

Betty of the Wilderness

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Author of "An Australian Lassie," "Sights of Sydney," etc.

DEDICATION: To my Husband.

CHAPTER XIX.

BETTY'S SCHEME.

THE next evening Betty opened her father's study door and peeped in.

Her face was all aglow, as surely it had never been before, and her heart was beating till it seemed to set her throat throbbing.

For Betty had a "scheme"—a scheme which had kept her awake half through the previous night, and made her by turns distraught and gay in the day—Dot's bewilderment.

At the sound of the opening of the door Mr. Bruce raised his head, and gazed, unseeing, at the girl's face. His brain was just beginning to warm and quicken with new thoughts, and a sheet of ink-wet paper was before him.

"Should I interrupt?" asked Betty, wheedlingly.

"Eh?" said her father.

"Could your worship grant me ten minutes?"

She came into the room and shut the door.

"No more, then," said her father; "and I'd rather have given you them at any time during the day. Well?"

He lifted his eyes from his sprawling black scrawl, and saw her face.

"What is the matter?" he asked in surprise, for the shining light in the girl's face was wonderful, her glowing eyes, her tremulous mouth!

"I—I've got a scheme, daddie," she said, and she didn't sit down. She just began to walk up and down the small room.

"If you throw cold water on it," she said, "you'll kill me. Oh, father, there's no cold water in the world, so don't look for any. I've used it all up during the seventeen years of my refrigerated life."

"Poor little icicle!" said her father, smiling humorously.

"I want to go away from home," she said feverishly—"right away by myself. I want to live in an attic up ten flights of stairs, where I can see nothing but chimney tops and sky by day, and stars and sky at night. Now Dot is here—"

A sudden thought came to her father. "Surely not a quarrel the first day," he said.

Betty laughed. "I should think not," she said. "We're far too polite! We're keeping the first quarrel for the fifth day. No, if Dot had not come home I was going to slaughter my Pegasus and become a model Martha. I was going to make and mend, and do all the housewifery that best becomes a woman." But, oh, I hate it so—I hate it so. And I love my Pegasus."

"But, child, you can keep him at home in your room."

"And never rise on him. Never!" said the girl hotly. "It's Betty, Betty, all day long. There's no peace." She clasped her hands and faced her father.

"My life is one long study in interruptions," she said, and her eyes filled.

"I'd rather have a limb or two off and have done with it," she said, speaking as one who had several to spare. "But the hourly sawing away at my thoughts—it's—it's positive agony."

No one could doubt her. Her mobile face was working, her eyes shining with tears; she was suffering the agony even while she spoke.

Her father threw down his pen. "He, perhaps, better than anyone in the world, could understand her."

He, too, had yearned for an attic up ten flights of stairs, with only the chimney pots and the star-world for company. And he had been given eight noisy children and a weatherboard cottage!

His present office in town was the nearest approach to the attic, and the ideal he had yet attained.

"I know," he said. "I know. But

how on earth can it be done? I don't want to blot out your stars, my child; but how can it be done? We must be practical, Betty!"

He tried to look so; threw back his head and bent shoulders, and frowned. But of the two of them, Betty, though more of an enthusiast, because younger, was far more practical.

"Quite easily," she said cheerfully. "Of course, I know, for one thing, it wants money."

She then told her father of her visit to the "Times" editor, and of her engagement as letter-writer.

Mr. Bruce was as astonished as she could possibly have desired; and the salary was in his eyes, as well as in Betty's, magnificent.

"Forty-eight—practically fifty pounds a year," he said.

"Yes," said Betty eagerly; "and that's only one letter a week. I might be taken on by New Zealand or Melbourne. I shall try all the colonies. I could easily manage three letters a week—and then get time for my stories. In an attic all things are possible."

Her father smiled.

"To the young," he said, "all things are possible. Life looks just a golden stairway, Betty, to the highest heaven of all. And I suppose, my child, it is—or may be. We who've missed our footing blame the stairway, and even doubt the heaven."

He stared before him with sad eyes. How he, too, had longed to climb—how eager-hearted, warm-blooded he had been. And now—now—

"The desire of the moth for the star!" he murmured.

Some of the glow, a very little, faded from the girl's bright face. Her father noticed it at once.

"Go on, my child," he said, rousing himself. "Climb, and climb, higher and higher. . . . I know what you want—you want your struggle. I won't stand in the way of your ten-storey-high attic. I'll make you a settled allowance. That's how a practical father should talk, isn't it?"

"Not a penny!" said Betty firmly. "It would spoil everything, father. I am practical. I've been into this over and over. I intend to be a self-supporting young woman. If I come to grief (and no fear of that) I can come to you then for an allowance. Let me have my flutter, anyway."

"Well, let me pay rent."

"Not a penny," reiterated Betty. "Not a fraction of a penny!"

"Let me pay the —"

"Nobody and nothing," said the girl firmly.

Her father considered, then a new thought came.

"My dear," he said, "is it, is it what the world calls proper? No, I'm sure it's not."

"Pooh!" said Betty scornfully. "What do I care for the world!"

"But we must consider it. Look at the thing, my child. You're seventeen, aren't you? Now, can I let you face the world at seventeen, alone? Characters, my child, though highly unpleasant shadows, are highly necessary—"

"Suppose," said Betty, thoughtfully, "that I got my attic in some old lady's house. There are loads of old ladies—"

"With attics to let?"

"Yes," said Betty, stoutly; "loads. Loads who would be glad to let a room for a trifle a week. An unfurnished room. And if she's a lonely widow lady, or a dear little old maid, think how she would like to go to the 'functions' with me! Why, it would open up life for her. I'll put an advertisement in the paper, father, and I promise you, if you don't approve of the old lady and the attic, I'll—not give up—but I'll try 'ill you do."

"Very well," said Mr. Bruce, smiling. "We'll leave things like that. But, again—"

"Not more cold water!" said Betty.

"No; it's lukewarm. How about Dot?"

Is she able to do at once what you have been doing for years?"

"I really think she's very good," said Betty. "She's so tidy, and she's a book-full of recipes, and one of the completest work-baskets I ever saw."

"Still—" said Mr. Bruce.

"And she can carve poultry," said Betty; "she's taken lessons in it."

"But we rarely have poultry."

"Oh, I know. But it's a sign, isn't it? She sounds so capable. She has a lot of hints on sick nursing—"

"But we are seldom ill."

"I know. But if you are! I'm only showing you that taking her all round she is far more capable than I. I only know a few childish ailments—sore throat, toothache, earache, and so on. And when I carve a fowl, I start at one end of the table and before I've half done I've travelled all round—I and the fowl, and the dish, and my work-basket is always half full of children's treasures. Oh, I'm sure Dot is far better than I."

"For everyday life—and a rough girl like Mary?"

"Oh, yes. Dot knows the duties of all servants, butlers, cooks, under-housemaids, nursery housemaids—"

Mr. Bruce's eyes twinkled.

"Then she can manage our staff," he said.

Betty laughed.

"I'm only showing you," she said, again, "how much better she is than I am. Now, I couldn't set one of those servants their duties if my very life depended on it."

"Suppose you and Dot talk over pros and cons," suggested Mr. Bruce. "Hear what she has to say. We must consider her. Remember, she has come home out of consideration to us—has given up, I suspect, a very comfortable home, to make us happier. You must consult Dot."

"I'll go now," this instant," said Betty. "You're quite right, father. I should tell Dot. Have I taken up very much of your time? I believe I've been here hours."

Mr. Bruce gave a whimsical look at his blackly-written page—

"I was really in good vein," he said.

"Now I'm all attics and old ladies, Betty, do you know this?"

"Making a mock of life and all its cares—Rich in the glory of my rising sun. Lightly I vaulted up four pair of stairs. In the brave days when I was twenty—"

Yes: 'tis a garret—let him know't who will; There was my bed, full hard it was and small; My table there — and I decipher still. Half a lame couplet charcoaled on the wall."

Well, never mind the rest. It's a cry of one old and weary, who has done precisely what you would do. Go to—go to; and shut the door."

Betty found Dot in the dining-room, sitting idly in front of the piano, her hands sunk on the keys, just as she had struck her last chord.

The children were all in bed. Cyril had disappeared with his books to his bedroom. Mr. Bruce was in his study, and Betty she had lost sight of.

Last night Dot had been treated as a visitor. She had been talked to, listened to. She had played and sung, and the family circle had seemed drawn together. But to-night they had all gone their own ways without her.

Even Nancy, her worshipper, had crept to bed, almost blinded with one of her headaches. There was a little weariness at Dot's heart. Until to-day a sort of exaltation had buoyed her up. Perhaps she felt something of a heroine; perhaps she felt she was coming to be a household angel. And now—now where was she? Where was there room for her in all the weatherboard cottage precincts? Who wanted her? Who was there to belong to? Not her father, certainly. He seemed to actually require no one—unless it was Betty. Not Cyril. He gave her scant attention, and turned to Betty in all things. Not Betty! That strange, eager-eyed sister, who seemed to walk with her head in cloudland, and—

"Dot," said Betty, in the doorway, "is that 'The Lost Chord' or a song without words, or—"

"I wasn't thinking," said Dot, raising her hands from the keys, and leaving the piano.

"If you're not going to do anything particular," said Betty, "let us have a little talk. I have something I would like to consult you over."

Dot's face brightened.

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