

Lady Betty Across the Water

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Chapter 12

It's more than a fortnight since I've been able to write about any of the things that have happened to me. The last I did was on the morning after the great affair, when we were looking forward to the pink ball in the evening. Mrs. Ess Kay didn't quite have her wish, for the ball was a moderate success, but it did seem a pale pink after the gorgeousness of the night before, and it might have been still paler (as every one felt rather washed out) if it hadn't been for one special excitement. Mohunsligh's engagement to Carolyn Pitchley was announced, and we were told that the wedding would have to be soon, as Mohunsligh had had news which called him back to England, and he wanted to take his bride with him.

Before I stopped to think I'd promised Carolyn to be one of her bridesmaids, but five minutes later I would almost have liked to change my mind because of Potter. He was asked to be an usher. (I didn't know at the time what that meant, but I had a vague impression it was something of importance at American weddings.) So that I was sure to see a lot of him if I were bridesmaid, and in any case I was beginning to feel he might make it too awkward for me to visit much longer with Mrs. Ess Kay.

However, when on second thought I tried to get out of my promise by thinking that I might have to go home, Carolyn seemed ready to cry and said that if I threw her over it would spoil everything. The wedding would be in ten days, and surely I hadn't been thinking of going back to England as soon as that?

It was quite true, I hadn't. And more than that, I knew I shouldn't be welcome at home. I made up my mind to get through somehow and told Carolyn I had only been joking.

She had always wanted to be married at Grace church in New York, but New York is no place for August weddings, if an August wedding you must have; so Carolyn's invitations, which appeared almost immediately after the engagement was announced, told every one that Mr. and Mrs. Pitchley begged them to be present at their daughter's marriage in the drawing room of the Chateau de Plaisance.

I didn't know that you could be married in a drawing room, but it seems you can, quite properly. However, when I go home I don't think I'd better say much about that part of Mohunsligh's wedding, or some of the old-fashioned people mightn't understand. I should hate them to get the idea just because of the drawing room that poor Carolyn was morganatic or something.

She seemed ecstatically happy, more than I could imagine any girl being if she had to marry Mohunsligh, who, although a dear good fellow when you know him, isn't a bit romantic. But he suddenly blossomed out into all sorts of pleasant American ways, sent Caro flowers and things every day, though I fancy he couldn't afford it; gave her a lovely solitaire diamond ring, which I'm sure he couldn't, and a "guard," an heirloom in his family.

It would have been shocking, Carolyn said, for her to be seen anywhere after the invitations were out, though I can't think why, as she didn't seem at all ashamed of marrying Mohunsligh, but rather the contrary, and asked me hundreds of questions about what she would have to do when she was a countess. Fortunately, though, she had lots of things to keep her busy indoors, trying on such frocks as she could get made in a hurry and writing letters to every girl she knew announcing her engagement.

The funniest things about the whole affair were—for me—the ushers, the rehearsals for the wedding and having a married woman as a sort of head bridesmaid. Carolyn's best girl chum was married herself in the spring, so she had to be what they call a matron of honor.

It seemed horribly irreverent to rehearse for the ceremony, but nobody else thought so except Mohunsligh and me, and Mohunsligh said in confidence that he'd found out the bridegroom was a mere lay figure at a wedding—anyhow—in America—and he intended to let Caro do exactly as she liked until after they were married. Then she might have to find out that once in a while it would be just as well if she did what he liked. But he asked me not to mention this to Carolyn and her stepmother, so I didn't. And in spite of my objection the rehearsals were interesting. I felt as if I oughtn't to laugh and joke, but the others all did tremendously, so I did, too, in the end.

Mohunsligh was disappointed because that Californian friend of his whom he would have visited if it hadn't been for falling in love unexpectedly and getting married couldn't come and be his best man. He urged him, but something interfered, Mohunsligh didn't tell us what, and Mr.

Jameson B. Harborough wasn't ever able to come to the wedding. I was disappointed, too, as Mohunsligh had told us such romantic things about his friend that we all wanted to see him. Mr. Harborough had been a sailor and a cowboy and had left everything to fight in the Spanish war, where he'd done brave and splendid things, and might have stayed in the army afterward as a captain if he had liked. But he preferred to go back to his old, free life and was still a poor young man until two or three years ago, when some land in which he'd invested a few savings turned out to have gold in it—quantities of gold, gold enough to make a famous mine and give Mr. Harborough a great fortune. Sally knew a good deal about the new millionaire too. It seemed that cousins of his in the west somewhere were acquaintances of hers and had told her how immensely he had been sought out and flattered in San Francisco and other places since he'd become rich. He hated it so much that he'd gone abroad and stopped a long time, wandering about in strange eastern countries making friends with Bedouins and people like that who love horses better than money, and on account of certain experiences with women he'd got almost a morbid horror of falling in love with some girl who would only pretend to like him, while in reality all she cared about was his money. Nobody in Mrs. Ess Kay's set knew Jameson B. Harborough, though everybody would like to, so it was a blow to others beside Mohunsligh and me that he couldn't or wouldn't show himself at Newport for the wedding.

With the exception of this one hitch nothing went wrong so far as the wedding party was concerned, but with me things began to go very wrong several days before Caro and Mohunsligh were married. There was a fuss of some sort between Sally and Mrs. Ess Kay, and Sally came to me, very much upset, to say that she would have to leave the Moorings immediately, she couldn't stand it twenty-four hours longer, even for my sake. She had promised to visit a friend in Chicago sooner or later, so she would go straight to her, and if anything too bresome should happen before I was ready to sail for home, I had better run out there—the friend would be delighted to have me. Sally gave me the address, and I told her I would write often, but of course I didn't dream of having to accept her invitation. I missed her badly, but not as much as if the wedding had not been so near.

Poor old Mohunsligh—who knows more about the manners of polite society than etiquette in American society—was coached by Potter, and the night before the wedding rehearsal reluctantly gave an elaborate dinner to his best man (an officer in Stan's regiment who happened to turn up) and the six ushers. The same day Carolyn had her matron of honor and the bridesmaids to lunch, and we did have fun talking over things. I should have thought a luncheon with all girls and no men might have been a little tame, and perhaps it would in England, but in America girls are not at all shy. They say just as funny things as men, and take the most beautiful pains to amuse each other, so that it's impossible to be bored, and for hours on end you forget there is such a creature as man.

At home Mohunsligh would have had to give us things, of course, but in America it appears that the bridegroom makes presents to the best man and the ushers, so it was from Carolyn that I got a duck of a brooch, like an American flag, with stripes of diamonds and rubies and the blue part sapphires. Mohunsligh said that, as he was awfully hard up, it was bad luck for him to have to provide each of the bridesmaids with bouquets and chiffon muffs, and he could not see at all that it was a pretty idea for everything they carried in their hands to come from the bridegroom. But as Sally had told me that Carolyn's father had settled ten million dollars on her, I don't think Mohunsligh need have complained.

Although it was in a house, the wedding was very picturesque, and the bride and groom stood under a bell of white roses about as large as Big Ben. I enjoyed it all immensely, for it was my first time as bridesmaid, and I had a lovely frock and hat (copied from an old picture) for which—when I wanted the bill—I found Sally had paid. There was a crush at the reception, but it only lasted two hours. After the bride and groom had gone, with showers of rice and satin slippers, we stayed and had a dance—just the ushers and bridesmaids and a few young people who were intimate friends of Carolyn's.

It was then that my greatest troubles began. On a pretense of showing some wedding presents which he said I hadn't seen because they were in a different room from the others Potter got me alone and proposed again. This time he didn't laugh and joke, as he had before, so that I could take it half in fun even while it made me uncomfortable, but was very serious indeed. When I wanted to go out he stood in front of the door and wouldn't let me pass, and his chin and eyes looked so horribly determined

that he was more like Mrs. Ess Kay than ever.

"My dear little ladyship," he said, "you're not going to get away until you've given me my answer."

"But I have given it," said I.

"I don't call what you've given me an answer, because, you see, I want you so much, and I've made up my mind so hard and fast to have you that I shan't take 'no' for an answer."

"I don't see how you can help it, as it's the only one I have to give, and I've told you that two dozen times at least," I said, beginning to feel irritable, as I always have from the first whenever Potter talked about love.

"I know you have, but that doesn't count. There's no such word as fall in the bright lexicon of my youth. Look here, dear girl, you don't quite realize perhaps what a good time I'd give you if you married me. I've got as much money as my sister has, and I'd do just as you liked about staying in the army. You could have a house in New York and a whole, real live castle in your own country if you liked. I wouldn't care a rap how much you spent on clothes, and there isn't a woman in America who's got better jewels than you should have. I'd see to that. Besides, you could do what you choose for your own people. I couldn't stint you. I want to be friends with them. I never talked like this to you before, but you see what I mean. And now, isn't what I've said any inducement?"

"I wouldn't need any such inducements if I loved you," I answered, "but I don't and can't, and somehow I never have been able to believe that you really loved me."

"If that's the trouble you can make your mind easy. I want you badly."

"Then I'm sorry, for I simply can't marry you. I should be miserable and so would you."

"I'll risk that. You're too much of an English rosebud to understand anything about love. What you must do is to trust others who know what you ought to want better than you do yourself—your mother, for instance. You'd like to please her and your sister and brother, wouldn't you? Well, they all want you to say yes to me."

"How do you know?" I broke out.

"I do know. You can ask Kath if it isn't true."

"I don't want to talk to her about it."

"You needn't if you'll only be a good girl and do what everybody expects you to do. Come now, do say yes, and let's be happy."

That did make me furious.

"Any one would think I was a naughty child and you were some kind of medicine the whole family was waiting for me to take!" I exclaimed. "It's a wonder you don't get out your watch and give me five minutes to do it!"

His eyes began to sparkle with anger. I believe he would have liked to box my ears, and I know I could have boxed his.

"I thought English girls were brought up to be sensible," said he, "and amiable."

"I can't help what you thought," I answered rudely, for I was getting desperate. "You've no right to keep me here like this, and it won't do you a bit of good, for if you stand there all we're both in our second childhood I won't change my mind. You ought to know that now, Mr. Parker. Please let me go."

He didn't move.

"If you don't I'll scream at the top of my lungs," I said. And he must have seen that I meant it, for he flung open the door with a slam, and I swept past him with my nose in the air, trying to look like mother.

I didn't see him again till it was time to go home. Then he drove back with Mrs. Ess Kay and me to the Moorings in the shut up motor car and didn't open his mouth once on the way, which was wonderful for him and seemed somehow ominous.

I had been too angry and excited after that scene of ours to feel unhappy or to worry much about what might come next, but that drive, short as it was, with Potter freely silent and Mrs. Ess Kay alarmingly polite, made me feel that the end had come. I was sure she had been told by her brother what an obstinate, ungrateful girl I was, and I had a guilty sinking of the heart as if I really had been both. There was no Sally to protect me now, no one to advise me what to do, and there was a big lump in my throat as I said good night and went to my own room.

I hadn't been there long when there came a knock at the door, the same determined kind of inexorable knock which mother gives when I've been found out in something which she thinks it is my duty to make me sorry for.

I'd locked the door and would have liked to make some excuse not to open it, but it was Mrs. Ess Kay's door and Mrs. Ess Kay's room just as much as it was Mrs. Ess Kay's brother I had refused.

She sat in all in black, like an executioner, though, of course, executioners don't go down into history wearing chiffon trimmed with jet.

"My dear Betty," said she, subsiding into a large armchair, "I want to have a serious talk with you."

It would have been stupid pretend-



"My dear Betty, I want to have a serious talk with you."

ing not to understand, so I just looked at her and waited.

"I dare say you can guess what it's about?" she went on.

"I suppose so," I said. "I am very sorry about everything. But I can't help not being in love with Mr. Parker, can I?"

"I should have thought," said Mrs. Ess Kay, "that your mother's daughter would have attached very little importance to being in love. Apparently she hasn't been as successful with you as with Lady Victoria. Believe me, Betty, there's nothing in it—nothing at all."

"In what?"

"In what you call 'being in love.' A girl fancies a man for his eyes, or his dancing, or because he is strong, and she thinks she's in love with him, but it's only a fancy which passes before she's been his wife for twelve months, and she wonders what she ever saw in him then. A year after you have been married to my brother, you will be very fond of him, and you will be one of the most important young women in America as well as in Europe. Oh, my dear, you will have to take him. Your mother will never forgive you if you don't. It was quite an understood thing between us when she lent you to me that if possible there was to be a match. Your beauty and name, and Potter's money. He's really a very good fellow—a temper, perhaps, but I wouldn't give much for a man without one, and, like most Americans, he'll make a splendid husband."

"For some one," I murmured.

"For you, Betty. I assure you, I daren't tell the duchess you've definitely refused Potter. You must be persuaded. Be engaged to him. Let him follow you to England."

"If I did that I should find myself being married off to him before I knew."

"Well, and if you did? It would be because you'd had the chance to change your mind."

I shook my head. "I must go home to England," said, "but Mr. Parker mustn't follow me."

Mrs. Ess Kay's face hardened.

"I'm afraid if you go home after refusing Potter you'll have a very poor welcome, my child. The duchess has been kind enough to take me a little into her confidence. I don't think she would have sent you over with me if she hadn't known something about Potter, and your sister's affairs aren't arranged yet. Oh, you needn't blush and look so indignant. The duchess didn't mind putting her difficulties in a letter when I wrote her you weren't behaving quite satisfactorily, and you may take it from me that at present things stand like this—you must go back an engaged girl or else stay away until Lady Victoria is married."

If mother were different I should have hoped Mrs. Ess Kay was exaggerating, but as it was I believed her, though I did my best to be high eyed and incredulous till she remarked that I could see the duchess' letter if I liked, though it might be rather embarrassing.

I was sure it would be and preferred to take its contents on faith, but I was so miserable that I had to keep my eyes staring wide open to prevent the tears dropping down. I was tired and forlorn and homesick—for Vic and Stan and the dear dogs and everything except mother—and I felt such a horrible weakness creeping over me that I could even imagine myself by and by doing what they meant me to do. I thought the best thing was to gain a respite lest Mrs. Ess Kay should drag some kind of a concession from me which I would have to live up to afterward.

"I can't talk any more about it now," I said. "I believe what you say, but it only makes it worse for me to think that mother should have made what amounts to a kind of bargain with you. Maybe by tomorrow everything won't seem so dreadful."

She got up with a relieved air. Perhaps even she hadn't been enjoying the conversation.

"Of course it won't," said she. "It won't seem dreadful at all. You've no idea how happy we're all going to be. Now, just you sleep well and dream sweet dreams and you'll wake up feeling a different girl. Maybe poor Potter hasn't been as tactful as he might be. That's because he's too much in love to be clever. But he has a lovely surprise for you tomorrow. Something connected with a certain finger of your left hand. I promise you that you'll like it. And now I'm going to leave you in peace for the night."

I can't tell what savage deed I might not have been capable of doing if she had had the idea of kissing me, but she hadn't. She merely patted me on the shoulder and went out, leaving me to stare aimlessly at the door after she had softly closed it.

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