

A Christmas Honey-moon

By
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CHAPTER VII.

When the West Called to the East.

IT was a quiet life that Betty led in Limoges; a wholly provincial life with far-off echoes of Paris and farther off echoes still of all the rest of the world. There were quaint families living in the old town near the stone bridge, families who were royalist to the finger tips; to whom the Corsican and his whole brood were anathema; stately personages of noble blood and lineage; ladies with wonderful graces and accomplishments; gentlemen of an almost exaggerated courtesy. Then there were the people of the city, the traders and exporters; the enamel makers, heads of the great potteries, manufacturers, dealers and their wives and daughters and sons. There were the voyagers who came and went at the consulate, but these Betty eschewed. What the months and years did with her in their detail of rising and setting of suns and moons, New Years, Christmases and the like, it is not the province of this record to state.

But even to Limoges there did come news one day of the great war that had broken out in the United States. Following fast on this there arrived one of Anne de Peyster's letters in which there was this paragraph: "Peter Van Zandt has volunteered for the army; his regiment has been ordered to the front."

Mrs. Van Zandt, as she read this, was sitting in the garden of her fathers' chateau in the upper town, the high wall covered with vines was ample protection from the passerby, and the tender shade of the poplars served to shield her from the sun. On a rustic table stood her breakfast tray, an equipage for two.

Betty was not alone. One was there with her. As she sat with Anne's letter spread out before her she heard the tinkle of the fountain on the terrace, the cawing of the robins in their nests, the click of the sabots on the pavement of the court where the servants were at work; and likewise Betty heard the voice of her companion.

She saw, too, all these people and things, felt the wonderful balm of the breeze perfumed by the flowers from the little beds around her; felt the unerring and complacent peacefulness of her environment; the superb self-sufficiency that exists in some corners of the world, a self-sufficiency so complete that it has, in certain instances, the strange and subtle power of erasing the storms and stresses of those who come beneath its influences.

For twelve times twelve months Betty, radiant, irresponsible, laughing, dancing, willful Betty had lived on at Limoges. As has been set down it is no part of this simple narrative to tell what she went through during her sojourn in the France where she had once so longed to live.

But the outward quiet had been hers. The dull and perhaps deadly average had seemed to set its seal upon Colonel Revere's daughter.

Peter had never written. Peter's checks came every month and as regularly were filed away by his father-in-law, but never presented for payment;

never once.

That morning the charm of the poplars, and the gardens, and the river below, with its lazily craft; the faint azure of the sky; the drone of the windmill; the hum of the bees in the fields of violets on the other side of her terrace; the distant song of a shepherd on the hills with his flocks; even the voice of the One who was her companion; all suddenly were blurred, blotted, stamped out of sound, vision, and even remembrance by the overpower of Anne's news.

"Peter Van Zandt has volunteered for the army; his regiment has been ordered to the front."

She got up from her seat, threw her thimble, scissors, the garment she was making, to the table, walked to the little gate in the wall, opened it and stepped forth to the road.

Shading her eyes with her hand, she looked to the west.

Yes, to the west, where her husband was.

"Husband?" Well, yes, certainly.

And across from the west there seemed to Betty out of the immeasurable blue to stretch toward her soul a yearning cry. It was not a sob, not an articulated coherence; a strange something that made to say, "Come," as nearly as she could define it herself.

Then as her arms, her soul, her mind, answered the gate behind her was pushed wider open, and the One who was her companion came through and with tender words lured Betty back into the safety of the garden and into a semblance of the inertness of the days before Anne's letter had arrived.

Which lasted for a long, long time. It was near the close of the war in America when another of Anne's letters came. To be sure there had been scores between, but no mention of Peter Van Zandt in any one of these until now Anne wrote: "Perhaps you will have seen by the papers, dear, if indeed they reach you, that Peter Van Zandt was taken prisoner by the south. He was in Libby for months, if not for a year, but has recently been exchanged with health so impaired by the prison that a fever of some sort has set in, and he lies in Washington city now in a hospital, whether in danger or not I don't find out."

It was winter when this letter of Anne's came. It was Christmas eve, and the town was resounding with music and bells and jollity. Betty sat before the porcelain stove; the One who was with her sat very near on a velvet stool at her feet. Outside the chateau could be heard the Christmas hymns being sung in preparation by the serving people.

It was intensely cold, the panes were covered with the exquisite tracery of the frost even in the very teeth of the piled up stoves at either end of the long salon.

But to Betty it was burning. Her veins seemed filled with fire, the languid December sun slanted in with its calm, yellow streaks on the polished floor. She threw down the embroidered hand she was working on and walked to the window at the west.

Ab, yes, the west. She opened the casements, both inner and outer, and the blast blew in scattering her reels and skeins over the floor. To be sure, her companion picked them up.

And again the west cried over to Betty's heart, and her heart answered, and nothing that the One could do or say could prevent her this time.

On Christmas day she left Limoges alone for Havre, for America, for New York. Twelve days later she landed, and in an hour more she was at the front door on the side street of the old double house.

It had been a day of snow, gray, dark and melancholy. The street lamps were long since shining when Betty reached her home, and glancing up as she got out of the coach she saw that every window of her old rooms was ablaze.

Who was there? Had Peter been fetched home ill unto death, or was he straight and well and able and with his house full of guests for the holiday season?

While she had these flashing thoughts the coachman had rung the bell, and Shaddie had opened and beheld his mistress. Supple was behind her swain. Supple ran down the stoop and took Betty's reticule, the same reticule (the same trunks, one of them too, was on the box), and Betty's long shawl, and gave her arm to her mistress quite as if her absence had been merely a matter of a few days.

"You see, madam, the master's orders were to keep your rooms always in readiness and always lighted up every evening until morning; so all is quite as you would like, we hope," so said Bridget, while the butler stood tall and pompous dealing with the cabman as to the trunk.

When the coach had rolled away



Again the West Cried Over to Betty's Heart, and Her Heart Answered.

over the snow Mrs. Van Zandt, who had paused in the hall, turned to Bridget and asked, "Is Mr. Van Zandt at home?"

"No, madam; Mr. Van Zandt has never been in this side of the house since you were called away, and he hasn't been in the other side for above three years now. Mr. Van Zandt is in a hospital in the south somewhere. We don't know anything more than that." The tears were in Miss Supple's eyes.

Betty inclined her head. Then she went up the stairs to her rooms. The Christmas greens were still fresh and pretty all about, for it had been Peter's orders to dress her rooms with them every year, no matter where he might be, and this order the faithful pair had always carried out with reverent, wistful care.

Bridget went down. Shaddie beckoned to her from his pantry. "Biddy," he said, noting the tear traces in her eyes, "the young mistress has come back, and now the banans."

"Shaddie!" Miss Supple's tone was that of one horror-struck by the other one's audacity, upon whom she placed an eye of fire. "The mistress is here, but where's our young master?"

And Shaddie, of course, beat a retreat. Shaddie seemed to himself to be always beating retreats before the object of his affections. Years made no odds for him. Bridget, obedient as the unspurred gods, would listen to no nuptial overtures and generally concluded these amatory colloquies by leaving the butler much of the opinion that he was an unnatural wretch to think of marrying under the conditions existing in his master's family.

Betty had been home for eight days before she let Anne de Peyster know of her arrival. In those eight days there was no word got by her of Peter Van Zandt's well or ill fare.

It was just to wait and wait. Would he come? Was he dying? Had he forgotten her? Was there some other, fairer, sweeter woman whom his heart now rested in? Why not?

Then, when she sent Anne a note by Shaddie, Anne came at once.

She had news of Peter; of course Betty had it too? No, Well, Ned Davies had got back from Washington the night before; he had seen Peter, if you please, none the worse for his Libby imprisonment; none the worse of his fever and hospital; quite splendidly well and usual, stopping at Willard's and asking Ned how soon he and Anne were going to be tied up.

Betty listened, said not a word and turned the talk wholly toward the patience of Ned Davies and the charms of life in a quaint French town like Limoges.

"And when do you go back, dear, or don't you go back at all?" Anne had asked gently of her friend.

"On Saturday," Betty replied. "And when you and Ned are married you must make the wedding journey over the sea to me, will you?"

Anny promised quizzically. She had been putting off that wedding of hers so long that it looked to her now like an agreeable ignis fatuus, or a delightful jest, although, to be sure, Ned Davies had always to be counted with, and sometimes he did allow himself a restiveness incompatible with Anny's holding out many more years.

So Mrs. Van Zandt sailed away again on the Saturday. She had left the house on the square for the ship at noon. The sailing was scheduled for 1 o'clock. At 9 that evening Mr. Van Zandt arrived from Washington.

Shaddie and Miss Supple had a conference in the kitchen, the result of which was that the butler when he removed the dessert and set out the cheese and celery and refilled his mistress's glass took covert occasion to slip beneath this last a scrap of paper carefully contrived by his own and the dictating hand of Bridget. It ran this way: "Honored sir and master we dutifully inform you that our mistress, Mrs. Van Zandt, returned home on the six of Jan, and sailed off this fifteenth day of same month, your respectful and obedient servants Shaddie and Bridget."

Shaddie did not remain in the dining room after he had placed the cheese, etc. He, in fact, got away to his pantry, down his little corkscrew back stairs and into the kitchen as quickly as he could, where Bridget awaited him. He sat bravely in her rocking chair, a liberty he seldom allowed himself, and swayed back and forth.

"What's the matter, Shad?" asked

the serving woman.

"The matter is," Shaddie spoke with an unwonted asperity, "that if the master only could have reached home before the mistress left, the banans"—

"Shaddie, I'm surprised at you. Hush!"

Shaddie hushed.

CHAPTER VIII.

Betty's Carte de Visite.

THAT night, or rather it was about 2 a. m., when all the little household slept, Mr. Van Zandt, who had made not even a feint of lying down, put on his raglan and hat, and went out into the street; merely to step up to the corner and around it; a few paces further to where the two big horse chestnut trees were casting their gaunt winter shadows across the moonlit sidewalk; up the stoop of Mrs. Van Zandt's half of the house; the key he had never ceased to carry in his pocket, out, and fitted to the latch; the door pushed softly back and closed; the master within the precinct of the mistress.

He stood still; his glance going first to the archway and its curtains behind which he supposed the brick wall to have been built all those years ago. Then to the staircase; the clock ticking on; the niche with the statue of Ceres in it, the landing where she had stood.

She had been there. Not a dozen hours since, Betty, his wife, had come down where he was now going up, for Peter went up to the second floor, where the flood of radiance from the open doors of Mrs. Van Zandt's room greeted him.

He halted in the wide hall and leaped at her threshold. He did not enter. His eyes took in all the old, familiar, sweet things she had used—the chair that was her favorite, the vases from Nanking that were her pleasure, the silver candlesticks on her dressing table, the trinkets, the hand mirrors, the pictures, the Christmas wreaths, the mahogany bedstead, with its tall carved headboard close to the door, its down quilt a little disturbed, a pillow to one side, something just projecting from under the pillow.

A card! Could Betty have left there another message? His hand shook as he reached in and drew the scrap from under the pillow, for Peter Van Zandt did not cross the sill of that room.

It was a little carte de visite, as the photographs of that day were called, and it was, yes, it was Betty. Changed? Not so much. Older? Not an hour. But most serene, her smiles just at the corners of her mouth. Yes, Betty, and yet, no; not quite entirely. Perhaps it was the style of dress. Sav-eten years make differences in a woman's gown. This Betty wore a short skirt with some arrangement looping it on the hips called, he believed, panniers, and a sack of fur with hanging sleeves, a cap of fur on top of her curly head.

Peter turned it over. To be sure, if he needed confirmation there it was in Betty's own handwriting. "Betty Van Zandt, Limoges, Oct. 16, 18—." Taken only about two months ago. He slipped it into his pocket, turned around, went down and went out, cautiously as a thief in the night, around into his own portion of the old house.

When Betty reached Limoges no one was at the station to meet her, because no one at the chateau knew that she was to arrive. When she got to the chateau, drying up in a sleigh in great jangling of bells and calls of the driver who rode the smallest of his lean beasts, the One was at the step to welcome her with such a wealth of warmth as made her coming back a joy. By and by, when these two were alone together in the long salon, for the colonel had much business down in the city at the consulate, of course, Betty was told a story.

By the One? Of course. A story as sweet, as tender, as full of happiness, hope, as had been the story Peter Van Zandt had told her more than seven years before.

And Betty listened? Yes; she listened, and the comfort and pleasure of that which the One told her was inexpressibly grateful; not as had been the comfort of Peter's story, but as the later shadow of that first Eden.

Yes; Betty listened and was content. While Betty, in Limoges, was listening to all the One had to tell her day in and day out, night in and night out, Peter Van Zandt was in India.

Two days only, after his odd, stealthy visit to Mrs. Van Zandt's side of the double house, the master had left. There seemed a fatal kind of unrest on him. He could not stop in any land long. It was India, then China, Russia, down into France. Ah, yes, into France! In Paris he met some people he knew—a few men. One of them said, "You remember Ashleigh?"

"Yes; I do remember Ashleigh, the first secretary of the English embassy years ago."

"Exactly. I ran against him here the other day. He asked for you."

"Did he? A comfortable British husband by this time, I suppose?"

"Not in the least. En route to Limoges, I think—yes, Limoges, to marry. He said, the most beautiful woman in the world."

"Who?" Peter's heart throbbed.

"Could one ask! My dear boy, when a chap talks like that, you know?" This man laughed; they shook hands and parted.

Peter went into a cafe and surreptitiously took out the carte de visite of Betty and looked at it. But Betty could not marry; of course not. What a fool he was. But she might, there

might have been some sort of way by which she had freed herself. Ashleigh had wanted to marry Betty, he knew that.

He would go at once to Limoges. No, he would do nothing of the kind. Instead, he went to South Africa, deep in the mines and digged and sweated and became grimy, and at eventide, frantic with the unspent forces that even the spade and the pickaxe and the shovel could not seem to exhaust, he would lie down under the stars and awake soaked with the damps; and let the sun make him dry; and rise up again to eat coarsely, drink deeply and fall down again at twilight like the beasts, all for the sake of a woman.

Then at the end of six years he got a better hold of himself and washed and thrashed his soul and put on the harnesses of civilization and got back to England. He stopped there a twelve-month and each thirty-one days found Peter Van Zandt in the power of the memory of Betty, his wife, than the preceding thirty-one. He met Ashleigh and his wife, a charming French girl, and dined with them.

But the close of the seventh year fetched him back to the United States, to the old double house his father had so wisely built.

What was it that urged him? A jealous rage, a fierce pang at his heart; the perhaps belated strangest phase of that which we call love; not the pretty envying of any praise or worship she might have won from other men, but the insatiable desire to pit his worship against that of all the other men in the world, and so to win her over again. This was the god that lashed Peter's soul and sent him home to America.

Mrs. Van Zandt had never returned. The faithful servants were as they had been, quite as if only yesterday the young master had gone away.

And over in Limoges? The chateau was for rent; there had to be a new consul general. While the shepherd sang on the hillsides a song of the early autumn; while the lily fields were still white and the poplars whispered to the wind; while the evergreen's dream was of Christmas and while the sabots clicked on the paths; when the harvest was being gathered and when the grapes were in the press, Betty, with strange, difficult new stirrings in her woman's heart, drew all that belonged to her about her and set sail again from France for New York.

CHAPTER IX.

What Peter Saw Passing His Door.

BIDDY," Shaddie said the day after Mrs. Van Zandt came back, "what shall we do?"

Miss Supple shook her head.

"We must let the master know, Biddy, mustn't we?"

"We'll write him the same as we did before, Shad, and say that Mrs. Van Zandt is back."

"Yes, but"—the butler cast a dubious eye upon his betrothed.

"Leave the buts out of it altogether, Shad. Don't say nothing. Don't write nothing except what we did the first time."

"All right, Bridget, you know best."

"Let him find it all out for himself," Bridget added, as she adjusted her Turkey red dusting cap. "Ah, it's glad I am this day, I wheedled the boss builder into not puttin' up the wall on the parlor floor."

Shaddie regarded Miss Supple with that veneration which is always becoming in his sex and proceeded out to sweep his sidewalk.

The note, a counterpart of its predecessor, was written and cautiously placed beneath the finger bowl dolly this time, when the master was about to finish his dinner. He saw and read it.

He did not finish his dinner. He rose from the table, took his coat and hat and went out. Around the corner on the opposite side of the street, from there he could see the lights in her windows, see even her shadow as she crossed.

Well, it was—he was evenly balanced enough to admit to himself—a magnificent thing to have lived to feel as he did. At forty-seven Peter felt as he never had before. What he had experienced at twenty-one was a child's play in comparison.

She was up there. One roof would cover them both that night. Was it not a splendor to know so much? She had not sought to marry another man. His name was her name. She had come home. The knowledge thrilled to his soul and the rapture of it raised him to those seventh heavens which are erroneously supposed to be reserved for the young in years.

Which is quite an untruth, for they are untraveled roads to the young in years, and only he who has lived awhile on has ever become at all intimate with the gardens of the gods through which these paths pass.

By and by Peter went over to the Union League club; by and by again he came home by way of her windows assuredly.

Days afterward Mr. Van Zandt was standing on his stoop buttoning his gloves, about to go downtown, when he saw a little boy just passing his eyes gate—a little boy with the bluest eyes and the softest dark curls and the straightest little legs in velvet leggings. He carried a violin case, and very likely that and a certain air of distinction and courage about the boy caused Mr. Van Zandt to touch his hat and speak.

"Good morning, little man."

"Good morning, monsieur!" The vel-

vet cap was entirely off the curly head with a bow of mingled courtesy and aloofness—the salute of one gentle person to another when both are strangers.

"On the way to school, I suppose?" Mr. Van Zandt was by this down the stoop and on the sidewalk.

"No, monsieur, on the way to take my violin lesson."

"Aha, I see—you don't go to school?" They were already taking steps together toward the parade ground.

"No, monsieur. Grandmamma says I shall not go to the school until another year."

"You are a French boy, sir?"

"Yes, monsieur," looking up with wide inquisitive eyes. "But I am to be an American man."

"Indeed, how is that?"

"I will learn to be one here; grandmamma says so."

"I hope you may. Now, do you turn here?"

"Yes, monsieur, I cross the park and go on to the Cottage place, No. 12. Signor Prati lives there. He is the teacher of my violin."

Peter lingered; why, he did not know. The boy loitered; the reason for it he, of course, did not seek. Then Peter said, "Do you pass this way every day, sir?"

"No, monsieur; all the every other day."

"And you love the violin, of course?"

The child's small shoulders raised themselves quite expressively. "It was with me, monsieur, the piano; but grandmamma"—again the little shoulders went up—"would not have it so. It must, for her be the violin, always the violin; so I study it carefully, but I do not like the noise sometimes."

"But to please your grandmamma, eh?" Mr. Van Zandt was frankly interested now in this child. Children had not appealed to him; in fact, they had hardly been observed factors in the life he had so far led, and the fresh, naive expression of this one charmed and amused him, at any rate for the moment.

"Ah, monsieur, yes, to please grandmamma I would do whatever it was."

He raised his cap and, glancing at the clock, hurried away.

Peter had an image of the boy and of the boy's grandmother in his mind. Some stately, white haired old lady in a stiff, sage green brocade, with a cape and fringes; a snowy lace kerchief crossed on her breast, a cap with lilac ribbons and a reticule full of smelling salts and spectacles; quite a grand dame and from France, of course. This was Peter's mental portrait of this little boy's grandmother.

Then Peter got into an omnibus and rode down to Nassau street, for he had lately resumed his law practice.

The following morning, by an instinct or impulse which he did not recognize with sufficient definiteness to analyze, Mr. Van Zandt found himself as he left for his office glancing up and down the street for a glimpse of that little boy. He did not see him. The little boy did not go for violin lessons every day, to be sure not. When Mr. Van Zandt came home about 5 o'clock he also looked for that little boy, but did not see him. He had a mind to go around the corner and get just a glimpse of Mrs. Van Zandt's windows, of Mrs. Van Zandt's shadow; but, no, he went into his house with something rather like a sigh. Peter lived in the front of his house. He had never in all these years gone to the rear, where he might have looked out upon the garden. The garden, he argued, was Betty's, and not even his eyes should pry upon the paths, the shade, the flowers or the vines in summer; on the broad, unfecked reaches of the snow, the frozen pool of the fountain in winter. He would deny himself even one glance over the high wall which he had built, giving to her the most part of the ground.

He was thinking along these lines when the vision of that little boy with the violin entered in and took quiet possession of his mind. That little boy seemed to him in his fantasy to be standing near Betty. Ah, to be sure! That was because the little French lad's eyes were blue and his curls dark, his cheeks bursting in bloom of rose, his lips coral. Of course. What odd fancies a man can have!

But again the next day and the next Peter Van Zandt searched the street for the little boy. At last he espied him, running as fast as his small legs could tear, but coming to a sudden halt, cap off, as he beheld Peter Van Zandt.

"Good morning, monsieur." He was quite breathless.

"Good morning, sir. You are in a hurry. You are late."

"No, monsieur, I am early, but I am running away so that Stradivarius can't follow me."

"Indeed, Stradivarius is a playmate of yours, I take it—another little boy?"

"No, monsieur, I find no boys here yet to play with. Grandmamma says by and by it will be different, but now my playmate is grandmamma and also the pussy cats."

"Is Stradivarius a pussy cat?" Peter inquired, wishing ardently to know, to commune with this child and feeling awkward and ill at ease with the perfect novelty of his situation.

"Yes, monsieur. There is also Ole Bull and Paganini."

"Very nice, I am sure. May I walk along with you, sir, to Signor Prati's?"

"Yes, monsieur, if you will. They have these names because, grandmamma says, their singing—at night, you know, in the garden—is much like the way my violin cries when I punish it with my bad playing."

"I see." Mr. Van Zandt found the little French boy adorable and entertaining both. "And your grandmamma is your playmate? For an old lady that is remarkable, sir."

"Oh, monsieur!" The lad's round eyes opened to their widest. "Grandmamma is not old, not at all," he laughed a little. "Oh, but not! You should see her play with Paganini! Figure to yourself, monsieur. She runs for him with a ball and string, quite like I do!"

"Is it possible?" Mr. Van Zandt's imagination took shape with the old lady in the brocade and kerchief tripping somewhat stiffly for the edification of the pussy cat and the boy.

"And what is your name, sir, may I ask?"

The child looked at the man askance, with the unconscious appraisal of childhood. Then he answered frankly, "Pierre de la Querena, monsieur."

"Pierre," repeated Mr. Van Zandt with a smile.

"Yes, monsieur. For the English, it is Peter