

XXIV. Barbara

Another shock was waiting for me farther down the story.

For we had resumed our adventures, though we seldom saw Bailey now. At long intervals we met him on our way to or from the Gardens, and, if there was none from Pilkington's to mark him, methought he looked at us somewhat longingly, as if beneath his real knickerbockers a morsel of the egg-shell still adhered. Otherwise he gave David a not unfriendly kick in passing, and called him "youngster." That was about all.

When Oliver disappeared from the life of the Gardens we had lofted him out of the story, and did very well without him, extending our operations to the mainland, where they were on so vast a scale that we were rapidly depopulating the earth. And then said David one day,

"Shall we let Barbara in?"

We had occasionally considered the giving of Bailey's place to some other child of the Gardens, divers of David's year having sought election, even with bribes; but Barbara was new to me.

"Who is she?" I asked.

"She's mysister."

You may imagine how I gaped.

"She hasn't come yet," David said lightly, "but she's coming."

I was shocked, not perhaps so much shocked as disillusioned, for though I had always suspicioned Mary A---- as one who harboured the craziest ambitions when she looked most humble, of such presumption as this I had never thought her capable.

I wandered across the Broad Walk to have a look at Irene, and she was wearing an unmistakable air. It set me reflecting about Mary's husband and his manner the last time we met, for though I have had no opportunity to say so, we still meet now and again, and he has even dined with me at the club. On these occasions the subject of Timothy is barred, and if by any unfortunate accident Mary's name is mentioned, we immediately look opposite ways and a silence follows, in which I feel sure he is smiling, and wonder what the deuce he is smiling at. I remembered now that I had last

seen him when I was dining with him at his club (for he is become member of a club of painter fellows, and Mary is so proud of this that she has had it printed on his card), when undoubtedly he had looked preoccupied. It had been the look, I saw now, of one who shared a guilty secret.

As all was thus suddenly revealed to me I laughed unpleasantly at myself, for, on my soul, I had been thinking well of Mary of late. Always foolishly inflated about David, she had been grudging him even to me during these last weeks, and I had forgiven her, putting it down to a mother's love. I knew from the poor boy of unwonted treats she had been giving him; I had seen her embrace him furtively in a public place, her every act, in so far as they were known to me, had been a challenge to whoever dare assert that she wanted anyone but David. How could I, not being a woman, have guessed that she was really saying good-bye to him?

Reader, picture to yourself that simple little boy playing about the house at this time, on the understanding that everything was going on as usual. Have not his toys acquired a new pathos, especially the engine she bought him yesterday?

Did you look him in the face, Mary, as you gave him that engine? I envy you not your feelings, ma'am, when with loving arms he wrapped you round for it. That childish confidence of his to me, in which unwittingly he betrayed you, indicates that at last you have been preparing him for the great change, and I suppose you are capable of replying to me that David is still happy, and even interested. But does he know from you what it really means to him? Rather, I do believe, you are one who would not scruple to give him to understand that B (which you may yet find stands for Benjamin) is primarily a gift for him. In your heart, ma'am, what do you think of this tricking of a little boy?

Suppose David had known what was to happen before he came to you, are you sure he would have come? Undoubtedly there is an unwritten compact in such matters between a mother and her first-born, and I desire to point out to you that he never breaks it. Again, what will the other boys say when they know? You are outside the criticism of the Gardens, but David is not. Faith, madam, I believe you would have been kinder to wait and let him run the gauntlet at Pilkington's.

You think your husband is a great man now because they are beginning to talk of his foregrounds and middle distances in the newspaper columns that nobody reads. I know you have bought him a velvet coat, and that he has taken a large, airy and commodious studio in Mews Lane, where you are to

be found in a soft material on first and third Wednesdays. Times are changing, but shall I tell you a story here, just to let you see that I am acquainted withit?

Three years ago a certain gallery accepted from a certain artist a picture which he and his wife knew to be monstrous fine. But no one spoke of the picture, no one wrote of it, and no one made an offer for it. Crushed was the artist, sorry for the denseness of connoisseurs was his wife, till the work was bought by a dealer for an anonymous client, and then elated were they both, and relieved also to discover that I was not the buyer. He came to me at once to make sure of this, and remained to walk the floor gloriously as he told me what recognition means to gentlemen of the artistic callings. O, the happy boy!

But months afterward, rummaging at his home in a closet that is usually kept locked, he discovered the picture, there hidden away. His wife backed into a corner and made trembling confession. How could she submit to see her dear's masterpiece ignored by the idiot public, and her dear himself plunged into gloom thereby? She knew as well as he (for had they not been married for years?) how the artistic instinct hungers for recognition, and so with her savings she bought the great work anonymously and stored it away in a closet. At first, I believe, the man raved furiously, but by-and-by he was on his knees at the feet of this little darling. You know who she was, Mary, but, bless me, I seem to be praising you, and that was not the enterprise on which I set out. What I intended to convey was that though you can now venture on small extravagances, you seem to be going too fast. Look at it how one may, this Barbara idea is undoubtedly a bad business.

How to be even with her? I cast about for a means, and on my lucky day I did conceive my final triumph over Mary, at which I have scarcely as yet dared to hint, lest by discovering it I should spoil my plot. For there has been a plot all the time.

For long I had known that Mary contemplated the writing of a book, my informant being David, who, because I have published a little volume on Military tactics, and am preparing a larger one on the same subject (which I shall never finish), likes to watch my methods of composition, how I dip, and so on, his desire being to help her. He may have done this on his own initiative, but it is also quite possible that in her desperation she urged him to it; he certainly implied that she had taken to book-writing because it must be easy if I could do it. She also informed him (very inconsiderately), that I did not print my books myself, and this lowered me in the eyes of

David, for it was for the printing he had admired me and boasted of me in the Gardens.

"I suppose you didn't make the boxes neither, nor yet the labels," he said to me in the voice of one shorn of belief in everything.

I should say here that my literary labours are abstruse, the token whereof is many rows of boxes nailed against my walls, each labelled with a letter of the alphabet. When I take a note in A, I drop it into the A box, and so on, much to the satisfaction of David, who likes to drop them in for me. I had now to admit that Wheeler & Gibb made the boxes.

"But I made the labels myself, David."

"They are not so well made as the boxes," he replied.

Thus I have reason to wish ill to Mary's work of imagination, as I presumed it to be, and I said to him with easy brutality, "Tell her about the boxes, David, and that no one can begin a book until they are all full. That will frighten her."

Soon thereafter he announced to me that she had got a box.

"One box!" I said with a sneer.

"She made it herself," retorted David hotly.

I got little real information from him about the work, partly because David loses his footing when he descends to the practical, and perhaps still more because he found me unsympathetic. But when he blurted out the title, "The Little White Bird," I was like one who had read the book to its last page. I knew at once that the white bird was the little daughter Mary would fain have had. Somehow I had always known that she would like to have a little daughter, she was that kind of woman, and so long as she had the modesty to see that she could not have one, I sympathised with her deeply, whatever I may have said about her book to David.

In those days Mary had the loveliest ideas for her sad little book, and they came to her mostly in the morning when she was only three-parts awake, but as she stepped out of bed they all flew away like startled birds. I gathered from David that this depressed her exceedingly.

Oh, Mary, your thoughts are much too pretty and holy to show themselves to anyone but yourself. The shy things are hiding within you. If they could come into the open they would not be a book, they would be little Barbara.

But that was not the message I sent her. "She will never be able to write it," I explained to David. "She has not the ability. Tell her I said that."

I remembered now that for many months I had heard nothing of her ambitious project, so I questioned David and discovered that it was abandoned. He could not say why, nor was it necessary that he should, the trivial little reason was at once so plain to me. From that moment all my sympathy with Mary was spilled, and I searched for some means of exulting over her until I found it. It was this. I decided, unknown even to David, to write the book "The Little White Bird," of which she had proved herself incapable, and then when, in the fulness of time, she held her baby on high, implying that she had done a big thing, I was to hold up the book. I venture to think that such a devilish revenge was never before planned and carried out.

Yes, carried out, for this is the book, rapidly approaching completion. She and I are running a neck-and-neck race.

I have also once more brought the story of David's adventures to an abrupt end. "And it really is the end this time, David," I said severely. (I always say that.)

It ended on the coast of Patagonia, whither we had gone to shoot the great Sloth, known to be the largest of animals, though we found his size to have been under-estimated. David, his father and I had flung our limbs upon the beach and were having a last pipe before turning in, while Mary, attired in barbaric splendour, sang and danced before us. It was a lovely evening, and we lolled manlike, gazing, well-content, at the pretty creature.

The night was absolutely still save for the roaring of the Sloths in the distance.

By-and-by Irene came to the entrance of our cave, where by the light of her torch we could see her exploring a shark that had been harpooned by David earlier in the day.

Everything conduced to repose, and a feeling of gentle peace crept over us, from which we were roused by a shrill cry. It was uttered by Irene, who came speeding to us, bearing certain articles, a watch, a pair of boots, a newspaper, which she had discovered in the interior of the shark. What was our surprise to find in the newspaper intelligence of the utmost importance to all of us. It was nothing less than this, the birth of a new baby in London to Mary.

How strange a method had Solomon chosen of sending us the news.

The bald announcement at once plunged us into a fever of excitement, and next morning we set sail for England. Soon we came within sight of the white cliffs of Albion. Mary could not sit down for a moment, so hot was she to see her child. She paced the deck in uncontrollable agitation.

"So did I!" cried David, when I had reached this point in the story.

On arriving at the docks we immediately hailed a cab.

"Never, David," I said, "shall I forget your mother's excitement. She kept putting her head out of the window and calling to the cabby to go quicker, quicker. How he lashed his horse! At last he drew up at your house, and then your mother, springing out, flew up the steps and beat with her hands upon the door."

David was quite carried away by the reality of it. "Father has the key!" he screamed.

"He opened the door," I said grandly, "and your mother rushed in, and next moment her Benjamin was in her arms."

There was a pause.

"Barbara," corrected David.

"Benjamin," said I doggedly.

"Is that a girl's name?"

"No, it's a boy's name."

"But mother wants a girl," he said, very much shaken.

"Just like her presumption," I replied testily. "It is to be a boy, David, and you can tell her I said so."

He was in a deplorable but most unselfish state of mind. A boy would have suited him quite well, but he put self aside altogether and was pertinaciously solicitous that Mary should be given her fancy.

"Barbara," he repeatedly implored me.

"Benjamin," I replied firmly.

For long I was obdurate, but the time was summer, and at last I agreed to play him for it, a two-innings match. If he won it was to be a girl, and if I won it was to be a boy.