

BARBARA'S WEDDING

The Colonel is in the sitting-room of his country cottage, staring through the open windows at his pretty garden. He is a very old man, and is sometimes bewildered nowadays. He calls to Dering, the gardener, who is on a ladder, pruning. Dering, who comes to him, is a rough, capable young fellow with fingers that are already becoming stumpy because he so often uses his hands instead of a spade. This is a sign that Dering will never get on in the world. His mind is in the same condition as his fingers, working back to clods. He will get a rise of one and sixpence in a year or two, and marry on it and become duller and heavier; and, in short, the clever ones could already write his epitaph.

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'A beautiful morning, Dering.'

'Too much sun, sir. The roses be complaining, and, to make matters worse, Miss Barbara has been watering of them--in the heat of the day.'

The Colonel is a very gentle knight nowadays. 'Has she? She means well.' But that is not what is troubling him. He approaches the subject diffidently. 'Dering, you heard it, didn't you?' He is longing to be told that Dering heard it.

'What was that, sir?'

'The thunderstorm--early this morning.'

'There was no thunderstorm, sir.'

Dispirited, 'That is what they all say.' The Colonel is too courteous to contradict any one, but he tries again; there is about him the insistence of one who knows that he is right. 'It was at four o'clock. I got up and looked out at the window. The evening primroses were very beautiful.'

Dering is equally dogged. 'I don't hold much with evening primroses, sir; but I was out and about at four; there was no thunderstorm.'

The Colonel still thinks that there was a thunderstorm, but he wants to placate Dering. 'I suppose I just thought there was one. Perhaps it was

some thunderstorm of long ago that I heard. They do come back, you know.'

Heavily, 'Do they, sir?'

'I am glad to see you moving about in the garden, Dering, with everything just as usual.'

There is a cautious slyness about this, as if the Colonel was fishing for information; but it is too clever for Dering, who is going with a 'Thank you, sir.'

'No, don't go.' The old man lowers his voice and makes a confession reluctantly, 'I am--a little troubled, Dering.'

Dering knows that his master has a wandering mind, and he answers nicely, 'Everything be all right, sir.'

'I'm glad of that,' the Colonel says with relief. 'It is pleasant to see that you have come back, Dering. Why did you go away for such a long time?'

'Me, sir?' Dering is a little aggrieved. 'I haven't had a day off since Christmas.'

'Haven't you? I thought--'

The Colonel tries to speak casually, but there is a trembling eagerness in his voice. 'Is everything just as usual, Dering?'

'Yes, sir. There never were a place less changed than this.'

'That's true.' The Colonel is appeased. 'Thank you, Dering, for saying that.' But next moment he has lowered his voice again. 'Dering, there is nothing wrong, is there? Is anything happening that I am not being told about?'

'Not that I know of, sir.'

'That is what they all say, but--I don't know.' He stares at his old sword which is hanging on the wall. 'Dering, I feel as if I was needed somewhere. I don't know where it is. No one will tell me. Where is every one?'

'They're all about, sir. There's a cricket match on at the village green.'

'Is there?'

'If the wind had a bit of south in it you could hear their voices. You were a bit of a nailer at cricket yourself, sir.'

The Colonel sees himself standing up to fast ones. He is gleeful over his reminiscences.

'Ninety-nine against Mallowfield, and then bowled off my pads. Biggest score I ever made. Mallowfield wanted to add one to make it the hundred, but I wouldn't let them. I was pretty good at steering them through the slips, Dering! Do you remember my late cut? It didn't matter where point stood, I got past him. You used to stand at point, Dering.'

'That was my grandfather, sir. If he was to be believed, he used to snap you regular at point.'

The Colonel is crestfallen, but he has a disarming smile. 'Did he? I daresay he did. I can't play now, but I like to watch it still.' He becomes troubled again. 'Dering, there is no cricket on the green to-day. I have been down to look. I don't understand it, Dering. When I got there the green was all dotted with them--it's the prettiest sight and sound in England. But as I watched them they began to go away, one and two at a time; they weren't given out, you know, they went as if they had been called away. Some of the little shavers stayed on--and then they went off, as if they had been called away too. The stumps were left lying about. Why is it?'

'It's just fancy, sir,' Dering says soothingly, 'I saw Master Will oiling his bat yesterday.'

'Did you?' avidly. 'I should have liked to see that. I have often oiled their bats for them. Careless lads, they always forget. Was that nice German boy with him?'

'Mr. Karl? Not far off, sir. He was sitting by the bank of the stream playing on his flute; and Miss Barbara, she had climbed one of my apple-trees,--she says they are your trees.' He lowers.

'They are, you know, Dering,' the Colonel says meekly.

'Yes, sir, in a sense,' brushing the spurious argument aside, 'but I don't like any of you to meddle with them. And there she sat, pelting the two of them with green apples.'

'How like her!' The Colonel shakes his head indulgently. 'I don't know how we are to make a demure young lady of her.'

Dering smirks. 'They say in the village, sir, that Master Will would like to try.'

To the Colonel this is wit of a high order.

'Ha! ha! he is just a colt himself.' But the laughter breaks off. He seems to think that he will get the truth if Dering comes closer, 'Who are all here now, Dering; in the house, I mean? I sometimes forget. They grow old so quickly. They go out at one door in the bloom of youth, and come back by another, tired and grey. Haven't you noticed it?'

'No, sir. The only visitors staying here are Miss Barbara and Mr. Karl. There's just them and yourselves, sir, you and the mistress and Master Will. That's all.'

'Yes, that's all,' his master says, still unconvinced. 'Who is the soldier, Dering?'

'Soldier, sir? There is no soldier here except yourself.'

'Isn't there? There was a nurse with him. Who is ill?'

'No one, sir. There's no nurse.' Dering backs away from the old man. 'Would you like me to call the mistress, sir?'

'No, she has gone down to the village. She told me why, but I forget. Miss Barbara is with her.'

'Miss Barbara is down by the stream, sir.'

'Is she? I think they said they were going to a wedding.' With an old man's curiosity, 'Who is being married to-day, Dering?'

'I have heard of no wedding, sir. But here is Miss Barbara.'

It is perhaps the first time that Dering has been glad to see Miss Barbara, who romps in, a merry hoyden, running over with animal spirits.

'Here's the tomboy!' the Colonel cries gaily.

Barbara looks suspiciously from one to the other.

'Dering, I believe you are complaining to the Colonel about my watering the flowers at the wrong time of day.'

'Aha! Aha!' The Colonel thinks she is even wittier than Dering, who is properly abashed.

'I did just mention it, miss.'

'You horrid!' Barbara shakes her mop of hair at the gardener. 'Dear, don't mind him. And every time he says they are his flowers and his apples, you tell me, and I shall say to his face that they are yours.'

'The courage of those young things!' says the happy Colonel.

Dering's underlip becomes very pronounced, but he goes off into the garden. Barbara attempts to attend to the Colonel's needs.

'Let me make you comfy--the way granny does it.'

She arranges his cushions clumsily.

'That is not quite the way she does it,' the Colonel says softly, 'Do you call her granny, Barbara?'

'She asked me to--for practice.' Barbara is curious. 'Don't you remember why?'

Of course the Colonel remembers.

'I know! Billy boy.'

'You are quick to-day. Now, wait till I get your cane.'

'I don't need my cane while I'm sitting.'

'You look so beau'ful, sitting holding your cane.' She knocks over his cushions. 'Oh dear! I am a clumsy.'

Politely, 'Not at all, but perhaps if I were to do it for myself.' He makes himself comfortable. 'That's better. Thank you, Barbara, very much.'

'I didn't do it. I'm all thumbs. What a ghastly nurse I should make.'

'Nurse?' The Colonel's troubles return to him. 'Who is she, Barbara?'

'Who is who, dear?'

'That nurse.'

'There's no nurse here.'

'Isn't there?'

Barbara feels that she is of less use than ever to-day. 'Where is granny?'

'She has gone down to the village to a wedding.'

'There's no wedding. Who could be being married?'

'I think it's people I know, but I can't remember who they are. I thought you went too, Barbara.'

'Not I. Catch me missing it if there had been a wedding!'

'You and the nurse.'

'Dear, you have just been imagining things again. Shall I play to you, or sing?' She knocks over a chair, 'Oh dear, everything catches in me. Would you like me to "Robin Adair," dear?'

The Colonel is polite, but firm, 'No, thank you, Barbara.' For a few moments he forgets her; his mind has gone wandering again. 'Barbara, the house seems so empty. Where are Billy and Karl?'

'Billy is where Karl is, you may be sure.'

'And where is Karl?'

'He is where Billy boy is, you may be sure.'

'And where are they both?'

'Not far from where Barbara is, you bet.' She flutters to the window and waves her hand. 'Do you hear Karl's flute? They have been down all the morning at the pool where the alder is, trying to catch that bull-trout.'

'They didn't get him, I'll swear!'

'You can ask them.'

'I spent a lot of my youth trying to get that bull-trout. I tumbled in there sixty years ago.'

'I tumbled in sixty minutes ago! It can't be the same trout, dear.'

'Same old rascal!'

Billy and Karl come in by the window, leaving a fishing-rod outside. They are gay, careless, attractive youths.

BARBARA, with her nose in the air, 'You muddy things!'

COLONEL, gaily firing his dart, 'Did you get the bull-trout, Billy boy?'

BILLY. 'He's a brute that.'

COLONEL. 'He is, you know.'

BILLY. 'He came up several times and had a look at my fly. Didn't flick it, or do anything as complimentary as that. Just yawned and went down.'

COLONEL. 'Yawned, did he? Used to wink in my time. Did you and Billy fish at Heidelberg, Karl?'

KARL. 'We were more worthily employed, sir, but we did unbend at times. Billy, do you remember--' He begins a gay dance.

BILLY. 'Not I.' Then he joins in.

BARBARA. 'Young gentlemen, how disgraceful!' She joins in.

COLONEL. 'Harum-scarums!'

KARL. 'Does he know about you two?'

BILLY. 'He often forgets, I'll tell him again. Grandfather, Barbara and I have something to say to you. It's this.' He puts his arm round Barbara.

COLONEL, smiling, 'I know--I know. There's nothing like it. I'm very glad, Barbara.'

BARBARA. 'You see, dear, I've loved Billy boy since the days when he tried to catch the bull-trout with a string and a bent pin, and I held on to his pinafore to prevent his tumbling in. We used to play at school at marrying and giving in marriage, and the girl who was my bridegroom had always to take the name of Billy. "Do you, woman, take this man

Billy--" the clergyman in skirts began, and before I could answer diffidently, some other girl was sure to shout, "I should rather think she does."

COLONEL, in high good humour, 'Don't forget the ring, Billy. You know, when I was married I think I couldn't find the ring!'

KARL. 'Were you married here, sir?'

COLONEL. 'Yes, at the village church.'

BILLY. 'So were my father and mother.'

COLONEL, as his eyes wander to the garden, 'I remember walking back with my wife and bringing her in here through the window. She kissed some of the furniture.'

BILLY. 'I suppose you would like a grander affair, Barbara?'

BARBARA. 'No, just the same.'

BILLY. 'I hoped you would say that.'

BARBARA. 'But, Billy, I'm to have such a dream of a wedding gown. Granny is going with me to London, to choose it'--laying her head on the Colonel's shoulder--'if you can do without her for a day, dear.'

COLONEL, gallantly, 'I shall go with you, I couldn't trust you and granny to choose the gown.'

KARL. 'You must often be pretty lonely, sir, when we are all out and about enjoying ourselves.'

COLONEL. 'They all say that. But that is the time when I'm not lonely, Karl. It's then I see things most clearly--the past, I suppose. It all comes crowding back to me--India, the Crimea, India again--and it's so real, especially the people. They come and talk to me. I seem to see them; I don't know they haven't been here, Billy, till your granny tells me afterwards.'

BILLY. 'Yes, I know, I wonder where granny is.'

BARBARA. 'It isn't often she leaves you for so long, dear.'

COLONEL. 'She told me she had to go out, but I forget where. Oh, yes, she has gone down to the village to a wedding.'

BILLY. 'A wedding?'

BARBARA. 'It's curious how he harps on that.'

COLONEL. 'She said to me to listen and I would hear the wedding bells.'

BARBARA. 'Not to-day, dear.'

BILLY. 'Best not to worry him.'

BARBARA. 'But granny says we should try to make things clear to him.'

BILLY. 'Was any one with granny when she said she was going to a wedding?'

COLONEL, like one begging her to admit it, 'You were there, Barbara.'

BARBARA. 'No, dear. He said that to me before. And something about a nurse.'

COLONEL, obstinately, 'She was there, too.'

BILLY. 'Any one else?'

COLONEL. 'There was that soldier.'

BARBARA. 'A soldier also!'

COLONEL. 'Just those three.'

BILLY. 'But that makes four. Granny and Barbara and a nurse and a soldier.'

COLONEL. 'They were all there; but there were only three.'

BILLY. 'Odd.'

BARBARA, soothingly, 'Never mind, dear, Granny will make it all right. She is the one for you.'

COLONEL. 'She is the one for me.'

KARL. 'If there had been a wedding, wouldn't she have taken the Colonel with her?'

BARBARA. 'Of course she would.'

KARL. 'You are not too old to have a kind eye for a wedding, sir.'

COLONEL, wagging his head, 'Aha, aha! You know, if I had gone, very likely I should have kissed the bride. Brides look so pretty on their wedding day. They are often not pretty at other times, but they are all pretty on their wedding day.'

KARL. 'You have an eye for a pretty girl still, sir!'

COLONEL. 'Yes, I have; yes, I have!'

BARBARA. 'I do believe I see it all. Granny has been talking to you about Billy boy and me, and you haven't been able to wait; you have hurried on the wedding!'

BILLY. 'Bravo, Barbara, you've got it.'

COLONEL, doubtfully, 'That may be it. Because I am sure you were to be there, Barbara.'

BARBARA. 'Our wedding, Billy!'

KARL. 'It doesn't explain those other people, though.'

The Colonel moves about in agitation.

BARBARA. 'What is it, dear?'

COLONEL. 'I can't quite remember, but I think that is why she didn't take me. It is your wedding, Barbara, but I don't think Billy boy is to be there, my love.'

BARBARA. 'Not at my wedding!'

BILLY. 'Grandfather!'

COLONEL. 'There's something sad about it.'

BARBARA. 'There can't be anything sad about a wedding, dear. Granny didn't say it was a sad wedding, did she?'

COLONEL. 'She was smiling.'

BARBARA. 'Of course she was.'

COLONEL. 'But I think that was only to please the nurse.'

BARBARA. 'That nurse again! Dear, don't think any more about it. There's no wedding.'

COLONEL, gently, though he wonders why they can go on deceiving him, 'Is there not?'

The village wedding bells begin to ring.

The Colonel is triumphant. 'I told you! There is a wedding!'

The bells ring on gaily. Billy and Barbara take a step nearer to each other, but can go no closer. The bells ring on, and the three young people fade from the scene.

When they are gone and he is alone, the Colonel still addresses them. 'It's Barbara's wedding. Billy boy, why are you not at Barbara's wedding?'

Soon the bells stop. He knows that he is alone now, but he does not understand it. The sun is shining brightly, but he sits very cold in his chair. He shivers. He is very glad to see his wife coming to him through the open window. She is a dear old lady, and is dressed brightly, as becomes one who has been to a wedding. Her face beams to match her gown. She is really quite a happy woman again, for it is several years since any deep sorrow struck her; and that is a long time. No one, you know, understands the Colonel as she does, no one can soothe him and bring him out of his imaginings as she can. He hastens to her. He is no longer cold. That is her great reward for all she does for him.

'I have come back, John,' she says, smiling tranquilly on him. 'It hasn't seemed very long, has it?'

'No, not long, Ellen. Had you a nice walk?'

She continues to smile, but she is watching him closely. 'I haven't been for a walk. Don't you remember where I told you I was going, John?'

'Yes, it was to a wedding.'

Rather tremulously, 'You haven't forgotten whose wedding, have you?'

'Tell me, Ellen.' He is no longer troubled. He knows that Ellen will tell him.

'I have been seeing Barbara married, John.'

'Yes, it was Barbara's wedding. They wouldn't--Ellen, why wasn't I there?'

Like one telling him amusing gossip, 'I thought you might be a little troubled if you went, John. Sometimes your mind--not often, but sometimes if you are agitated--and then you think you see--people who aren't here any longer. Oh dear, oh dear, help me with these bonnet strings.'

'Yes, I know. I'm all right when you are with me, Ellen. Funny, isn't it?'

She raises her shoulders in a laugh. 'It is funny, John. I ran back to you, John. I was thinking of you all the time--even more than of Billy boy.'

The Colonel is very gay. 'Tell me all about it, Ellen. Did Billy boy lose the ring? We always said he would lose the ring.'

She looks straight into his eyes. 'You have forgotten again, John. Barbara isn't married to Billy boy.'

He draws himself up. 'Not marry Billy! I'll see about that.'

She presses him into his chair. 'Sit down, dear, and I'll tell you something again. It is nothing to trouble you, because your soldiering is done, John; and greatly done. My dear, there is war again, and our old land is in it. Such a war as my soldier never knew.'

He rises. He is a stern old man. 'A war! That's it, is it? So now I know! Why wasn't I told? Why haven't I my marching orders? I'm not too old yet.'

'Yes, John, you are too old, and all you can do now is to sit here and--and take care of me. You knew all about it quite clearly this morning. We stood together upstairs by the window listening to the aircraft guns.'

'I remember! I thought it was a thunderstorm, Dering told me he heard nothing.'

'Dering?'

'Our gardener, you know.' His voice becomes husky. 'Haven't I been talking with him, Ellen?'

'It is a long time since we had a gardener, John.'

'Is it? So it is! A war! That is why there is no more cricket on the green.'

'They have all gone to the war, John.'

'That's it; even the little shavers.' He whispers, 'Why isn't Billy boy fighting, Ellen?'

'Oh, John!'

'Is Billy boy dead?' She nods. 'Was he killed in action? Tell me, tell me!' She nods again. 'Good for Billy boy. I knew Billy boy was all right. Don't cry, Ellen. I'll take care of you. All's well with Billy boy.'

'Yes, I know, John.'

He hesitates before speaking again. 'Ellen, who is the soldier? He comes here. He is a captain.'

'He is a very gallant man, John. It is he who was married to Barbara to-day.'

Bitterly, 'She has soon forgotten.'

His wife shakes her brave head. 'She hasn't forgotten, dear. And it's nearly three years now since Billy died.'

'So long! We have a medal he got, haven't we?'

'No, John; he died before he could win any medals.'

The Colonel moves about, 'Karl will be sorry. They were very fond of each other, those two boys, Ellen.'

'Karl fought against us, John. He died in the same engagement. They may even have killed each other.'

'They hadn't known, Ellen.'

She with, thin lips, 'I daresay they knew.'

'Billy boy and Karl!'

She tells him some more gossip. 'John, I had Barbara married from here because she has no people of her own. I think Billy would have liked it.'

'That was the thing to do, Ellen. Nice of you. I remember everything now. It's Dering she has married. He was once my gardener!'

'The world is all being re-made, dear. He is worthy of her.'

He lets this pass. He has remembered something almost as surprising, 'Ellen, is Barbara a nurse?'

'Yes, John, and one of the staidest and most serene. Who would have thought it of the merry madcap of other days! They are coming here, John, to say good-bye to you. They have only a few days' leave. She is in France, too, you know. She was married in her nurse's uniform.'

'Was she? She told me to-day that--no, it couldn't have been to-day.'

'You have been fancying you saw them, I suppose.' She grows tremulous again. 'You will be nice to them, John, won't you, and wish them luck? They have their trials before them.'

He says eagerly, 'Tell me what to do, Ellen.'

'Don't say anything about Billy boy, John.'

'No, no, let's pretend.'

'And I wouldn't talk about the garden, John; just in case he is a little touchy about that.'

The Colonel is beginning to fancy himself as a tactician. 'Not a word!'

She knows what is the way to put him on his mettle. 'You see, I'm sure I would make a mess of it, so I'm trusting to you, John.'

He is very pleased, 'Leave it all to me, Ellen. I'll be frightfully sly. You just watch me.'

She goes to the window and calls to the married couple. Captain Dering, in khaki, is a fine soldierly figure. Barbara, in her Red Cross uniform, is quiet and resourceful. An artful old boy greets them. 'Congratulations, Barbara. No, no, none of your handshaking; you don't get past an old soldier in that way. Excuse me, young man.' He kisses Barbara and looks at his wife to make sure that she is admiring him, 'And to you, Captain Dering--you have won a prize.'

A gallant gentleman answers, 'I know it; I'll try to show I know it.'

The Colonel is perturbed. 'I haven't given Barbara a wedding present, Ellen, I should like----'

Barbara breaks in, 'Indeed you have, dear, and a lovely one. You haven't forgotten?'

Granny signs to the Colonel and he immediately says, with remarkable cunning, 'Oh--that! I was just quizzing you, Barbara. I hope you will be as happy, dear, staid Barbara, as if you had married----' He sees that he has nearly given away the situation. He looks triumphantly at granny as much as to say, 'Observe me; I'm not going to say a word about him.'

Granny comes to his aid. 'Perhaps Captain Dering has some little things to do: and you, too, Barbara. They are leaving in an hour, John.'

For a moment the Colonel is again in danger. 'If you would like to take Barbara into the garden, Captain Dering----' He recovers himself instantly. 'No, not the garden, you wouldn't know your way about in the garden.'

'Wouldn't I, Colonel?' the Captain says, smiling.

The answer is quite decisive. 'No, certainly not. I'll show it you some day.'

He makes gleeful signs to granny. 'But there is a nice meadow just beyond the shrubbery. Barbara knows the way; she often went there with--' He checks himself. Granny signs to them to go, and Barbara, kisses both the Colonel's hands. 'The Captain will be jealous, you know,' he says, twinkling.

'Let me, dear,' says Barbara, arranging his cushions professionally.

Granny nods. 'She is much better at it than I am now, John.'

The Colonel has one last piece of advice to give. 'I wouldn't go down by the stream, Barbara--not to the pool where the alder is. There's--there's not a good view there, sir; and a boy--a boy I knew, he often--nobody in particular--just a boy who used to come about the house--he is not here now--he is on duty. I don't think you should go to the alder pool, Barbara.'

'We won't go there, dear.' She and her husband go out, and the Colonel scarcely misses them, he is so eager to hear what his wife thinks of him.

'Did I do all right, Ellen?'

'Splendidly. I was proud of you.'

He exults. 'I put them completely off the scent! They haven't a notion! I can be very sly, you know, at times. Ellen, I think I should like to have that alder tree cut down. There is no boy now, you see.'

'I would leave it alone, John. There will be boys again. Shall I read to you; you like that, don't you?'

'Yes, read to me--something funny, if you please. About Sam Weller! No, I expect Sam has gone to the wars. Read about Mr. Pickwick. He is very amusing. I feel sure that if he had tried to catch the bull-trout he would have fallen in. Just as Barbara did this morning.'

'Barbara?'

'She is down at the alder pool. Billy is there with that nice German boy. The noise they make, shouting and laughing!'

She gets from its shelf the best book for war-time. 'Which bit shall I read?'

'About Mr. Pickwick going into the lady's bedroom by mistake.'

'Yes, dear, though you almost know it by heart. You see, you have begun to laugh already.'

'You are laughing too, Ellen. I can't help it!'

She begins to read; they are both chuckling.