

## A FEARFUL RISK: OF BARBARA'S DANGER.

### CHAPTER I.

She had been christened Barbara, this fair-haired dainty little heroine of ours, whose love-story I am going to tell you. She had spent all her life in a retired country house, and until her eighteenth birthday she had been allowed to follow the fancy of her own sweet will, without let or hindrance from the uncle and aunt who had brought her up from childhood, and loved her better than anything else in the world.

Barbara had a very happy home, but one thing it would have surprised a shrewd observer—the girl was jealously guarded from making fresh acquaintances or forming friendships of her own.

Her uncle and aunt never said to their charge in so many words, "You are not to fall in love," they simply prevented the catastrophe by never letting her see anyone for whom she could conceive a preference.

But Barbara had her longings after gaiety; a party was the zenith of her ambition, and she had been promised, ever since she could remember, that when once her eighteenth birthday was passed, she should mingle freely in all the pleasures suited to her age.

Therefore for a long time past this eighteenth birthday had been looked forward to with the greatest glee.

The eighteenth birthday came at last. It was a lovely morning in June; the sky was a cloudless blue, the air was sweet with the perfume of countless flowers; the birds sang merrily, and Barbara, as she dressed for breakfast, felt as light-hearted and free from care as one of the merry little songsters who carolled beneath her window as though to felicitate her on her happiness.

Poor little Barbara! It was the last day of her childhood; she had much happiness, albeit mixed with bitter pain, in her after life, but never, never more did she feel that joyous glee, that utter freedom from care and sorrow which was hers when she stood before the glass putting her aunt's birthday present, a chaste gold brooch, into her collar.

She was slightly below the middle height and so delicately proportioned as to look even shorter than she was.

Her eyes were of the darkest tenderest shade of blue, her hair was rich brown, turning to gold in the sunshine.

Her complexion was clear and delicate, her cheeks had the sweetest carmine tint, her whole expression was full of hope and gladness.

"Eighteen!" she murmured to herself as she smoothed back a rebellious lock "Eighteen-to-day. Why, I am as old now as my mother was when I was born—my beautiful young mother, who only lived long enough to see her child."

Perhaps that thought sobered Bab; certainly she changed her dances for a slow almost tired step as she went downstairs to the breakfast room.

Here everything spoke of wealth. Simple as was Bab's attire, the Greys belonged to a grand old family. Sir Robert counted his income by thousands, and this orphan girl was the only kith and kindred he had in the world.

Bab was warmly kissed and congratulated both by uncle and aunt. Lady Grey was barely fifty—a handsome graceful woman still. She never had a child of her own, and yet it was true mother-love she lavished on her orphan niece.

That breakfast was rather a silent meal. After the few congratulations were over, Sir Robert and his wife seemed oppressed by a strange restraint. The baronet drank his coffee at one gulp, then turning to his wife, without looking at Barbara, he asked:

"When shall it be?"

"Soon," said Lady Grey gently. "I am sure delay is only painful. Shall I bring Barbara to the study about eleven?"

Bab looked up. Gaieties, parties, company—these were what had been promised her when she was eighteen. She hardly saw how a visit to her uncle's study could advance her claim to them.

But the hour came. Lady Grey took her hand and led her to Sir Robert's sanctum. Bab knew her aunt was trembling.

"What is the matter, Aunt Mary?"

"Nothing."

"There must be."

"I think I am a little anxious about you. Bab; you know you have been like our own child all these years."

"Of course," said Bab, "and I always mean to be."

Sir Robert received them with a strange air of formality. He placed seats near the oak writing-table, closed the door, and an uncomfortable silence fell on the three who usually had so much to say to each other.

But Bab was outspoken by nature. She felt the restraint unbearable. She rose and put one hand on Sir Robert's shoulder.

"Please speak," she cried. "Oh, do say something, uncle, or I shall scream."

Sir Robert laughed; he really could not help it.

"Bab, what do you know about your own history?"

Bab gave a little gasp.

"My father was your youngest brother, and he died," she said a little lamely.

"Yes; there were two brothers between myself; he naturally had no idea that he would ever be heir to the Abbey and its revenues."

"Naturally," said Bab, repeating the word after her uncle like a parrot, because she felt constrained.

"His one desire was to make a fortune for his only child. He left you in our care, and went abroad; five years later the news came of his death."

"It's very dreadful," said Bab gravely; "only I can't be very sorry. You have been just as good to me as if I had been your own child."

"I have tried to be; but, Bab, you belonged to your father."

"But he is dead."

"But he had the power to dispose of you absolutely, Barbara, by will."

Bab shook her head.

"England is a free country; he couldn't sell me as if I were a slave."

They were getting into difficulties. Lady Grey interposed.

"Let me tell the story," she said to her husband. "Bab," laying one hand on the girl's fair head, "When your father went to Africa he was so poor that he only had ten pounds in the world on landing. He had quarrelled with your uncle, who could not bear that a Grey should be in trade."

"Ten pounds! What did he do?"

"At first he failed in everything he undertook, then he met with a kind friend—a friend who stuck to him like a brother, who gave him food, shelter, love and sympathy."

"I should like to know that friend."

"You will some day. He took your father into partnership; he made him successful. Poor Lawrence would have died penniless but for this friend. Through him he spent a few years honorably in Africa, and when he was called away he left a large fortune to his only child. He felt that he owed all this to Mr. Carlyle, and he wished to prove his gratitude."

"That was right."

"Yes; but if only he had proved it in some other way."

"You mean he left his fortune to him instead of to me. I don't think it matters; you will always give me a home."

"Always; but you have made a mistake, child. Your father's dying wish was that you should marry Geoffrey Carlyle."

"He must be quite an old man."

"Your father's friend? Yes; but this is his son."

"But I have never seen him."

"Bab," said Lady Grey sadly, "as your uncle says, your father had no idea the Abbey could ever be his, but his name stands last in the entail. He left his whole property, present and to come, all his reversionary interests of any kind, to you on condition that you marry Geoffrey Carlyle; if not everything is his."

Bab gasped.

"Everything," struck in Sir Robert.

"It is cruelly hard. I have no power to save your heritage, Bab. Positively, if you refuse to marry Mr. Carlyle, this old place, where you have been bred, must pass at my death to a perfect stranger. It is a mad will, but I give Lawrence this credit, he would never have made it had he thought the Abbey could lapse to him."

There was a long silence; no one quite knew what to say.

At last Bab tossed back her golden locks with a pretty gesture of defiance, and suggested a new possibility.

"How if Mr. Carlyle refused to marry me—what then?"

Sir Robert fairly groaned.

"You don't understand, child; unless you marry this man everything is his. Now you see why we have lived so quietly why you have been screened from making fresh acquaintances. Your aunt and I have saved you a pretty little fortune, but it is a mere drop in the ocean compared to the money that will be yours if you marry your father's *portegé*. We have known this for thirteen years, and our one object was to prevent you from making any attachment, so that you might at least be fancy-free when this person from Africa arrives."

"I know I shall hate him."

Lady Grey tried to speak hopefully.

"After all, Bab, he may be an amiable young man."

"When is he coming, Sir Robert?"

Sir Robert produced a letter written on thin foreign paper, studied it attentively, and then replied:

"He was to sail in the Trojan, and it's due at Plymouth on Tuesday. Why, bless my soul, Mary, to-day is Tuesday! He may be here to-night."

"I shall hate him," decided Bab.

"Couldn't we tell him he may keep everything if only he will stay away and leave us in peace?"

But her more worldly-wise elders declined to consent to this arrangement. Bab found herself obliged reluctantly to prepare for an introduction to the stranger who stood in the position of her intended husband.

"It sounds just like a novel," said Bab with a sigh. "Why, we've been engaged thirteen years, and never even seen each other."

Even as she uttered this reflection the good ship Trojan was entering Plymouth Sound, and a young man who stood leaning over the side of the vessel took a pocket-book from his coat, and diligently studied its contents.

"Twenty thousand pounds!" he muttered to himself. "Even if they settled it on the girl it would be a comfortable income for life—no need to exert myself or trouble about bread-and-cheese. I suppose its the oddest, most outlandish scheme ever heard of, but I think I'll try it. It goes against the grain to injure him the best friend I ever had. But after all, would it be an injury? I think it would be doing him a very good turn. I should make my own fortune, and free him from a remarkable embarrassment at the same time. The question is, when I get to Merton, shall I present these letters?" and he spread two large business-like looking envelopes before him, "or shall I trust to native wit, and go in and win? I declare I've half a mind to risk it." He took a half-sovereign from his pocket and threw it into the air. "Let's trust to fate," he muttered. "Heads I try, tails I give it up."

But the coin came down with Her Majesty's head uppermost.

Clearly the gentleman was bound to attempt the enterprise.

It was late on Wednesday, the dressing-bell had sounded, and the three inmates of the Abbey were dressing for dinner.

A telegram had been received from Mr. Carlyle, saying he hoped to be with them at seven, and the repast had been postponed to suit his convenience.

Barbara stood before her looking-glass, wondering what to wear.

She would not marry Mr. Carlyle—of that she was very sure; but she could not make up her mind from which side the rejection should come. If she refused him, it would be of her own act and deed that the Abbey was lost to her; but on the other hand, there would be something rather humiliating in being declined by a young man from Africa, of which country Miss Grey had rather confused ideas.

"Which dress, miss?" repeated the maid for at least the sixth time.

Then pride triumphed. At least this uncoveted lover of hers should see she was a lady of high degree.

"My black velvet."

The black velvet was produced, and certainly justified Bab's choice.

It fitted closely to her slender figure, the train falling in rich soft folds, the front cut to disclose a petticoat of pale blue satin, the bodice open to reveal the firm white throat shaded by cobwebby lace.

She was spared the pain of her first introduction.

She had lingered so long over her toilet that the dinner-bell sounded.

Lady Grey, in pity for her embarrassment, met her at the drawing-room door, and they went in together.

One glance, and Bab lowered her eyes. The man she was bidden to accept as a husband stood by the window in conversation with her uncle, tall, dark, and foreign-looking, his shining black hair and well-kept moustache were in keeping with his dark eyes.

Sir Robert came forward and took his niece's hand.

"This is Miss Grey," he said to his guest with an air of high-bred courtesy, "my adopted daughter, and the young lady destined by her father's will to be your wife."

Two bright spots burnt on Bab's cheeks.

"Uncle!" she said imploringly.

But the baronet was not to be repressed.

"I will confess to you," he told Mr. Carlyle, "that I cannot regard my brother's will with favor."

"It seems to you unjust," returned the stranger.

"Unjust to Barbara and cruel to me; how am I to live when the child of my affection has left me for an African home? or, on the other hand, how can I bear to see the home of her childhood pass from her to a stranger?"

Geoffrey Carlyle bowed.

"These are painful alternatives," he said simply; "it is but natural you should be prejudiced against me; and yet," here he glanced at Barbara with irrepressible admiration, "and yet I cannot be sorry I am here."

They went in to dinner, Lady Grey on the stranger's arm, Barbara following with her uncle. All was prepared to do honor to the African.

"This is like fairy-land," said the guest to his hostess; "you have no idea what an impression English home-life makes on a colonist."

"And this is your first visit here. I suppose you were born in Africa?"

"No," he answered promptly; "in England—in Yorkshire."

"But I thought your father was one of the early settlers—one of the founders of Port Elizabeth."

"Precisely," said Mr. Carlyle with the utmost alacrity.

"But that must be over forty years ago;" she did not finish her sentence but her eyes implied "and you cannot be as old as that?"

"My mother made more than one voyage to England," explained Mr. Carlyle; "she had many relations in Yorkshire whom she wished to see."

"Very natural; it will be a pleasure to them, no doubt, to see you during your visit to this country."

Mr. Carlyle shook his head; he himself knew that, son of a millionaire though he might be, there were only four bank-notes in his portemonnaie. He was playing for a great stake, but twenty pounds was all too little to help him while he did it;

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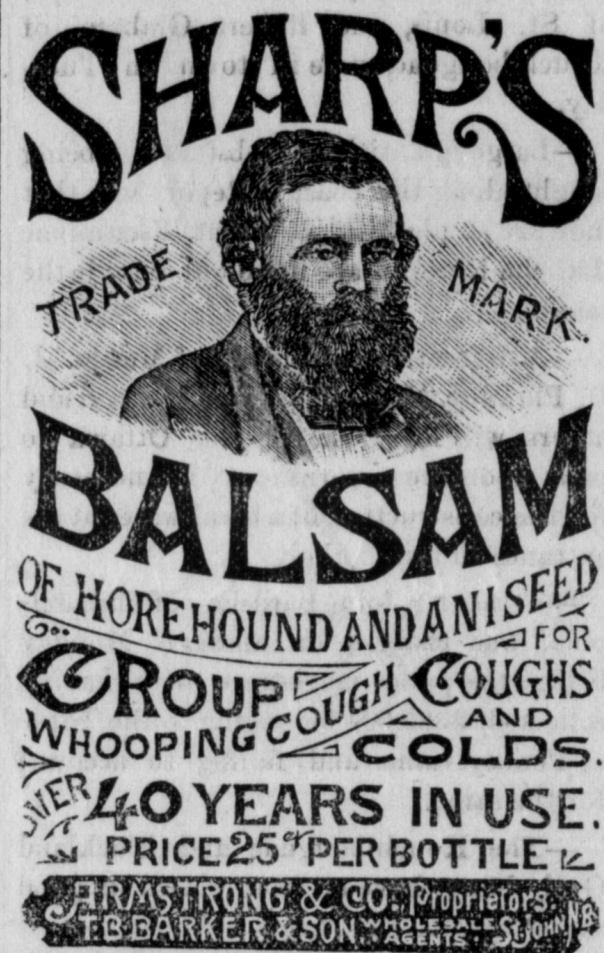
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