



The ISLAND of
APPLEDORE

CORNELIA MEIGS



THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY

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CHAPTER I

Peering Eyes

TWO BIG WILLOW TREES GUARDED the entrance to Captain Saulsby's place, willow trees with such huge, rough trunks and such thick, gnarled branches that they might almost have been oaks. For fifty years they had bent and rocked before the furious winter storms, had bowed their heads to the showers of salt spray, and had trembled under the shock of the thundering surf that often broke on the rocks below them. They had seen tempests and wrecks and thrilling rescues upon that stretch of the sea across which they had looked so long; they had battled with winds that had been too much for more than one of the ships flying for shelter to the harbor of Appledore. It was no wonder that they showed the stress of time.

Billy Wentworth stood hesitating at the gap in the wall, looked up at the swaying, pale-green branches above him and down at the green and white surf rolling in on the shore below, sniffed at the keen salt breeze, and tried to tell himself that he did not like it. He was so thoroughly angry and discontented that he could see nothing pleasant in the sunny stretch of open

water, the glitter of the tossing whitecaps, and the line of breaking waves about the lighthouse a mile away.

“To spend the summer on a little two-by-four island with an old maid aunt,” was his bitter reflection, “to have nothing on earth to do and no one to do it with—it’s just too hard. I won’t stand it long.”

He stumped the toes of his boots in the dust of the narrow path with as much obstinate sulkiness as though he were six years old instead of sixteen. Perhaps it made him even more angry than he was before to discover that, in spite of what he had been thinking, he had stood staring for some minutes at the big, curling waves as they rolled in, receded, and came foaming up among the rocks again. Indeed, he had been watching with such fascination that he could scarcely tear his eyes away. He had seen the Atlantic Ocean for the first time in his life only a few hours ago, and he was still trying, with some success, to convince himself that he did not like it and never would.

He strolled aimlessly along the path which he had been told led to “Cap’n Saulsby’s little house down on the point.” There was a vague desire in his mind to look upon a live sea captain since he had never seen one before. The feeling was not strong, only just enough to bring him along the shore road and through the willow-guarded gateway. He had no thought, as he walked slowly between the two big trees, that they marked the door to a new phase in his life, that they were to prove the entrance to adventures and perils of an unknown kind. He merely trudged along, frowning at the sun that shone too brightly on the dazzling blue water and at the wind that blew too sharply in his face.

Somebody was walking up the path before him, so he slackened his pace a little, having no wish to overtake him. As far as he could judge, it was a boy of about twenty-one or so, very fair-haired, with broad shoulders and well-shaped hands hanging from sleeves a trifle too short. He carried a bag of tools

and was whistling gaily some intricate tune of trills and runs as he walked along. As he turned to look out to sea, Billy saw that he had a pleasant face, cheerful, intelligent, and rather sensitive. He stood for a minute, though without seeing Billy, then walked on again, swinging his bag and piping his music in the very best of spirits.

A bobolink was swinging on the branch of a bush that leaned over the wall. The gay black-and-white fellow was a new bird to Billy, so he stopped to look at it more closely. Certainly, it was the bird that caught his attention and not the unaccountable rustle that he heard immediately after, for that sound he might never have noticed save for the strange thing that followed.

For the rustle was repeated; then a hand rose over the wall, slipped across one of the big lichen-covered rocks, and rapped upon it sharply with something metallic. The boy ahead of him stopped dead, hesitated a second, then turned slowly toward the sound. Billy could see now that there was a man there behind the wall, crouching among the bushes, someone rather small, narrow-shouldered, and with stiff black hair. He seemed to be peering intently at the boy on the path but did not move or speak. The boy, also, said nothing but presently went upon his way again, swinging his bag and once more trying to whistle. But such a trembling, broken tune as came forth in place of the former cheerful music! The lad looked back once but was gazing so eagerly at the wall that he did not notice Billy at all. He showed a face turned suddenly gray-white with terror, drawn, haggard, and anxious. It was plainly visible that his knees shook under him as he tried to stride onward at his former gait and that it was because of the trembling of his hands that his bag of tools dropped twice upon the grass.

What could have been in that man's face that had alarmed him so? The boy looked like a vigorous, spirited sort of person, Billy thought, one that it might be nice to know and be friends

with, not a coward. The mild interest that had brought him through the gate now gave place to extreme curiosity as he hurried up the path.

Around the curve of a low knoll, Captain Saulsby's house came into view. It was an oddly-shaped little dwelling, so surrounded with trees and bushes that there was not much to be seen of it except bits here and there: a peering chimney, patches of a red-stained roof, a portion of gray wall, and the front door painted a bright, cheerful blue. Sloping away to the rocky point lay Captain Saulsby's garden, with its rows of vegetables and shrubs and flowers. Captain Saulsby himself was sitting in an armchair on the wide, stone doorstep, but alas, he did not look in the least as Billy had expected.

He had pictured old sailors as being white-haired, but sturdy and upright, dressed in blue clothes, and moving with a rolling walk or sitting to stare out to sea through a brass telescope. Captain Saulsby's hair was not exactly white; it was indeed no particular color on Earth. He wore shabby overalls a world too big even for his vast figure, and he had carpet slippers instead of picturesque sea boots. Yet the flavor of the sea somehow clung to him after all, brought out, perhaps, by the texture of his face, which was red and weather-beaten, with the skin wrinkled and thickened to the consistency of alligator leather and by his huge rough hands that resembled nothing so much as the gnarled and stunted willow trees at his gate.

Instead of grasping a telescope, he was holding a bright blue sock which he was mending as deftly as though well used to the task. The darning needle seemed lost between his big fingers, but it went in and out with great speed, pushed by a sailor's palm instead of a thimble. That, Billy thought disappointedly, was the only really nautical thing about him.

"Good afternoon, Johann Happs," the Captain called cheerily as the first of his visitors came near. Then peering

over his spectacles at Billy, he added, "Who is that behind you?"

The boy whom he called Johann wheeled suddenly and turned upon Billy a look that he could never forget. Terror, desperation, and defiance all were written on his unhappy face and in his startled eyes. When he saw, however, that it was not the black-haired man who had peered over the wall, but only a boy from the summer colony at the hotel, his evident bewilderment and relief might have been almost ridiculous had they not been pathetic. He laughed shakily and turned to the Captain.

"I do not know who it is," he said. "Perhaps someone to buy strawberries."

"You're Miss Mattie Pearson's nephew, now I'll be bound," remarked the old man, surveying Billy carefully from head to foot as he came closer. "She told me all about you, where you had meant to go this summer, and how you came here instead and maybe weren't going to like us here on Appledore Island. Johann, look at that frown on his face; I don't think he has sized us up very fair so far, do you? Well, he'll learn, he'll learn!"

Billy frowned more deeply than ever, partly because he had no taste for being made sport of by a stranger and partly because the memory of his recent disappointments came back to him with a fresh pang. His plan for this summer had been to camp out in the Rockies; to climb mountains; to ride horseback; to fish in the roaring, ice-cold little trout streams; and to shoot grouse when the season came around. His father and mother had promised him just such a program; they were all three to carry it out together, being the three most congenial camping comrades that ever lived. However, sudden developments of business, due to the war in Europe and the necessity of turning in other directions for trade, had called his father to South America at just the season when Billy could not leave school to go also. It was during the Easter vacation

that he had traveled from his school in the Middle West to New York, to see his father and mother off on their long voyage; then he had gone back unwillingly to face continuous days of missing them and of rebelling vainly against the destruction of his hopes for the summer.

When Miss Mattie Pearson, his mother's sister, had invited her reluctant nephew to stay at Appledore, she must have realized that the resources of the hotel and the little fishing village that the island boasted would scarcely be sufficient to satisfy him. She seemed to have been thinking of Captain Saulsby even when she wrote her first letter, for she had said, "I hope you will find one companion, at least, who will interest you." She had a great affection for the queer, gruff, bent old sailor and must have felt that he and the boy were bound to become friends. And now Billy, standing before the Captain himself, shifting uneasily from foot to foot and looking into those small, twinkling blue eyes, was beginning, much to his surprise, to feel the same thing.

"There are some strawberries down yonder in the best patch that I have been saving for your aunt," the old man went on. "I'm glad you came along, for this isn't one of my spry days, and I couldn't carry them up to the hotel myself. I have been expecting Jacky Shute to take them, but the young monkey hasn't turned up. You didn't see him, did you, Johann, as you came along?"

"No," replied Johann hastily, much too hastily, Billy thought. "I saw no one, not anyone at all."

Billy looked at him in amazement. He did not seem at all like the kind of person who could tell such a lie. Nor did he appear to enjoy telling it, for he stammered, turned red, picked up his bag of tools, and set them down again.

"I will go in and mend the clock now if you don't mind, Captain Saulsby," he said, perhaps in the desire to escape further questioning.

“Go right in and do anything you like to it,” the old man returned, “and meanwhile this young fellow and I will go down and get the berries. Just reach me that basket of boxes, will you, and give me a hand up out of this chair, and we’ll be off. The clock is ticking away as steadily as old Father Time himself, but I suppose you will find some tinkering to do.”

He took up the heavy wooden stick that leaned against his chair. It looked as rough and knobby and weatherworn as himself. With Johann’s help, he rose slowly from his seat, making Billy quite gasp at the full sight of how big he was. Yet he would have been much bigger could he have stood upright, for he was bent and twisted with rheumatism in every possible way: his shoulders bowed, his back crooked, his knees and elbows warped quite out of their natural shape. He wrinkled his forehead under the stress of evident pain and breathed very hard as he stumped down the path, but for a few moments, he said nothing.

“Kind of catches me a little when I first get up,” he remarked cheerfully at last. “There have been three days of fog, and that’s always bad for a man as full of rheumatics as I am. I hope you won’t mind very much about gathering the berries yourself. I—I—” his face twisted with real agony as he stumbled over a stone. “I find it takes me a pretty long time to stoop my old back over the rows, and some folks would rather not wait.”

“Indeed, I don’t mind,” replied Billy with cordial agreement to the plan. He had no reluctance in owing to himself that, however discontented he was with things in general, here was one person at least whom he was going to like.

“Now,” said Captain Saulsby as they reached the strawberry patch at the foot of the garden, “eat as many as you can, and fill the boxes as full as you can carry them away. That is what berries are made for, so go to it.”

This invitation was not difficult to accept. The berries were

big and ripe and sweet and warm with the warmth of the pleasant June day. It was still and hot there in the sun, with no sound except the booming of the surf along the shore and the shrill call of a katydid in the hedge at Billy's elbow.

The glittering sea stretched out on each side of them, for Captain Saulsby's garden lay along the point that formed the northernmost end of Appledore Island. A coasting schooner, her decks piled high with new, yellow lumber, came beating into the wind on one side of the rocky headland, finally doubled it and, spreading her sails wing-and-wing, went skimming away before the breeze. Billy, whose whole knowledge of boats included only canoes and square, splashing Mississippi River steamers, sat back on his heels watching, open-mouthed, as the graceful craft sped off as easily as a big bird.

"Say, young fellow, your aunt will be waiting a long time for those berries," was Captain Saulsby's drawling reminder that brought him back to his senses. He blushed, recollected quickly that he was the boy who disliked the Island of Appledore and everything belonging to it, and fell to picking strawberries again with his back to the schooner. The little katydid began to sing again.

"That's a queer fellow, that Johann Happs," the old sailor remarked reflectively as he sat watching Billy's vigorous industry. "He is a German; at least his father was, although Johann was born in this country and is as American as any one of us. He is as honest and straightforward a boy as I have ever known and has been a friend of mine as long as I have lived here. But there is something wrong with him lately that he is keeping from me. I wish I could manage to guess what it is."

"Did you say he mends clocks for a living?" Billy asked. He decided that he would not betray Johann's secret, little as he knew of it, and much as he desired to learn more.

"No, clock mending is his recreation, not his business. He is a mechanic, and a good faithful worker, but when he wants

to be really happy, he just gets hold of a bunch of old rusty wheels and weights that haven't run for twenty years and works at them by the hour. To see him tinkering would show you where his real genius is. He gave me a clock that belonged to his father, a queer old thing with gold roses on the face and with wooden wheels, but it runs like a millionaire's watch. He comes around once every so often to see if it is doing its duty, and he has six fits if it has lost a second in a couple of weeks. He's a queer fellow."

"Then he isn't a fisherman," commented Billy. "I thought that everyone who lived on the island was that."

"Almost everyone is, except that boy and me," answered the Captain. "No, Johann isn't a fisherman, but you never saw anyone in your life who can sail a boat the way he can. That's his little craft anchored off the point there; she's the very apple of his eye. Just see how he keeps her; I do believe he would give her a new coat of paint every week if he could afford it. He's surely proud of her! He was so happy with her a little while back that I can't understand what has come over him now."

He sat staring at the little boat until Billy finally filled his boxes and rose to his feet.

"I have picked all these for Aunt Mattie," he said, "and have eaten about twice as many besides. Now, won't you let me pick some for you?"

"Why that's good of you," returned the old man gratefully. "I won't deny that it is easier work sitting here and watching you gather them than to try to get the pesky things myself. I don't need any myself, but I did want to send some to Mrs. Shute, over beyond the creek. They are just right for putting up now and will be almost too ripe in another day. That rascal Jacky should have taken them, but there's no knowing where he is."

"I'll pick them and take them to her if you will tell me the way," Billy assured him. "Don't say no; I would really like to."

The boxes filled rapidly, to the accompaniment of much earnest talk between Billy and his new friend. He learned how little to be relied upon was Jacky Shute, the Captain's assistant gardener; what an unusual number of summer visitors on the island there were, owing to the war in Europe and the impossibility of people's going abroad; what a cold, windy spring it had been, very bad for vegetables and for the poppies that were the pride of Appledore gardens but—

“Great for sailing,” the old man concluded wistfully.

When the berries were ready, the Captain came with Billy to the edge of the garden to show him the way. Beyond the point, on its western shoreline, was a stretch of curving beach, cut into a deep harbor by the mouth of a little stream.

“You cross that meadow above the rocks,” the Captain directed, “and go straight on down to the creek. You will find a row of stepping stones that makes almost a bridge; the tide is nearly dead low, so it will certainly be uncovered, and you can cross without trouble. The stream is the mill creek, and that building you see on the other side, among the trees, is the old mill. You go up from the creek right past the mill door and follow the road that leads through the woods. The first lane that turns off from that will take you to the Shutes', so you see you can't miss the way. They have a nice girl, Sally Shute; I hope she'll be at home, for I know you'll like her. She is worth twenty of Jacky, that worthless young brother of hers.” He turned back to the garden. “Well, goodbye; I know you won't have any trouble getting there, but don't stay too long; the tide is pretty quick to cover the causeway over the creek, and then you would have to walk five miles around by the high road. I will see you when you come back, and I surely am obliged to you.”

Billy set off with his load of boxes under his arm, stepping carefully through the tall grass of the meadow where daisies nodded in white profusion and bayberries and brambles grew thickly along the stony edge of the field. He came presently

in sight of the stream and the bridge-like stepping stones, finding them, as Captain Saulsby had said, just uncovered by the dropping tide. One huge rock jutted far out into the water at the edge of the little harbor, and here he found himself tempted to stop a minute, staring at the foaming green water, then to climb down from ledge to ledge, and finally to seat himself just above where the surf was breaking.

How cool and deep the tumbling waves were, how they came rolling solemnly in, and then seemed to hesitate for one short second before they broke and sent spattering showers up to his very feet. He must go on, of course; it was really a shame to delay longer; he would just watch another breaker come in, and then another—and another, so that he might see again those shining rainbows that came and went in the sunlit spray.

He heard something scurry and scuttle across the rock nearby him and, as he looked over the edge, saw a slim, brown mink come out of a hole and stop to look up at him. It must have had a nest nearby, for it was fierce in its anger at his intrusion and seemed quite unafraid. Its wicked little eyes fairly snapped with rage, and it made a queer hissing sound as it tried, with tiny fury, to frighten him away. He laughed and turned to go, then started back suddenly as he spied a face peering out at him for a moment from behind the big, gray rock above him. It struck him, startled as he was, that the human face was something like the mink's: the same narrow cruel jaw, the same retreating forehead, the little beady black eyes and stiff black hair. With a great effort, although his heart hammered at his ribs and his knees shook a little, if the truth must be told, he climbed up to the jutting rock and looked behind it. There was no one there. He drew a sigh of relief at the thought that he must have been mistaken, then checked it sharply when he saw a black shadow, thin, lithe, and quickly-moving, slip across the surface of the rocks and vanish.

The ISLAND of APPLEDORE



When sixteen-year-old Billy Wentworth is forced to spend the summer with his aunt on the tiny island of Appledore off the New England coast, he is determined to hate the place. But a salty old sea captain and a cheerful young girl quickly befriend him, and soon the three are caught in the middle of a dangerous plot. With a cunning and ruthless enemy lurking close by, Billy must gather all his courage to save his friends and defend his country from a war that's drawing ever nearer.



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