

**MARY  
JOHNSTON**



**SWEET  
ROCKET**

**Mary Johnston**

# **Sweet Rocket**

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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, straightening 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!"

"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—"

"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 lacework, and above it glowed the sumac torches. Blue sky roofed the autumn earth. The air just flowed, neither hot nor cold, milk warm, happy. Summer and winter had made a bargain, struck a compromise, achieved a diagonal. Gold autumn, crimson autumn, violet autumn, dusky and tawny autumn—autumn balm—autumn drawn up into a gracious figure—Keats's autumn—a goddess!

She drew a light, sighing breath. "I told you that I was happy.... Isn't it strange—living? Isn't it strange and sweet the way things come about? There's magic, all right! Sweet Rocket.... I was born in the overseer's house at Sweet Rocket. That was ten years after the war and there wasn't much nor many for my father to oversee. I love my father. He was what the mountain folk call 'a getter-on.' He had ability and a lot of goodness and a lot of kindness. Education from books had not come his way, but he knew many things. He had worked hard and saved, and after the war, when he gave up overseeing, or it gave him up, and when he turned merchant in Alder, over there, he made money—as we looked at it in Virginia in those days. Some money, that is. He had ten thousand dollars in bank when old Major Linden died, and Mary Linden married and went away, and Sweet Rocket was sold for debt. He bought it—though he kept a steady face, he was so proud to buy it! I was nine years old when we moved out of the overseer's house into the big house—my mother, my father, my two brothers, and I. I loved it, loved it, loved it—love it, love it, love it!"

"I remember the very way in which you used to say it, 'Sweet Rocket!'"

"We became at once land poor. And my father had an illness, and, though he seemed to recover, never did quite recover. When it came to choosing and bargaining, making and laying by, he was never again the man he had been. My mother, too, who had worked so hard when she was young—too hard—began to fail. Will, my elder brother, went West. Edgar, the younger, wanted to go, too. He did not like it here. You see ... every one still said: 'The old overseer bought it. They were all born in the overseer's house. Now they rattle around in the Lindens' house! Bottom rail—!' It was still called 'the Linden place.' As I grew old enough to have cared for what they said I somehow escaped caring. But Edgar cared. It was hard on the boy.... But I loved Sweet Rocket, loved it, love it! I love the overseer's house and the big house—which isn't, of course, very big, for the place was always a simple one—simple and still and out of the way!"

She seemed to pause somewhat deeply to vision something within. Miss Darcy watched the moving walls, now standing close, now a little receding, now opening as it were into gateways through which were seen forest lawns and aisles. They shut in again. A golden bough brushed the phaeton. She who had been speaking put out her hand and touched it. "How could one help but love it? To me it is forever so old and forever so new! I lock with it.... What was I saying? Well, Edgar did not like it, and my mother failed, and father had less money and less money—and still we went on ... five years, eight years, ten years. Then in one year my father died and my mother died.... Will came home.



He and Edgar said that we must sell Sweet Rocket. I wasn't eighteen. We knew about the mortgage, but we didn't know about some other debts. When it was sold there was hardly anything to divide among us—"

"The Lindens didn't buy it back, then?"

"No, not then. Northern people bought it. Will went back to Wyoming, and Edgar with him. I went to my mother's sister—Aunt Hester—who lived in Richmond. I went to her with my two hundred and fifty dollars a year. She's one of the best of women. I never had anything but kindness from her—and one of the greatest was when she spoke of me to you!"

She put her hand over Miss Darcy's hand. "I had been to school a little, of course. There were some books at home, and I had borrowed where I could. But in Richmond, to you, I really began to go to school."

"You studied as very few study, Marget. You studied as though waves of things were coming happily back into memory."

"Yes. But you released something. Always fire is lit from fire. Always one comes to any that sit in darkness.... Well, I went to school for three years. Then off you go from that school to Canada, to England, to I don't know where! I stayed in Richmond and went to a business school. I learned typewriting and stenography. I began to earn my living."

"You were with Baker and Owen?"

"Yes. And then I passed into library work. I went to Washington. I was in the library there for five years. I saved. I wrote a few papers that were published. I took what they brought me and what I had saved, and I left the library and I

went around the world, second class and third class—and at times fourth—and I learned and enjoyed. I taught English here and there, and so I paid as I went. I came back in four years—back to Richmond and Aunt Hester, until I might look about me and see what I could do, for I must earn."

"If you had written to me then in New York—"

"I felt that. But there is something—don't you know there is something?—that guides us.... I lay one night thinking of Sweet Rocket. I could always come back here, just as really—come back from the ends of the earth! I came back often. There has always been, along the garden wall, sweet rocket—dame's violet, you know. Some of it is white and some is purple—shining clusters growing above your waist. I could gather them in my arms and feel them against my cheek. I could get *into* the dark cedars that come up from the river. I lay in Richmond, more than half feeling, more than half seeing.... There's a country, you know, out of which things come down to you.... It came down—knowledge! I meant to go back to Sweet Rocket."

She paused. "Look at that tree—"

"It is so splendid! A sugar maple, isn't it? And that one?"

"Mountain linden. It puts on a clear, pale gold, like the old saints' haloes."

"I hear water."

"It is the little stream that we cross. See how sweet and clear and sounding it goes! Hemlock Run. All right, Daniel!"

Daniel bent mouth to water and drank.

"No check rein?"

"No."

Gray horse and old phaeton moved again. The wood grew richer and deeper. "We are nearing the river."

"And then, in Richmond, you heard about Sweet Rocket?"

"Aunt Hester had a letter from Alder. Richard Linden, old Major Linden's nephew, had bought Sweet Rocket. I was glad that some one who must love it was there. Aunt Hester said that he had visited it once or twice as a young boy. He would remember it then as I remembered it. The second letter said that he was almost blind, and alone on the place save for the colored people. Then I saw his advertisement in the Richmond papers. He wanted a secretary, one who could read aloud well. So I answered, and was taken—five years ago."

"How old a man is he?"

"He is forty-seven and I am forty-four."

"You have inner youth—higher youth."

"Yes. Childhood there. So has he."

"Do you love him, Marget?"

"Love him? Yes! But not the once-time way, if that is what you mean. As he loves me, but not the once-time way. So we shall not marry, in the once-time way. But we live here together all the same."

"Well, if it is as fair as this road—"

"It is just a simple house in the bent arm of a little river and with hills all around, and behind the hills, mountains. There are fields and an orchard and garden. It is hidden like a lost place, and happy like a place for evermore finding itself."

"Tell me about Mr. Linden."

"No, let us wait for that. Or I can tell outward things—how we live?"

"Yes."

"He has only a small, fixed income. It wouldn't at all go round the year, so we farm. We have an excellent man, Roger Carter, who lives in the overseer's house. Wheat, corn, buckwheat, hay, and apples! So we live and can buy—though with an elegant spareness—books and red-seal Victor records and more and more flowers for the flower garden."

"Of course you have help about the house?"

"There are two colored men and a boy, and Mimy the cook and Zinia the housemaid. But with the home garden and cornfield and orchard and the two cows and the chickens and ducks and Daniel and Whitefoot and Bess there is more than enough to do. You will be surprised to see how much he does himself."

"How can he see?"

"He can tell light from darkness, and the dim mass of things. And then, when you are blind, you grow so skillful with the other senses! And of course in a measure all of us are eyes to him. He has a great, strong body. He hoes and digs. He knows always what is beneath his fingers. He can weed a garden as well as I can. He gathers fruit and berries and vegetables and knows the perfect from the imperfect. He does no end of things. Perhaps he may work with his hands four hours a day."

"And then?"

"There are letters. I write them, and I keep his accounts, and, of course, the house. Then we read. It is a sandwiched

business, but we must average three hours a day with books. He gets up very early and walks before breakfast, and usually again in the afternoon. Sometimes I drive him on this road. Sometimes I walk with him, sometimes he goes alone. After supper we read, or listen to the Victor singing and playing, or we talk, or sit by the fire, still and thinking. Or on the porch steps when weather is warm, where I can see and he can image the stars."

"I see a good life."

"We are not without neighbors, though it seems so lonely. And then folk come to us. His blindness was an accident, you know. He has had life in the world as I have had life in the world. We *have* life in the world."

"He is one, then, that may be loved?"

"He is a great poet, though he would never call himself so. He just feels and acts so.... I think his face is beautiful."

"I think that your face is beautiful," thought Miss Darcy.

The tawny road turned a little east. Trees yet green, trees that wore the one color the year round, blended with golden trees and scarlet trees. Wild grapes with twisted and shaggy stems and yellowing leaves, with blue grapes hanging over, ran and mounted, held by the forest arms up to the sun. Sumac that was somehow like the Indian, that seemed to hold memories of the Indian in the land, grew in each minute clearing. There arose a little, rustling wind, the ineffable blue air moving lightly. Brown butterflies abounded. The sense grew strong of remoteness, of calm that was not indolence, of beauty gathered and at home.

Miss Darcy moved a little. Marget Land turned toward her. "You feel it, don't you?"

"Yes."

"They that come feel it. They are drawn. There are centers of integration. This is one. I do not know who started it. Probably many, working in at different times. But now it is in action."

"Is that mysticism?"

"No. It is fact."

The forest stopped with clean decision. The road ran through fields where the corn had been cut and shocked. The shocks stood in rows like brown wigwams. Daniel and the phaeton came down to a little river, very clear, falling and murmuring over stones above and below a ford, but at the ford a mirror, reflecting autumn hills and heaven. Across the ford stretched a little pebbly beach, crowned with trees and grass, and behind the trees stood a brick house, old-red, not so large as large houses go, but of excellent line. It had a porch with Doric pillars, weather-softened. It stood among fine trees in a small valley shut in on all sides by hills and mountains, all forested to the top. Only the road and the river seemed to have way out and in, only road and river and air and birds. Valley and colored mountain walls were proportioned, modeled, tinted to some wide and deep artist's taste. The tone was rest without weakness, movement without fury, solitude that had all company.

"How could you help but love it!" said the visiting woman.

"I don't try to help it.... If it burned down—if the hills sank and the wood was destroyed—still it would endure, and still I could come here. Now we cross the river. Look at the bright stones and the minnows, gliding, darting!"

Up from the river, across the pebbly shore, rose cedars dark and tall. "They are like warders. Only there's nothing, really, to ward out. All things may meet here. We go this way, to the back of the house."

"It feels enchanted."

"It is so simple. You might call it meek. There are people who pass who say, 'How lonely!'"

They were now at the back of the house, where the road skirted the flower garden. Here was the back door, with three rounded, moss-grown steps of stone. Daniel and the phaeton stood still. The two women left the vehicle. A colored man appeared. "Miss Darcy, this is Mancy. Mancy, this is Miss Darcy, come to stay with us as long as she will."

Mancy, tall and spare, with an Indian great-grandmother, said that he was glad to see her, and took her bags. In the brick kitchen in the yard, Mimy was singing:

"Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Coming for to carry me home—"



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"I might stay a week." Anna Darcy spoke to herself, standing at the window of the room where Marget had left her. She looked down upon flowers and out to the southern wall that closed in the valley. The mountains had the tints of desert sands at sunset. They had long wave forms; they were not peaked, nor very high. They were so old, she knew—Appalachians—older than Apennine or Himalaya. They

were wearing down here, disintegrating. The weather would be lowering them year by year. They were removing and building elsewhere. They had granaries full of memories, and they must have somewhere, springing like the winter wheat, as many as the blades of wheat, anticipations. Down in the garden she saw marigolds and zinnias, late blooming pansies, mignonette, snapdragon and aster and heliotrope, larkspur, mourning bride, and citronalis. A rosy light bathed garden and fields. This was the back of the house. She saw two or three cabins and a barn, stacked hay, and a rail fence worn and lichened, fostering a growth of trumpet vine and traveler's joy. She heard cow bells. A boy with a good-natured ebony face crossed the path below, carrying two milk pails. Chickens, turkeys, and guineas walked about in the barnyard. From the kitchen, fifty feet from the house, floated a smell of coffee and of bread in the oven. All the place was clean, friendly.

She turned to the large, four-windowed room. The walls had a paper of lavender-gray, on which hung three prints. The bed was a four-poster, with a linen, ball-fringed valance. Books stood ranged above an ancient desk; a blue jug held asters. There was a large closet and—modern blessing—a bathroom, white tubbed, pleasant and light. It had been, she saw, an old dressing room between the two chambers upon this side of the hall, with a door for each. Both doors being ajar, she saw Marget's room, large like this one, furnished not unlike this one. But that, something told her, was really the spare room, and this that she was to dwell in was Marget's room. It had the feel of Marget. "It is the pleasantest, and so she has given it to me."