

Lady Betty Across the Water

By C. N. & A. M. WILLIAMSON

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Chapter 2



NLY ten days have passed, but I feel as if they were a hundred. I have lived so much I've heard people near me in deck chairs saying that this was a "dull voyage," but whatever else it has been for me it hasn't been dull.

In the first place, I've never been on the sea before, except crossing the channel, which doesn't count, of course. And now that I've been thrown with so many people—all sorts of people—I realize how few I have known in my life so far. If I had about twice as many fingers and toes as I have I believe I might tick off every human being I've ever met as actual acquaintances outside my own relations.

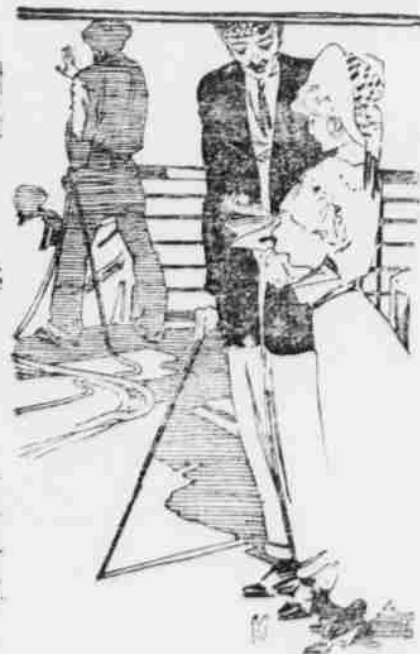
I've lived always at dear, beautiful old Battlemead. It seems doubly beautiful as I think of it now from far away, and till last year most of my time was spent in the schoolroom, or walking, or pottering about in a pony carriage with one of the governesses I used to drive to distraction. When we had house parties I was kept out of the way, as mother said it spoiled young girls to be taken notice of and I should have my fun later. When the others went up to town for the season, as they often did, I was left behind, and though Battlemead is within twenty-five miles of London I suppose I have not been there more than two dozen times in my life. When I did go it was generally for a concert or a matinee, and, of course, I enjoyed it immensely, but I don't know that it taught me much about life. And the one time I was taken abroad we had nothing to do with any one we met at hotels. Being on this big ship seemed at first exactly like being at a play when I had been brought in late and found it difficult to know which were the leading actors, which the villains and villainesses and what the plot was about.

Now, though, I've been through so many experiences I feel as if I were in the play myself, not watching it from outside.

Everything was very nice, though very strange, to begin with.

Dear old Stan came out of his shell and actually traveled all the way to Southampton to see me off, which was good of him, especially as Vic explained that he and Sally Woodburn had been thrown at each other's heads in vain.

He'd bought me a great box of sweets, a bunch of roses and several



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magazines, and just as we were starting he slipped something small but fat into my hand.

"That's to help you keep your end up, kid, in case you're imposed on," said Stan. "You're only a kid, you know, but all the same don't let them treat you like one, and if you get me hump over there just tell me. I'll see you through and boss you back again with my own best, mater or no mater, hanged if I do it."

Stan never made me such a long speech before, and after we sailed and I got time to look at the fat thing he'd put in my hand I found it was a lot of gold pieces bundled up in two ten-pound notes. The gold made twelve sovereigns more, so Stan had given me altogether more than thirty pounds. All that money, with the twenty pounds mother had told me to use only "when strictly necessary," made me feel a regular millionaire. I've never had a sixth part as much before in my life.

Stan's kindness was just like a cup of something warm and comforting when you're tired and cold, so that I began to like him up and feel happy.

I took our suit, with two staterooms, a bath and a dear little white and blue drawing room about as big as the old doll's house I inherited from Vic. I was thankful to find I was to chum with Miss Woodburn, not Mrs. Ess

Kay, for I never could have stood this. It was fun finding places to hang up our things when they were unpacked, and Mrs. Ess Kay's French maid Louise helped me get settled, paying me so many compliments on my hair and my eyes and my complexion that I grew quite confused, but perhaps that's a habit in which American ladies encourage their maids.

"But the marvel that is miladi's hair! It is of the color of gold and with a natural curl. It will be so great a joy if I may dress it. And her complexion! It is beyond that of any English demoiselle I have ever seen, yet all the world knows they are best on earth. With such eyes no doubt miladi can wear any color, and she has the figure for which the make of corsets is of no import."

If it had been in English I should have wanted to order her out of the room, but things like that don't sound so objectionable in French.

Miss Woodburn's and especially Mrs. Kay's clothes looked so exquisite that I was mortified to have Louise unpack mine, though I have had some of my smartest things, and Vic had two or three pretty blouses of hers altered in a great hurry, for me. Besides, mother said my outfit was quite good enough for a young girl in England and that I was not to let myself feel dissatisfied if in another country they chose to overdress.

Anyhow I will say for Mrs. Ess Kay that she didn't appear to be ashamed of me at first. On the contrary, she had a way of seeming to show me off, almost as if she thought I did her credit.

When we had unpacked we first went to luncheon and took the three seats which were vacant. But presently Mrs. Ess Kay sent for the chief steward or some one important. "I am Mrs. Stuyvesant-Knox," said she in a haughty voice, "and I have as my guest Lady Betty Bulkeley, daughter of the Duchess of Stanforth. You must give us three of the best seats at the captain's table."

I couldn't help hearing, and my ears did tingle, but Miss Woodburn only smiled and looked down, with a funny twinkle under her eyelashes, which curl up so much that it always seems as if she were just going to laugh.

I thought if I were the steward I would give us the worst seats on the ship to teach us not to be proud. But he didn't do anything of the sort. He was as meek as a lamb, so I'm sure he can't have any sense of humor. He said Mrs. Stuyvesant-Knox might count on him, and she and her party should have places on the captain's right hand.

Mrs. Ess Kay was as bad with the deck steward. She found that he hadn't put our chairs (which she had brought on board herself) in the right place, and she had him called up and made a great fuss. The cards of a Rev. Somebody, his wife and daughters were on chairs in the position which she had made up her mind to have, exactly amidship and on the shady side.

"I must have my chairs changed and put here," she said. And then—oh, horror!—I'm certain I caught her repeating the formula she'd used at luncheon. "I am Mrs. Stuyvesant-Knox, and I have as my guest," etc. To be sure, she had walked off to a little distance with the deck steward, where our chairs were, and I might have been mistaken, but two or three people who were standing near looked suddenly very hard at me, and I know I turned scarlet with annoyance, to be labeled in that way, as if I were a parcel marked "glass" and to be handled with care.

Afterward when I came to read the passenger list, I found that there was nobody else on board with any sort of title, not even an honorable anybody; otherwise, of course, Mrs. Ess Kay's little maneuver, which I'm afraid must have been meant for snobbishness, wouldn't have excited the slightest notice.

"Now," said Mrs. Ess Kay when we were settled in our places, "I know a good many people on the ship, but most of them are nobodies, and I do not intend to be troubled with them, nor do I think that the duchess would care to have me let Betty mix herself up with anybody and everybody. I shall do a great deal of weeding and select her acquaintances carefully."

"Betty," indeed! I'd never told her that she might call me Betty, and I hate having persons I don't care for take hold of my name without using a handle to touch it. It makes me feel as if I did when I was a child and mother commanded me to let myself be kissed by unkind and extraneous grownups.

"Thank goodness, Vic and I have come into the world with something of poor father's sense of humor. My share often serves me as well as balm on a wound or as a nice, dry, crackly little biscuit which you're enchanted to find when you're hungry and thought you had nothing to eat, and I got a good deal of quiet comfort out of it during Mrs. Ess Kay's "weeding" process, which otherwise would have done nothing but make me squirm."

When we had been on deck for a short time a number of people came up

to speak to Mrs. Ess Kay and some of the other women. The writer was in a smooth top of a ballroom when it's been well waxed for a dance, and there was no excuse for the most sensitive person to be ill; consequently the deck was something like a hotel terrace, with all its moving groups of men and women, girls and children. Most of the best looking and best dressed ones were Americans, and a great many seemed to know each other.

Some of them laughed a good deal and talked in high voices, putting emphasis on prepositions, which Miss Mackintyre and the others would never let me do in writing compositions. Somehow, though, when these people spoke it sounded very nice and credible, more so than it does when English people meet each other, though the voice doesn't so sweet, except a few that drawled in a pretty southern way, like Sally Woodburn's.

I could tell which were the poor things that Mrs. Ess Kay wanted to weed out of her acquaintance garden, for next season, by the way she acted when they came to say "How do you do?" to her. She screwed up her eyes till they looked hard and sharp enough to go through you like a thin knife or more like a long, slender hairpin jabbing your head, and having waited an instant before returning their greeting, slowly answered: "Very well, thank you. Yes, I am going home rather early. I'm due at Newport as soon as possible;" then fingered her open book, which she hadn't peeped into before, and made a little, just noticeable gesture with her longnet.

Then the poor people were too much crushed to stop and try to talk to Miss Woodburn, though she always looked at them sweetly, as if she would make up for her cousin being a dragon if she could.

By and by, somebody else would sail up, perhaps not half as nice to look at as the one who had gone. But so, Mrs. Stuyvesant-Knox would be suddenly transformed. She would smile and hold out her hand. To their "How do you do?" she would respond "How do you do?" and though I don't think she's really much interested in any one but herself, she would ask where they had been, what they had been doing and how it happened they were going back so soon. The next thing, she would say to me: "Betty, dear, I should like you and Mrs. So-and-so to know each other, as I hope you'll meet again, while you're staying with me. Lady Betty Bulkeley, etc., etc. I wonder if you have ever met her brother, the Duke of Stanforth, and her cousin, the Marquis of Loveland, over in London?"

Loveland would have had a fit if he could have heard her, for of course at home only the lower middle classes of such people hold a marquis' title at his head in that fashion, but I suppose foreigners, unless they've been in England a long time, don't know the difference.

When I got a chance, I asked Sally Woodburn how Mrs. Stuyvesant-Knox made her distinctions in snubbing some people and preening herself to others.

"My dear," said Sally (I'm to call her "Sally" now; it's been understood between us for some time, "my dear, you're a poor, innocent child, and I reckon you've been brought up in darkness, without even so much as hearing of the Four Hundred?"). "What are the Four Hundred? Are they a kind of light brigade, like the Six Hundred?" I asked. "Or is it a sort of governing body like—the Council of Three?"

She laughed so much at this, with her charming, velvety laugh, that I grew quite nervous, for it's embarrassing to have said something funny when you've meant to be rather intelligent. But soon she took pity on me. "You perfect love," she said, "that's really too sweet. It deserves to be put in Life, or something. And yet you're not so far wrong, when one comes to think of it. The Four Hundred is a kind of governing body, only I believe it's really reduced to Two Hundred now. They govern New York, and Newport, and Lennox, and Bar Harbor, and several other places which are considered very nice and important."

"Oh! Are they Republicans or Democrats?" I inquired, sure that I really was being intelligent at last, for I'd heard Stan say that in America the Republican party was rather like our Conservatives, and the Democrats like our Liberals, and I'd remembered because I believe I should be very much interested in politics if only I understood more about them. But Sally seemed to think that question funny too.

"They can be either, my poor lamb," she exclaimed, "and they can be almost anything else they like if only they're just awfully, dreadfully rich, and can manage to scrape up a family crest. It used to be the crest that counted with the man who invented the Four Hundred, but since his day that idea has got buried under heaps and heaps of gold, and pearls and diamonds, especially pearls. In those places I was telling you about you don't exist unless you're in the Four Hundred, which is now being sifted down to Two Hundred, and will probably be Seventy-five in a year or two. You may have the bluest blood in America in your veins; you may be simply smeared with ancestors, but if you haven't managed to push forward in a clever, indescribable way, neither they nor you will ever be noticed, and your gray hairs will go down to the grave in the wrong set. Now do you understand why my cousin Katherine makes narrow eyes for some people and broad smiles for others?"

"Ye-es, I suppose I do," I answered. "Only—we are quite different at home. I haven't been about at all yet, but I know; because some things are in the air. How did Mrs. Stuyvesant-Knox

ever have the wrong set of acquaintances, though?"

"Because she'd kill me if she heard that she has only lately got into the right set herself and after troublous times to do an ordinary nervous prostration. That kind of thing does give it to a lot of women, especially if they fall. But Cousin Katherine very seldom falls. She almost always carries things through. If you know anything about America in general and New York in particular you'd be able to realize what a hard time she's had, when I tell you that her husband died she lived west of Chicago. To get into the Four Hundred if you've lived west of Chicago unless you're Californian, which is getting to be fashionable, is just like having to climb over one of the great, high walls of yours in England, bristling with nails or broken glass."

"My goodness!" I exclaimed. "How funny! Fancy if people who live in Surrey should glare at people who live in Devonshire."

"That's different. You see, Chicago is new."

"But so is all America, isn't it?" I asked stupidly. "What difference can a hundred or so years make?"

"We haven't begun to think in centuries yet on our side of the water, my dear." (She has the most delicious way of saying "my dear," and all her "rs" are soft like that; only it's too much trouble to write them for nobody but myself to see.) "Anyhow, it is so, between New York and Chicago people—that is, the people who count in Society with a big S—and it was a great triumph for my cousin to become the three hundred and ninety-ninth in the Four Hundred. She did it by buying a Russian prince."

"Buying a—"

"Yes, love, he was going to the highest bidder, and she bought him. That is, she entertained him so gorgeously and did so many nice things for him that he posed as her property, and, as every one was dying to meet him, it made her. She'd been working killing hard before that, for a whole year after taking her house on Fifth avenue and building her cottage at Newport, but it was buying the prince which did the trick. On the strength of that episode and its consequences, she went to Europe with very nice introductions, and, as you know, dear, she has made some valuable as well as pleasant friends. To live up to them and her reputation, she will have to be busy for a while dropping a lot of old acquaintances."

"How horrid!" I couldn't help exclaiming, though Mrs. Ess Kay was going to be my hostess.

"Yes, it seems rather miserable to me because I'm a weak, lazy, southern being, who would be right down sick if I had to hurt any human being's feelings. Yet perhaps it looks fair to her. She's so ambitious, and she's worked so hard she has deserved to succeed. As for poor me, she just regularly mesmerizes me all through. She mesmerized me into coming up from Kentucky and visiting her this spring. Then she mesmerized me into going with her to Europe. But I'm not sorry I went, for I've had a right good time."

"I'm so glad you went," said I, "because if you hadn't I shouldn't have met you. I'm sure I should love Kentucky if all the people there are like you. But these things you've been saying seem so odd. Do you mean to tell me that the people who lead society in New York want to keep their set limited to a certain number and refuse to know others, even if they're extraordinarily clever and interesting?"

"They don't like them to be too clever because they call such people 'queer'—that is, unless they happen to be 'lions' of some sort from England or other places abroad. Then so long as they're not American, they welcome them with open arms."

"I'm glad society isn't like that in England," I said. "There the real people—the people who have the right to make social laws, you know—are delighted with any one who can amuse them. Of course deep down in our hearts we may be proud if we have old names, which have been famous for hundreds of years in one way or another, but we are so used, after all those centuries, to being sure of ourselves that we just take our position for granted and don't think much more about it. If people who haven't got quite the same position are genteel and amusing or clever or beautiful or anything like that which really matters, why, we're only too pleased with them."

"That's all the difference in the world! You've been sure of yourselves for centuries! You're said the best word, my dear. 'Out of the mouths of babes'—but Cousin Katherine's zanyish gushing to that silly old Mrs. Vander Windt. We mustn't dare discuss these things from our point of view any more. I reckon she would faint."

There are a good many young men on board, and some of them seemed to be quite devoted to Mrs. Ess Kay the first day out, but she was cold to them all, I couldn't think why, as some of them seemed very nice, and she had always appeared rather to like being with men. I asked Sally about it, but she laughed and said I might perhaps solve the mystery myself when we were at Newport if I remembered it then.

I never heard of such breakfasts and luncheons as they have on this ship, and the first menu I saw surprised me so much that I couldn't believe they really had and could produce all those things if anybody was inconsiderate enough to ask for them. I hardly supposed there were so many things to eat in the world. But the captain heard me exclaiming to Sally, so he smiled and told me to test the menu by ordering a bit of everything on it. He'd guarantee that nothing would be missed out. This was at breakfast the

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