

SWEET ROCKET

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Sweet Rocket by Mary Johnston

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MARY JOHNSTON

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BOOKS BY
MARY JOHNSTON

SWEET ROCKET
MICHAEL FORTH
FOES
SIR MORTIMER

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SWEET ROCKET

by

MARY JOHNSTON

AUTHOR OF

"SIR MORTIMER" "MICHAEL FORTH"
"TO HAVE AND TO HOLD" "FOES" ETC.



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I

THE woman driving turned the phaeton from the highway into a narrow road. Almost immediately the forest through which they had been passing for a mile or more deepened. It was now a rich woodland, little cut, seldom touched by fire. Apparently the road knew little use. Narrow and in part grass-grown, soft from yesterday's rain, dimmed by many trees, now it bent and now it ran straight, a dun streak, cut always in front by that ancient, exquisite screen of bough and leaf. The highway dropped out of sight and mind. The woman to whom this countryside was new, sitting beside the woman driving, drew a breath of pleasure. "Oh, smell it! It goes over you like balm!"

"It washes the travel stains away. Take off your hat."

The other obeyed, turning and placing it upon the back seat beside a large and a small traveling bag. She drew off her gloves, too, then, straight-

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ening herself, sighed again with happiness. "How deep it goes . . . and quiet! It's thousands of miles away!"

"Hundreds of thousands, and right at hand!"

Leaves were beginning to turn. Maples had lighted fires, hickories were making gold, dogwood and sumac dyeing with crimson. Ironweed, yet blooming, blotched the roadside with purple. Joe-pye lifted heads of ashy pink, goldenrod started forth, in places farewell-summer made a low mist of lilac. The road dipped into a dell. The gray horse, the phaeton, crossed a brown streamlet, sliding, murmuring. Mint filled the air. The road lifted and ran on again into mystery. Blackbirds flew across, a woodpecker tapped and tapped, a squirrel ran up an oak. But for all of faint, stealthy rustle, perpetual low sound and small movements without end, deep, deep, deep rest was the note. Rest and solitude.

The old, strong, gray horse was named Daniel. This was his road since he was a colt. Sometimes he might find upon it Whitefoot and Bess, the farm horses, drawing the farm wagon, but oftenest it was solitary like this—his road—Sweet Rocket road. The phaeton moving its wheels rolled it, droned it forth—"Sweet Rocket road—Sweet Rocket road."

"There are five miles of it," said Marget. Her tone added, "I love it—its solitariness, its ownness!"

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"It's miraculously beautiful," answered her companion. "It aches, it is so beautiful!"

"Sweet Rocket road—Sweet Rocket road," said the wheels. "Way to Sweet Rocket—way to Sweet Rocket."

"It is straight and single-minded as an arrow. No one goes but one who wishes to travel to Sweet Rocket. It is our road in and our road out. There seems to be no other."

"Seems'?"

"I mean that it is the only road made with spade and pick."

They traveled again in silence. The visitor sat, a small, elderly woman, with a thin, strong, intelligent face. Something about her, alike of strength and of limitation, said, "Teacher for long years." She sat with her hands in her lap, looking at that truly beautiful road and the forest walls. But at last with a sigh of appreciation she turned to talk. "Twenty years and more since we last met! But you keep young, Marget. I had no difficulty in picking you out of the station crowd."

"Nor I you, dear Miss Darcy! But then I've always kept you in mind and heart. I owe you so much!"

"Ah, Marget, not much!"

"I owe you learning. It is a good deal to take a country girl, charge scarcely anything for her and see that she gets knowledge and learns how to get more—and more—"

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"You are of those who reward teaching. Don't let us talk about that which was neither load nor task and so is no debt. The 'now' interests me. You look well. Your face is a rose under clear brown."

"I am well."

"And happy?"

"Yes, happy."

"I know that you couldn't be happy unless you were helping."

"I don't know how much I help. I help some."

"You were never given to long letters. There really is much that I don't at all know about you! And such as they are, I have had very few letters of late years. It was the sheerest accident my finding out that this was your part of the country. I might have gone to the Conference and never known that you were not twenty miles away!"

"The day before I had your card I knew that something pleasant was going to happen."

"Well, tell me what you do—"

Marget Land looked over Daniel's ears, down the vista of the road. At this point hemlocks grew to either hand, cones of a green that was almost black. Between rose sycamores with pale arms and leaves like silky brown hair. At the road edge the farewell-summer made a lace-work, and above it glowed the sumac torches. Blue sky roofed the autumn earth. The air