

CHAPTER III

"ALL ASHORE"

Beth De Graf was a puzzle to all who knew her. She was a puzzle even to herself, and was wont to say, indifferently, that the problem was not worth a solution. For this beautiful girl of fifteen was somewhat bitter and misanthropic, a condition perhaps due to the uncongenial atmosphere in which she had been reared. She was of dark complexion and her big brown eyes held a sombre and unfathomable expression. Once she had secretly studied their reflection in a mirror, and the eyes awed and frightened her, and made her uneasy. She had analyzed them much as if they belonged to someone else, and wondered what lay behind their mask, and what their capabilities might be.

But this morbid condition mostly affected her when she was at home, listening to the unpleasant bickerings of her father and mother, who quarrelled constantly over trifles that Beth completely ignored. Her parents seemed like two ill tempered animals confined in the same cage, she thought, and their snarls had long since ceased to interest her.

This condition had, of course, been infinitely worse in all those dreadful years when they were poverty stricken. Since Uncle John had settled a comfortable income on his niece the grocer was paid promptly and Mrs. De Graf wore a silk dress on Sundays and held her chin a little

higher than any other of the Cloverton ladies dared do. The Professor, no longer harrassed by debts, devoted less time to the drudgery of teaching and began the composition of an oratorio that he firmly believed would render his name famous. So, there being less to quarrel about, Beth's parents indulged more moderately in that pastime; but their natures were discordant, and harmony in the De Graf household was impossible.

When away from home Beth's disposition softened. Some of her school-friends had seen her smile--a wonderful and charming phenomenon, during which her expression grew sweet and bewitchingly animated and her brown eyes radiant with mirthful light. It was not the same Beth at all.

Sometimes, when the nieces were all at Aunt Jane's, Beth had snuggled in the arms of her cousin Louise, who had a way of rendering herself agreeable to all with whom she came in contact, and tried hard to win the affection of the frankly antagonistic girl. At such times the gentleness of Elizabeth, her almost passionate desire to be loved and fondled, completely transformed her for the moment. Louise, shrewd at reading others, told herself that Beth possessed a reserve force of tenderness, amiability and fond devotion that would render her adorable if she ever allowed those qualities full expression. But she did not tell Beth that. The girl was so accustomed to despise herself and so suspicious of any creditable impulses that at times unexpectedly obtruded themselves, that she would have dismissed such a suggestion as arrant flattery, and Louise was clever enough not to wish to arouse her

cousin to a full consciousness of her own possibilities.

The trained if not native indifference of this strange girl of fifteen was demonstrated by her reception of Uncle John's telegram. She quietly handed it to her mother and said, as calmly as if it were an invitation to a church picnic:

"I think I shall go."

"Nothing like that ever happened to me," remarked Mrs. De Graf, enviously. "If John Merrick had an atom of common sense he'd have taken me to Europe instead of a troop of stupid school girls. But John always was a fool, and always will be. When will you start, Beth?"

"To-morrow morning. There's nothing to keep me. I'll go to Patsy and stay with her until we sail."

"Are you glad?" asked her mother, looking into the expressionless face half curiously.

"Yes," returned Beth, as if considering her reply; "a change is always interesting, and I have never travelled except to visit Aunt Jane at Elmhurst. So I think I am pleased to go to Europe."

Mrs. De Graf sighed. There was little in common between mother and daughter; but that, to a grave extent, was the woman's fault. She had

never tried to understand her child's complex nature, and somewhat resented Beth's youth and good looks, which she considered contrasted unfavorably with her own deepening wrinkles and graying hair. For Mrs. De Graf was vain and self-important, and still thought herself attractive and even girlish. It would really be a relief to have Beth out of the way for a few months.

The girl packed her own trunk and arranged for it to be taken to the station. In the morning she entered the music room to bid the Professor good-bye. He frowned at the interruption, for the oratorio was especially engrossing at the time. Mrs. De Graf kissed her daughter lightly upon the lips and said in a perfunctory way that she hoped Beth would have a good time.

The girl had no thought of resenting the lack of affection displayed by her parents. It was what she had always been accustomed to, and she had no reason to expect anything different.

Patsy met her at the train in New York and embraced her rapturously. Patsy was really fond of Beth; but it was her nature to be fond of everyone, and her cousin, escaping from her smacking and enthusiastic kisses, told herself that Patsy would have embraced a cat with the same spontaneous ecstasy. That was not strictly true, but there was nothing half hearted or halfway about Miss Doyle. If she loved you, there would never be an occasion for you to doubt the fact. It was Patsy's way.

Uncle John also was cordial in his greetings. He was very proud of his pretty niece, and discerning enough to realize there was a broad strata of womanliness somewhere in Elizabeth's undemonstrative character. He had promised himself to "dig it out" some day, and perhaps the European trip would give him his opportunity.

Patsy and Elizabeth shopped for the next few days most strenuously and delightfully. Sometimes their dainty cousin Louise joined them, and the three girls canvassed gravely their requirements for a trip that was as new to them as a flight to the moon. Naturally, they bought much that was unnecessary and forgot many things that would have been useful. You have to go twice to Europe to know what to take along.

Louise needed less than the others, for her wardrobe was more extensive and she already possessed all that a young girl could possibly make use of. This niece, the eldest of Uncle John's trio, was vastly more experienced in the ways of the world than the others, although as a traveller she had no advantage of them. Urged thereto by her worldly mother, she led a sort of trivial, butterfly existence, and her character was decidedly superficial to any close observer. Indeed, her very suavity and sweetness of manner was assumed, because it was so much more comfortable and effective to be agreeable than otherwise. She was now past seventeen years of age, tall and well formed, with a delicate and attractive face which, without being beautiful, was considered pleasant and winning. Her eyes were good, though a bit too shrewd, and her light brown hair was fluffy as spun silk. Graceful of carriage,

gracious of manner, yet affecting a languor unsuited to her years, Louise Merrick was a girl calculated to draw from the passing throng glances of admiration and approval, and to convey the impression of good breeding and feminine cleverness.

All this, however, was outward. Neither Patsy nor Beth displayed any undue affection for their cousin, although all of the girls exhibited a fair amount of cousinly friendship for one another. They had once been thrown together under trying circumstances, when various qualities of temperament not altogether admirable were liable to assert themselves. Those events were too recent to be already forgotten, yet the girls were generous enough to be considerate of each others' failings, and had resolved to entertain no sentiment other than good will on the eve of their departure for such a charming outing as Uncle John had planned for them.

Mr. Merrick being a man, saw nothing radically wrong in the dispositions of any of his nieces. Their youth and girlishness appealed to him strongly, and he loved to have them by his side. It is true that he secretly regretted Louise was not more genuine, that Beth was so cynical and frank, and that Patsy was not more diplomatic. But he reflected that he had had no hand in molding their characters, although he might be instrumental in improving them; so he accepted the girls as they were, thankful that their faults were not glaring, and happy to have found three such interesting nieces to cheer his old age.

At last the preparations were complete. Tuesday arrived, and Uncle John "corralled his females," as he expressed it, and delivered them safely on board the staunch and comfortable ocean greyhound known as the "Princess Irene," together with their bags and baggage, their flowers and fruits and candy boxes and all those other useless accessories to a voyage so eagerly thrust upon the departing travellers by their affectionate but ill-advised friends.

Mrs. Merrick undertook the exertion of going to Hoboken to see her daughter off, and whispered in the ear of Louise many worldly admonitions and such bits of practical advice as she could call to mind on the spur of the moment.

Major Gregory Doyle was there, pompous and straight of form and wearing an assumed smile that was meant to assure Patsy he was delighted at her going, but which had the effect of scaring the girl because she at first thought the dreadful expression was due to convulsions.

The Major had no admonitions for Patsy, but she had plenty for him, and gave him a long list of directions that would, as he said, cause him to "walk mighty sthraight" if by good luck he managed to remember them all.

Having made up his mind to let the child go to Europe, the old fellow allowed no wails or bemoanings to reach Patsy's ears to deprive her of a moment's joyful anticipation of the delights in store for her. He laughed and joked perpetually during that last day, and promised the

girl that he would take a vacation while she was gone and visit his old colonel in Virginia, which she knew was the rarest pleasure he could enjoy. And now he stood upon the deck amusing them all with his quaint sayings and appearing so outwardly jolly and unaffected that only Patsy herself suspected the deep grief that was gripping his kindly old heart.

Uncle John guessed, perhaps, for he hugged the Major in a tight embrace, whispering that Patsy should be now, as ever, the apple of his eye and the subject of his most loving care.

"An' don't be forgetting to bring me the meerschaum pipe from Sicily an' the leathern pocket-book from Florence," the Major said to Patsy, impressively. "It's little enough for ye to remember if ye go that way, an' to tell the truth I'm sending ye abroad just for to get them. An' don't be gettin' off the boat till it stops at a station; an' remember that Uncle John is full of rheumatics an' can't walk more n' thirty mile an hour, an'--"

"It's a slander," said Uncle John, stoutly. "I never had rheumatics in my life."

"Major," observed Patsy, her blue eyes full of tears but her lips trying to smile, "do have the tailor sponge your vest every Saturday. It's full of spots even now, and I've been too busy lately to look after you properly. You're--you're--just disgraceful, Major!"

"All ashore!" called a loud voice.

The Major gathered Patsy into an embrace that threatened to crush her, and then tossed her into Uncle John's arms and hurried away. Mrs. Merrick followed, with good wishes for all for a pleasant journey; and then the four voyagers pressed to the rail and waved their handkerchiefs frantically to those upon the dock while the band played vociferously and the sailors ran here and there in sudden excitement and the great ship left her moorings and moved with proud deliberation down the bay to begin her long voyage to Gibraltar and the blue waters of the Mediterranean.