

***GRACE
LIVINGSTON
HILL***



***EXIT
BETTY***

Grace Livingston Hill

Exit Betty

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CHAPTER I

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The crowd gave way and the car glided smoothly up to the curb at the canopied entrance to the church. The blackness of the wet November night was upon the street. It had rained at intervals all day.

The pavements shone wetly like new paint in the glimmer of the street lights, and rude shadows gloomed in every cranny of the great stone building.

Betty, alone in the midst of her bridal finery, shrank back from the gaze of the curious onlookers, seeming very small like a thing of the air caught in a mesh of the earth.

She had longed all day for this brief respite from everyone, but it had passed before she could concentrate her thoughts. She started forward, a flame of rose for an instant in her white cheeks, but gone as quickly. Her eyes reminded one of the stars among the far-away clouds on a night of fitful storm with only glimpses of their beauty in breaks of the overcast sky. Her small hands gripped one another excitedly, and the sweet lips were quivering.

A white-gloved hand reached out to open the car door, and other hands caught and cared for the billow of satin and costly lace with which she was surrounded, as if it, and not she, were the important one.

They led her up the curtained way, where envious eyes peeped through a furtive rip in the canvas, or craned around an opening to catch a better glimpse of her loveliness, one little dark-eyed foreigner even reached out a grimy,

wondering finger to the silver whiteness of her train; but she, all unknowing, trod the carpeted path as in a dream.

The wedding march was just beginning. She caught the distant notes, felt the hush as she approached the audience, and wondered why the ordeal seemed so much greater now that she was actually come to the moment. If she had known it would be like this—! Oh, why had she given in!

The guests had risen and were stretching their necks for the first vision of her. The chaplet of costly blossoms sat upon her brow and bound her wedding veil floating mistily behind, but the lovely head was bowed, not lifted proudly as a bride's should be, and the little white glove that rested on the arm of the large florid cousin trembled visibly. The cousin was almost unknown until a few hours before. His importance overpowered her. She drooped her eyes and tried not to wish for the quiet, gray-haired cousin of her own mother. It was so strange for him to have failed her at the last moment, when he had promised long ago to let nothing hinder him from giving her away if she should ever be married. His telegram, "Unavoidably detained," had been received but an hour before. He seemed the only one of her kind, and now she was all alone. All the rest were like enemies, although they professed deep concern for her welfare; for they were leagued together against all her dearest wishes, until she had grown weary in the combat.

She gave a frightened glance behind as if some intangible thing were following her. Was it a hounding dread that after all she would not be free after marriage?

With measured tread she passed the long white-ribboned way, under arches that she never noticed, through a sea of

faces that she never saw, to the altar smothered in flowers and tropical ferns. It seemed interminable. Would it never end? They paused at last, and she lifted frightened eyes to the florid cousin, and then to the face of her bridegroom!

It was a breathless moment, and but for the deep tones of the organ now hushing for the ceremony, one of almost audible silence. No lovelier bride had trod those aisles in many a long year; so exquisite, so small, so young—and so exceeding rich! The guests were entranced, and every eye was greedily upon her as the white-robed minister advanced with his open book.

"Beloved, we are met together to-night to join this man ——!"

At that word they saw the bride suddenly, softly sink before them, a little white heap at the altar, with the white face turned upward, the white eyelids closed, the long dark lashes sweeping the pretty cheek, the wedding veil trailing mistily about her down the aisle, and her big bouquet of white roses and maiden-hair ferns clasped listlessly in the white-gloved hands.

For a moment no one stirred, so sudden, so unexpected it was. It all seemed an astonishing part of the charming spectacle. The gaping throng with startled faces stood and stared. Above the huddled little bride stood the bridegroom, tall and dark and frowning, an angry red surging through his handsome face. The white-haired minister, with two red spots on his fine scholarly cheeks, stood grave with troubled dignity, as though somehow he meant to hold the little still bride responsible for this unseemly break in his beautiful service. The organ died away with a soft crash of the keys

and pedals as if they too leaped up to see; the scent of the lilies swept sickeningly up in a great wave on the top of the silence.

In a moment all was confusion. The minister stooped, the best man sprang into the aisle and lifted the flower-like head. Some one produced a fan, and one of the ushers hurried for a glass of water. A physician struggled from his pew across the sittings of three stout dowagers, and knelt, with practiced finger on the little fluttering pulse. The bride's stepmother roused to solicitous and anxious attention. The organ came smartly up again in a hopeless tangle of chords and modulations, trying to get its poise once more. People climbed upon their seats to see, or crowded out in the aisle curiously and unwisely kind, and in the way. Then the minister asked the congregation to be seated; and amid the rustle of wedding finery into seats suddenly grown too narrow and too low, the ushers gathered up the little inert bride and carried her behind the palms across a hall and into the vestry room. The stepmother and a group of friends hurried after, and the minister requested the people to remain quietly seated for a few minutes. The organ by this time had recovered its poise and was playing soft tender melodies, but the excited audience was not listening:

"I thought she looked ghastly when she came in," declared the mother of three frowsy daughters. "It's strange she didn't put on some rouge."

"Um-mm! What a pity! I suppose she isn't strong! What did her own mother die of?" murmured another

speculatively, preparing to put forth a theory before any one else got ahead of her.

"Oh! The poor child!" sympathized a romantic friend. "They've been letting her do too much! Didn't they make a handsome couple? I'm crazy to see them come marching down the aisle. They surely wouldn't put off the wedding just for a faint, would they?"

And all over the church some woman began to tell how her sister's child, or her brother's niece, or her nephew's aunt had fainted just before her wedding or during it, till it began to seem quite a common performance, and one furnishing a unique and interesting part of the program for a wedding ceremony.

Meanwhile on a couch in the big gloomy vestry room lay Betty with a group of attendants about her. Her eyes were closed, and she made no move. She swallowed the aromatic ammonia that some one produced, and she drew her breath a little less feebly, but she did not open her eyes, nor respond when they spoke to her.

Her stepmother stooped over finally and spoke in her ear:

"Elizabeth Stanhope! sit up and control yourself!" she said sharply in a low tone. "You are making a spectacle of yourself that you can never get over. Your father would be ashamed of you if he were here!"

It was the one argument that had been held a successful lash over her poor little quivering heart for the last five years, and Betty flashed open her sorrowful eyes and looked around on them with a troubled concentration as if she were just taking in what had happened:

"I'm so tired!" she said in a little weary voice. "Won't you just let me get my breath a minute?"

The physician nodded emphatically toward the door and motioned them out:

"She'll be all right in just a minute. Step outside and give her a chance to get calm. She's only worn out with excitement."

She opened her eyes and looked furtively about the room. There was no one there, and the door was closed. She could hear them murmuring in low tones just beyond it. She looked wildly about her with a frantic thought of escape. The two windows were deeply curtained, giving a narrow glimpse of blank wall. She sprang softly to her feet and looked out. There was a stone pavement far below. She turned silently and tried a door. It opened into a closet overflowing with musty hymn-books. She closed it quickly and slipped back to her couch just in time as the door opened and the doctor came back. She could catch a glimpse of the others through the half open door, anxiously peering in. She gathered all her self-control and spoke:

"I'm all right now, Doctor," she said quite calmly. "Would you just ask them to send Bessemer here a minute?"

"Certainly." The doctor turned courteously and went back to the door, half closing it and making her request in a low tone. Then her stepmother's excited sibilant whisper:

"Bessemer! Why, he isn't here! He went down to the shore last night."

"Sh-h-h!" came another voice, and the door was shut smartly.

Betty's eyes grew wide with horror as she lay staring at the closed door, and a cold numbness seemed to envelop her, clutching at her throat, her heart and threatening to overwhelm her.

Bessemer not here! What could it mean? Her mind seemed unable to grasp and analyze the nameless fear that awaited her outside that door. In a moment more they would all swarm in and surround her, and begin to clamor for her to go back into that awful church—and *she could not*—ever! She would far rather die!

She sprang to her feet again and glided noiselessly to the only remaining uninvestigated door in the room. If this was another closet she would shut herself inside and stay till she died. She had read tales of people dying in a small space from lack of air. At least, if she did not die she could stay here till she had time to think. There was a key in the lock. Her fingers closed around it and drew it stealthily from the keyhole, as she slid through the door, drawing her rich draperies ruthlessly after. Her fingers were trembling so that she scarcely could fit the key in the lock again and turn it, and every click of the metal, every creak of the door, sounded like a gong in her ears. Her heart was fluttering wildly and the blood seemed to be pouring in torrents behind her ear-drums. She could not be sure whether there were noises in the room she had just left or not. She put her hand over her heart, turned with a sickening dread to look about her prison, and behold, it was not a closet at all, but a dark landing to a narrow flight of stone steps that wound down out of sight into the shadows. With a shudder she gathered her white impediment about her and crept down

the murky way, frightened, yet glad to creep within the friendly darkness.

There were unmistakable sounds of footsteps overhead now, and sharp exclamations. A hand tried the door above and rattled it violently. For an instant her heart beat frightfully in her throat at the thought that perhaps after all she had not succeeded in quite locking it, but the door held, and she flew on blindly down the stairs, caring little where they led only so that she might hide quickly before they found the janitor and pried that door open.

The stairs ended in a little hall and a glass door. She fumbled wildly with the knob. It was locked, but there was a key! It was a large one and stuck, and gave a great deal of trouble in turning. Her fingers seemed so weak!

Above the noises grew louder. She fancied the door was open and the whole churchful of people were after her. She threw her full weight with fear in the balance, and the key turned. She wrenched it out of the rusty keyhole, slid out shutting the door after her, and stooping, fitted in the key again. With one more Herculean effort she locked it and stood up, trembling so that she could scarcely keep her balance. At least she was safe for a moment and could get her breath. But where could she go? She looked about her. High walls arose on either hand, with a murky sky above. A stone walk filled the space between and ran down the length of the church to a big iron gate. The lights of the street glistened fitfully on the puddles of wet in the depressions of the paving-stones. The street looked quiet, and only one or two people were passing. Was that gate locked also, and if so could she ever climb it, or break

through? Somehow she must! She shuddered at the thought of what would happen if she did not get away at once. She strained at the buttons on her soft white gloves and pulled the fingers off, slipping her hands out and letting the glove hands hang limp at her wrists. Then with a quick glance backward at a flicker of light that appeared wavering beyond the glass door, she gathered her draperies again and fled down the long stone walk. Silently, lightly as a ghost she passed, and crouched at the gate as she heard footsteps, her heart beating so loudly it seemed like a bell calling attention to her. An old man was shuffling past, and she shrank against the wall, yet mindful of the awful glass door back at the end of the narrow passage. If they should come now she could not hope to elude them!

She stooped and studied the gate latch. Yes, it was a spring lock, and had no key in it. Stealthily she tried it and found to her relief that it swung open. She stepped around it and peered out. The gateway was not more than a hundred feet from the brightly lighted corner of the main avenue where rows of automobiles were lined up waiting for the wedding ceremony to be over. She could see the chauffeurs walking back and forth and chatting together. She could hear the desultory wandering of the organ, too, from the partly open window near by. A faint sickening waft of lily sweetness swept out, mingled with a dash of drops from the maple tree on the sidewalk. In a panic she stepped forth and drew back again, suddenly realizing for the first time what it would be to go forth into the streets clad in her wedding garments? How could she do it and get away? It could not be done!

Down the street, with a backward, wistful glance at the church, hurried a large woman with a market basket. Her curious eyes shone in the evening light and darkness of the street. There was something about her face that made Betty know instantly that this woman would love to tell how she had seen her, would gather a crowd in no time and pursue her. She shrank farther back, and then waited in awful fear and tried to listen again. Was that a rattling at the glass door? She must get away no matter what happened! Where? Was there an alleyway or anything across the block? Could she hope to cross the street between the shadows unnoticed?

She looked out fearfully once more. A girl of her own age was approaching around the corner, paddling along in rubbers, and a long coat. She was chewing gum. Betty could see the outline of a strong good-natured jaw working contentedly as she was silhouetted against the light. She had her hands in her pockets, and a little dark hat worn boyishly on the back of her head, and she was humming a popular song. Betty had slipped behind the half open gate again and was watching her approach, her desperation driving her to thoughts that never would have entered her mind at another time. Suddenly, as the girl passed directly in front of the gate, Betty leaned forward and plucked at her sleeve:

"Wait!" she said sharply; and then, with a pitiful pleading in her voice, "Won't you help me just a minute, please?"

CHAPTER II

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The girl came to a standstill abruptly and faced about, drawing away just a hair's-breadth from the detaining hand, and surveying her steadily, the boyish expression in her eyes changing to an amused calculation such as one would fancy a cowboy held up on his native plains by a stray lamb might have worn.

"What's the little old idea!" asked the girl coldly, her eyes narrowing as she studied the other girl in detail and attempted to classify her into the known and unknown quantities of her world. Her face was absolutely expressionless as far as any sign of interest or sympathy was concerned. It was like a house with the door still closed and a well-trained butler in attendance.

"I've got to get away from here at once before anybody sees me," whispered Betty excitedly, with a fearful glance behind her.

"Do you want me to call a cab for you?" sneered the girl on the sidewalk, with an envious glance at the white satin slippers.

"Oh, no! Never!" cried Betty, wringing her hands in desperation. "I want you to show me somewhere to go out of sight, and if you will I'd like you to walk a block or so with me so I won't be so—so conspicuous! I'm so frightened I don't know which way to go."

"What do you want to go at all for?" asked the girl bluntly, with the look of an inquisitor, and the intolerance of

the young for its contemporary of another social class.

"Because I *must!*" said Betty with terror in her voice. "They're coming! Listen! Oh, help me quick! I can't wait to explain!"

Betty dashed out of the gate and would have started up the street but that a strong young arm came out like a flash and a firm young fist gripped her arm like a vise. The girl's keen ears had caught a sound of turning key and excited voices, and her quick eyes pierced the darkness of the narrow court and measured the distance back.

"Here! You can't go toggled out like that!" she ordered in quite a different tone. She flung off her own long coat and threw it around the shrinking little white figure, then knelt and deftly turned up the long satin draperies out of sight and fixed them firmly with a pin extracted from somewhere about her person. Quickly she stood up and pulled off her rubbers, her eye on the long dark passageway whence came now the decided sound of a forcibly opened door and footsteps.

"Put these on, quick!" she whispered, lifting first one slippered foot and then the other and supporting the trembling Betty in her strong young arms, while she snapped on the rubbers.

Lastly, she jerked the rakish hat from her own head, crammed it down hard over the orange-wreathed brow and gave her strange protégée a hasty shove.

"Now beat it around that corner and wait till I come!" she whispered, and turning planted herself in an idle attitude just under the church window, craning her neck and apparently listening to the music. A second later an excited

usher, preceded by the janitor, came clattering down the passageway.

"Have you seen any one go out of this gate recently?" asked the usher.

The girl, hatless and coatless in the chill November night, turned nonchalantly at the question, surveyed the usher coolly from the point of his patent leather shoes to the white gardenia in his buttonhole, gave his features a cursory glance, and then shook her head.

"There might have been an old woman come out a while back. Dressed in black, was she? I wasn't paying much attention. I think she went down the avenoo," she said, and stretched her neck again, standing on her tiptoes to view the wedding guests. Her interest suddenly became real, for she spied a young man standing in the church, in full view of the window, back against the wall with his arms folded, a fine handsome young man with pleasant eyes and a head like that of a young nobleman, and she wanted to make sure of his identity. He looked very much like the young lawyer whose office boy was her "gentleman friend." Just to make sure she gave a little spring from the sidewalk that brought her eyes almost on a level with the window and gave her a brief glimpse, enough to see his face quite clearly; then she turned with satisfaction to see that the janitor and the usher had gone back up the passageway, having slammed the gate shut. Without more ado the girl wheeled and hurried down the street toward the corner where Betty crouched behind a tree trunk, watching fearfully for her coming.

"Aw! You don't need to be that scared!" said the girl, coming up. "They've gone back. I threw 'em off the scent.

Come on! We'll go to my room and see what to do. Don't talk! Somebody might recognize your voice. Here, we'll cut through this alley and get to the next block. It's further away and not so many folks passing."

Silently they hurried through the dark alley and down the next street, Betty holding the long cloak close that no gleam of her white satin might shine out and give away her secret, her heart beating like a trip hammer in her breast, her eyes filled with unshed tears, the last words of her stepmother ringing in her ears. Was she making her father ashamed? Her dear dead father! Was she doing the wrong thing? So long that thought had held her! But she could not go back now. She had taken an irrevocable step.

Her guide turned another corner abruptly and led her up some stone steps to the door of a tall, dingy brick house, to which she applied a latchkey.

The air of the gloomy hall was not pleasant. The red wallpaper was soiled and torn, and weird shadows flickered from the small gas taper that blinked from the ceiling. There were suggestions of old dinners, stale fried potatoes and pork in all the corners, and one moving toward the stairs seemed to stir them up and set them going again like old memories.

The stairs were bare and worn by many feet, and not particularly clean. Betty paused in dismay then hurried on after her hostess, who was mounting up, one, two, three flights, to a tiny hall bedroom at the back. A fleeting fear that perhaps the place was not respectable shot through her heart, but her other troubles were so great that it found no lodgment. Panting and trembling she arrived at the top and stood looking about her in the dark, while the other girl

found a match and lighted another wicked little flickering gas-burner.

Then her hostess drew her into the room and closed and locked the door. As a further precaution she climbed upon a chair and pushed the transom shut.

"Now," she said with a sigh of evident relief, "we're safe! No one can hear you here, and you can say what you please. But first we'll get this coat and hat off and see what's the damage."

As gently as if she were undressing a baby the girl removed the hat and coat from her guest, and shook out the wonderful shining folds of satin. It would have been a study for an artist to have watched her face as she worked, smoothing out wrinkles, shaking the lace down and uncrushing it, straightening a bruised orange-blossom, and putting everything in place. It was as if she herself were an artist restoring a great masterpiece, so silently and absorbedly she worked, her eyes full of a glad wonder that it had come to her once to be near and handle anything so rare and costly. The very touch of the lace and satin evidently thrilled her; the breath of the exotic blossoms was nectar as she drew it in.

Betty was still panting from her climb, still trembling from her flight, and she stood obedient and meek while the other girl pulled and shook and brushed and patted her into shape again. When all was orderly and adjusted about the crumpled bride, the girl stood back as far as the limits of the tiny room allowed and surveyed the finished picture.

"There now! You certainly do look great! That there band of flowers round your forehead makes you look like some

queen. 'Coronet'—ain't that what they call it? I read that once in a story at the Public Library. Say! Just to think I should pick that up in the street! Good night! I'm glad I came along just then instead o' somebody else! This certainly is some picnic! Well, now, give us your dope. It must've been pretty stiff to make you cut and run from a show like the one they got up for you! Come, tune up and let's hear the tale. I rather guess I'm entitled to know before the curtain goes up again on this little old stage!"

The two tears that had been struggling with Betty for a long time suddenly appeared in her eyes and drowned them out, and in dismay she brought out a faint little sorry giggle of apology and amusement and dropped on the tiny bed, which filled up a good two-thirds of the room.

"Good night!" exclaimed the hostess in alarm, springing to catch her. "Don't drop down that way in those glad rags! You'll finish 'em! Come, stand up and we'll get 'em off. You look all in. I'd oughta known you would be!" She lifted Betty tenderly and began to remove her veil and unfasten the wonderful gown. It seemed to her much like helping an angel remove her wings for a nap. Her eyes shone with genuine pleasure as she handled the hooks deftly.

"But I've nothing else to put on!" gurgled Betty helplessly.

"I have!" said the other girl.

"Oh!" said Betty with a sudden thought. "I wonder! Would you be willing to exchange clothes? Have you perhaps got some things you don't need that I could have, and I'll give you mine for them? I don't suppose perhaps a wedding dress would be very useful unless you're thinking of getting