The Free Press Short Story

KING CHARLES' HEAD

By FREDERICK HALL

IT was to be a very important evening. Walter had known it all day, he felt it even more upstairs after supper while he was putting on his other suit and polishing his shoes. Just what would happen he did not know. Probably nothing. He meant to make it his business (in a way) to see that nothing did happen, and yet he was certain that twenty, fifty years hence, when he was an old man, he should look back to this evening as one of the most important in all his life.

They had eaten supper, he and his mother, almost in silence. She knew where he was going; she must guess something of all that he thought and felt, though it was a matter they never talked of. He hoped she would not question him, but she did.

"Going over to Betty's?" she asked as he picked up his hat.

"Yes," he answered.

"You won't know what to do with yourself after she is gone."

"Oh, I'll find something to keep me busy."

"You're not very old." She was trying to talk as if it were all unimportant, but she did not succeed very well. "You're not twenty-one yet, and Betty is almost a little girl. You're not getting to think too much of her, are you?"

He looked grave, then a sudden recollection made him laugh.

"You know, mother, the kids at school have teased Betty about me. Miss Treadwell, the English teacher, told me about it, or she said they tried to tease her, until one day Betty flared up and said to them, 'Well, you can say all you please. I think Walter Diercks is a nice boy, and I don't care who knows it. Now, mother, it's the same with me. I think Betty Fenton is a nice girl, and I don't care who knows it."

She did not smile, as he had hoped she would, and he knew that she was worrying about him. He came and sat down beside her. He wanted to reassure her, but even now he could not speak entirely serious.

"Mother," he said, "am I a fairly satisfactory boy?"

"Yes," she said.

"A steady worker? Save my money? No bad habits? Sowing no wild oats? Most of the credit is due to you, but some of it, I believe, is due to Betty. Don't you?"

She nodded.

"Betty has done me a lot of good, and now don't worry. She isn't going to do me any harm."

"It's isn't that quite."

"I know. And I'm not going to do her any harm. I know I'm not twenty-one mother, and I know she's still more a little girl than she is a grown-up young lady. So don't worry. Good night, mother."

"Good night," she answered.

Walter was thinking as he walked down the street in the direction of Betty's house. Gradually and quite naturally a wonderful new thing had been coming into his life. He was a junior, with just one dominant interest, —basketball,—when Betty had entered high school. He was the school's star player, the one whose name was most often on the lips of the cheer leader. As for his studies, he kept them up simply to keep on the team. Betty belonged to a different crowd from his. His mother was just as good a woman as Mrs. Fenton,—every one knew that,—but while Mrs. Fenton was in college Mrs. Diercks had been working as a hired girl. That was a part of the difference, and yet it was not so important as one might imagine. Dumfries was democratic, and among the young people there were few social barriers. The first time Walter had asked Betty to go to a school party it had been almost an act of bravado, and he had half expected her to refuse. But she had gone with him, and they had had a good time together. What he did not know was that Mrs. Fenton had asked Professor Tate about him and received a good report. That was almost four years ago.

Betty was a good student; before that first year was over it had begun to gall Walter that he, a tall junior, should have grades so much poorer than this little freshman's. He suddenly went at his studies as if they had been the players of an opposing team; his grades promptly showed the result. Betty played the piano for the high school orchestra. Walter had never learned any more music than he could help, but about the middle of that junior year he bought a mandolin, took a few lessons, practised faithfully and the next year joined the orchestra. His voice, hitherto despised and unmanageable, was, he found, settling into a passable bass, and he joined the glee club.

It rather surprised him that he should have a senior year. He had never intended, in spite of the joys of basketball, to keep on and graduate; his idea had always been to get out and earn some money. But he did graduate—well up toward the head of his class. At the time he did not realize that it was Betty who had made him do it: she had never asked him to; but he had done it on her account. He had studied harder in order to win her good opinion. He had gone at music, though at the time he would have stoutly denied it, for no other reason than to be able to walk home with her from orchestra and glee-club practices. He had graduated because to leave school earlier was to go away from her also.

Since he had graduated she had done even more for him. He was not quite sure that she had prompted him to take the troop of Boy Scouts with whom he had been in camp for the past week. But he knew that it was on her account that he had coached the second basketball team for the past two years. There had been no money in it, but the work had helped him. The school atmosphere had been stimulating; he was almost one of the faculty, and the position gave him standing and prestige. On her account too, though she did not know it, he had changed his work.

One evening on the porch, waiting for her to come down to go with him to a school "movie," he had fallen into conversation with her father. Mr. Fenton had asked him where he was working. Walter told him, rather proud of the wages he could report; not a boy in his class was doing any better. Mr. Fenton seemed to be not greatly impressed. With perfect courtesy and in just a word or two, he analyzed the young man's "expectation" as compared with that of one in work offering less for the present and more for the future. He was merely making talk with one of Betty's callers; nor was he saying anything especially new. Professor Tate had talked to every graduating class about "deadened occupations," but from Betty's father such words had a weight no one else could have given them. For a month Walter pondered them. Then one day he quit the factory to become what Professor Tate called "the banker's devil." Daily he swept the bank out, tended the furnace, saw that the outer desks had ink, blotters, checks and deposit slips and bit by bit began picking up some of the abstruse mysteries of banking. The pay was small compared with what he had been getting, and until Professor Tate had talked it over with his mother she was puzzled. Now, after eighteen months, she and Walter both knew that he had made no mistake. His pay had been raised, and his work had grown more responsible. His bank friends were as kind and helpful as the young men and women of the high school faculty. Mr. Waite, the cashier, turned over to him extra work on the neostyle or addressograph that had brought his earnings almost to what they were in the factory. In the bank he had learned things the factory could never have taught him; already he was planning to supplement his practical experience with a year at the state university. The first goal he had set himself on graduation—to earn enough money to buy a motorcycle—now seemed to him unutterably childish.

People had of course talked. They always do when in a small town a boy and girl go about together for almost four years. But they knew that he would not permit any nonsense beyond a certain point. As for the girls, Betty had proved quite able to look out for herself; and, for that matter, there had been little to poke fun at. They had been good friends. They had not been lovers; they had not acted like lovers. Between them there had, in the high school phrase, never been anything "mushy."

To have put into words just what he thought and felt would have been difficult for Walter. He could not have done it for Professor Tate or for his mother. But he had a high, exacting code, chiefly distilled out of four or five great novels. His code had taught him —among other things—to despise sentimentality and to face hard facts. Once, for instance, he had heard Mr. Waite say, "Yes, they have good times together but nothing's likely to come of it," and his steady-ticking heart had skipped a beat, for he had realized that Mr. Waite was talking of himself and Betty. "But nothing's likely to come of it" meant that he probably never would marry Betty, and that was quite true, he admitted; the law of averages pointed that way. For Betty college was a thing taken for granted; for him four more years of study were simply out of the question. Betty would probably marry some man whom she met at college—and Betty was leaving for college tomorrow morning.

She would be changed when she came home for the Christmas holiday, more changed still at the year's end. At the end of four years—he could not picture the Betty of four years hence. All he was sure of was that he should think just as much of her then as he did now. And, just because he thought so much of her, he must let her go away tomorrow morning, without any sort of promise, without her dreaming that he could think of a promise.

It had been some consolation during the past weeks to reflect that, whatever else Betty found at college, she could find no one who cared for her more than he did. But other thoughts had come to disturb even that assurance. She would find men who could do more for her; she would find men, plenty of them, who had had better advantages; and such things counted—they counted even with him.

Miss Ebers, the gymnasium teacher, was just his own age, and a very nice girl. He had been tempted to think sometimes that Miss Ebers would have been glad if he had cared for her. And there was no reason in the world why he should not care for Miss Ebers as he cared for Betty. Miss Ebers had done things Betty had never done and probably never could do; she had poise, ability, strength born of struggle. Betty was a hot-house plant, delicate, tenderly nurtured; Miss Ebers was a strong, beautiful, wind-blown prairie flower—not that Walter used exactly these figures. There was no good reason that he could see why he should not think of Miss Ebers just as he did of Betty, no reason in the world—except that he didn't. Why shouldn't it be the same way with Betty. Next year, or the year after, she might be saying, "Walter Dericks is a nice boy, and I don't care who knows it," and adding, "but he isn't—" And then would follow some other name. All that was to be expected, and because it was so likely to happen he must not say to her one word to make her feel that she was not free. Inside him something was stronger, it sometimes seemed to him, than he himself was, and yet it had to be rammed down and kept under. He must just say, "Good-by," and let her go away.

All these thoughts passed through his mind in the few minutes that he was walking the half-dozen blocks from his own door to the Fentons' front steps, and all of them vanished when at his light knock Betty appeared to say, "Hello, Walter. Come in."

A new leather suit case stood in the hallway. She was leaving early the next morning; he must make his call short.

"All set?" he asked.

"Yes. Father's going to take me to Milton Junction in the car. Everything's ready and packed."

They sat down near the piano.

"How was it at Ravens' Roost?" she asked.

"All right," he answered. "Stubby White pretty nearly drowned himself, and Billy Peters was homesick. Oh, yes, and for three days the soup, the beefsteak, everything we cooked, tasted of vanilla. It looked as if somebody was playing a poor trick; so I cooked one meal all by myself, and it was the same way. Then we found that we had been keeping our salt in a can that had held vanilla-flavoring crystals."

"Did the mosquitoes bother much?"

"No, not so bad this year."

"Up at the Conference one day we found a wasps' nest and a girl who had never seen one before poked a stick into it. I got stung only once; I ran too fast; but some of the girls were a sight."

"I don't suppose you know what studies you are going to take?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"Yes, I do. I'll have—let me see: freshman chem. and algebra, and French. Father says if I make a good record he'll take me to Europe the summer after I graduate. Oh, yes, and Vic prose."

"What Vic prose will you read?" Walter asked.

"Some Ruskin, and Newman, and Matthew Arnold."

"Which one first?"

"Ruskin's Seven Lamps of Architecture."

Walter took out a pocket notebook and carefully set down the title. "I'm going to get it out of the library, and I'll read it, too," he said.

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