

The Orchards of Amethyst Hills

By Blanche Gertrude Robbins

SHADOWS reflecting the purple glimmer of amethyst studded Blomidon, fell across the green carpeted avenues of the orchards.

The girl, rambling in the shade, threw back the Leghorn hat with its wealth of rosebuds, baring her brown head. She paused in a second's listening attitude as a man's step sounded on the hillside. Mischief flickered in the blue eyes as with light step, Betty Allison darted to hiding in shelter of the Ben Davis.

The man, tall and muscular, swung through the orchard avenue with energetic stride. The mimicking call of the bluebird arrested his steps. He paused and answered the call, perplexity in his face as he peered through the dense foliage. Then momentary silence and girlish laughter as Betty Allison slipped from her retreat. "Philip! Stupid Boy!" she pouted prettily, as the man caught the lithe figure and held her close.

His hand caressed the brown hair with its golden lustre as with unwonted seriousness he reproached her: "Always playing, Betty, girl. Don't suppose you'll ever grow up. Doesn't the turmoil of the sad old world's struggles ever impress you?" he questioned, seriousness lending depth to his grey eyes.

The girl started and withdrew her arm. "What do you mean? Why are you so serious and cold and harsh tonight?" she questioned, the strangeness of his mood imparted in the very caress he gave her.

"I do not intend to be cold or harsh," he answered quickly, "but the agony of the warring world is pulsing in my own soul to-night. I have dallied long enough. Betty, you and I must cease child's play. Our life work should begin. Yes, I've volunteered for active service and been accepted. I shall take advantage of the officers' short course in training. Perhaps before many weeks I shall be journeying overseas."

"But the orchards," interrupted the girl, her cheek whitened with the shock of the man's message. "Surely you have a duty to perform here. It is good work that you do for your country—giving them fruit, perfect and plentiful. If you go away I shall be lonesome and dull. There will be no one to give me good times. Have you not thought how monotonous it will be for me?"

The man started and the girl wondered if she only fancied that he winced. His voice was unnaturally harsh as he answered: "The valley is well supplied with fruit growers. There are men who, physically unfit, can stay at home and look after the crops. If that is all you care to get out of life, Betty—just living for good times, perhaps it is best I should go away. I've had a vision of life worth while—service and true manhood. There are women who have had this vision of woman's duty to their Empire. The women of France have been the inspiration of the nation. I regret that this purpose of mine should estrange us—that you are incapable of understanding."

"You mean that you would like our engagement broken?" the girl interrupted coldly.

"No, Heavens! no. Not that," replied Philip, "still I have not the right to hold you to your promise. You will scarcely be happy, for I must throw myself wholeheartedly into the fight. Play hour is over for me. You, who have had no vision and are not blessed with a great throbbing interest, will need gaiety. I have no right to withhold your freedom. As you wish."

Darkness had fallen and in the silence the girl shivered. Through the curtain of orchard foliage, she caught a glimpse of stars shining—a silver lining to the darkened clouds. Anger stirred her heart. Her happiness had been ignored in Philip Steadman's response to the Empire's call. But there were other men. Alder-hot Camp—only a few miles distant—teemed with officers who were eager to meet her. These should provide her with an abundance of life and merriment—the good times her being ever craved.

"You are right," she spoke clearly, deliberately. "I do not reach the attitude of your ambition. Henceforth

there will be little in common between us. It is better that we understand each other before you go. To-night, I doubt whether we ever really loved. We have been just happy children playing together. Take this and do not give me and my little frivolities further thought. I shall find plenty in life to keep me merry. Don't think I shall entertain sorrow and care until they are thrust upon me."

The girl slipped the ring from her finger into the man's hand. Half bitterly he clenched his fingers on the golden circle. His voice was husky as he tried to find words to express the turmoil of his mind:

"God forbid that I should be the man

to burden your young life with sorrow. You are right, we have been children dreamily playing. But I am aroused. Play and nonsense no longer appeal to me. If you should ever regret this step you will let me know. Shall I walk home with you?"

The girl shook her head. "The path is bright with starlight. We have played together most often in the orchards. This old Ben Davis tree has been our trysting place. Let our parting be here also."

The man would have taken the girl's hand and kissed the fingers in friendliness, but impulsively snatching away her arm, Betty Allison fled down the orchard avenue to the path that led to her grandfather's orchard.

Always she had known this home. As babies, Betty and Philip had played together. Girlhood and boyhood, and

then at the beginning of womanhood and manhood came the plighting of their troth.

The wealth of Betty Allison's grandfather provided liberally for her. Servants cared for the home and gave her freedom to indulge in the social activities of neighboring towns.

Amethyst Hills—so called because of the purple light ever shining on them—had come as an inheritance to Philip Steadman. It had pleased his ancestors to fancy that the purple lights were the reflection of the amethyst stones gleaming in the rocks of Cape Blomidon, a northern shadow to the hills.

Proudly Philip Steadman superintended the pruning and harvesting of his hills with just pride. But the making of this vast orchard was not his achievement. He followed in the wake of his fathers.



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