

# The Inglenook

## The Test of Barbara.

"But, Rick, I am depending on you to help me entertain her."

Little Mrs. Prentiss's voice had a reproachful cadence. She looked up gravely at the tall son beside her.

"Oh, of course, Mother, you're in the scrape and I shall help you out, somehow," he said, a little impatiently.

"Rick, you grieve me. It is no 'scrape,' at all. I invited Barbara Owen, my old classmate's daughter, to come to spend a month with me—with us. I invited her because I wanted her to come. If my big college boy is inclined to consider it a bore, perhaps he would better go down to Fred Billingham's for that visit with him."

"To bore Fred's sister!" laughed Rick, his good nature quite restored. He picked up the tiny woman and dropped her gently into the biggest easy-chair in the room, and seated himself on one of its broad arms.

"Little Mother Mary, you are the only girl I care about 'helping entertain!'" he cried. "Now, I'd take you a-fishing quickly enough. Wouldn't I? You wouldn't grab your skirts and squeal when I landed a fine pickerel, or say 'Take it away! Take it away!' if I brought in a splendid fat crab. She will, I know. She'll tip the boat over, probably, and then hang around my neck when I try to swim her ashore. That's the programme for city girls, when they go a-fishing."

The little mother laughed. Her sweet, clear voice rose out of the depths of the easy-chair and fell into line with the boy's booming bass.

"Try her and see, Big Boy!" she said. "You don't know the stuff girls are made of!"

"Made of. Sugar and spice and all things nice." That's what girls are 'made of—made of,'" Rick chanted, but his mother did not notice his raillery. She was looking away, out of the window, with the look in her face that came into it when she was thinking of the little girl who had never grown up. Rick checked his fun when he saw that look. He leaped his big length down to kiss her quietly.

The tea bell's tinkle sounded then and nothing more was said about the expected guest. She came a day earlier than Mrs. Prentiss had thought, and Rick was not at home when she tripped up the front walk, between the nodding poppies. She was a slender slip of a girl, with irregular, dark features and an independent air that sat becomingly upon her. Her laugh—Rick heard her laugh before he saw her face—was as merry as a wedding bell.

"But she'll squeal! you'll see, Mother Mary—when I pull the six pounders in," he said, at their "confidence meeting" that night. "She's real nice and jolly, I guess, but she'll squeal. I'll tell you about it to-morrow night, ma'am."

"To-morrow? Are you going fishing so soon, Richard?" laughed Mrs. Prentiss.

"Soon! Call that soon? Why, I might have gone this afternoon! Didn't I tell you I'd help you entertain her?"

To entertain was to fish, according to Rick's way of thinking.

Up in her dainty room, that same night, Barbara Owen took her little diary out of her trunk and sat down to "talk" in it. Her sweet face was an odd mixture of dismay and relish.

"There's a Big Boy here—very tall, very college-y, very—I was going to say nice but I guess I'll wait and see. He's going to entertain me—I see it in his eye!"

She shook her fountain pen energetically to make the ink run smoother, and then wrote on:

"The good fates deliver me, he's going to take

me out on the river fishing! He'll pull in a great slippery, floppy fish and I shall squeal, I know I shall. Who wouldn't?"

Crooked River ran, rippling like a brook, between willow banks. It was thick with tall sedges and rank waterweeds, where Rick knew the crabs were. He poled out to the "grounds" with great sturdy sweeps of his arms that sent the slender boat jauntily ahead. In his naughty soul the boy had laid a little trap for Barbara—to test her "courage," as he called it.

"A big, fat crab, sidling and wriggling along," he chuckled inwardly. "The crabs in Crooked River are beauties! Wait till I land the prince of 'em at her feet, then, if she doesn't squeal, I am a freshman!"

It was pleasant gliding over the sunny water. Barbara dabbled her little, white fingers in it, and hummed softly in pure contentment.

"It's almost a pity to disturb them, isn't it?" she said suddenly, aloud.

"Beg pardon—disturb what?" Rick said, over his shoulder, his big, sinewy frame swinging steadily forward and backward with the boat.

"The fish, you know. They must be having such a cool, moist time down there, unmolested. Now, if we were fish—you and I—would we care to be disturbed? The Golden Rule says—"

"Sh, I see one! He's a Jack Dandy! Please don't breathe! I'm going for him."

The boat came to rest promptly and Rick Prentiss peered into the clear water intently, net in hand. Barbara's eyes were fixed on the rim of willow trees on the farther bank. She had no interest in the fishing.

"Ship ahoy—he's coming!" shouted Rick, excitedly. "He was napping and I scooped him in before he knew it! He's a regular dandy."

The big, ungainly crab wriggled in the bottom of the boat in indignant revolt. Barbara gathered her skirts together and screamed shrilly.

"Take him away!—take him away, if you please!" she cried. "He's so terribly lively—he's so squirmy—I'd a good deal rather get out and walk."

"What'd I tell you, Mother Mary?" thought Rick, triumphantly, upon the success of his naughty little scheme.

The boat lurched tipsily as Barbara and the big crab writhed in it. Rick took out his knife to end the creature's struggles. The real distress in Barbara's white face moved him.

A minute later his own face was white. The crab's movements had sent his knife sideways, and the bright, red blood was spurting from his wrist. He hid it with his other hand and sank down dizzily in the boat.

"I—was going to—kill it," he muttered, watching the red stream steal out from under his hand and trickle down his sleeve. Barbara's startled gaze saw it, too.

"Oh! you are hurt—that is blood on your arm," she cried quickly. "Please take your hand away."

But the big boy was beyond answering. His white face, whiter still, had tilted backward, and lay across the gunwale. He had fainted at the sight of the spurting red stream.

"Oh!" breathed poor Barbara, in a little gasp of distress. She crept along over the sidling crab to Rick. Then she knew what had happened.

"He has cut an artery—he will bleed to death!" she groaned.

The slender boat rocked gently among the sedge grasses, and the lapping of the water made soft music against its keel. The rim of willows on the shore was half a mile away.

Rick lay inert and white, while, spurt by spurt the bright blood flowed from his wrist. It was an appalling situation for a girl of seventeen, but Barbara Owen was equal to it. She set her lips together rigidly and began her work.

"First a tourniquet," she whispered as if she were saying a lesson by rote. She caught her handkerchief and wound it tightly—above the wound, twisting with all her strength. Her eyes were seeking the distant shore. How was she to get there? It was so necessary to hold the bandage tight. The big boy's life, perhaps, depended on it—and there was the big boy's mother.

All the time she was working. She dashed handfuls of the cool river water into Rick's face and then caught up the net. The handle she twisted into her handkerchief and then braced it firmly against one of the seats, holding it with her knee. It was a strange tourniquet, but it bound the boy's arm tightly. Barbara's knee did not tremble.

"Now I'll pole ashore—that is, I'll try," she murmured, reaching carefully for the pole.

Her position was very painful. How far it was! The little boat seemed scarcely to move under her awkward pushes. She had never managed a boat before.

"Dear Lord in heaven, help me!" she prayed.

Rick came slowly back to consciousness, but he lay still in a kind of daze, regarding her curiously. The bandage above his wrist seemed to interest him as if it were on somebody else's arm. He wondered at it and at the pale girl standing somewhere—a good way off—above him, and swaying back and forth. What was she doing? Who was she? Not the girl who was a coward—no, no! He thought he could tell by her eyes that this girl was brave. She seemed to be doing something brave then, but he could not tell exactly what it was—some time he would know.

Gradually his mind cleared, and he tried to sit up.

"No, no, don't!" Barbara cried. "Don't you remembered, you fainted? You were such a long time coming to—now you must stay 'to!' I am the nurse and the cap'n of this craft, both."

She was smiling reassuringly, though her lips were white. She plied her heavy pole unsteadily, and the boat crept shoreward by inches.

"Lie still!—Cap'n's orders; also head nurse's. When you get strong enough I want you to hold this bandage, so I can stand up straight. Then we'll spin! This is only creeping. Lie still, sir! I tell you you've cut an artery. Do you want to bleed to death?"

He was struggling to get up. It was necessary to frighten him.

"Ah, the blood!" shuddered Rick. "That was the trouble, confound it! I never could stand the sight of it. Talk about cowards!"

"Oh, no, don't!" laughed the girl, unsteadily. "You might get personal. Some people are afraid of—of—well, crabs, we'll say."

"Don't!" groaned Rick, the color surging back to his white face for an instant.

He was able to hold the bandage, after a little, and then Barbara straightened her aching back and poled to shore. Something red on her sleeve twisted and moved as her arm swayed back and forth. It was a splash of blood—two splashes, one on the other. When her arm stopped from sheer necessity to rest, Rick saw that the red marks crossed each other quite regularly.

"You are my Red Cross nurse, Cap'n," he said gently, and an under-note of reverence was in the boy's voice. He had found what brave thing this girl was doing.

The willow rim, at last! Barbara let her pole fall and stumbled wearily to the shore. She was faint herself, but fought against it fiercely. So much was still to be done.

"You are to sit under that willow tree and wait while I run across fields to that house and send for a doctor," she commanded. "Cap'n's orders and—the Red Cross nurse's. Mind, too, you are to hold that handkerchief tight—tight—tight! Good-by."

Late that evening the big boy's mother sat beside