THE HISTORY OF THE LADY BETTY STAIR

BY

MOLLY ELLIOT SEAWELL

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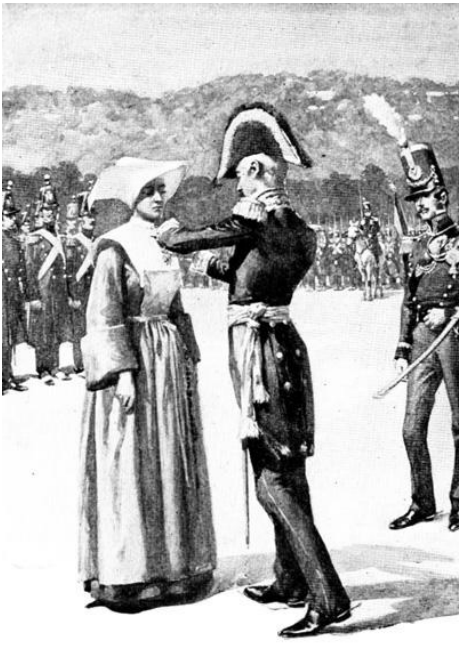


"'I present you with the Cross for Tried Bravery. None has deserved it more than you.'"

The History of the Lady Betty Stair

IN the year 1798 the palace of Holyrood was inhabited by a swarm of French people,—his Royal Highness the Comte d'Artois, who in his youth had danced so deliciously on the tightrope as to be the admiration of the Little Trianon, and in his old age was Charles X. of France; his Savoyard princess, Marie Thérèse; and some gentlemen and ladies in waiting. Among the suite were four persons whose lives had been remotely but strangely connected in the old days at Versailles; and as fate is an adept at such tricks, all four of them were brought together in this old haunted palace when the Comte d'Artois took up his abode there. One of them, the Abbé de Ronceray, was a brave, gentle old priest, who had once been a soldier and was a soldier still at heart; another was De Bourmont, a fellow with a fine figure, a plain face, but irresistible among the ladies; the third was Bastien,—handsome, but an arrant scoundrel; and the fourth was Lady Betty Stair, one of the sweetest creatures that ever lived. Years before, in 1789, when Lady Betty was a mere chit of fifteen, she knew both De Bourmont and Bastien well by sight. They were officers in the Queen's Musketeers, and Lady Betty's education had been finished at the palace of Versailles, under the care of Madame Mirabel, an ancient hanger-on of the court, so they had a plenty of chances to meet. But she was so young and unformed that De Bourmont had never noticed the handsome

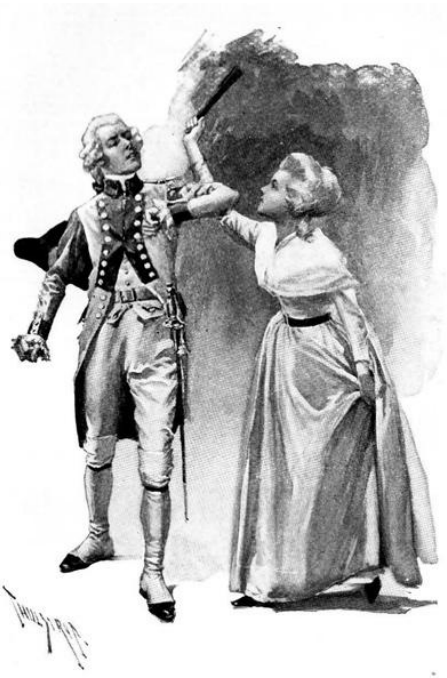
slip of a girl; and Bastien had a most unpleasant recollection of her. In those days she had a brother, Angus Macdonald, an officer in the Scottish Guard of the King of France, as his father had been before him. The Macdonalds were of those who had poured out their blood and treasure with a free hand for the Stuarts, and esteemed George III. just as much a "Hanoverian rat" as George I. They were also of that remnant of the Highland families which held to the old religion, and, being cut off thereby from the profession of arms in their own country, they were apt to pass over to France, in each generation, and see some service under the fleur-de-lis of the Bourbons. The old laird himself had served in Berwick's brigade, and had married a French girl, who died young, leaving him a boy and girl. The son, therefore, following the traditions of his family, went to France for the restless years of his youth, and the old laird sent his only daughter, the apple of his eye, with her brother to be "finished" in her mother's land. The brother and sister had the simple ways of Scotch people, and, in spite of Madame Mirabel's "finishing" process, Lady Betty, who was the most highbred creature imaginable, could never get over this pretty simplicity. She and Angus openly kissed each other quite warmly at parting, no matter who was present; and one morning—it was that terrible October day in 1789, when Versailles entertained strange company, consisting of a hundred thousand of the "canaille," as the Versailles people called them—she kissed Angus in sight of Bastien, who did not know they were brother and sister. Bastien, passing along a few minutes after, ogled Lady Betty very odiously, which she responded to by a cool stare, quite unlike a French girl's drooping glance; and Bastien, then and there, made the

greatest mistake of his life. He paid Lady Betty an impudent compliment and completed his folly by a motion as if to kiss her.

Now, Lady Betty held in her hand a large green fan, and when Bastien thought he was about to gain a kiss, she raised the fan, and, bringing it down on his nose with all the strength in her strong young arm, gave him such a whack that he was, in a minute, as bloody as a butcher, and wore court-plaster for a week.

Lady Betty, having done this timely act of justice, immediately fled, blushing with the fierceness of insulted maidenhood, while Bastien stood still and cursed her and her green fan. Being a highly accomplished liar, however, he invented a romance of a baker's wife having assaulted him while he was trying, later in the morning, to keep her out of the Queen's bedroom; and he really made a very comical story out of it—only, there was not a word of truth in it.

But events so terrible followed a few days after, that for months, and even years, Lady Betty almost forgot this adventure. Besides the outbreak of that ferocious thirst for freedom called the Revolution, Lady Betty met with a dreadful sorrow and loss. Within a week of the episode of the green fan and Bastien's nose, Angus Macdonald was found one evening, shortly after dark, lying stark and dead in the forest of Fontainebleau, and he had evidently lost his life in a duel.



“Now, Lady Betty had in her hand a large green fan.”

The name of his adversary and the cause of the quarrel remained a mystery; but there was a suspicion that the Abbé de Ronceray knew something about it. It so happened that he had that very day received ordination as a priest, after having spent more than thirty years with the reputation of a peculiarly dashing *beau sabreur*, and having reached the rank of commandant of battalion. He had gone to Fontainebleau in the afternoon, at the urgent request of the old curé, who happened to be ill and to need the services of an assistant. About dusk the new-made priest was sitting with the curé, when a servant came upstairs and, with a scared face, told De Ronceray that a

gentleman, evidently an officer, was downstairs in the little salon and was in deep agitation. Would M. de Ronceray come at once?

The new-made priest went down, carrying a lighted candle in his hand, being unfamiliar with the house. As he entered the salon a young man in uniform arose, and, before the priest could get a look at him, blew out the candle, leaving them in darkness.

Having been used to danger all his life, this little occurrence only caused De Ronceray to say coolly, “Well, my friend, just as you like. If you prefer the darkness—”

The officer’s response was to close and lock the door, to which De Ronceray made no objection. The two remained locked in the room, and in darkness, conversing in whispers, for half an hour, when a knock came at the door. The officer responded by dropping through the window on the priest’s flower-bed, and then took briskly to his heels. De Ronceray opened the door and almost ran into the arms of young De Bourmont. The two had known each other, as a subaltern and a commandant might, and De Bourmont had come to pay his respects to his old chief. De Ronceray was charmed to see him, and the two sat up half the night conversing. De Bourmont, before then, had been somewhat irreligious, but a change for the better was noted in him after that night, and he and the ex-commandant became fast friends.

When the tragedy of Angus Macdonald’s death that evening became known, De Ronceray said nothing about his mysterious visitor—whose face he had not seen, and whose voice, except

in whispers, he had not heard. But the servant, like most of her kind, was unable to hold her tongue and gave a brilliantly picturesque description of it, not forgetting the incident of De Bourmont's visit. The story, in going from mouth to mouth, naturally had many additions and emendations, and it was whispered abroad that De Bourmont was the slayer of the young Scotch officer. But the days of storm and stress were at hand then, and such a trifle as the loss of a single life made the less stir when lives went down before the red revolution as the ripe wheat before the sickle.

The story reached the ears of the broken-hearted young sister, but in such form that she only knew it was thought that De Ronceray knew something concerning Angus Macdonald's murderer. Alone, except for the elderly infant known as Madame Mirabel, and preparing to return to Scotland through the storm of the Revolution, Lady Betty had no means, and indeed no wish, to know the name of her brother's murderer. Angus could never come back—the rest mattered little.

At last the two women—Lady Betty being entitled to be called a woman for her spirit and sharp intelligence rather than by reason of her years—reached the eyry in the Highlands which was the home of the Macdonalds of Stair.

It was a melancholy life enough for the two during the next few years. Madame Mirabel, with the singular fortitude that those shallow, trifling people of the French court showed generally in their misfortunes, bore her exile without a word of complaint. The climate, the people, the fare, the bagpipes, even the heather that made the towering peaks about them to be clothed in royal purple, she hated with all her French soul,—

but she said no word. As for Lady Betty, who was as proud as any Highland chieftain ever was, she would rather have died than uttered one complaint. The old laird was that not uncommon character a hundred years ago, a Highlandman, half savage and half courtier, who talked more Gaelic and more French than he did English, almost found consolation for the loss of his only son in the charm and tenderness of his only daughter. For her sake he even gave up having those noisy drinking bouts at his house when a score of Highland gentlemen would assemble and spend, not hours, but days, "on the lee side of a bowl of punch." On one of these occasions, Sandy Macgowan, one of the inferior gentry, having been observed to sit perfectly still for several hours, a cursory examination revealed that Sandy was dead. This trifling accident did not interrupt the proceedings though, and the old laird's reply, some days after, to Madame Mirabel's volubly expressed horror, was brief and to the point:—

"Would ye have the pleasure of a company of gentlemen disturbed for such a puir creature as Sandy Macgowan?"

Lady Betty, however, cast a glance of such reproach at her father that the laird actually blushed for the first time in forty years, and left the room. Not long afterward, though, the laird followed Sandy Macgowan, and Lady Betty was indeed alone in the world.

In the same year, '98, a great event happened to her, however. The Comte d'Artois having taken refuge at Holyrood, it was thought well in order to keep the Edinburgh people satisfied with their visitors, that at least one of the young ladies of the old Jacobite families be asked to attend the Princess Marie

Thérèse,—and a shrewd move it was. Lady Betty was their choice, and nothing could have been more judicious; for, in spite of her readiness to wield her green fan on impudent young gentlemen, and the unforgettable sorrow for her father and brother, the sweetness, the charm she carried with her, was irresistible,—and the French colony needed all the consolatory charm that could be had, especially the young De Bourmont.

In the spirit of devotion among the old nobility to their exiled royalties, a request was equivalent to a command, and the Comte d'Artois, having requested De Bourmont's company, that high-spirited young gentleman, ex-officer of the Queen's Musketeers, thereupon had to spend several of the best years of his life in laboriously watching and waiting upon a man who did nothing all day long and half the night. At first De Bourmont bore it with the fine air of a martyr; then he yearned and burned to join the Vendeans, and latterly he had boldly made up his mind to go over to the Corsican at the first decent opportunity. He was thinking about this one autumn night in 1798, as he leaned against the wall in the courtyard of Holyrood, fingering his sword and biting his lips and muttering grimly to himself, when up rattled a huge old travelling chariot, and, the steps being let down, a simpering old French lady descended, and after her the sweetest, freshest, most laughing, coquettish young girl De Bourmont had ever seen,—Lady Betty Stair. Now, De Bourmont had little difficulty in identifying the party. He knew the Scotch girl was expected, and had pictured to himself a tall, rawboned, redhaired girl,—in short, a Highland chief in long petticoats. And Bastien, who was coming around the corner of the stone gateway, recognized them and

gave a little start, and changing color turned back, but presently came forward again. Bastien's claim to being of the old nobility was a little shady; consequently, he highly valued his attendance on royalty, and was willing to stay as long as the Comte d'Artois wanted him.

Lady Betty, with the eye of an eaglet in her own mountains, recognized both men by the light of the flaring flambeaux carried by the running footmen,—Bastien with a thrill of hatred, fear, and disgust, and De Bourmont with a thrill of a very different sort. She remembered seeing him at Versailles years before, and she recalled a certain little girlish, almost childish tenderness she had felt for him, which suddenly came to life when she saw him again. As for Madame Mirabel, forgetting all about etiquette, which had been the passion and study of her lifetime, she rushed up to De Bourmont and fairly embraced him.

"Oh, my dear De Bourmont," she cried, "such a happiness to see a French face once more!"

De Bourmont gallantly and impudently responded to this by giving her a sounding kiss upon her withered cheek, at which the delighted old lady protested loudly.

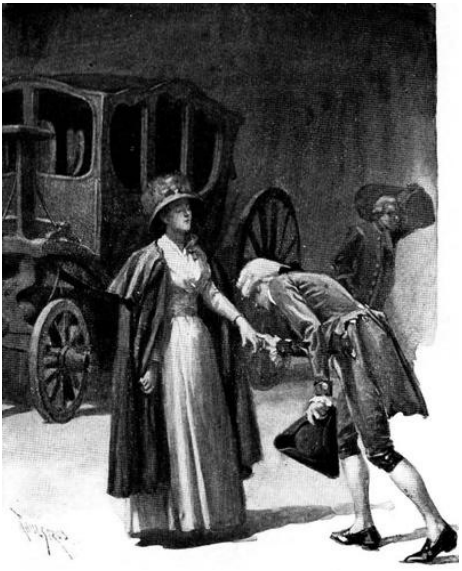
"And here," continued Madame, "here is Miladi Betty—don't you remember her at Versailles in that dear, sweet, happy time?—oh me, oh me!"

"Ah, yes," answered De Bourmont, advancing and bowing to the ground as he kissed the tips of Lady Betty's fingers, "I recollect this young lady well as a little demoiselle. She was so

pretty, and so proud—she reminded me of a young peacock in the King's gardens."

Lady Betty blushed more than ever at this—and then some one else came forward.

"Dear, dear Bastien," cried Madame Mirabel, who had scarcely known Bastien in the old days, but who would have been glad to see a dog from Versailles.



"'I recollect this young lady well.'"

Lady Betty stood for a moment throbbing and thrilling as to whether she should speak to Bastien or not. But having, with all her grace and spirit, her own share of hard Scotch sense, she saw in a moment that she would be a laughing-stock forever, and would have to leave Holyrood, if ever that green fan

episode came out, she wisely determined to ignore it for the present. Besides, did Bastien really know her? and had he ever known her name? Bastien was perfectly familiar with both, but he did not choose to acknowledge it, and so he made Lady Betty a low bow, and carefully divested his countenance of the smallest recognition.

"'Tis too late to see their Royal Highnesses to-night," cried De Bourmont, "so there is nothing for it but to come and sup in my apartment—you, too, Bastien," thinking from Madame Mirabel's cordial greeting that they were bosom friends of long standing.

Bastien, at this, had his moment of hesitation. Should he risk it with that beautiful young virago or not? but he arrived by an instantaneous course of reasoning at the very same conclusion that Lady Betty had come to regarding himself,—he thought she did not recognize him, and Bastien devoutly hoped she never would. And there was something else—a more serious thing—Bastien tried to put it out of his mind but he could not; he felt himself shudder slightly at the expectation that the name of Lady Betty's dead brother be spoken before him—he never liked to hear that name. However, a little while saw them seated around a supper-table in De Bourmont's grim, half-furnished room in the old palace, with a good fire and wax lights and a Scotch-French supper to cheer them up.

The Lady Betty Stair was distinctively a child of palaces, so that she would have been perfectly happy but for Bastien's presence,—and even that could not seriously affect her happiness. Besides—blessed thought—he did not know her!

Ah, Lady Betty, Lady Betty, he knows you well enough, and he means to make you pay for that once-skinned nose of his!

Madame Mirabel did an almost inconceivable amount of eating and talking, and Bastien, with an eye to punishing Lady Betty's Scotch pride, began to complain bitterly of Edinburgh and Holyrood.

"An old rat-hole, my dear Madame. And the parties—oh, the parties! Once a week we have levees in an old hall full of nightmares in canvas,—portraits of Scotch kings,—and the great people from the town are invited. Perhaps you thought the old nobility of France proud, but you ought to see these people. Their pedigrees go back to Moses, and their pride is as long as their pedigrees."

Lady Betty would have dearly liked to box Bastien's ears for this, but De Bourmont, who was a sharp fellow, said, very artfully: "I think our levees most charming—and every spot consecrated to the memory of Mary Stuart, as this old castle is, must ever be interesting."

De Bourmont knew, well enough, that a true Scotchman or a Scotchwoman bases his or her opinion of a person upon that person's opinion of Mary Stuart. So Lady Betty smiled brilliantly at De Bourmont, whose fortune was made from that onward with her, and said: "You are worthy, Monsieur, of the hospitality of the Scotch people."

"And who is in the suite?" asked Madame Mirabel.

Bastien named several persons, and among others the Abbé de Ronceray,—"the best man and the worst bore! He is always

after me about my soul, when I am thinking about my body, and he preaches alms—giving to us when most of us are so devilish poor that we are afraid to meet our washerwomen."

"He was my old commander," said De Bourmont, laughing, "and the first thing he did when he became a priest was to order me to go to confession, and I was afraid to refuse. I had merely called to hear the news; it was the evening of that dreadful October day at Versailles in 1789, and I was stationed at Fontainebleau, where we heard all sorts of wild reports,—most of them turned out to be worse than we dreamed,—and, knowing the Abbé had come from Paris that morning, I went to his house ostensibly to pay my respects. Before I knew it, I was on my knees in the confessional. I was his first penitent; and I made him a confession that kept him awake that night, *I* know."

Madame Mirabel cackled with laughter. Bastien rose suddenly and went to the window, which he raised a little.

"Pardon, Madame and Mademoiselle—just a breath of air—"

He came back in a moment to his chair looking much as usual, but in pouring out a glass of wine, his hand shook so that the wine was spilled on the cloth.

At the mention of the Abbé de Ronceray's name Lady Betty turned a little pale, remembering the vague story which credited him with knowing who was the murderer of Angus Macdonald. She said nothing, however, only wishing in her heart that some other Abbé were at Holyrood instead of this one, whose very name was a painful reminder of a terrible tragedy in her life. De Bourmont, whose eyes were quick, saw

that the subject was an unfortunate one, for Lady Betty sighed instead of smiling at his little story; so he turned it very aptly and began to sing the praises of Edinburgh and Scotland in general. Usually, nobody was sharper at finding out the meaning of words than Lady Betty; but, being a Scotchwoman, she fell directly into De Bourmont's trap, and smiled and blushed with pleasure, to the vast delight of that young hypocrite.

De Bourmont was so gay and full of life that he made the evening charming. In spite of his gayety, though, Lady Betty saw, plainly enough, a restlessness in his manner which showed that the life he was leading did not altogether suit him. And presently, when Madame Mirabel and Bastien were deep in recalling the terrible incidents that had happened to those left behind in France, De Bourmont and Lady Betty began to talk confidentially, and his dissatisfaction was plain.

"We occupy ourselves with trifles here," he said bitterly, "because else we should go mad. Think,—almost every Frenchman is fighting for France, and here we are, and we can neither fight for her nor against her. That is it which keeps me awake at night, and inspires me to all the desperate schemes of amusement that we can find in this sober town."

Lady Betty, who came of good fighting stock, fully understood this.

"Let me tell you, under the rose, here," she said, "I like that Corsican, General Bonaparte. I believe he will do greater things for France than he has done yet."