

CHAPTER V

BARBARA MAKES A SPEECH

While Alan and Barbara, on the most momentous occasion of their lives, were seated upon the fallen oak in the woods that thrilled with the breath of spring, another interview was taking place in Mr. Champers-Haswell's private suite at The Court, the decorations of which, as he was wont to inform his visitors, had cost nearly £2000. Sir Robert, whose taste at any rate was good, thought them so appalling that while waiting for his host and partner, whom he had come to see, he took a seat in the bow window of the sitting-room and studied the view that nobody had been able to spoil. Presently Mr. Haswell emerged from his bedroom, wrapped in a dressing gown and looking very pale and shaky.

"Delighted to see you all right again," said Sir Robert as he wheeled up a chair into which Mr. Haswell sank.

"I am not all right, Aylward," he answered; "I am not all right at all. Never had such an upset in my life; thought I was going to die when that accursed savage told his beastly tale. Aylward, you are a man of the world, tell me, what is the meaning of the thing? You remember what we thought we saw in the office, and then--that story."

"I don't know," he answered; "frankly I don't know. I am a man who has never believed in anything I cannot see and test, one who utterly lacks

faith. In my leisure I have examined into the various religious systems and found them to be rubbish. I am convinced that we are but highly-developed mammals born by chance, and when our day is done, departing into the black nothingness out of which we came. Everything else, that is, what is called the higher and spiritual part, I attribute to the superstitions incident to the terror of the hideous position in which we find ourselves, that of gods of a sort hemmed in by a few years of fearful and tormented life. But you know the old arguments, so why should I enter on them? And now I am confronted with an experience which I cannot explain. I certainly thought that in the office on Friday evening I saw that gold mask to which I had taken so strange a fancy that I offered to give Vernon £17,000 for it because I thought that it brought us luck, swim across the floor of our room and look first into your face and then into mine. Well, the next night that negro tells his story. What am I to make of it?"

"Can't tell you," answered Mr. Champers-Haswell with a groan. "All I know is that it nearly made a corpse of me. I am not like you, Aylward, I was brought up as an Evangelical, and although I haven't given much thought to these matters of late years--well, we don't shake them off in a hurry. I daresay there is something somewhere, and when the black man was speaking, that something seemed uncommonly near. It got up and gripped me by the throat, shaking the mortal breath out of me, and upon my word, Aylward, I have been wishing all the morning that I had led a different kind of life, as my old parents and my brother John, Barbara's father, who was a very religious kind of man, did before me."

"It is rather late to think of all that now, Haswell," said Sir Robert, shrugging his shoulders. "One takes one's line and there's an end. Personally I believe that we are overstrained with the fearful and anxious work of this flotation, and have been the victims of an hallucination and a coincidence. Although I confess that I came to look upon the thing as a kind of mascot, I put no trust in any fetish. How can a bit of gold move, and how can it know the future? Well, I have written to them to clear it out of the office to-morrow, so it won't trouble us any more. And now I have come to speak to you on another matter."

"Not business," said Mr. Haswell with a sigh. "We have that all the week and there will be enough of it on Monday."

"No," he answered, "something more important. About your niece Barbara."

Mr. Haswell glanced at him with those little eyes of his which were so sharp that they seemed to bore like gimlets.

"Barbara?" he said. "What of Barbara?"

"Can't you guess, Haswell? You are pretty good at it, generally. Well, it is no use beating about the bush; I want to marry her."

At this sudden announcement his partner became exceedingly interested.

Leaning back in the chair he stared at the decorated ceiling, and uttered his favourite wind-in-the-wires whistle.

"Indeed," he said. "I never knew that matrimony was in your line, Aylward, any more than it has been in mine, especially as you are always preaching against it. Well, has the young lady given her consent?"

"No, I have not spoken to her. I meant to do so this morning, but she has slipped off somewhere, with Vernon, I suppose."

Mr. Haswell whistled again, but on a new note.

"Pray do stop that noise," said Sir Robert; "it gets upon my nerves, which are shaky this morning. Listen: It is a curious thing, one less to be understood even than the coincidence of the Yellow God, but at my present age of forty-four, for the first time in my life I have committed the folly of what is called falling in love. It is not the case of a successful, middle-aged man wishing to ranger himself and settle down with a desirable partie, but of sheer, stark infatuation. I adore Barbara; the worse she treats me the more I adore her. I had rather that the Sahara flotation should fail than that she should refuse me. I would rather lose three-quarters of my fortune than lose her. Do you understand?"

His partner looked at him, pursed up his lips to whistle, then remembered and shook his head instead.

"No," he answered. "Barbara is a nice girl, but I should not have imagined her capable of inspiring such sentiments in a man almost old enough to be her father. I think that you are the victim of a kind of mania, which I have heard of but never experienced. Venus--or is it Cupid?--has netted you, my dear Aylward."

"Oh! pray leave gods and goddesses out of it, we have had enough of them already," he answered, exasperated. "That is my case at any rate, and what I want to know now is if I have your support in my suit. Remember, I have something to offer, Haswell, for instance, a large fortune of which I will settle half--it is a good thing to do in our business,--and a baronetcy that will be a peerage before long."

"A peerage! Have you squared that?"

"I think so. There will be a General Election within the next three months, and on such occasions a couple of hundred thousand in cool cash come in useful to a Party that is short of ready money. I think I may say that it is settled. She will be the Lady Aylward, or any other name she may fancy, and one of the richest women in England. Now have I your support?"

"Yes, my dear friend, why not, though Barbara does not want money, for she has plenty of her own, in first-class securities that I could never persuade her to vary, for she is shrewd in that way and steadily refuses

to sign anything. Also she will probably be my heiress--and, Aylward," here a sickly look of alarm spread itself over his face, "I don't know how long I have to live. That infernal doctor examined my heart this morning and told me that it was weak. Weak was his word, but from the tone in which he said it, I believe that he meant more. Aylward, I gather that I may die any day."

"Nonsense, Haswell, so may we all," he replied, with an affectation of cheerfulness which failed to carry conviction.

Presently Mr. Haswell, who had hidden his face in his hand, looked up with a sigh and said:

"Oh! yes, of course you have my support, for after all she is my only relation and I should be glad to see her safely married. Also, as it happens, she can't marry anyone without my consent, at any rate until she is five and twenty, for if she does, under her father's will all her property goes away, most of it to charities, except a beggarly £200 a year. You see my brother John had a great horror of imprudent marriages and a still greater belief in me, which as it chances, is a good thing for you."

"Had he?" said Sir Robert. "And pray why is it a good thing for me?"

"Because, my dear Aylward, unless my observation is at fault, there is another Richard in the field, our late partner, Vernon, of whom, by

the way, Barbara is extremely fond, though it may only be in a friendly fashion. At any rate she pays more attention to his wishes and opinions than to mine and yours put together."

At the mention of Alan's name Aylward started violently.

"I feared it," he said, "and he is more than ten years my junior and a soldier, not a man of business. Also there is no use disguising the truth, although I am a baronet and shall be a peer and he is nothing but a beggarly country gentleman with a D.S.O. tacked on to his name, he belongs to a different class to us, as she does too on her mother's side. Well, I can smash him up, for you remember I took over that mortgage on Yarleys, and I'll do it if necessary. Practically our friend has not a shilling that he can call his own. Therefore, Haswell, unless you play me false, which I don't think you will, for I can be a nasty enemy," he added with a threat in his voice, "Alan Vernon hasn't much chance in that direction."

"I don't know, Aylward, I don't know," replied Haswell, shaking his white head. "Barbara is a strong-willed woman and she might choose to take the man and let the money go, and then--who can stop her? Also I don't like your idea of smashing Vernon. It isn't right, and it may come back on our own heads, especially yours. I am sorry that he has left us, as you were on Friday night, for somehow he was a good, honest stick to lean on, and we want such a stick. But I am tired now, I really can't talk any more. The doctor warned me against excitement. Get the girl's

consent, Aylward, and we'll see. Ah! here comes my soup. Good-bye for the present."

When Sir Robert came down to luncheon he found Barbara looking particularly radiant and charming, already presiding at that meal and conversing in her best French to the foreign gentlemen, who were paying her compliments.

"Forgive me for being late," he said; "first of all I have been talking to your uncle, and afterwards skimming through the articles in yesterday's papers on our little venture which comes out to-morrow. A cheerful occupation on the whole, for with one or two exceptions they are all favourable."

"Mon Dieu," said the French gentlemen on the right, "seeing what they did cost, that is not strange. Your English papers they are so expensive; in Paris we have done it for half the money."

Barbara and some of the guests laughed outright, finding this frankness charming.

"But where have you been, Miss Champers? I thought that we were going to have a round of golf together. The caddies were there, I was there, the greens had been specially rolled this morning, but there was no You."

"No," she answered, "because Major Vernon and I walked to church and

heard a very good sermon upon the observance of the Sabbath."

"You are severe," he said. "Do you think it wrong for men who work hard all the week to play a harmless game on Sunday?"

"Not at all, Sir Robert." Then she looked at him and, coming to a sudden decision, added, "If you like I will play you nine holes this afternoon and give you a stroke a hole, or would you prefer a foursome?"

"No, let us fight alone and let the best player win."

"Very well, Sir Robert; but you mustn't forget that I am handicapped."

"Don't look angry," she whispered to Alan as they strolled out into the garden after lunch, "I must clear things up and know what we have to face. I'll be back by tea-time, and we will have it out with my uncle."

The nine holes had been played, and by a single stroke Barbara had won the match, which pleased her very much, for she had done her best, and with such heavy odds in his favour Sir Robert, who had also done his best, was no mean opponent, even for a player of her skill. Indeed the fight had been quite earnest, for each party knew that it was but a prelude to another and more serious fight, and looked upon the result as in some sense an omen.

"I am conquered," he said in a voice in which vexation struggled with a laugh, "and by a woman over whom I had an advantage. It is humiliating, for I confess I do not like being beaten."

"Don't you think that women generally win if they mean to?" asked Barbara. "I believe that when they fail, which is often enough, it is because they don't care, or can't make up their minds. A woman in earnest is a dangerous antagonist."

"Yes," he answered, "or the best of allies." Then he gave the clubs and half-a-crown to the caddies, and when they were out of hearing, added, "Miss Champers, I have been wondering for some time whether it is possible that you would become such an ally to me."

"I know nothing of business, Sir Robert; my tastes do not lie that way."

"You know well that I was not speaking of business, Miss Champers. I was speaking of another kind of partnership, that which Nature has ordained between men and women--marriage. Will you accept me as a husband?"

She opened her lips to speak, but he lifted his hand and went on.

"Listen before you give that ready answer which it is so hard to recall, or smooth away. I know all my disadvantages, my years, which to you may seem many; my modest origin; my trade, which, not altogether without reason, you despise and dislike. Well, the first two cannot be changed

except for the worse; the second can be, and already is, buried beneath the gold and ermine of wealth and titles. What does it matter if I am the son of a City clerk who never earned more than £2 a week and was born in a tenement at Battersea, when I am one of the rich men of this rich land and shall die a peer in a palace, leaving millions and honours to my children? As for the third, my occupation, I am prepared to give it up. It has served my turn, and after next week I shall have earned the amount that years ago I determined to earn. Thenceforth, set above the accidents of fortune, I propose to devote myself to higher aims, those of legitimate ambition. So far as my time would allow I have already taken some share in politics as a worker; I intend to continue in them as a ruler which I still have the health and ability to do. I mean to be one of the first men in this Empire, to ride to power over the heads of all the nonentities whose only claim upon the confidence of their countrymen is that they were born in a certain class, with money in their pockets and without the need to spend the best of their manhood in work. With you at my side I can do all these things and more, and such is the future that I have to offer you."

Again she would have broken in upon his speech and again he stopped her, reading the unspoken answer on her lips.

"Listen: I have not told you all. Perhaps I have put first what should have come last. I have not told you that I love you earnestly and sincerely, with the settled, unalterable love that sometimes comes to men in middle-age who have never turned their thought that way before.

I will not attempt the rhapsodies of passion which at my time of life might sound foolish or out of place; yet it is true that I am filled with this passion which has descended on me and taken possession of me. I who often have laughed at such things in other men, adore you. You are a joy to my eyes. If you are not in the room, for me it is empty. I admire the uprightness of your character, and even your prejudices, and to your standard I desire to approximate my own. I think that no man can ever love you quite so well as I do, Barbara Champers. Now speak. I am ready to meet the best or the worst."

After her fashion Barbara looked him straight in the face with her steady eyes, and answered gently enough, for the man's method of presenting his case, elaborate and prepared though it evidently was, had touched her.

"I fear it is the worst, Sir Robert. There are hundreds of women superior to myself in every way who would be glad to give you the help and companionship you ask, with their hearts thrown in. Choose one of them, for I cannot do so."

He heard and for the first time his face broke, as it were. All this while it had remained masklike and immovable, even when he spoke of his love, but now it broke as ice breaks at the pressure of a sudden flood beneath, and she saw the depths and eddies of his nature and understood their strength. Not that he revealed them in speech, angry or pleading, for that remained calm and measured enough. She did not hear, she saw,

and even then it was marvellous to her that a mere change in a man's expression could explain so much.

"Those are very cruel words," he said. "Are they unalterable?"

"Quite. I do not play in such matters, it would be wicked."

"May I ask you one question, for if the answer is in the negative, I shall still continue to hope? Do you care for any other man?"

Again she looked at him with her fearless eyes and answered:

"Yes, I am engaged to another man."

"To Alan Vernon?"

She nodded.

"When did that happen? Some years ago?"

"No, this morning."

"Great Heavens!" he muttered in a hoarse voice turning his head away, "this morning. Then last night it might not have been too late, and last night I should have spoken to you, I had arranged it all. Yes, if it had not been for the story of that accursed fetish and your uncle's illness,

I should have spoken to you, and perhaps succeeded."

"I think not," she said.

He turned upon her and notwithstanding the tears in his eyes they burned like fire.

"You think--you think," he gasped, "but I know. Of course after this morning it was impossible. But, Barbara, I say that I will win you yet. I have never failed in any object that I set before myself, and do not suppose that I shall fail in this. Although in a way I liked and respected him, I have always felt that Vernon was my enemy, one destined to bring grief and loss upon me, even if he did not intend to do so. Now I understand why, and he shall learn that I am stronger than he. God help him! I say."

"I think He will," Barbara answered, calmly. "You are speaking wildly, and I understand the reason and hope that you will forget your words, but whether you forget or remember, do not suppose that you frighten me. You men who have made money," she went on with swelling indignation, "who have made money somehow, and have bought honours with the moneys somehow, think yourselves great, and in your little day, your little, little day that will end with three lines in small type in The Times, you are great in this vulgar land. You can buy what you want and people creep round you and ask you for doles and favours, and railway porters call you 'my Lord' at every other step. But you forget your limitations

in this world, and that which lives above you. You say you will do this and that. You should study a book which few of you ever read, where it tells you that you do not know what you will be on the morrow; that your life is even as a vapour appearing for a little time and then vanishing away. You think that you can crush the man to whom I have given my heart because he is honest and you are dishonest, because you are rich and he is poor, and because he chances to have succeeded where you have not. Well, for myself and for him I defy you. Do your worst and fail, and when you have failed, in the hour of your extremity remember my words to-day. If I have given you pain by refusing you it is not my fault and I am sorry, but when you threaten the man who has honoured me with his love and whom I honour above every creature upon the earth, then I threaten back, and may the Power that made us all judge between you and me, as judge it will," and bursting into tears she turned and left him.

Sir Robert watched her go.

"What a woman!" he said meditatively, "what a woman--to have lost. Well she has set the stakes and we will play out the game. The cards all seem to be in my hands, but it would not in the least surprise me if she won the rubber, for the element that I call Chance and she would call something else, may come in. Still, I never refused a challenge yet and we will play the game out without pity to the loser."

That night the first trick was played. When he got back to The Court Sir Robert ordered his motorcar and departed on urgent business, either to his own place, Old Hall, or to London, saying only that he had been summoned away by telegram. As the 70-horse-power Mercedes glided out of the gates a pencilled note was put into Mr. Haswell's hand.

It ran: "I have tried and failed--for the present. By ill-luck A.V. had been before me, only this morning. If I had not missed my chance last night owing to your illness, it would have been different. I do not, however, in the least abandon my plan, in which of course I rely on and expect your support. Keep V. in the office or let him go as you like. Perhaps it would be better if you could prevail upon him to stop there until after the flotation. But whatever you say at the moment, I trust to you to absolutely veto any engagement between him and your niece, and to that end to use all your powers and authority as her guardian. Burn this note.

"R.A."