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The Vanishing of Betty Varian

CAROLYN WELLS

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By CAROLYN WELLS

THE VANISHING OF BETTY VARIAN
THE LUMINOUS FACE
THE COME BACK
IN THE ONYX LOBBY
THE MAN WHO FELL THROUGH THE EARTH
THE ROOM WITH THE TASSELS
FAULKNER'S FOLLY
THE BRIDE OF A MOMENT
DORIS OF DOBBS' FERRY
THE BOOK OF HUMOROUS VERSE
SUCH NONSENSE! *An Anthology*

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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THE VANISHING OF BETTY VARIAN

BY

CAROLYN WELLS

Author of "The Luminous Face," "The Come Back," "In the Onyx Lobby," "The Man Who Fell Through the Earth," etc.

NEW YORK

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

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THE VANISHING OF BETTY VARIAN

CHAPTER I

Headland Harbor

IT is, of course, possible, perhaps even probable, that somewhere on this green earth there may be finer golf links or a more attractive clubhouse than those at Headland Harbor, but never hope to wring such an admission from any one of the summer colony who spend their mid-year at that particular portion of the Maine coast.

Far up above the York cliffs are more great crags and among the steepest and wildest of these localities, a few venturesome spirits saw fit to pitch their tents.

Others joined them from time to time until now, the summer population occupied nearly a hundred cottages and bungalows and there was, moreover, a fair sized and fairly appointed inn.

Many of the regulars were artists, of one sort or another, but also came the less talented in search of good fishing or merely good idling. And they found it, for the majority of the householders were people

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of brains as well as talent and by some mysterious management the tone of the social side of things was kept pretty much as it should be.

Wealth counted for what it was worth, and no more. Genius counted in the same way, and was never overrated. Good nature and an amusing personality were perhaps the best assets one could bring to the conservative little community, and most of the shining lights possessed those in abundance.

To many, the word harbor connotes a peaceful, serene bit of blue water, sheltered from rough winds and basking in the sunlight.

This is far from a description of Headland Harbor, whose rocky shores and deep black waters were usually wind-swept and often storm-swept to a wild picturesqueness beloved of the picture painters.

But there were some midsummer days, as now, one in late July, when the harbor waters lay serene and the sunlight dipped and danced on the tiny wavelets that broke into spray over the nearby rocks.

Because it was about the hour of noon, the clubhouse verandah was crowded with members and guests waiting for the mail, which, as always, was late.

The clubhouse, a big, low building, with lots of shiny paint and weathering shingles, was at the nearest spot consistent with safety to the shore. From it could be had a magnificent view of the great headland that named the place.

This gigantic cliff jutted out into the sea, and rising to a height of three hundred feet, the mighty

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crag showed a slight overhang which rendered it unscalable. The wet black rock glistened in the sunlight, as spray from the dashing breakers broke half way up its sides.

The top was a long and narrow tableland, not much more than large enough to accommodate the house that crowned the summit. There was a strip of sparse lawn on either side the old mansion, and a futile attempt at a garden, but vegetation was mostly confined to the weird, one-sided pine trees that waved the branches of their lee sides in mournful, eerie motions.

"Can't see how any one wants to live up there in that God-forsaken shack," said John Clark, settling more comfortably in his porch rocker and lighting a fresh cigarette.

"Oh, I think it's great!" Mrs Blackwood disagreed with him. "So picturesque——"

"You know, if you say 'picturesque' up here, you'll be excommunicated. The thing is all right, but the word is taboo."

"All right, then, chromoesque."

"But it isn't that," Clark objected; "it's more like an old steel engraving——"

"Oh, not with all that color," said Lawrence North. "It is like an engraving on a gray, cloudy day,—but today, with the bright water and vivid sunshine, it's like a——"

"Speak it right out!" cried Ted Landon, irrepressibly, "like a picture postcard!"

"It can't help being like that," Mrs Blackwood

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agreed, "for the postcards for sale in the office of the club are more like the reality than any picture an artist has ever made of the Headland House."

"Of course, photographs are truer than drawings," North said, "and that card that shows the cliff in a storm comes pretty near being a work of art."

"The difficulty would be," Clark observed, "to get any kind of a picture of that place that wouldn't be a work of art. Why, the architect's blueprints of that house would come a good deal nearer art than lots of watercolors I've seen in exhibitions. I'm keen on the place."

"Who isn't?" growled Landon, for most of the Headlanders resented the faintest disparagement of their cherished masterpiece, a joint work of nature and man.

The promontory was joined to the mainland by a mere narrow neck of rocky land, and from that point a rough road descended, over and between steep hills, reaching at last the tiny village and scattered settlement of Headland Harbor.

Headland House itself was a modified type of old world architecture. Built of rough gray stone, equipped with a few towers and turrets, pierced by deep and narrow windows, it had some effects of a French chateau and others that suggested an old English castle.

It was true to no school, it followed no definite type, yet perched on its lonely height, sharply outlined against the sky, its majestic rock foundations

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sweeping away from beneath it, it showed the grandeur and sublimity of a well-planned monument.

And, partly because of their real admiration, partly because of a spirit of ownership, the artist colony loved and cherished their Headland House with a jealous sensitiveness to criticism.

"Stunning thing,—from here," John Clark said, after a few moments of further smoking and gazing; "all the same, as I stated, I shouldn't care to live up there."

"Too difficult of access," Claire Blackwood said, "but, otherwise all right."

Mrs Blackwood was a widow, young, attractive, and of a psychic turn of mind. Not enough of an occultist to make her a bore, but possessing quick and sure intuitions and claiming some slight clairvoyant powers. She dabbled in water colors, and did an occasional oil. She was long-limbed, with long fingers and long feet, and usually had a long scarf of some gauzy texture trailing about her. Of an evening or even on a dressy afternoon, she had a long panel or sash-end hanging below her short skirt, and which was frequently trodden on by blundering, inattentive feet.

Good-looking, of course, Claire Blackwood was,—she took care to be that,—but her utmost care could not make her beautiful,—much to her own chagrin. Her scarlet lips were too thin, and the angle of her jaw too hard. Yet she was handsome, and by virtue of her personality and her implicit

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belief in her own importance, she was the leader socially, notwithstanding the fact that the colony disclaimed any society element in its life.

"Tell us about the Headland House people, Claire. You've called, haven't you?"

This from Ted Landon, who by reason of his sheer impudence was forgiven any unconventionality. No other man at the Harbor would have dreamed of addressing Mrs Blackwood by her first name.

"Yes; I've called. They're delightful people." The words said more than the tone.

"With reservations?" asked North.

"Oh, in a way. They're quite all right,—it's only that they're not picture mad,—as we all are."

"Ignorant?"

"Oh, no,—not that. Well, I'll sketch them for you. Mr Varian is a Wall Street man,——"

"Magnate?"

"Yes, I daresay. Wealthy, anyway. He's big and Vandyke-bearded. Well mannered,—but a bit preoccupied,—if——"

"Yes, we get what you mean," said the irrepressible Ted. "Go on,—what about the daughter?"

"I haven't come to her yet. The mother is due first. Mrs Varian is the clingingest vine I ever saw. I only saw her on parade, of course, but I'm positive that in curl-papers, she can whine and fret and fly into nervous spasms! Her husband spoils her,—he's far too good to her,——"

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"What a lot you gathered at one interview," murmured Lawrence North.

"That's what I went for," Mrs Blackwood returned, coolly. "Well. Mother Varian is wrapped up in her blossom-child. Betty is a peach,—as I know you boys will agree,—but I never saw greater idolatry in any mother than Mrs Varian shows."

"Betty worth it?" asked John Clark, idly.

"Rather!" Mrs Blackwood assured him. "She's a dear thing. I don't often enthuse over young girls, but Betty Varian is unusual."

"As how?"

"Prettier than most girls, more charm, better manners, and,—a suspicion of brains. Not enough to hurt her, but enough to make it a pleasure to talk to her. Moreover, she's a wilful, spoiled, petted darling of two worshipping parents, and it's greatly to her credit that she isn't an arrogant, impossible chit."

"Sounds good to me," commented Ted; "when can I meet her?"

"I'll introduce you soon. They want to meet some of our best people——"

"Of course. That lets me in at once. When will you take me?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. They're having a small picnic and they asked me to bring two amusing young men."

"May I go?" asked Lawrence North.

"*Young* men, I said," and Mrs Blackwood looked

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at him calmly. "You are old enough to be Betty Varian's father!"

"Well, since I'm not, that needn't prevent my meeting her."

"So you shall, some time. But I'm to take two tomorrow, and,—what do you think? I said I would bring Rodney Granniss, and Mr Varian said, "No, he'd rather I asked some one in his place!"

"Why, for heaven's sake?" cried Landon. "Rod's our star performer."

"Well, you see, they know him——"

"All the more reason——"

"Oh, it's this way. Rod Granniss is already a beau of Betty's,—and her father doesn't approve of the acquaintance."

"Not approve of Granniss!" John Clark looked his amazement. "Mr Varian must be an old fuss!"

"I think that's just what he is," assented Claire Blackwood, and then Ted Landon urged,

"You haven't described the siren yet. What's she like to look at?"

"A little thing, sylphish, rather,—dainty ways, quick, alert motions, and with the biggest gray eyes you ever saw,—edged with black."

"Raving tresses?"

"No; very dark brown, I think. But the liveliest coloring. Red-under-brown cheeks, scarlet lips and——"

"I know,—teeth like pearls."

"No; good, sound, white teeth, and fluttering hands that emphasize and illustrate all she says."

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"All right, she'll do," and Ted looked satisfied. "I can cut out old John here, and if Granniss is barred, I'll have a cinch!"

"You must behave yourself,—at first, anyway, because I am responsible for you. Be ready to go up there with me at four tomorrow afternoon."

"Leave here at four?"

"Yes, we'll walk up. A bit of a climb, but motors can go only to the lodge, you know, and that's not worth while."

The porter's lodge belonging to Headland House was partly visible from the clubhouse, and it guarded the gates that gave ingress to the estate. There was no other mode of entrance, for a high wall ran completely across the narrow neck that joined the headland to the main shore, and all other sides of the precipitous cliff ran straight down to the sea.

From where they sat the group could discern the motor road as far as the lodge; and here and there above that could be glimpsed the narrow, tortuous path that led on to the house.

"Grim old pile," Landon said, looking at Headland House. "Any spook connected with its history?"

"I never heard of any," said Mrs Blackwood. "Did you, Mr North?"

"Not definitely, but I've heard vague rumors of old legends or traditions of dark deeds——"

"Oh, pshaw, I don't believe it!" and Mrs Blackwood shook her head at him. "You're making that up to lend an added interest!"

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North grinned. "I'm afraid I was," he admitted, "but if there isn't any legend there surely ought to be. Let's make one up."

"No, I won't have it. I hate haunted houses, and I shan't allow a ghost to be invented. The place is too beautiful to have a foolish, hackneyed old ghost yarn attached to it. Just because you were up here last summer and this is the first year for most of us, you needn't think you can rule the roost!"

"Very well," Lawrence North smiled good-naturedly, "have it your own way. But, truly, I heard rumors last year——"

"Keep them to yourself, then, and when you meet the Varians, as of course you will, don't say anything to them about such a thing."

"Your word is law," and North bowed, submissively. "Here comes the mail at last, and also, here comes Granniss,—the disapproved one!"

A tall outdoorsy-looking young man appeared, and throwing himself into a piazza swing, asked breezily, "Who's disapproving of me, now? Somebody with absolute lack of fine perception!"

"Nobody here," began Landon, and then a warning glance from Claire Blackwood prevented his further disclosures on the subject.

"Don't make a secret of it," went on Granniss, "own up now, who's been knocking poor little me?"

"I," said Mrs Blackwood, coolly.

"Nixy, Madame Claire! You may disapprove of me, but you're not the one I mean. Who else?"

"Oh, let's tell him," North laughed; "he can stand

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the shock. They say, Granniss, you're *persona non grata* up at the house on the headland."

Rodney Granniss' eyes darkened and he looked annoyed. But he only said, "That's a disapproval any one may obtain by the simple process of admiring Miss Varian."

"Really?" asked Claire Blackwood.

"Very really. To call twice is to incur the displeasure of one or both parents; to venture a third time is to be crossed out of the guest book entirely."

"But, look here, old man," Landon said, "they've only been in that house about a week. Haven't you been rushing things?"

"I knew them before," said Granniss, simply. "I've met them in New York."

"Oh, well, then their dislike of you is evidently well-founded!"

But this impudence of Landon's brought forth no expression of resentment from its victim. Granniss only winked at Ted, and proceeded to look over his letters.

It was the first time in the memory of any of the present *habitués* of Headland Harbor, that the house on the rocks had been occupied. Built long ago, it was so difficult of access and so high priced of rental that no one had cared to live in it. But, suddenly, and for no known reason, this summer it had been rented, late, and now, toward the end of July, the new tenants were only fairly settled.

That their name was Varian was about all that was known of them, until Mrs Blackwood's call had

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been hospitably received and she brought back favorable reports of the family.

It seems Betty was anxious to meet some young people and Mrs Varian was glad to learn from her caller that small picnics were among the favored modes of entertainment, and she decided to begin that way.

Next day, she explained, a few house guests would arrive, and if Mrs Blackwood would bring two or three young men and come herself, perhaps that would be enough for a first attempt at sociability.

This met Mrs Blackwood's entire approval, and she proposed Rodney Granniss' name, all unsuspecting that he would not be welcomed.

"He's all right, you understand," Mrs Varian had said,—Betty not being then present,—"but he's too fond of my daughter. You can tell,—you know,—and I want the child to have a good time, but I want her to have a lot of young acquaintances, and be friendly with all, but not specially interested in any one. Her father feels the same way,—in fact, he feels more strongly about it even than I do. So, this time, please leave Mr Granniss out of it."

This was all plausible enough, and no real disparagement to Rodney, so Mrs Blackwood agreed.

"Can I do anything for you?" she asked her hostess at parting. "Have you everything you want? Are your servants satisfactory?"

"Not in every respect,"—Mrs Varian frowned. "But we're lucky to keep them at all. Only by the

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most outrageous concessions, I assure you. If they get too overbearing, I may have to let some of them go."

"Let me know, in that case, and I may be able to help you," and with a few further amenities, Claire Blackwood went away.

"But if I were one of her servants I shouldn't stay with her!" she confided later to a trusted friend. "I never saw a more foolishly emotional woman. She almost wept when she told me about her cook's ingratitude! As if any one looked for appreciation of favors in a cook! And when she talked about Betty, she bubbled over with such enthusiasm that she was again moved to tears! It seems her first two little ones died very young, and I think they've always feared they mightn't raise Betty. Hence the spoiling process."

"And it also explains," observed the interested friend, "why the parents discountenance the attentions of would-be swains."

"Of course,—but Betty is twenty, and that is surely old enough to begin to think about such things seriously."

"For the girl,—yes. And doubtless she does. But parents never realize that their infants are growing up. It is not impossible that Rod Granniss and Miss Betty have progressed much further along the road to Arcady than her elders may suspect. Why did the Varians come here,—where Rod is?"

"I don't suppose they knew it,—though, maybe Betty did. Young people are pretty sharp. And

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you know, Rod was here in June, then he went away and only returned after the Varians arrived. Yes, there must have been some sort of collusion on the part of the youngsters."

"Maybe not. I daresay Miss Betty has lots of admirers as devoted as young Granniss. Can't you ask me to the picnic?"

"Not this one. It's very small. And there are to be some guests at the house, I believe. The family interests me. They are types, I think. Betty is more than an ordinary flutterbudget, like most of the very young girls around here. And the older Varians are really worth while. Mr Varian is a brooding, self-contained sort,—I feel sorry for him."

"There, there, that will do, Claire! When you feel sorry for a man—I remember you began by being sorry for Lawrence North!"

"I'm sorry for him still. He's a big man,—in a way, a genius,—and yet he——"

"He gets nowhere! That's because he *isn't* a genius! But he's a widower, so he's fair quarry. Don't go to feeling sorry for married men."

"Oh, there's no sentiment in my sympathy for Mr Varian. Only he intrigues me because of his restless air,—his restrained effect, as if he were using every effort to keep himself from breaking through!"

"Breaking through what?"

"I don't know! Through some barrier, some limit that he has fixed for himself—I tell you I don't

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know what it's all about. That's why I'm interested."

"Curious, you mean."

"Well, curious, then. And how he puts up with that hand-wringing ready-to-cry wife! Yet, he's fawningly devoted to her! He anticipates her slightest wish,—he is worried sick if she is the least mite incommoded or disturbed,—and I know he'd lie down and let her walk on him if she even looked as if she'd care to!"

"What a lot you read into a man's natural consideration for his wife!"

"But it's there! I'm no fool,—I can read people,—you know that! I tell you that man is under his wife's thumb for some reason far more potent than his love for her, or her demand for affection from him."

"What *could* be the explanation?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm curious. I'm going to find out, though, and that without the Varians in the least suspecting my efforts. Wait till you see her. She's almost eerie, she's so emotional. Not noisy or even verbally expressive, but her face is a study in nervous excitement. She seems to grab at the heartstrings of a mere passer-by, and play on them until she tears them out!"

"Good gracious, you make her out a vampire!"

"I think she is,—not a silly vamp, that the girls joke about,—but the real thing!"

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CHAPTER II

Betty Varian

"DAD, you're absolutely impossible!"

"Oh, come now, Betty, not as bad as that! Just because I don't agree to everything you say——"

"But you *never* agree with me! You seem to be opposed on principle to everything I suggest or want. It's always been like that! From the time I was born,—how old was I, Dad, when you first saw me?"

Mr Varian looked reminiscent.

"About an hour old, I think," he replied; "maybe a little less."

"Well, from that moment until this, you have persistently taken the opposite side in any discussion we have had."

"But if I hadn't, Betty, there would have been no discussion! And, usually there hasn't been. You're a spoiled baby,—you always have been and always will be. Your will is strong and as it has almost never been thwarted or even curbed, you have grown up a headstrong, wilful, perverse young woman, and I'm sure I don't know what to do with you!"

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"Get rid of me, Dad," Betty's laugh rang out, while her looks quite belied the rather terrible character just ascribed to her.

One foot tucked under her, she sat in a veranda swing, now and then touching her toe to the floor to keep swaying. She wore a sand-colored sport suit whose matching hat lay beside her on the floor.

Her vivid, laughing face, with its big gray eyes and pink cheeks, its scarlet lips and white teeth was framed by a mop of dark brown wavy hair, now tossed by the strong breeze from the sea.

The veranda overlooked the ocean, and the sunlit waves, stretching far away from the great cliff were dotted in the foreground with small craft.

Frederick Varian sat on the veranda rail, a big, rather splendid-looking man, with the early gray of fifty years showing in his hair and carefully trimmed Vandyke beard.

His air was naturally confident and self-assured, but in the face of this chit of a girl he somehow found himself at a disadvantage.

"Betty, dear," he took another tack, "can't you understand the fatherly love that cannot bear the idea of parting with a beloved daughter?"

"Oh, yes, but a father's love ought to think what is for that daughter's happiness. Then he ought to make the gigantic self-sacrifice that may be necessary."

A dimple came into Betty's cheek, and she smiled roguishly, yet with a canny eye toward the effect she was making.

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But Varian looked moodily out over the sea.

"I won't have it," he said, sternly. "I suppose I have some authority in this matter and I forbid you to encourage any young man to the point of a proposal, or even to think of becoming engaged."

"How can I ward off a proposal, Dad?" Betty inquired, with an innocent air.

"Don't be foolish. Of course you can do that. Any girl with your intelligence knows just when an acquaintance crosses the line of mere friendship——"

"Oh, Daddy, you are *too* funny! And when you crossed the line of mere friendship with mother,—what did she do?"

"That has nothing to do with the subject. Now, mind, Betty, I am not jesting,—I am not talking idly——"

"You sound very much like it!"

"I'm not. I'm very much in earnest. You are not to encourage the definite attentions of any——"

"All right, let Rod Granniss come up here then, and I promise not to encourage him."

"He shall not come up here, because he has already gone too far, and you have encouraged him too much——"

"But I love him, Daddy,—and—and I think you might——"

"Hush! That's enough! Don't let me hear another word now or ever regarding Granniss! He is crossed off our acquaintance, and if he persists in staying here, we will go away!"

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"Why, Father, we've only just come!"

"I know it, and I came here, thinking to get you away from that man. He followed us up here,——"

"He was here before we came!"

"But he didn't come until he knew we were coming."

"All right, he came because he wanted to be where I am. And I want to be where he is. And you'd better be careful, Father, or I may take the bit in my teeth and——"

"And run off with him? That's why I came here. You can't get away. You perfectly well know that there's no way down from this house but by that one narrow path,—I suppose you've no intention of jumping into the sea?"

"Love will find a way!" Betty sang, saucily.

"It isn't love, Betty. It's a miserable childish infatuation that will pass at once, if you lose sight of the chap for a short time."

"Nothing of the sort! It's the love of my life!"

Varian laughed. "That's a fine-sounding phrase, but it doesn't mean anything. Now, child, be reasonable. Give up Granniss. Be friends with all the young people up here, boys and girls both, but don't let me hear any foolishness about being engaged to anybody."

"Do you mean for me never to marry, Father?"

"I'd rather you didn't, my dear. Can't you be content to spend your days with your devoted parents? Think what we've done for you? What we've given you,——"

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"Dad, you make me tired! What have you given me, what have you done for me, more than any parents do for a child? You've given me a home, food and clothing,—and loving care! What else? And what do I owe you for that, except my own love and gratitude? But I don't owe you the sacrifice of the natural, normal, expectation of a home and husband of my own! I'm twenty,—that's quite old enough to think of such things. Pray remember how old mother was when she married you. She was nineteen. Suppose her father had talked to her as you're talking to me! What would you have said to him, I'd like to know!"

By this time Fred Varian was walking with quick short strides up and down the veranda. Betty rose and faced him, standing directly in his path.

"Father," she said, speaking seriously, "you are all wrong! You don't know what you're talking about——"

"That will do, Betty!" When Varian's temper was roused he could speak very harshly, and did so now. "Hush! I will not hear such words from you! How dare you tell me I don't know what I'm talking about! Now you make up your mind to obey me, or I'll cut off all your association with the young people! I'll shut you up——"

"Hush, yourself, Dad! You're talking rubbish, and you know it! Shut me up! In a turret of the castle, I suppose! On bread and water, I suppose! What kind of nonsense is that?"

"You'll see whether it's nonsense or not! What

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do you suppose I took this isolated place for, except to keep you here if you grow too independent! Do you know there is no way you can escape if I choose to make you a prisoner? And if that's the only way to break your spirit, I'll do it!"

"Why, Father Varian!" Betty looked a little scared, "whatever has come over you?"

"I've made up my mind, that's all. For twenty years I've humored you and indulged you and acceded to your every wish. You've been petted and spoiled until you think you are the only dictator in this family! Now a time has come when I have put my foot down——"

"Well, pick it up again, Daddy, and all will be forgiven."

Betty smiled and attempted to kiss the belligerent face looking down at her.

But Frederick Varian repulsed the offered caress and said, sternly:

"I want no affection from a wilful, disobedient child! Give me your word, Betty, to respect my wishes, and I'll always be glad of your loving ways."

But Betty was angry now.

"I'll give you no such promise! I shall conduct myself as I please with my friends and my acquaintances. You know me well enough to know that I never do anything that is in bad form or in bad taste. If I choose to flirt with the young men, or even, as you call it, encourage them, I propose to do so! And I resent your interference, and I deny your right to forbid me in such matters. And, too,

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I'll go so far as to warn you that if you persist in this queer attitude you've taken,—you'll be sorry! Remember that!"

Betty's eyes flashed, but she was quiet rather than excited.

Varian himself was nervous and agitated. His fingers clenched and his lips trembled with the intensity of his feelings and as Betty voiced her rebellious thoughts he stared at her in amazement.

"What *are* you two quarreling about?" came the surprised accents of Mrs Varian as she came out through the French window from the library and looked curiously at them.

"Oh, Mother," Betty cried, "Dad's gone nutty! He says I never can marry anybody."

"What nonsense, Fred"; she did not take it at all seriously. "Of course, Betty will marry some day, but not yet. Don't bother about it at present."

"But Daddy's bothering very much about it at present. At least, he's bothering me,—don't let little Betty be bothered, Mummy,—will you?"

"Let her alone, Fred. Why do you tease the child? I declare you two are always at odds over something!"

"No, Minna, that's not so. I always indulge Betty——"

"Oh, yes, after I've coaxed you to do so. You're an unnatural father, Fred, you seem possessed to frown on all Betty's innocent pleasures."

"I don't want her getting married and going off and leaving us——" he growled, still looking angry.

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"Well, the baby isn't even engaged yet,—don't begin to worry. And, too, that is in the mother's province.

"Not entirely. I rather guess a father has some authority!"

"Oh, yes, if it's exercised with loving care and discretion. Don't you bother, Betty, anyway. Father and mother will settle this little argument by ourselves."

"I'd rather settle it with Dad," Betty declared spiritedly. "It's too ridiculous for him to take the stand that I shall never marry! I'm willing to promise not to become engaged without asking you both first; I'm willing to say I won't marry a man you can convince me is unworthy; I'm willing to promise anything in reason,—but a blind promise never to marry is too much to ask of any girl!"

"Of course, it is!" agreed Mrs Varian. "Why do you talk to her like that, Fred?"

"Because I propose to have my own way for once! I've given in to you two in every particular for twenty years or more. Now, I assert myself. I say Betty shall not marry, and I shall see to it that she does not!"

"Oh, my heavens!" and Mrs Varian wrung her hands, with a wail of nervous pettishness, "sometimes, Fred, I think you're crazy! At any rate, you'll set me crazy, if you talk like that! Do stop this quarrel anyhow. Kiss and make up, won't you? To think of you two, the only human beings on earth that I care a rap for, acting like this! My

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husband and my child! The only things I live for! The apple of my eye, the core of my soul, both of you,—can't you see how you distress me when you are at odds! And you're always at odds! Always squabbling over some little thing. But, heretofore, you've always laughed and agreed, finally. Now forget this foolishness,—do!"

"It isn't foolishness," and Varian set his lips together, doggedly.

"No, it isn't foolishness," said Betty quietly, but with a look of indomitable determination.

"Well, stop it, at any rate," begged Mrs Varian, "if you don't I shall go into hysterics,—and it's time now for the Herberts to come."

Now both Fred and Betty knew that a suggestion of hysterics was no idle threat, for Minna Varian could achieve the most annoying demonstrations of that sort at a moment's notice. And it was quite true that the expected guests were imminent.

But no truce was put into words, for just then a party of three people came in sight and neared the veranda steps.

The three were Frederick Varian's brother Herbert and his wife and daughter. This family was called the Herberts to distinguish them from the Frederick Varian household.

The daughter, Eleanor, was a year or two younger than Betty, and the girls were friendly, though of widely differing tastes; the brothers Varian were much alike; but the two matrons were as opposite as it is possible for two women to be. Mrs Herbert

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was a strong character, almost strong-minded. She had no patience with her sister-in-law's nerves or hysterical tendencies. It would indeed be awkward if the Herberts were to arrive in the midst of one of Mrs Frederick's exhibitions of temperamental disturbance.

"Wonderful place!" exclaimed Herbert Varian as they ascended the steps to the verandah. "Great, old boy! I never saw anything like it."

"Reminds me of the Prisoner of Chillon or the Castle of Otranto or——" said Mrs Herbert.

"Climbing that steep path reminded me of the Solitary Horseman," Herbert interrupted his wife. "Whew! let me sit down! I'm too weighty a person to visit your castled crag of Drachenfels very often! Whew!"

"Poor Uncle Herbert," cooed Betty; "it's an awful long, steep pull, isn't it? Get your breath, and I'll get you some nice, cool fruit punch. Come on, Eleanor, help me; the servants are gone to the circus,—every last one of 'em——"

"Oh, I thought you were having a party here this afternoon," Eleanor said, as she went with Betty.

"Not a party, a picnic. They're the proper caper up here. And only a little one. The baskets are all ready, and the men carry them,—then we go to a lovely picnic place,—not very far,—and we all help get the supper. You see, up here, if you don't let the servants go off skylarking every so often, they leave."

"I should think they would!" exclaimed Eleanor,

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earnestly; "I'm ready to leave now! How do you stand it, Betty? I think it's fearful!"

"Oh, it isn't the sort of thing you'd like, I know. Put those glasses on that tray, will you, Nell? But I love this wild, craggy place, it's like an eagle's eyrie, and I adore the solitude,—especially as there are plenty of people, and a golf club and an artist colony and all sorts of nice things in easy distance."

"You mean that little village or settlement we came through on the way from the station?"

"Yes; and a few of their choicest inhabitants are coming up this afternoon for our picnic."

"That sounds better," Eleanor sighed, "but I'd never want to stay here. Is Rod Grannis here? Is that why you came?"

"Hush, Nell. Don't mention Rod's name, at least, not before Father. You see, Dad's down on him."

"Down on Rod! Why for?"

"Only because he's too fond of little Betty."

"Who is? Rod or your father?"

Betty laughed. "Both of 'em! But, I mean, Dad is down on any young man who's specially interested in me."

"Oh, I know. So is my father. I don't let it bother me. Fathers are all like that. Most of the girls I know say so."

"Yes, I know it's a fatherly failing; but Dad is especially rabid on the subject. There you take the basket of cakes and I'll carry the tray."

It was nearly five o'clock when the picnic party was finally ready to start for its junketing.

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Mrs Blackwood had arrived, bringing her two promised young men, Ted Landon and John Clark.

Rearrayed in picnic garb, the house guests were ready for the fun, and the Frederick Varians were getting together and looking over the baskets of supper.

"If we could only have kept one helper by us," bemoaned Minna Varian, her speech accompanied by her usual wringing of her distressed hands. "I begged Kelly to stay but he wouldn't."

"The circus is here only one day, you know, Mrs Varian," Landon told her, "and I fancy every servant in Headland Harbor has gone to it. But command me——"

"Indeed, we will," put in Betty; "carry this, please, and, Uncle Herbert, you take this coffee paraphernalia."

Divided among the willing hands, the luggage was not too burdensome, and the cavalcade prepared to start.

"No fear of burglars, I take it," said Herbert, as his brother closed the front door and shook it to be sure it was fastened.

"Not a bit," and Frederick Varian took up his own baskets. "No one can possibly reach this house, save through that gate down by the lodge. And that is locked. Also the windows and doors of the house are all fastened. So if you people have left jewelry on your dressing tables, don't be alarmed, you'll find it there on your return."

"All aboard!" shouted Landon, and they started,

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