

Lady Betty Across the Water

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Chapter 15

"THE first face I saw on the platform when we arrived in Chicago was Mr. Brett's. He was waiting to help me as if I looked as fresh as if I hadn't spent eighteen hours in the train. He said I looked fresh, too, but if I did it must have been excitement, as I'd written half the night and dreamed desperately the other half about Potter Parker—dressed like one of those red Indians they have for cigar signs in New York—pursuing me with a jeweled tomahawk.

Mr. Brett had insisted on my telegraphing to Sally before we left New York to say I was coming and asking her to meet the train; therefore we were surprised not to find her at the station. I was rather anxious, and so, I could see, was Mr. Brett. He thought he had better not drive in a cab with me to the friend's house where she was staying, but he told me the name of a hotel where he would go at once and made me promise that I would send him a line by the cabman to say whether everything was well with me.

"Miss Woodburn probably has a headache or perhaps is out of town for the day," said he. "It can't be anything else. Still I shall be a little uneasy till I hear. And you know I hold myself absolutely at your service."

"What about your friend whose business you've come to attend to?" I asked. "I mustn't be so selfish as to interfere with that, whatever happens."

"Oh, I can attend to both interests," he assured me. "without neglecting either. I shan't need to let me interfere with the other. And remember, I won't stir out of my hotel till I've had your note."

Reassured of him, Chessie overawed me and took my breath away. It is a good thing I saw New York first, for if I'd come straight from England with only memories of peaceful London to support me through the ordeal, I don't think but it might have affected my train.

It was a long drive, though, and as I had time to calm down I saw that numbers of the huge buildings are nobly designed and very magnificent in execution, making a splendid effect in spite of their vast size rather than because of it. And such shops too! They're like the fairy palaces in a nurse used to tell me about, as big as whole cities, where you could get anything you wanted just by wishing.

At last we stopped before a large, handsome house with a lawn round it and no fence. The house was stone in front, but had brick sides, which gave it a queer effect, yet somehow didn't spoil it, and wherever there wasn't a porch it had broken out in bow windows.

I told the cabman to wait and then ran up the four or five steps to ring the front door bell. In a minute a maid came who could have been very smart looking if she had only worn a proper cap.

"Is Miss Woodburn stopping here?" I asked.

"No, she isn't," returned the young woman, with a glint of the eye which seemed to say she would perish sooner than call any one "Miss."

"Are you sure?" I persisted, my heart preparing for a plunge toward.

"I guess so," said the girl with a superior but not ill-natured smile. "She was staying with us, but she went yesterday. I don't think she'll be back, because she's gone to take care of a friend who's real sick way back in Ohio somewhere."

"Way back in Ohio somewhere?" The words were like a knell for all my hopes. "I didn't know what was to befall me now."

"I am sorry," I said. "Do you know if a telegram came for Miss Woodburn yesterday?"

"Yes, indeed," replied the young woman, all in one word, but her face brightened. Suddenly she was looking at me like a long lost friend. "I guess you're expected. Mrs. Hale, that's the lady of the house here, sent the telegram on, and Miss Woodburn telegraphed back about you. Mrs. Hale went to meet your train, but may be she didn't recognize you or else she got caught at the bridge. Anyway, she hasn't come back yet. I guess you'd better come in. Your room is all ready for you."

"I can't do that, though I'm very grateful indeed to Mrs. Hale," I said. "I have other plans. I'll just scribble a little note to tell her so and thank her, then I must go."

"She'll just never forgive me if I let you," protested the young woman.

I began to be a little afraid that I might be detained by well meant force, but when I had written a letter to Mrs. Hale (squeezing Vivace under one arm and sitting at a desk in a bright, charming drawing room where three Persian cats, six Japanese spaniels and a number of birds played about the floor) I contrived to persuade the hospitable creature that my immedi-

ate departure was practically a matter of life or death.

So instead of writing my news to Mr. Brett I went back with it to him, like a bad penny. He must have been surprised when he heard that a lady was waiting in the drawing room of his hotel and hurried in to see me sitting there. I should have felt ready to die if he had looked bored, but he didn't at all.

I told him all my adventures and about the dogs and cats and birds, and then I asked what on earth I should do now. "I suppose I shall have to go back to New York," I said gloomily, "and cable to my brother. I could stop at some pension and wait till I heard—a quiet pension Mrs. Stuyvesant-Kuex wouldn't be likely to know about."

"You alone in a New York boarding house?" exclaimed Mr. Brett. "Never." "Then could you find me a Chicago one?"

"There'd be nothing to choose between. No, Lady Betty, but I can suggest something better. Only—I don't know how you'll take it. Wouldn't you rather be near Miss Woodburn than anything else until your future plans are settled?"

"Of course," said I, "but that's impossible now."

"I'm not so sure. I think—in fact I know, where she is. You say Mrs. Hale's maid told you she'd gone to Ohio, to take care of a sick friend. I can tell you where that friend lives and her name, because I have relatives in the neighborhood. I don't often go there, but I've heard from them of Miss Woodburn's visits. My cousins have a farm, and I was wondering whether you could content yourself boarding with them for awhile, so near Miss Woodburn you could see her every day?"

"Oh, I should love it," I cried. "But would they have me?"

"They would be happy to have you. I know. The only question is, would you be happy? They're simple folk with simple ways, such as you would expect of my people, Lady Betty, but they're hearts of gold."

"Like yours," I thought, but I didn't say it. I said instead that I was fond of simple ways, and I asked where the place was and if it was far off?

"It will take us about twelve hours to get there," he answered.

"Us?" I echoed. "Why, you can't!"

"I can if you'll let me," said he, growing red. "I've finished my business in Chicago already and—"

"What, while I was away?"

"It was a short affair, though important."

"But I thought you weren't going to leave the hotel till I wrote?"

"I didn't need to. My friend came to me, and we fixed up everything between us in a few minutes. Now I'm free again, and my idea in any case was to drop in on my Ohio cousins. You see, twelve hours' traveling is nothing to us Americans, and they wouldn't like it if I didn't just say 'how do you do' when I'm so near."

"Oh, well, if that's really true and you aren't doing it only to help me," said I, with a sigh of relief. "I was afraid you were. I shouldn't mind the journey a bit if you were with me, but I do hope we'll have the same kind of ticket this time. Do get mine like yours, won't you?"

His eyes had a beautiful expression in them as he thanked me and said he would do the best he could, only I couldn't exactly make it out.

"The best train to take would be this evening," he went on. "That would give my cousins, Mr. and Mrs. Trowbridge, plenty of time to get ready for you, too, for I'll wire them that you're coming. But how could you pass the day? Would you—let me show you the sights of Chicago?"

"Would I? It would be the best of fun. Oh, I am glad I came, after all."

"Then that's settled. I'll send off that telegram and one or two others and come back with an automobile. Don't look like that, please, Lady Betty. It isn't going to cost me all I've got to hire one. They're cheap here; besides I know a man who will give me one for the day for next to nothing. And I'll bring you one of those silk things with tulle windows to wear over your head and face, so no one will see that Lady Betty Burkeley is 'doing' Chicago today."

I was as pleased as Punch. As Caro Pichley said when she was engaged, I felt I was "going to have the time of my life." And it was fun. I shall never forget that day of mine in Chicago with Mr. Brett if I live to be a hundred.

The best fun of all was the Chinese restaurant, where we had dinner. It's in a queer street where there are some famous pawnshops, it seems, and I wanted to go into them, but Mr. Brett wouldn't take me. To get to the restaurant you go up a long flight of marble stairs, with two grinning Chinese devil heads, like watchdogs, on the wall at the top.

Mr. Brett had to pay with a number of expensive looking greenback things, but he laughed when he saw my frightened face and said the dinner didn't really cost all that, he only want-

ed change. I begged him to let me go halves with everything, as I'd invited myself in a way, but he told me I didn't understand American customs yet and asked if I had the heart to spoil the happiest day of his life.

I couldn't resist telling him it was the happiest of mine, too—that I had never amused myself half as well.

"Not even in Newport?" said he.

"Not even in Newport," I repeated.

"It was delightful there, and everybody was kind and charming to me, but you see I had no real friends like you to go about with, and that makes the greatest difference, doesn't it?"

His eyes lit up again at that, and I could see the blood mounting under his brown skin.

"All the difference in the world," he answered in a low voice. Then he looked as if he were going to say something else, but shut his lips tight together and didn't. One wouldn't dare speak out the truth like this to a rich man one might be supposed to be trying to marry. I remember enough of what mother and Vic have told me about proper behavior in a debutante to know that. But I've never wanted to talk in such a way to any man except Mr. Brett, which is lucky, as he always understands me, and that's one reason why it's pleasanter to be with him than any other person I've ever met yet.

Chapter 16

AFTER all, Mr. Brett's ticket was different from mine again, but I suppose he couldn't arrange to have the same kind and see something of me on the journey, because, as I'd asked him, he would have done it if possible. We went back part of the way we had come the night before, in the same grand kind of train, as far as Cleveland, which we reached in the morning quite early. We got out there, for no fine train like that stop at the village near which Mr. Brett's cousins live, and he said the best thing we could do would be to drive to the farm in a motor car. It was about forty miles away, but with a good car, which he could easily get, we wouldn't be more than two hours, allowing for bad roads. If we didn't take a motor, we should have to wait half the morning for a slow train, and then have a drive at the end of six or seven miles in some kind of a country conveyance.

When I hesitated, thinking of expense, Mr. Brett explained that among his many other occupations he had once acted as a chauffeur, therefore, knowing the tricks of the trade and being a sort of professional himself, he could always hire a motor at a nominal price. This settled my doubts. We drove in a cab to a hotel, where he left me with Vivace, while he went to search for a car. Presently he came back with a smart gray thing which matched my clothes, and not only was there a gray chauffeur to go with it, but a gray holland coat for me, and a gray silk hood, with a lace curtain. I do think they do things well in America.

I looked forward to seeing the country between Cleveland and Aristo, which is the name of the town nearest to the Valley farm, because except for the drives I had had near Newport I knew nothing at all of the real country in America. I had an idea that we should pass some fine country houses and see a number of pretty little nesting villages.

The name of Aristo was rather impressive and classical sounding. I thought, and I had visions of meeting on the way pretty girls driving or riding, and good looking, well groomed men such as I had met always in the country round Newport. But as we went on and on I was disappointed. The scenery itself was lovely, rich and peaceful, with groves of maple trees which would have been quite new to me if I hadn't seen a few in the east. But the villages were blotchy rather than beauty spots, and we saw only peasants and farm people.

Mr. Brett was driving the car, with me beside him, while the chauffeur sat behind, and I made some such remark to him before I stopped to remember that his relatives were farm people. I could have bitten my tongue then, but he didn't seem to be offended.

"Outside the towns in the west there are few of what you would call gentlefolk," he said, with just the faintest emphasis of good natured scorn for English prejudice; "nor are there any 'country houses' as you understand the name in England. Here people live in the country to till the land and to live by tilling it, yet they don't call themselves 'peasants,' either. It isn't that they're snobbish and want to seem to be what they are not, don't think that for a moment. But they—well, I won't try to describe them. Many people from the old world would never understand what they really are or their point of view, but you will, Lady Betty. You are quick and sympathetic

and intelligent, and when I ask you to define for me the difference between the farmers of Ohio, as typified by my cousins and their neighbors in Summer county, I shall be surprised if you don't exactly hit the nail on the head. They'll surprise you a little at first, I expect, but for about ten minutes maybe you won't know what to make of them. But I count on you to see the point in spite of all your traditions."

"What have my traditions got to do with it?" I asked.

"Wait and see."

I laughed. "Well, I only wish I knew what my traditions are," said I. "I suppose I ought to know, but I don't think I do."

"You may feel them pricking up and down your spine for a bit, while you're getting used to a new order of things at the Valley farm," answered Mr. Brett. "And yet I don't know. I shall be enormously interested in watching the effect upon you before I—have to say goodbye."

I forgot everything else he had been saying when I heard that last sentence.

"Will you have to say goodbye soon?" I asked him in a crestfallen voice.

He didn't speak for a minute, perhaps on account of a series of bumps in the road.

At last he said, "To tell you the truth, Lady Betty, I should like to stop and pay my cousins a little visit, but—I don't know if I have a right to."

"Oh, why not?" I asked. "Wouldn't they be delighted to keep you?"

"Perhaps. I hope so. But what about you?"

"If it depended one bit on me, you'd make a long visit."

"Wouldn't you really mind seeing me hanging around—sometimes? Just at meals, you know—or to drive you a drive once in awhile?"

I looked at him merrily through my tale window, for I felt happy and light-hearted, and the world seemed such a very nice place to live in at that moment.

"Do you truly need to have me answer that question?" I asked. "If you do, we can't be real friends as I thought, after all."

"You say that because you are kind—too kind to have reflected enough perhaps. An accident—the happiest accident in the world for me—has given me a chance to see something of you, Lady Betty, but do you understand that only by an accident could a rough fellow like me have any place at all in your life, no matter how small or temporary? I don't want to take advantage of that sweet kindness of yours, which is partly all your own and partly the essence of your youth and innocence."

"Now, you are making me very cross," said I. "I won't bear you talk so. You may laugh at me, because we've known each other such a short time, but really and truly you are the best friend I've ever had. I wouldn't lose you for any one or anything in the world, and I don't mean to, unless you get tired of me—so, there?"

"Tired of you! Good heavens, I tired of you!"

"Very well, then," said I flippantly. "So far as I'm concerned you needn't say 'goodbye' to the Valley farm until you feel the first symptoms coming on."

"Lady Betty," remarked Mr. Brett, "I wonder if there's another girl like you in the world?"

"According to my mother, there isn't another so vexing," I replied.

We both laughed, and then he suddenly said, "Here is Aristo."

I stared about wildly. "Where, where?" I asked.

He laughed a great deal more. "Why, you're looking right at the postoffice and the grocery and dry goods store."

Sure enough, there was a brown wooden building at the top of a dusty hill we were just climbing, but there was nothing else anywhere, except a clear brown creek and some sweet smelling meadows with a white horse grazing in a bored way over rather a queer fence, and some cows asleep under a clump of maple trees on our side of a young birch grove.

"Where's the rest of it?" I went on. "Where are the other shops and the houses and the people?"

"Oh, the other shops and the houses aren't built yet, but they may be any time, and then the people will come. But the fact that they haven't come yet doesn't prevent this from being Aristo. But you mustn't think this is the only place you will have to do your shopping when you're at the Valley farm. Wait till you see Hermann's Corners. There's a great emporium there, and you'll ruffle the feelings of half the ladies of Summer county if you don't fall in line with it and its proprietor, Whit Walker. Promise you'll let me be the first one to introduce you to both?"

We were in a sweet and gracious country now. I looked as if Mother Nature would never allow any of her children who obeyed her to be poor or unhappy here. As we whizzed along the up and down road between billowing meadows of grain we could see here and there a farmhouse showing between trees or peering over the brow of a rounded hill, but there was none where I longed to stop until we came in sight of a dear, old, red brick house—really old, not what some Americans call old. It was set back several hundred yards from the road and an avenue of magnificent maples—each one a great green temple—led up to the comfortable, rose draped porch which sheltered the door. There was an old fashioned garden on one side, with a running flame of hollyhocks hemming it in. The background was a dark green oak and maple grove, and in a clover meadow beyond the garden was a colony of beehives. It looked an ideal story book place, and I wished it

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