the glasses of jelly on the shelf, until they shone again, amber and crimson, in the bright light. And last of all, she polished up Debby's old garden shoes with a brush from the hall closet. Hunched up on the chair, Polly rubbed and rubbed until her back was lame and her arms were sore. As she finally set the shoes side by side in the middle of the table, the clock in the hall struck *one*. It sounded so very loud and accusing that it made Polly jump and wish that she was safely upstairs. But before she tip-toed out into the great silent house again, she sat down in front of the shoes and wrote a note, which she pinned to the toes.

DEAR DEBBY (read the note),

I couldn't do them any better because there wasn't any blacking, but I dusted everything in the room for you.

POLLY

P.S. After this I'm going to act like a real sister.

P. DEC. S.

Chapter Fourteen

AND DEBBY UNTIES IT

POLLY was not the only one who lay awake that night in the Stebbins mansion, and stared wretchedly up into the dark. In her big four-poster on the third floor Debby, too, turned and tossed, alternately trying to think things through, and to go to sleep and forget them. How *could* this happy day have ended in such utter misery? It seemed to Debby that she had reached the very peak of despair, compared to which the trouble with Aunt Retta, and the uncertainties about the portrait and Art School, were as nothing. To have Eric actually know that he was suspected of being a thief—after all his kindness—oh, it was just too much to be borne.

Debby flung her head back and forth on the pillow, and beat her hands against the blanket. Perhaps he even believed that *she* suspected him. But no, she told herself, surely he would not think that, after their afternoon together. If she could only see Eric, she would make him sure that she did not distrust him.

Or had Polly perhaps told him that, after all? It occurred to Debby now that she had not questioned Polly very closely. She had been so angry with her at supper-time—and was still. How *could* the child have been so naughty and stupid? It was not like Polly to be stupid. In the morning, thought Debby, she must make her tell the whole story. And she must see Eric. She could not wait for him to come, for that might not be for several days.

Suddenly Debby sat up in bed. She would go to Bellport Harbor right after breakfast and find him, and tell him everything, if she had to, even about Aunt Retta—although she was almost afraid that that would not be quite loyal. She would ask Judge Parker to let her take his car. Had he not told her, over and over, that he liked to see her behind his wheel; had he not beamed upon her when she backed skilfully out of his garage, and said that she was the best little driver in Bellport. He himself had taught her to drive, and they were always the best of friends. Surely he would let her have the car for just an hour or two, especially as he almost never used it himself early in the morning. Then all at once she remembered that to-morrow was Sunday, and that the Judge always drove over to Thomaston to church. Besides, Aunt Retta never countenanced an absence from their own family pew on Sunday morning, except for illness. Well, then, she would try to get the car right after dinner—although she did not see how she could possibly wait as long as

that. As she lay down again on her pillow, Debby felt calmer than for many hours. The decision as to what she would do had brought, as usual, a renewal of that spirit of confidence and cheer that was especially hers, and she soon went, exhausted, to sleep.

The first thing that Debby did when she came downstairs in the morning was to go in search of Polly. In the fresh brightness of the warm September day, it seemed that all difficulties could soon be cleared away. But Polly was not to be found, either in the kitchen with Aunt Nell, or in the south parlor with Aunt Retta. Debby even glanced into the drawing-room as she went by the door, puzzled as to where Polly could be, for she never lay abed in the morning. But when she went into the workshop, there were the shoes and the note and the crumpled duster on the back of the chair. As she stood looking at the shoes, and the gleaming jellies, and the dark shiny cover of the old chest, Debby bit her lip, and a faint smile flickered across her face. It was hard to stay angry with Polly for long.

Then all at once she noticed that the outer door was open into the garden, and that something was moving behind the barberry bushes just outside. There was a peep-hole among the red leaves, and two eyes were looking through.

"Come here, please, Polly," said Debby, still trying to sound stern, "I want to talk to you."

Polly came out from behind the bushes immediately.

She had seen the smile through the peep-hole, and she was sure that the worst was over. Standing before her sister in the workshop, she obediently told the whole story of her interview with Eric. The only thing that Polly did not tell was how very much she wanted Debby to be friends with her again. But Debby sensed this and her heart misgave her. There were dark circles to-day under the shoe-button eyes, and it was still a very subdued and repentant Polly.

"And I ran out on the sidewalk," she said in conclusion, "and tried to tell him *you* didn't think he was a thief either, but I guess he didn't hear, though I shouted at him."

"You mean you shouted that right on Main Street?" said Debby, appalled.

"Yes," Polly reassured her, "as loud as ever I could."

For a moment Debby frowned sternly again. Then the frown cleared away.

"Pollykins," she said, suddenly putting both her hands on her sister's shoulders, "you simply *must* learn to hold your tongue. But you were a good Scout and a real sister to fix up my room for me."

"I guess breakfast is ready," said Polly suddenly, slipping from under Debby's hands. And she ran across the hall to the kitchen, to help Aunt Nell with the toast.

When breakfast was over Polly made all the beds, being very careful about the square corners, and she was waiting, quite spick and span, in the south parlor,

when the others came down at half past ten. As she and Debby walked down the hill together to church, behind Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell, Polly thought that Debby had never looked so pretty. Her white dress was very soft and silky, and her turban very jaunty on her dark hair. Polly was in white too, but there was starch in her dress, and her hair, as usual, stuck out under her round hat, as if it also had been stiffened. It would be wonderful, thought Polly, to be old enough not to have starch in one's best dress. Well, any way, she would be putting her surplice over it as soon as she got to church.

For Polly sang in the children's chorus, and sat in the choir stalls, where her absurd tilted profile was outlined every Sunday against the dignified draperies of the chancel. Aunt Retta, who sat with Aunt Nell and Debby in a front pew, was never so proud of Polly as when she saw her up there in her surplice, singing lustily in a shrill soprano that led all the rest. Polly opened her mouth wider than anybody else and was very sure of her notes, and she never forgot her words. The only trouble was that Polly *would* look around at the congregation, instead of straight ahead at the opposite side of the chancel. Aunt Retta was often severe about this, but Polly did hate to miss all the interesting things that went on during the service, and besides, she wanted to see what everybody had on; it helped with *Sylvia Fisher*.

Today, however, Polly was on her best behavior,

and never once looked around at the congregation, even during the prayer, although out of the corner of her eye she could see that Zab was signalling something from a back pew. It was probably nothing, decided Polly, except that he wanted to speak to her after church. And sure enough, there he was, waiting for her at the door, when she had finally thanked Miss Hopkins for the five cents, and helped her to put away the surplices.

"Can you come over this afternoon and listen to the radio?" said Zab. Sundays were inclined to drag for Zab, without Polly's constant society.

"No," said Polly at once, "there's nothing good on on Sunday—just sermons and symphonies."

"Well, I've got something for you," said Zab, desperately playing his trump card, "something special."

Polly considered for a moment, faintly curious.

"No," she said again, "I've got to work on my novel." And she turned and ran off to try to find Debby, who had disappeared immediately after church.

Debby, indeed, had hurried up the hill, to catch Judge Parker as soon as he should return from Thomaston, and ask him for his car. She found him just closing the door of the garage, as she turned into his driveway.

"Well, well," said Judge Parker, a smile on his wide, florid face, as soon as he saw Debby. "What's all this flurry and scurry about?"

Then hesitating a little, for Debby had all the Stebbins reluctance to ask favors, she made her request. But she need not have faltered, for the Judge was kindness itself, and said that of course she should have the car, for the whole afternoon if she wished, for he had work to do at home. And then he pinched her cheek, and asked her, with pompous playfulness, to whom in Bellport Harbor she was taking all those roses.

It seemed to Debby that dinner that day would never be over and cleared away. But by three o'clock both Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell had gone upstairs for their afternoon naps, and even Polly had vanished. Then, free at last, Debby slipped out of the house and across the road to Judge Parker's. She felt impatient now with everything that kept her from Eric—with the garage door that stuck, with the long, narrow driveway where one must back so carefully, with Polly's shrill voice, calling from the window of the "office" in the attic, to ask where she was going.

Debby felt like a caged bird set free, as the car slid down the hill into the quiet town, through the covered bridge over Salt Creek, and out into the bright fragrance of the country. It seemed that summer had come again, after the frost of yesterday. Debby could see a few late wild roses flowering still in the pastures along the way, and the wind blew sweet and warm in her face, through the open window of the Judge's car. Debby liked to drive. The responsive wheel, the

accelerator beneath her foot, the knowledge that at her own sweet will she could go on and on over the hills, faster and faster, until it was like flying, thrilled her. And she flew today, faster perhaps than she realized, for there was little traffic, even on Sunday, on the Harbor road, and she was going to Eric. Every field and patch of woods along the way brought back to her the things that she and Eric had said to each other on that happy yesterday, and it was not until she came to the last long hill that she suddenly remembered that she did not yet know just what she was going to say to him today.

She slowed down then, and began to turn over in her mind just how she should begin. Should she tell him at once that she was aware of all that had happened with Polly in the shop, or should she lead up to it gradually? But of course, she would have to plunge right in, for otherwise what reason could she give for coming to find him? But suppose she found him with his mother and sister! What should she say then? Debby brought the car to a sudden jerky stop at the top of the hill. What a goose she had been not to think of that! All the time she had been imagining herself going to Eric, but the chances were that Mrs. Anderson and Edith would be with him, and what *could* she do then? For a moment Debby had a wild impulse to turn the car right about and go back to Bellport.

Clutching the wheel, she looked off across the long

stretches of pasture, falling away beneath her to the blue ocean far below, hardly knowing, in her momentary panic, what she saw, until suddenly she saw Eric himself, standing alone against a broken stone wall among the bayberry bushes, looking out to sea with his field glasses. His back was toward her, and he gave no sign that he saw or heard, as Debby drew the car to the side of the road, and ran toward him through the pasture. She had almost reached him before he was aware of her, for he swung abruptly around from the wall.

"Debby!" he exclaimed in astonishment, slipping the field glasses into his pocket, and coming toward her with outstretched hand, "You?"

And her name on his lips for the first time seemed to her so natural that she hardly noted it.

"Oh, Eric," she said, all her utter relief at finding him in her voice. Then she was silent, not knowing what to say next, just looking at him with pleading in her eyes.

And Eric looked at her, slender and white among the bayberry bushes, the wind of the hilltop blowing her hair into a soft disorder, for she had not worn her hat, and for a moment he too seemed to find no words. Then—

"My, but I'm glad you came," he said. "I should have gone to you before this, but that Mother and Edith had the car. After I saw Polly last night I knew that—something was the matter. Tell me what I can do."

"How *can* I tell you?" said Debby, clasping her hands tightly in front of her, in anguish of spirit, but nevertheless looking up at Eric with eyes that were very clear. "It's we, *we* who should be doing something after accusing you in this outrageous way."

"But *you* have not accused me, have you, Debby?" said Eric, searching her face.

"Oh, no," she said, with an intensity that he could not mistake.

"Then it doesn't matter," said Eric, with quiet conviction. "Suppose we sit down here on the wall, while you tell me about it."

So they sat together in the sunny high pasture, sweetened by the tang of the sea and the warm fragrance of the bayberry, while Debby, with many hesitations, told Eric the story of the loss of the gold beads, not sparing Aunt Retta or omitting her own suspicions of old Anthony. One thing only about the beads she did not tell. Not even with Eric could she share Aunt Nelly's broken romance. Through it all Eric sat quietly beside her on the wall, his hands clasped loosely between his knees, his eyes on the bushes in front of him. Once or twice he looked up at her in surprise, but there was no hint of reproach in his gray eyes. As Debby faltered through the sorry story of Aunt Retta's accusations, softening them as best she could, she felt with an almost unbearable pang that she was saying these things to one who had never before known what it was to be suspected of

anything mean or false. Debby's heart cried out that it was all too preposterous.

"Oh, I don't want you to think that we Stebbins are not just and fair," she said, slipping from the wall, and standing very straight among the bushes. "Aunt Retta has been terribly worried, but I'm sure that sometime she will blame herself for this."

Eric too had risen from the wall.

"I think I see how it all happened," he said slowly, choosing his words. "And of course it was true that your aunt did not really know anything about me. For the time being, however, suppose we put all the blame on Polly's wretched turtle."

For a moment Debby saw in the gray eyes the happy gleam that she knew so well. How generous he was! But he was instantly sober again.

"How soon can I see your aunt?" he said, with grave decision.

"I could take you now," said Debby.

"Would you?" said Eric. And he turned quickly toward the road and the car.

In a few moments they were riding again together, back through the hills and pastures of Bellport, but today it was Debby who sat behind the wheel, and Eric who studied the profile beside him that seemed curiously untroubled, in spite of the agitation of the last hour. Debby herself wondered a little at her own lightheartedness. She knew well enough that they were on the way to no easy interview, but all was at



*"I don't want you to think we Stebbins are not just
and fair."*

last clear between Eric and herself, and nothing else seemed to matter, as Eric had said. As yesterday, they spoke little, but she felt the same sense of comradeship. When the roofs and elms of Bellport came into sight, however, over the last green hill, Eric spoke.

"Oh, by the way," he said, "I believe I have a customer for your old sea chest."

"*Really?*" said Debby, her face lighting for a moment into downright happiness. "How wonderful!"

"And I am quite sure," added Eric, "that I can get them to give two hundred dollars."

"Two hundred dollars?" repeated Debby, incredulously. "Without their even seeing it? How can they?"

"I rather think they will take my word for it," he said.

There was something in Eric's tone, or Debby fancied that there was, that made her turn quickly to him for a moment, the color rushing to her cheeks. Could he be buying the chest for himself, in order to give her the money for Art School? Oh, she could not endure that! But what could she say or do? How could she refuse the offer unless she knew, and how could she ask Eric? She could make out nothing in that momentary glance, before she must turn back to her wheel.

"That's awfully good of you," was all that she could manage to say, but her voice did not sound quite natural.

Then, holding tight to her wheel, she took the car through the narrow covered bridge over Salt Creek, and out into Main Street. And so, though Eric was beside her, Debby came home to Bellport with fresh trouble and uncertainty in her heart.



Chapter Fifteen

SOMEBODY GUESSES

WHEN Polly, at the attic window, saw Debby disappearing down the hill in Judge Parker's car, she at once lost all interest in *Sylvia Fisher*, and ran as fast as she could out of the "office" and down the three flights of stairs. She felt that she just must know right away whether Debby was going to Bellport Harbor, or only to the Academy. But by the time that Polly reached the sidewalk in front of the house, the Judge's car was nowhere in sight.

Across the garden and old Anthony's field she could see the roofs of the Academy buildings among the trees on the other hill, and a small patch of the road leading up to them under the sugar maples. Polly

fastened her eyes on this bit of road. If Debby were on the way to the Academy, the car would be there in just a moment. But there was no sign of movement on the side road, and after a few minutes Polly felt sure that Debby had gone to see Eric at Bellport Harbor. *What* would happen now? Polly did not see how she could possibly wait all the afternoon to find out, for she was afraid that Debby would not be back until supper time. With a sigh, she turned toward the house.

It was just then that she saw Zab, swinging in the hammock on the Eatons' porch. His back was toward the Stebbins mansion, but there was something about the way he swung that looked dejected and lonesome. Polly was sorry that she had snubbed Zab so completely after church. Somehow she did not feel like going back to *Sylvia Fisher* just then. It was hot in the attic, and besides, she remembered that Zab had said he had something special for her. In a moment Polly's curiosity had got the better of her, and she was walking slowly along the side-walk toward the Eatons'.

"Hello," she said when she was directly in front of the house.

At the sound of Polly's voice, Zab stopped swinging and jumped up from the hammock.

"I've been waiting for you," he said, his round face as full of eagerness as it was of freckles.

"What is it you've got for me?" demanded Polly.

"Come on in," said Zab, "and I'll show you."

"No," said Polly, who could hear through the open window a sermon coming in over the radio, "you bring it out here."

Zab ran into the house, appearing after a minute, carrying a small pasteboard box, with an elastic band around it. He walked slowly down the path toward Polly.

"I got them for you," he said, holding out the box over the gate. "I guess it has *almost* as many in it as the other."

"What?" said Polly, thoroughly mystified, taking the box from Zab's hand and opening it.

It was full of daddy-long-legs.

"They're just as good," explained Zab hastily. "Lots of their legs are gone, and I didn't mean to lose the other one."

Polly stared at the box. She had forgotten all about the daddy-long-legs. So much had been happening, indeed, that she had not thought of them since Debby had found them on the hall table on Community Day.

"Did you take that other box out of the drawer?" demanded Polly, looking sharply at Zab with her black eyes, in the way that always scared him.

"Ye—es," he said, stammering a little, as he hurried on with his story. "You told me they were to go to the hospital and when I went in that day, you weren't there, and your aunt was in the parlor talking

to somebody—and I took the box out of the drawer and stuck it in my pocket—and then I saw the woodchuck going through the stone wall and I went after it—and—and the box got lost.”

Polly scowled. All at once she recalled how she had waited for Zab at the hospital the day that Eric Anderson had sprained his ankle, and how guilty Zab had looked, when later she had caught him getting over Judge Parker’s stone wall.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” demanded Polly sternly.

“W—ell,” said Zab, fingering the top of the gate, and not daring to look at Polly any more, “I thought I’d hunt again bye-and-bye, and p’raps I’d find it. I didn’t take the elastic off, so I guess the daddy-long-legs are still in it all right. It’s somewhere in the cornfield.”

“You didn’t look in that box at all?” said Polly, and her eyes seemed to Zab brighter and sharper than ever. As a matter of fact, Polly just then remembered other things that had happened in connection with the drawer of the hall table.

“No,” said Zab, “you said not to open it.”

“Zab Eaton,” said Polly, in her most impressive voice, “do you remember just where you went in the cornfield?”

“I—guess so,” said Zab.

“Come on,” said Polly suddenly, opening the gate, and pulling Zab through. “Quick! We’ve got to find that other box.” And she dragged him by the sleeve

of his best Sunday suit across the road to the stone wall, on the other side of which lay the Judge's cornfield.

In a moment the children had climbed over the wall.

"Now which way did you go?" said Polly.

"I—I don't know," faltered poor Zab, glancing hopelessly down the aisles of rustling yellow cornstalks, that all looked exactly alike.

"Well, we'll start here," said Polly, "and walk up and down between every single one of the rows." And so saying, she marched away briskly into the corn.

"Oh, dear," said Zab, looking down the road where the great cornfield stretched away behind the stone wall almost as far as he could see. Everything seemed to be shimmering under the hot September sun, and Zab's red face was warm and moist. Polly was already far in among the corn, bending down to search carefully under every stalk. Suddenly Zab stooped and picked up something.

"Polly," he shouted, running in among the corn stalks too, "Oh, Polly, you've dropped the cover off my box and you're spilling out the daddy-long-legs!" It had taken Zab a whole month to collect them.

But Polly was paying no attention to the box in her hand. She had guessed something that had driven the new box of daddy-long-legs and everything else completely out of her mind—something so absorbing

that she even forgot that she intended to be sitting on the front steps when Debby should return from Bellport Harbor in Judge Parker's car.

And that is why, when an hour or two later, Debby did at last bring the car to a stop in front of the Stebbins mansion, there was no Polly to greet her. Debby and Eric slipped out at either side of the car, and went together, without a word, up the walk to the front door. The house, as they came into it, seemed so very quiet that Debby for a moment thought that her aunts must be still in their rooms. The hall as usual was pungent and sweet from the bowl of asters on the table, and through the door of the drawing-room Debby could see Great-grandmother's portrait, bright with a gleam of late afternoon sunshine, that fell directly upon it, the richness of the dress and the beauty of the face glowing in the light which, oddly enough, scarcely touched any other spot in the room. It was almost, thought Debby, as if Great-grandmother were reaching forward in warmth and serenity, to bid Eric welcome. And then something moved by the secretary, and Debby saw Aunt Retta rising from her chair. Stiff and handsome, in her black afternoon dress, Miss Henrietta looked from under level brows, first at Debby and then at Eric, standing together just inside the door.

"Good afternoon," she said, but she did not offer to shake hands, or indeed move from where she stood by the secretary.

But Eric walked directly across the room and stood before her.

“Miss Stebbins,” he said quietly, going with characteristic simplicity right to the point, “I believe there has been some misunderstanding, and I want, if I can, to straighten it out.”

How splendid he looked, thought Debby, straight and broad-shouldered in his Norfolk jacket before Aunt Retta, the same shaft of sunlight that had touched Great-grandmother’s portrait, now lighting up his face, and the bright hair above it.

“To what do you refer, Mr. Anderson?” said Miss Henrietta, in her most unbending tone.

“Your niece tells me that I am suspected of opening the drawer of your hall table and taking something out,” said Eric without a moment’s hesitation, “gold beads, I believe, and I want to assure you that I know nothing of any such beads, although I confess that I did open the drawer to put something in, namely a turtle which I found in my hat as I went out.”

“What!” said Miss Henrietta, her cool composure deserting her for the moment. For while Miss Henrietta had little regard for Eric and his hat, she was always much concerned for the dignity of the Stebbins mansion.

“It does not matter in the least,” said Eric, looking directly at Miss Henrietta with those clear gray eyes that had looked so disconcertingly through Polly.

"The one who put it into my hat and I have a perfect understanding about it, and I don't at all object to turtles."

"It was Polly!" said Miss Henrietta, feeling her own dignity, as well as that of the Stebbins mansion slipping away by the unexpected turn in the conversation, and making every effort to recapture it, under the scrutiny of those gray eyes.

"Won't you be seated," said Miss Henrietta, feeling herself, perhaps, in need of a chair.

"Thank you," said Eric, and, having pulled forward an armchair for Aunt Retta, he seated himself by the secretary.

Debby had sat down on an ottoman near the door, where she could see the others, her own face in shadow. For some reason Debby no longer had any fear of this interview. There was even the flicker of a smile about her lips, as from her dark corner she watched the quiet mastery with which Eric faced Aunt Retta.

"You see," he continued, quite as if he were explaining things to an understanding friend, "I had just taken the turtle out of my hat as you came in at the door, and as it seemed rather odd to meet you with it in my hand, I slipped it into the drawer, which was partly open." For the second time Polly's turtle seemed to be breaking the tension.

"You were just putting it into the drawer?" was all that Aunt Retta could manage to say. In a flash

she remembered how she had accused Polly that day in the hall. So Polly had been telling the literal truth after all, the scamp. Miss Henrietta was finding it more and more difficult to resume the full measure of her lost dignity, while the turtle remained the center of the conversation. She therefore made an effort to change it. "But what I should like to know," she said, cool and straight in her chair, "is what became of the beads. I put them there in the box myself."

"I hope that you will let me help you to solve that mystery, Miss Stebbins," said Eric, with quiet courtesy. Debby could see that Aunt Retta was disarmed, in spite of herself, by Eric's evident assumption that she would, of course, accept his word, now that he had given it. "Do you suppose," he added, "that Polly could possibly have taken the box—by mistake?" It seemed to Eric that many things might be possible, with Polly in the house.

Before Miss Henrietta could reply, there was a step in the hall, and Miss Eleanor appeared at the door. She stopped abruptly when she saw what was going on in the room, and half turned toward the stairs, as if she would make her escape. Then all at once she seemed to change her mind, for she walked directly into the drawing-room toward Eric, holding out her hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Anderson," she said, with her own pleasant smile. "I am glad to see you again."

Then she went on into the dining-room, leaving Eric standing before Aunt Retta.

Darling little Aunt Nelly, thought Debby, how she always did manage to do the gracious and comfortable thing. Eric had at last been welcomed to the Stebbins mansion! But Aunt Retta still sat as stiff and straight as a poker.

"Polly says that she knows nothing about the beads," said Miss Henrietta, resuming the conversation, "and Polly always tells the truth." And so saying, she rose, almost, Debby thought, with a hint of dismissal.

But before Eric could take the hint, if such it was, there was a commotion in the hall, and another, quite extraordinary, apparition at the door, Polly herself, in short, waving something in the air, and fairly bursting with more truth to be told.

"I've found them!" she cried shrilly. "I've found them and it wasn't Eric at all!"

And there in Polly's uplifted hand was Aunt Nell's string of gold beads at last!

"*Where?*" began Aunt Retta, as they all turned in astonishment to Polly.

But her words were cut short by a shriek from the back of the house. It was the voice of Aunt Nell, and so sharp was the sound that they all, with one accord, rushed alarmed toward the kitchen—all, that is, except Polly, who stood apparently rooted to the floor of the hall, one hand still holding the beads, the other pressed over her mouth.

Debby, having been nearest to the door, was the first to reach the kitchen through the hall, with Eric close behind her, joined almost at once by Aunt Retta, white of face, through the door of the butler's pantry. But all that they could see, in the twilight of the seemingly peaceful kitchen, was Aunt Nell, standing by the table, staring into the big preserving kettle, which had been inadvertently left there.

"What is it? It's moving!" said Aunt Nell, in a voice that shook a little, "Put on the light, somebody."

And when Eric had quickly switched on the electricity, and they all, crowding around, looked nervously into the kettle, there at the bottom of it was a half-grown and thoroughly frightened woodchuck!

"Oh!" said Aunt Retta, the last shred of her dignity deserting her, as she sat down on the wood-box.



Chapter Sixteen

AUNT RETTA IS A TRUE STEBBINS

BUT I was only going to leave it there a little while, until I showed you the beads," pleaded Polly a few moments later in the drawing-room. "There wasn't any other place, and Zab wouldn't come in and hold it because he had on his best Sunday suit." Aunt Retta looked down upon Polly's own once-white Sunday dress, and raised her eye-brows, "and its jaw is swollen," continued Polly, "and we've got to do something for it and—"

"Never mind that," interrupted Aunt Retta impatiently, shaking the beads which she now held in her hand. "Tell us at once where you found the necklace."

"All right," said Polly, delighted to change the subject. "It was over in the cornfield."

"The cornfield!" echoed the others.

"Yes," said Polly. "Zab took the box out of the table drawer because he thought there were daddy-long-legs in it for the hospital, and he lost it in the cornfield and never told me until today, and then I guessed right off it was the beads."

Standing in the middle of the drawing-room in her bedraggled dress, Polly looked from one to the other, very eager and bright-eyed. Polly dearly loved to hold the center of the stage, and never had she found so interested an audience. Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell on one side, Debby and Eric on the other, were one and all hanging upon her words. As dramatically as she could, Polly recounted how she and Zab had walked back and forth, back and forth, through Judge Parker's cornfield, until at last they had come upon the dirty, water-soaked box, with the beads still safely inside.

"And then on the way back," said Polly, "we—" She was just on the point of telling about the exciting adventure with the woodchuck, when it suddenly occurred to her that perhaps it would be just as well not to bring up that subject again. "We—we—just ran like the dickens—and that's all," she finished rather abruptly.

There was a moment's silence at this sudden ending to the story. All the time that Polly had been talking

Debby had been looking at Aunt Retta. Never before had she seen just that expression on Aunt Retta's face, and the silence was now broken in a voice that was not quite Aunt Retta's either.

"No," said Miss Henrietta, "that is *not* all. We owe Mr. Anderson an apology, and I shall make it now." As she spoke, Miss Henrietta moved across the room in front of Polly, and held out her hand to Eric, "Mr. Anderson," she said, with her usual stateliness, and yet with a graciousness that was rare in Aunt Retta, "no Stebbins is ever afraid to admit being in the wrong, and I hope that you will be good enough to overlook this hasty misunderstanding. I sincerely beg your pardon."

Never, thought Debby, had Aunt Retta looked so handsome. Oh, but she was fine, after all, and Debby was proud of her. Why, Aunt Retta had almost smiled upon Eric! As for Eric—he smiled whole-heartedly at Aunt Retta—that winning smile, said Debby to herself, that no one was ever able to resist.

"Apology is quite unnecessary, Miss Stebbins," he said, taking Miss Henrietta's hand. "We had only to meet, I think, to understand each other."

And then Aunt Retta outdid herself entirely.

"I hope," she said, "that you will stay and have supper with us. It will be ready in half an hour, and perhaps meanwhile Deborah would like to show you the garden."

"Thank you," said Eric, "I should be delighted to

stay, if you will let me use the telephone, to call my family.”

“Polly will show you where it is,” said Miss Henrietta, as she turned, in her own brisk way, toward the dining-room.

While Eric was being directed to the telephone by an eager Polly, Debby slipped out the front door into the twilight, to return the Judge’s car to the garage. The sky beyond the trees was bright with the clear pink and gold and green of an autumn sunset, and above the color rode the most delicate of crescent moons. Debby thought that she had never seen so sweet a night. As she came happily back across the road, Eric was waiting for her under the portico.

“It is almost too dark to see much of the garden,” she said, leading the way around the house, “but we might just walk down the path.” And so engrossed were they in each other’s companionship that they did not notice Polly’s absurd nose pressed wistfully against the other side of the screen door. For once, however, Polly understood clearly that she was not wanted.

“Gardens are loveliest of all in the evening, I think,” said Eric, as they came into the broad path, bordered with great pale mallows, and faintly fragrant with the few other flowers that had escaped the frosts. “At least, they were in Florence, where I first knew gardens well.”

“Oh, have you been in Italy?” said Debby.

"Yes," said Eric, "I was there for a year in the museums, studying, not creating like you."

Walking along the garden path, he told her of the beauty of the Italian gardens, and of his life in Florence. It seemed a magic hour, that opened vistas of delight and carried her far away. But just as they turned to retrace their steps up the now dark garden, Debby saw something that brought her suddenly back to the here and now. A light flared out in the cottage in the field below, and she could make out the dim figure of old Min behind the kerosene lamp in Anthony Thorpe's window. In a flash she thought again of the beads, and of how strangely old Tony had acted about them. But now it was clear that he could not have had anything to do with their disappearance. Why, then, had he looked so sly? Why had he always put his fingers to his lips? Twice since that first night she had tried to probe old Tony, but always with the same baffling result—just "Sh-sh—sh-sh" on his withered old lips.

Mystified anew, Debby listened to Eric's voice, scarcely conscious for a moment of his words, until she realized that he was asking her something for the second time.

"Would it be possible, do you think," he said, "for me to see the old sea-chest to-night?"

"Oh, yes," said Debby, collecting her thoughts. "We will go and look at it now."

As they had just then reached the top of the garden

path again, she led the way directly into her little studio, through the door that opened on the garden.

Eric stood before the chest and examined it intently, rapping the sound old wood, touching the graceful lines of the carving along the top.

"May I see the inside too?" he said.

"Of course," said Debby. And she lifted the cover.

There on top of the pile of drawing papers lay her sketch of the two heads, Youth and Age, the face of Youth still blank. The quick color came into Debby's cheeks, as she saw Eric's eyes on the sketch. Would he guess her purpose with that face? But if he did, he gave no sign. Apparently absorbed in the chest, he continued to run his fingers along the true, sure workmanship. Debby watching, knew that she could never again forget how that face should be filled in.

"It is a fine piece," said Eric at last, "well worth the two hundred dollars. I can let you know positively in a day or two, but I am pretty sure now that my—my client will take it." And he looked at Debby, surprised apparently at the doubt upon her face. "Does that not seem to you a fair price?" he added.

"Oh, yes," she said hastily. "More, much more than I ever dreamed. But," and although she hesitated, she looked directly at him, "but I must ask you something. It isn't you, is it?"

"I?" said Eric.

"You—who are buying the chest?"

There was a moment of silence, and Debby, search-

ing his face, hoped that it was just surprise that she saw, but she was not sure.

"No," he said slowly, "it is not I. But would that make a difference?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Can't you see?" And her eyes were still full of doubt.

"Don't you trust me, Debby—dear?" he said.

All at once he held out both his hands to her. She caught her breath. Then with a sudden smile, she put her hands in his.

"Oh, yes, Eric, I do," she said, with all her heart.

At that moment the door into the hall was opened.

"Supper is all rea—oh!" said Polly. She had suddenly seen something that would be wonderful for *Sylvia Fisher*.

Sunday night supper was always served in the drawing-room at the Stebbins mansion, and in a few minutes Eric was sitting between Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell, while Debby and Polly brought in the trays. A small gate-leg table had been placed beside Aunt Retta, and on this Debby put the tray with the silver tea service, and the hot water, covered with a cosy. Everybody was given a lacquer tray, with a plate and a white, fringed napkin upon it, and while Debby brought the cups of tea from Aunt Retta's table, Polly, once more arrayed in a clean dress, passed the bread and butter sandwiches and Aunt Nell's oatmeal wafers. The night outside was chill, and at Aunt Retta's request Eric lighted the open fire. As Debby well knew,

it was a great concession on Aunt Retta's part to allow any outsider to light a fire on a Stebbins hearth, and a sure sign that the lighter was in high favor.

Sipping her tea on the other side of Aunt Nell, Debby watched the quiet ease with which Eric handled the conversation with Aunt Retta, beginning with her own beautiful things in the fine old room, the very Chippendale in which she herself sat, and comparing them favorably with the treasures at the Columbian Museum. Aunt Retta, who prided herself on knowing a good deal about antiques, was openly interested, and was presently telling the history of her various heirlooms to Eric, who listened as well as he talked. As for Polly, she sat on a stool by the fire, her eyes glued upon Eric, and almost forgot to eat her supper. Altogether, it was as pleasant a family party as had gathered around the drawing-room hearth for many a day, and Debby, stealing an occasional glance at Great-grandmother, thought that she looked down upon the scene with more than her usual sweet gaiety. But nobody mentioned the portrait, until suddenly, to Debby's utter astonishment, Aunt Retta looked directly up at it.

"That, Mr. Anderson," said Aunt Retta, impressively, with a motion of her hand, "is the most priceless of all the Stebbins treasures."

"I am sure it is, Miss Stebbins," said Eric gravely, looking at the portrait as if it had never before been an issue between them.

"I want you to know," went on Aunt Retta, "that I am in receipt of the letter from your museum in regard to the portrait. I can believe that their suggestions were made in good faith, and I shall answer the letter in a few days. But you must understand, Mr. Anderson, what it means to receive a proposal to have the portrait leave this house. We have been obliged to give it a great deal of anxious thought. Deborah, will you and Polly please remove the tea things."

Could it be *possible*, thought Debby in a daze, as she carried the silver tray through the dining-room, that Aunt Retta was actually considering sending the portrait to the Columbian Museum after all! It would be like having the sun stand still in the heavens. And now that the chest was to be sold, there would be no need for even considering the sale of the picture. As soon as she had heard definitely from Eric, she must tell her aunts what she was going to do, although she hated to broach the subject of selling anything, even her own sea-chest.

When she came back from the kitchen Aunt Retta was in the dining-room, showing Eric Great-grandfather's ship-model, and telling of the old family traditions that had to do with clipper ships, of the rich voyages to the Orient, with their romance and adventure. Never had Debby seen Aunt Retta so animated, so full of life and zest. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes almost as bright as Polly's, and she

seemed to Debby twenty years younger than any Aunt Retta she had ever known. As the evening went on, even Aunt Nell sat looking in evident surprise at this strange new sister. And when at last they heard a car drive up to the gate, and knew that it must be Edith Anderson for her brother, Aunt Retta went with Eric to the door, opening it for him herself, and inviting him to come again.

Debby walked with Eric down the path to the gate. The crescent moon had gone, but the night was still very sweet.

"You shall hear from me soon," he said in a low voice, as they went toward the car. "And if—when—you come, I shall be waiting for you. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," said Debby, also very low.

For a moment she felt his hand on hers. Then they stepped into the light from the car, where Edith Anderson was sitting.

When Debby came back into the house, Aunt Nell and Polly had disappeared, and she could hear the faint clatter of dishes in the kitchen. But Aunt Retta still stood, stately and quiet, in the drawing-room, as if wrapped in all the memories that she herself had evoked. She turned around as Debby came into the room.

"He seemed to appreciate everything," said Aunt Retta, with satisfaction. "He is a very intelligent young man."

And Debby, looking at the face softened by those memories, walked across the room to where Miss Henrietta stood, with the portrait of her mother behind her.

“Oh, Aunt Retta,” she said, quite as if it had been Aunt Nell, “you *are* a dear. I think you are very like Great-grandmother.”



Chapter Seventeen

A VERY OLD SECRET IS TOLD

DEBBY knelt before the old sea-chest, and drew her hand along the worn, delicately wrought carving on the top:

“Where thy treasure—there thy heart”

Yes, it had been her chief treasure, and it hurt her very much to let it go. Perhaps Great-grandfather had sat here himself long ago, in her workshop, with the fall sunshine streaming in through the doorway, as it had been streaming all this afternoon, and chiselled and carved and sung. The only thing that Aunt Retta remembered about Great-grandfather was the rollicking songs of the sea that had echoed through

the house when he, her father, came home. He had been young and happy and broad-shouldered like Eric. And he must have liked lovely things, just as she did, or he would never have carved that vine with the starry flowers that twined itself among the letters.

“Where thy treasure—there thy heart”

Was he thinking of Great-grandmother when he carved them? Had he already seen her in that Spanish island far away, with her gay smile and her bright eyes? And had he made this old chest to hold *her* treasures when he should bring her home to Bellport? Debby threw both her arms across it. How could she ever sell it, in spite of Mrs. Anderson’s letter.

For yesterday had come the loveliest of letters from Eric’s mother. It was she, after all, who wanted to buy the chest. She had been looking for years, she wrote, for just such an old genuine home-made treasure as Eric described this to be, and if Debby could really make up her mind to part with it for so low a price, she, Mrs. Anderson, should feel that she had had a real stroke of luck at last. In her own tactful way Eric’s mother had allayed the last of Debby’s doubts.

Now at last she could really apply for the scholarship—and oh, she *did* hope that it would not be too late for this year. And yet—it would be almost like selling Great-grandfather, and all the things that he had worked and hoped for. He had had to give them up

so soon anyway, the treasures that had filled the chest. But what had filled it, besides the old charts, in those days when he went to sea with Great-grandmother in his clipper ship, and left it behind? And why had he carved those words? Always there had seemed a mystery about the old chest.

Debby lifted the cover. She would take out all the old papers and sort them now, before it grew too dark. The light was out of order in the workshop, and already the late afternoon sunshine had gone, leaving the fields below the garden shadowy with the autumn dusk. Looking through the open door that led into the garden, she could see a thread of blue smoke curling up from old Anthony Thorpe's little cottage in the field. A delicate smell of tea biscuits drifted in through the other door that opened into the hall. Aunt Nell would soon be wanting her in the dining-room. Debby reached into the chest and lifted out a pile of the old drawings. Then, sitting on the floor, she began to look them over.

Suddenly there was a scurry in the hall, and Polly appeared in the doorway, with Zab's tously red head behind her. She held in her hand an old vanilla bottle, filled with a white fluid and plugged with a piece of cheese-cloth.

"Oh, Debby," she began, "I've got some warm milk for the little woodchuck. We've put him in the old parrot cage in the shed, and Why, *what* are you doing, Debby?" ended Polly, coming up to the chest, fol-

lowed by Zab. Both the children peered into it with interest.

"Are you going to take all the things out?" asked Polly.

"Yes," said Debby.

"Even the ones at the bottom?"

"Yes," repeated Debby.

"What are you going to do with them?" continued Polly.

"Throw some of them away, and put the rest on the shelf," replied Debby.

"Oh," said Polly, considering, "then aren't you going to use the chest any more, Debby?"

"I don't think so," said Debby, with a shade of impatience. Things that were not quite straight-forward always made Debby impatient, and she had not yet told the family that she had decided to sell the sea-chest.

"Then can Zab and I have it to keep our things in?" enquired Polly eagerly.

Ever since old Anthony Thorpe had told them about the sea-chest that he had once helped Great-grandfather to make, Polly and Zab had envied Debby this romantic possession.

"No," said Debby with decision.

Whenever her older sister spoke in that tone of voice, there was never anything to do, Polly knew, except to make a fresh start in the conversation.

"Well, can Zab and I help now?" said Polly, who

had always wanted to see what the bottom of the chest looked like.

"We can put the things on the shelf," suggested Zab.

"Oh, I know," cried Polly, looking out into the dusk of the garden, "we'll burn the old stuff in the incinerator. It's right outside the door. Can we, Debby?"

"If you want to," said Debby, busily sorting the sheets of old drawing papers into two piles before her on the floor.

"Oh, goody," said Zab, who loved making fires. "I'll get a match from the kitchen."

Polly put the vanilla bottle on the floor beside the chest, and picked up a pile of the discarded drawing papers. She carried them through the door and down the steps to the incinerator. Her little tilted nose sniffed with pleasure. The twilight was deepening fast, and there was the chill, pungent smell of asters and moist earth that comes in the evening from September gardens, mingled pleasantly with the wood smoke from old Anthony's chimney down the hill. Quickly Polly stuffed the papers into the incinerator and ran back for more.

"Wait a minute. Don't touch those," said Debby. "Those are my good drawings."

"What *can* I take?" said Polly, anxious as usual to get the business of the moment under way.

"There isn't enough out there to make a good blaze."

"You'll have to wait until I sort some more," said Debby firmly. "Don't stand in the light, please. It's getting awfully dark."

"I know," said Zab, who had come back with the match, "let's put in some leaves."

"All right," said Polly, for once accepting a suggestion from Zab. "Aunt Retta said I should have to rake them up any way."

Both the children ran out through the door, and for a few minutes there was a great rustling in the garden, as they scurried about, gathering armfuls of the dry leaves to stuff into the incinerator.

"That's enough," said Polly presently. "Now we'll draw lots to see who'll light it."

Zab, being the lucky one, struck the match on his corduroys, and a moment later the flames were leaping into the dusk, touching the clumps of asters and zinnias with color again, and bringing out into sharp relief the dry, gaunt stalks of the hollyhocks against the house.

The children capered around in glee, throwing in great armfuls of leaves whenever the fire began to die down, while Debby within the door emptied the chest and sorted her papers by the flickering light. Presently Polly broke off two of the dried hollyhock stalks and threw them into the fire, which made a delicious crackle and leaped up higher than ever.

“Don’t put on too much,” called Debby. “I’ve got everything out now, and you can have the papers in a minute.”

“What was that?” said Zab suddenly, standing still with his arms full of leaves, and looking down the hill.

“What?” said Polly, peering into the now almost dark garden.

“That mumbling sound. Something’s coming up from down there,” said Zab, moving cautiously around behind the incinerator.

But Polly, ever curious and unafraid, ventured a step or two down the garden toward a shape that came stumblingly from the direction of the hedge.

“Who is it?” she called, in her high fearless voice.

The shape, which was the size of a man, made no reply, but moved directly toward her, up the garden path. It was mumbling to itself, as Zab had said, and was hurrying rather unsteadily.

“Oh,” cried Polly, as the figure came out at last into the circle of the firelight, “it’s only old Anthony, Zab. Tony,” she said, going to meet him as he came shuffling on, short of breath, “what do you want here? Where are you going?”

“The chest,” mumbled old Anthony, “the precious thing first—the chest.”

“Oh, Polly, what’s the matter with him?” said Zab in an awe-struck voice, as he came out from behind the incinerator.

For indeed in old Anthony’s eyes was an expression

such as the children had never seen before—tense, almost rapt, as if he were looking at things that were far away and long ago. Even Polly shrank from that strange, withered old face. But she went up and touched his arm.

“Have you lost your way, Tony?” she said. “Shall Zab and I take you home?”

But the old man paid no heed to her or to anything except the leaping flames and the doorway just beyond, from which his eyes never wavered. He seemed neither to see nor to hear the children. Straight toward the firelit door he went, where Debby, on the floor in front of the old chest, was still sorting her papers.

“First of all the chest. The precious thing—the chest,” he continued to mumble, as, followed by the now frightened children, he hurried, as fast as his uncertain old legs would take him, up the steps and through the doorway.

Debby, springing to her feet with a cry, shrank back against the wall, away from this strange apparition. The sparse gray hair and dingy beard were more unkempt than usual, the coat was unbuttoned and flapping, and the flames behind cast a weird shadow on the wall. But old Anthony Thorpe, seemingly unconscious of any other presence than the chest, knelt swiftly down beside it, where Debby had been, and in the tense hush, that was broken only by the snapping of the fire outside, groped with trembling old fingers along the bottom.

Suddenly, as if he had touched a hidden spring, there was an odd sort of click in the chest, and in a moment old Anthony was getting shakily to his feet again. In a sudden flare from the fire, the children saw that he held in his hand a strange little wooden box that they had never before seen.

"The precious thing, first of all, the precious thing," murmured old Anthony, turning once more, bewildered, toward the garden door, and shuffling out upon the steps. It had all happened so quickly that not one of them had spoken or moved, when Aunt Retta came suddenly out from the shadows of the other doorway.

"What does all this mean?" she demanded, looking from Debby, Polly and Zab, standing rooted by the chest, to old Anthony's retreating figure. "What is this old man doing here? And what is he taking away?"

With long, swift strides Aunt Retta followed old Anthony to the foot of the steps, and took the box from his unresisting fingers. His errand accomplished, all purpose and intensity had gone out of the old man's face, even as the flame had died down in the incinerator. He stood, the village half-wit again, looking blankly at Aunt Retta, as with nervous fingers she quickly drew the sliding cover of the wooden box. Then out of it, before all their astonished eyes, she lifted a long chain. In the low flickering light they

distinctly saw the flash of precious stones and the shape of a great cross.

It was Great-grandmother's jeweled chain!

"Who told you where to find this, Tony?" said Aunt Retta, her usually calm voice tense with excitement, turning to where old Anthony had stood.

But he was no longer there. While Aunt Retta had been taking the chain from the box, he had gone vaguely off down the garden again. They could faintly see his old figure shuffling away. He had already forgotten the jeweled chain.

"Don't you see, Zab!" exclaimed Polly, in an eager whisper. "He saw the flames in the incinerator, and it made him remember what Great-grandfather said long ago about a fire at the big house and saving the precious thing. I mean the story he told that day when the lid of the chest fell on the cat's paw and we took it home. Don't you remember?"

"Where could he have possibly found it in the chest?" said Debby. "There was nothing under the papers. I took them all out." And she ran up the steps into the workshop again, followed by the children and Aunt Retta.

"There's a flashlight in that drawer," said Polly, who had an uncanny way of knowing always where things were.

They waited, breathless, while Debby found the light.

“Look!” cried Polly, as it flashed into the bottom of the chest. “There, in the corner.”

And lo, on the bottom of the chest, where nobody had ever known such a thing to be, was a tiny square cavity, chiselled out of one of the boards, with a little lid, now open, but so cunningly cut and fitted that when closed it seemed an unbroken part of the floor of the chest.

“But how did old Anthony know that it was there?” repeated Aunt Retta greatly puzzled. “A hiding place like that must mean that the chain is immensely valuable.” She held it up where in the strong rays of the flashlight it sparkled in heavy richness. “Children,” said Aunt Retta impressively, “I think that the Stebbins’ ship has come in at last!”

Then, carrying the chain in both hands, like a cat’s cradle, Aunt Retta walked swiftly out into the hall to find her sister. And they were all too excited to notice that, in her best afternoon shoes, Aunt Retta walked directly through the little woodchuck’s warm milk, which was trickling across the floor from the overturned vanilla bottle!

“Aunt Nell,” cried Polly, running ahead with Zab at her heels, “we’ve found Great-grandmother’s chain, we’ve found Great-grandmother’s chain—and we’re going to be rich and glorious!”

“Sh, child!” said Aunt Retta. “Don’t tell all the neighborhood.”

Polly, however, was not to be suppressed.

*"Glorious and glorious!
Rich and glorious!
The Stebbinses are going to be
Rich and glorious!"*

she sang, in a sort of chant, skipping ahead of Aunt Retta toward the drawing-room.

But Debby, the flashlight in her hand, lingered a moment in the workshop to close the old chest. It looked a little forlorn, she thought, standing alone, empty and robbed of its secret and its treasure. But after all, treasures hidden away were of no use. Treasures were meant to make people happy. And it was not safe to hide things. Supposing she had sold the chest to strangers with Great-grandmother's jewels in it! Debby caught her breath, and quickly let down the cover.

"Where thy treasure—there thy heart."

That was it! You must use your treasure, not lock it away, if your heart would be happy and free. The chance to paint, that was her real treasure. Somehow Debby was sure now that her chance had come.

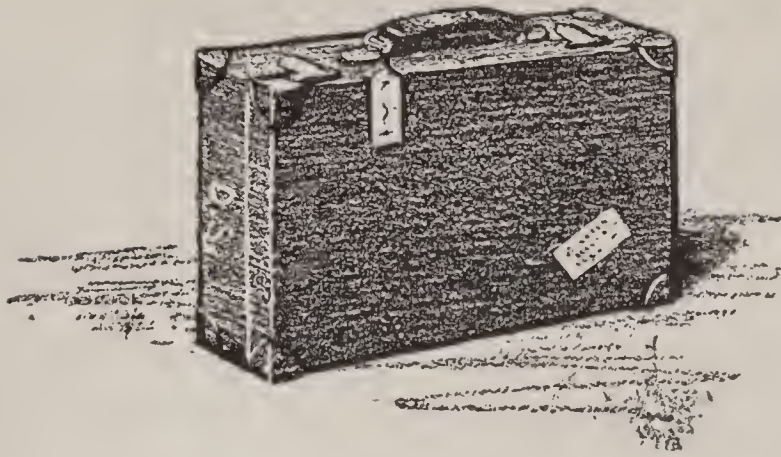
*"Glorious and glorious!
The Stebbinses are going to be
Rich and glorious!"*

sang the irrepressible Polly from the drawing-room, "Oh, Debby, come quick. Great-grandmother's name is carved right on the clasp."

Debby turned for a moment to look back at the old

chest. Yes, she would make things rich and glorious to put into it—things as beautiful as Great-grandmother's chain. She was sure that she could, and so was Eric. Oh, but life was fun!

And smiling to herself, Debby closed the door and ran down the hall.



Chapter Eighteen

A DREAM COMES TRUE

POLLY and Zab swung side by side on the gate in front of the Stebbins mansion. It was cool, even for October, so that they wore their fall coats and hats, and they were plainly excited, for they looked first at the front door, then at Judge Parker's car, which stood waiting before the gate, with the Judge himself at the wheel, then back at the front door again.

"She's almost ready," said Polly. "I think she'll be out in a minute."

"Is that a new trunk?" asked Zab, staring at the back of the Judge's car, where a very shiny piece of baggage was strapped, with *D. S.* on it in red letters.

"Yes," said Polly. "Aunt Retta and Aunt Nell gave it to her when she won the scholarship at the museum. And she's got a new suit-case too, with all kinds of things fitted into it, and a lot of new clothes. We're

quite rich now, you know." And Polly looked complacently at her own new dark blue coat.

"Yes," said Zab, properly impressed. Zab had been more than ever in awe of the Stebbins mansion and its inmates since that strange night a month ago when Anthony Thorpe had found the jeweled chain in the old chest.

"Is Debby going to take the chain to the city?" ventured Zab.

"Of course not," said Polly. "Aunt Retta sold the jewel. That's why we're rich. It was worth hundreds and hundreds and *hundreds* of dollars, so we shan't ever have to sell the portrait. Aunt Retta said she wouldn't dare to sleep in the house with anything as valuable as that jewel, for fear of robbers."

"She *did* sleep in the house with it, though," said matter-of-fact Zab, "ever so long."

"Yes," admitted Polly, musing on the strangeness of things, "since way, way back as far as the nineteenth century. And Tony knew about the chain all the time, and that's why he acted so queer about the gold beads. Debby says he got them mixed up in his mind with the chain."

Just then there was the sound of the front door opening.

"There she is," cried Polly, jumping from the gate, and running up the walk.

Debby, in her pretty brown traveling suit, was saying good-bye to Aunt Retta under the portico.

Aunt Nell was going to the station, but Miss Henrietta very seldom left the house.

“Good-bye, my child,” said Aunt Retta. “We shall miss you.”

And Debby knew, even from the somewhat austere kiss, that there was something kind and warm for her there. She turned at the foot of the steps and threw Aunt Retta another kiss. Then with her arm through Aunt Nell’s, and with Polly behind carrying the suitcase, Debby went down the walk to the car.

“Well, well, well, so we’re really off to the city,” said the Judge, as he packed them in.

“Yes,” said Debby, with a smile that wavered a little.

She sat between Aunt Nell and Polly on the back seat, Zab in front with the Judge, but nobody could think of very much to say, as they rolled down the hill into lower Main Street. Even Polly was silent, sitting back in the corner of the car, and staring up at Debby’s gay new hat with the red feather, and at the face under it, that looked more sober than usual.

At the station by the water front they all got out, and the Judge helped the baggage man to set the trunk on the platform. He kissed Debby with genuine affection, and pinched her cheek, and told her not to let any one run away with her in the city. Then he got back behind his wheel and opened his newspaper, for the Judge had a horror of partings.

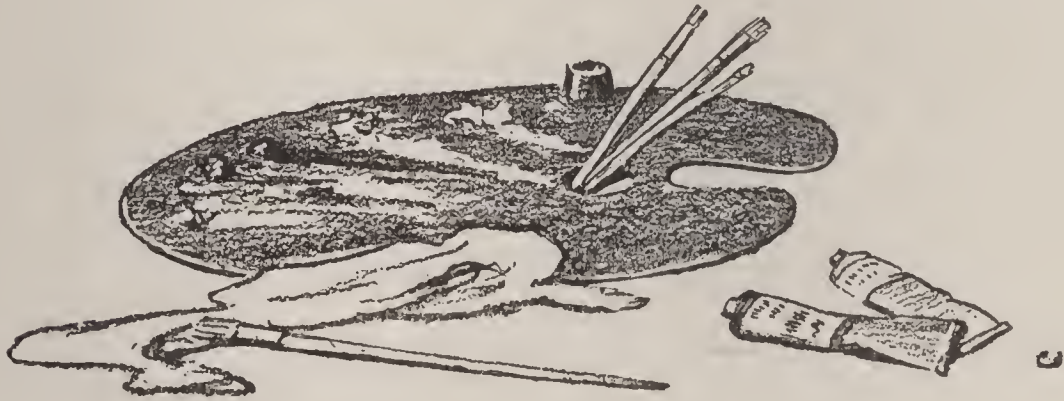
The others stood on the platform, looking anxiously

up the track, where the train would soon come around the curve, and saying those jerky, unimportant things that constitute farewells. Polly alone said nothing at all, shifting from one foot to the other, and wondering why the bright October sunshine seemed so queer and different today. She did not now look at Debby, who stood beside her holding Aunt Nelly's hand, but down at the rails, nor would she say a word to Zab, who loved railroad stations and wanted to talk. After a few minutes her eyes began to feel funny, so she stopped looking at the rails.

Then the train came thundering and shrieking around the curve, and in a moment there were hasty good-byes, a rush for the steps, a grinding of wheels, and Debby was really off. She stood on the train platform and waved at Aunt Nell, and smiled as best she could, but there was no Polly to be seen. As the train rumbled away over the grade crossing at lower Main Street, however, Debby, looking from her car window, caught sight of a small figure in a dark blue coat, running *running* away from the station up the street, with a coat sleeve held across its face. Debby drummed on the window as hard as she could, but the flying figure did not stop or turn, and in a flash it and Main Street were blotted out, as the train rushed on across the outlying meadows.

Debby, her face close to the window, looked back over the fields to the familiar hill, where the four tall chimneys of the Stebbins mansion rose among the now

bare elms against the sky. Then they too were gone, and for just a moment Debby put her face into her hands. But when she looked up again there was happiness in her eyes. Through the window she could see where the rails ahead gleamed in a long curve. Far away at the end of those shining rails she knew that her dreams were coming true—the Columbian Museum, a year of painting—Eric. And Eric had said that he would be waiting for her!



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