

Betsy-Tacy

By Maud Hart Lovelace

Chapter One: Betsy Meets Tacy

It was difficult, later, to think of a time when Betsy and Tacy had not been friends. Hill Street came to regard them almost as one person. Betsy's brown braids went with Tacy's red curls, Betsy's plump legs with Tacy's spindly ones, to school and from school, up hill and down, on errands and in play. So that when Tacy had the mumps and Betsy was obliged to make her journeys alone, saucy boys teased her: "Where's the cheese, apple pie?" "Where's your mush, milk?" As though she didn't feel lonesome enough already! And Hill Street knew when Sunday came, even without listening to the rolling bells, for Betsy Ray and Tacy Kelly (whose parents attended different churches), set off down Hill Street separately, looking uncomfortable and strange.

But on this March afternoon, a month before Betsy's fifth birthday, they did not know each other. They had not even seen each other, unless Betsy had glimpsed Tacy, without knowing her for Tacy, among the children of assorted sizes moving into the house across the street. Betsy had been kept in because of bad weather, and all day she had sat with her nose pasted to the pane. It was exciting beyond words to have a family with children moving into that house.

Hill Street was rightfully named. It ran straight up into a green hill and stopped. The name of the town was Deep Valley, and a town named Deep Valley naturally had plenty of hills. Betsy's house, a small yellow cottage, was the last house on her side of Hill Street, and the rambling white house opposite was the last house on that side. So of course it was very important. And it had been empty ever since Betsy could remember.

"I hope whoever moves in will have children," Betsy's mother had said.

"Well, for Pete's sake!" said Betsy's father. "Hill Street is so full of children now that Old Mag has to watch out where she puts her feet down."

"I know," said Betsy's mother. "There are plenty of children for Julia." (Julia was Betsy's sister, eight years old.) "And there are dozens of babies. But there isn't one little girl just Betsy's age. And that's what I'm hoping will come to the house across the street."

That was what Betsy hoped, too. And that was what she had been watching for all day as she sat at the dining room window. She was certain there must be such a little girl. There were girls of almost every size and boys to match, milling about the moving dray and in and out of the house. But she wasn't sure. She hadn't absolutely seen one.

She had watched all day, and now the dining room was getting dark. Julia had stopped practicing her music lesson, and Mrs. Ray had lighted the lamp in the kitchen.

The March snow lay cold and dirty outside the window, but the wind had died down, and the western sky, behind the house opposite, was stained with red.

The furniture had all been carried in, and the dray was gone. A light was shining in the house. Suddenly the front door opened, and a little girl ran out. She wore a hood beneath which long red ringlets spattered out above her coat. Her legs in their long black stockings were thin.

It was Tacy, although Betsy did not know it!

She ran first to the hitching block, and bounced there on her toes a minute, looking up at the sky and all around. Then she ran up the road to the point where it ended on the hill. Some long-gone person had placed a bench there. It commanded the view down Hill Street. The little girl climbed up on this bench and looked intently into the dusk.

"I know just how she feels," thought Betsy with a throb. "This is her new home. She wants to see what it's like." She ran to her mother.

"Mamma!" she cried. "There's the little girl my age. Please let me go out! Just a minute! Please!"

Mrs. Ray was moved by the entreaty. She looked out at the colored sky.

"It does seem to be clearing up," she said. "But you could only stay a minute. Do you want to go to the bother of putting on your things . . ."

"Oh, yes, yes!"

"Overshoes and mittens and everything?"

"Yes, really!"

Betsy flew to the closet, but she could not find her pussy hood. The mittens were twisted on the string inside her coat.

"Mamma! Help me! Please! She'll be gone."

"Help her, Julia," called Betsy's mother, and Julia helped, and at last the pussy hood was tied, and the coat buttoned, and the overshoes buckled, and the mittens pulled on.

Outside the air was fresh and cold. The street lamp had been lighted. It was exciting just to be out at this hour, even without the prospect of meeting the new little girl. But the new little girl still stood on the bench looking down the street.

Betsy ran toward her. She ran on the sidewalk as far as it went. Then she took to the frozen rutty road, and she had almost reached the bench when the little girl saw her.

"Hello!" called Betsy. "What's your name?"

The other child made no answer. She jumped off the bench.

"Don't go!" cried Betsy. "I'm coming."

But the other child without a word began to run. She brushed past Betsy on her headlong flight down the hill. She ran like a frightened rabbit, and Betsy ran in pursuit.

"Wait! Wait!" Betsy panted as she ran. But the new child would not stop. On fleet, black-stockinged legs she ran, faster than Betsy could follow.

"Wait! Wait!" pleaded Betsy but the child did not turn her head. She gained her own lawn, floundered through the snow to her house.

The entrance to her house was through a storm shed. She ran into this and banged the door. The door had a pane of glass in the front, and through that pane she stared fearfully at Betsy.