



# Tacy Kelly: Friend, Singer, and Coronet- Braid-Wearer<sup>1</sup>

by Jennifer Davis-Kay

When one sits down to write about one's most admired woman in the Betsy-Tacy series, one is naturally inclined to write about Betsy, unless one is a big fat liar. Betsy is our shining star, the one we identify with and aspire to be, the *raison d'être* of the entire series.

In other words, it's a no-brainer. And what a delightful assignment! What fun to write an essay on my beloved Betsy!

But then—a dark and terrible question struck me: What if . . . there were no Tacy? What if she had stayed in Mazomanie, Wisconsin? Would we just as eagerly devour a book called *Betsy with No Other Friends on Hill Street*? And its sequel, *Betsy, No One, and Tib*? My answer is no. No, we would not. For Tacy is not merely the second-place titleholder of much of the series—she is the wind beneath Betsy's wings, the milk to her mush. She is an *essential element* of the lifelong friendship that is the heart of this series.

And therefore I choose ★TACY KELLY★ as my most admired woman.

The immortal friendship begins on Betsy's fifth birthday party, when she receives the nicest present she can imagine: "Not the usual kind of present. It was the present of a friend. It was Tacy." In Tacy, Maud Hart Lovelace pours the key qualities of a true friend into a uniquely believable human form. As Betsy herself says, "There's nobody like Tacy."

For example: In our best friends, our bosom chums, we most hope to find a kindred spirit, and Tacy "gets" Betsy in a way that no one else does. She immediately falls in with Betsy's plan to marry the King of Spain (unlike Tib did,

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<sup>1</sup> A tip of the hat to Cari McGee, who wrote, "The only way the essay topic [The History of the Deep Valley Region] could have been MORE perfect for her would have been if it was, 'Tacy Kelly: Evaluate Her As Friend, Singer and Coronet-Braid-Wearer'" (Maud-L, May 2, 2009).

or Carney or Winona would have), and, “[following] Betsy’s lead like lightning,” she’s quickly on board to entice comp-holding Winona with *The Repentance of Lady Clinton*. When Betsy emotes on how frightfully *old* the girls are, drinking coffee at Heinz’s and all, Tacy gets it and Tib doesn’t (*Tacy Gets It, Tib Doesn’t*—a running subtitle for the entire series).

But the girls are also soulmates on a deeper level. As a child, Betsy feels most religious when she talks to Tacy about God. Tacy is the one who understands how Betsy feels about leaving Hill Street—for “Betsy was proud before everyone in the world but Tacy.” And immediately following the momentous occasion **♥When Tony Met Betsy♥**, Betsy heads straight for a phone to call Tacy.

For Tacy shares Betsy’s love affairs, even if she doesn’t share Betsy’s adulation of boys: “[Tacy] rejoiced with her when things went well and grieved when they went badly.” Tacy is unfailingly generous, as a best friend should be. From the unfrosted cake on her plate, to the fashion sheets her brother gets from the tailor (even then, good men could be hard to find), to the choice of Tony as back-up dance date, to the pain Betsy feels when called to the blackboard in Geometry class, to the dubious entertainment of having her ringlets combed, Tacy shares everything with Betsy.

And this is indicative of her larger generosity of spirit. She is not jealous of a Triumvirate of Lady Bugs that leaves her out—she’s genuinely happy that Betsy’s making friends on High Street. When Betsy prepares for her first solo excursion to the Carnegie Library, the girls are initially forlorn at being parted. But Tacy won’t let Betsy embark on her adventure with a heavy heart. She hugs Betsy’s arm and looks into her chum’s eyes “with her deep blue eyes that were always so loving and kind. ‘I *want* you to go,’” she assures her friend—and only then does Betsy feel all right about going. Later, Tacy resumes this role when Betsy’s headed to Milwaukee to spend Christmas with Tib. Tacy senses that Betsy’s spirits are low and acts nonsensical to cheer her up. Tacy “never once said . . . ‘I wish I were going.’ She was never envious, no matter how many nice things happened to Betsy.”

For Tacy is Betsy’s biggest fan. Her *first words* to Tib are, “Betsy makes up stories.” She is an early advocate for Betsy’s writing, believing that Betsy’s tales

are just as good as the ones in *Ladies Home Journal*. "I've always known you were going to be a writer," says Tacy. "I knew it ahead of everyone." Tacy is confident and proud when Betsy is chosen for the Essay Contest, and later bristles at the suggestion that Joe Willard might win again.

Betsy also yearns to be pretty, a belle, and here again Tacy feeds her hunger. When Betsy mourns that she's not pretty enough for Tony, Tacy is indignant at the suggestion. At the Freshman Party, Tacy remarks at once how pretty Betsy looks, and says that Betsy has "fascinated" Herbert and Cab. When Betsy realizes that she's older than Juliet, Tacy, "who always said the right thing," notes, "Well, you've had the love affair." Tacy also reminds Betsy how absurd it is to try to change herself: "Betsy, did it ever occur to you that the better people know you, the better they like you? . . . It shows how silly you are ever to act like somebody you aren't."

Tacy has Betsy's back. She sees right through her best friend's plot to avoid "flying" but says nary a word. Tacy is willing to give in to Julia and Katie during the Queen War, but she senses that Betsy is going to be stubborn—"and when Betsy got stubborn, Tacy was stubborn too because she didn't like to go back on Betsy." As the girls grow up, Tacy easily moves into the role of Betsy's wingman: She approves Betsy's first note to Herbert Humphreys, and snaps Betsy's apple for Tony in a perfectly casual offhand way—"Trust Tacy not to betray Betsy's feelings." Tacy instantly sees the implications of the *Dree-eee-eaming* song at the Crowd picnic but is too late to stop it. And when the school is buzzing about hot new couple Phyllis and Joe, Tacy glances at Betsy and declares, "It won't last long, I imagine."

Tacy is there when Betsy needs her most—from age 5, with the arrival of threatening newcomer Margaret, to Betsy's life as a young bride who can't cook. Her role as Betsy's comforter ideal is established in the first book, on the occasion of Margaret's birth, as Betsy marvels, "[Tacy] *had* comforted her. All the sore hurt feeling was gone." Tacy writes faithfully when Betsy's visiting the Taggart's ("To Tacy, and to Tacy alone, would [Betsy] confess how homesick she had been"). Tacy notices that Tony and Bonnie have been skating for a long time, reads the handwriting on the wall, and heads straight to Betsy. Tacy is there waiting when it becomes clear that Betsy's been dumped by Phil, and later when Betsy gets the

worst news possible from Miss Clarke. (No Essay Contest for sorority girls!) Tacy would *never* push a Ouija board to spell out T-R-O-U-B-L-E, not even as a joke. She is there for Betsy, always.

The girls bring out the best in each other. When Baby Bee dies, Tacy's need of her inspires Betsy to rise to the occasion; she bravely climbs a tree with Bee's purple Easter egg. And Tacy is a good model for Betsy—scorning fashion with her coronet braids, refusing to pretend to be boy crazy, focusing on her music. In turn, Betsy helps Tacy step out of her shell; shy Tacy sings the Cat Duet at school and talks baby talk while window-shopping for Christmas presents. Tacy notes, "There's no one I can be so silly with as I can with you."

Quite simply, this is a friendship based on true and enduring love. When the girls create Okto Delta, Tacy says, "I can't think of anyone I'd feel safer about promising to like." "Tacy," Betsy comes to realize, "is a wonderful person." On the day of Tib's wedding, the girls climb the Big Hill hand in hand. Maud writes, "Their hands met and as always, unfailingly, joined in a loyal clasp."

"It was difficult, later, to think of a time when Betsy and Tacy had not been friends." And for us, the readers who follow this much-loved pair through the Winding Hall of Fate, it is simply impossible to imagine otherwise.

There *is* no Betsy-Tacy without her. She is the best friend of our dreams. I most admire Tacy.