

Seventeen

A Tale of Youth and Summer Time and the Baxter Family, Especially William

By BOOTH TARKINGTON
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Jane one sunshiny morning stood outdoors watching interestedly the unloading of moving vans into a house across the way. Her mouth was equally affected, remaining open at a visible crisis in the performance of its duty—consuming bread and apple sauce. These were the tokens of her agitation upon beholding the removal of a dolls' house from one of the wagons. This dolls' house was at least five feet high, of proportionate breadth and depth, the customary absence of a facade disclosing an interior of four luxurious floors, with stairways, fireplaces and wall paper. Here was a mansion wherein doll duchesses, no less, must dwell.

Straightway a little girl ran out of the open doorway of the brick house and with a self-importance concentrated to the point of shrewdness, began to give orders concerning the disposal of her personal property, which included, as she made clear, not only the dolls' mansion, but also three dolls' trunks and a packing case of fair size.

She was a thin little girl, perhaps half a year younger than Jane, and she was as soiled, particularly in respect to hands, brow, chin and the knees of white stockings, as could be expected of any busybodyish person of nine or ten whose mother is house moving.

The little girl across the street was of course instantly aware of Jane, though she pretended not to be, and from the first her self-importance was in large part assumed for the benefit of the observer. After a momentary silence, due to her failure to think of any proper response to workmen who had pointedly criticised her, she resumed the peremptory direction of her affairs.

Then, apparently in the very midst of her cares, she suddenly and without warning ceased to boss, walked out into the street, halted and stared frankly at Jane.

CHAPTER XX.

"Don't Forget."

JANE came out to the sidewalk and began to kick one of the fence pickets.

"You see that ole fatty?" asked the little girl, pointing to one of the workmen thus sufficiently identified.

"Yes."

"That's the one broke the goldfish," said the little girl. There was a pause, during which she continued to scuff the curbstone with her shoe. Jane likewise scuffling the fence picket. "I'm goin' to have papa get him arrested," added the stranger.

"My papa got two men arrested once," Jane said calmly, "two or three."

The little girl's eyes, wandering upward, took note of Jane's papa's house and of a fierce young gentleman framed in an open window upstairs. He was seated, wore ink upon his forehead and tapped his teeth with a red penholder.

"Who is that?" she asked.

"It's Willie."

"Is it your papa?"

"No-o-o-o!" Jane exclaimed. "It's Willie."

"Oh!" said the little girl, apparently satisfied.

Each now scuffed less energetically with her shoe; feet stowed down, so did conversation, and for a time Jane and the stranger wrapped themselves in stillness, though there may have been some silent communing between them. Then the new neighbor placed her feet far apart and leaned backward upon nothing, curving her front up-

ward placed her feet wide apart and leaned backward upon nothing, attempting the feat in contortion just performed by the stranger.

"Look!" she said. "Look at me!"

But she lacked the other's genius, lost her balance and fell. Born persistent, she immediately got to her feet and made fresh efforts.

"No! Look at me!" the little girl cried, becoming semicircular again.

"This is the way; I call it 'puttin' your stummick out o' joint.' You haven't got yours out far enough."

"Yes, I have," said Jane, gasping.

"Well, to do it right, you must walk that way. As soon as you get your stummick out o' joint you must begin an' walk. Look! Like this!"

And the little girl having achieved a state of such convexity that her braided hair almost touched the ground behind her, walked successfully in that singular attitude.

"I'm walkin'!" Jane protested, her face not quite upside down. "Look! I'm walkin' that way too. My stummick!"

There came an outraged shout from above, and a fierce countenance stained with ink protruded from the window.

"Jane!"

"What?"

"Stop that! Stop putting your stomach out in front of you like that! It's disgraceful!"

Both young ladies, looking rather oppressed, resumed the perpendicular.

"Why doesn't he like it?" the stranger asked in a tone of pure wonder.

"I don't know," said Jane. "He doesn't like much of anything. He's seventeen years old."

After that the two stared moodily at the ground for a little while, chastened by the severe presence above; then Jane brightened.

"I know!" she exclaimed coolly. "Let's play callers. Right here by this bush'll be my house. You come to call on me, an' we'll talk about our children. You be Mrs. Smith, an' I'm Mrs. Jones." And in the character of a hospitable matron she advanced graciously toward the new neighbor.

"Why, my dear Mrs. Smith, come right in! I thought you'd call this morning. I want to tell you about my lovely little daughter. She's only ten years old an' says the brightest things! You really must!"

But here Jane interrupted herself abruptly and, hopping behind the residential bush, peeped over it, not at Mrs. Smith, but at a boy of ten or eleven who was passing along the sidewalk. Her expression was gravely interested, somewhat complacent, and Mrs. Smith was not so lacking in perception that she failed to understand how completely—for the time being, at least—calling was suspended.

The boy whistled briskly "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," and, though his knowledge of the air failed him when he finished the second line, he was not disheartened, but began at the beginning again, continuing repeatedly after this fashion to offset monotony by patriotism. He whistled loudly. He walked with ostentatious intent to be at some heavy affair in the distance. His ears were red. He looked neither to the right nor to the left—that is, he looked neither to the right nor to the left until he had passed the Baxters' fence. But when he had gone as far as the upper corner of the fence beyond he turned his head and looked back, without any expression, except that of a whistler, at Jane. And thus, still whistling "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," and with blank pink face over his shoulder, he proceeded until he was out of sight.

"Who was that boy?" the new neighbor then inquired.

"It's Freddie," Jane said placidly. "He's in our Sunday school. He's in love of me."

"Jane!"

Again the outraged and ink stained countenance glared down from the window.

"What you want?" Jane asked.

"What you mean talking about such things?" William demanded. "In all my life I never heard anything as disgusting! Shame on you!"

The little girl from across the street looked upward thoughtfully. "He's mad," she remarked, and, regardless of Jane's previous information, "It is your papa, isn't it?" she insisted.

"No," said Jane testily. "I told you five times it's my brother Willie."

"Oh!" said the little girl, and, grasping the fact that William's position was in dignity and authority negligible compared with that which she had persisted in imagining, she felt it safe to shut her upward gaze with disfavor. He acts kind of crazy," she murmured.

"He's in love of Miss Pratt," said Jane. "She's goin' away today. She said she'd go before, but today she is! Mr. Parcher, where she visits, he's almost dead, she's stayed so long. She's awful, I think."

William, to whom all was audible, looked heavily, "I'll see to you!" and disappeared from the window.

"Will he come down here?" the little girl asked, taking a step toward the gate.

"No. He's just gone to call mamma. All she'll do'll be to tell us to go play somewhere else. Then we can go alk to Genesis."

"Who?"

"Genesis. He's puttin' a load of coal in the cellar window with a shovel. He's nice."

"What's he put the coal in the window for?"

"He's a colored man," said Jane. "Shall we go talk to him now?"

"No," Jane said thoughtfully. "Let's be playin' callers when mamma comes to tell us to go 'way. What was your name?"

"Rannie."

"No, it wasn't."

"It is too Rannie," the little girl insisted. "My whole name's Mary (an' delph) Kirsted, but my short name's Rannie."

Jane laughed. "What a funny name!" she said. "I didn't mean your real name; I meant your callers' name. One of us was Mrs. Jones, and one was—"

"I want to be Mrs. Jones," said Rannie.

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Jones," Jane began at once, "I want to tell you about my lovely children. I have two, one only seven years old and the other—"

"Jane!" called Mrs. Baxter from William's window.

"Yes'm."

"You must go somewhere else to play. Willie's trying to work at his studies up here, and he says you've disturbed him very much."

"Yes'm."

The obedient Jane and her friend turned to go, and as they went Miss Mary Handolph Kirsted allowed her uplifted eyes to linger with increased disfavor upon William, who appeared beside Mrs. Baxter at the window.

"I tell you what let's do," Rannie suggested in a lowered voice. "He got so fresh with us an' made your mother come an' all, let's—let's—"

She hesitated.

"Let's what?" Jane urged her in an eager whisper.

"Let's think up some'n he won't like and do it!"

They disappeared round the corner of the house, their heads close together.

Upstairs Mrs. Baxter moved to the door of her son's room, pretending to be unconscious of the gaze he main- tained upon her. Mustering courage to hum a little tune and affecting in consequence, she had nearly crossed the threshold when he said sternly:

"And this is all you intend to say to 'hat child?"

"Why, yes, Willie."

"And yet I told you what she said!" he cried. "I told you I heard her stam- there and tell that dirty faced little girl how that idiot boy that's always walkin' past here, four or five times a day, whistling and looking back, wa- in 'love of her! Ye gods! What kin- of a person will she grow up into! I can't punish her for havin' ideas like that at her age? I never heard o' such a thing! That worm walkin' past here four or five times a day just to look at Jane! And her standing there, 'nimbly tellin' that sooty faced little girl 'He's in love of me! Why, it's enough to sicken a man! Honestly, if I had my way, I'd see that both she and that little Freddie Banks got a last class whipping!"

"Don't you think, Willie," said Mrs. Baxter—"don't you think that, consid- ring the rather noncommittal method of Freddie's courtship, you are sug- gesting extreme measures?"

"Well, she certainly ought to be pun- ished," he insisted, and then, with a re- versal to agony, he stammered, "That's the least of it!" he cried. "It's the bit- ting things you always allow he to say of one of the nicest girls in the United States—that's what counts. On the very last day—yes, almost the last hour—that Miss Pratt's in the town you let your only daughter stand there and speak disrespectfully of her and then all you do is to tell her to go play somewhere else?"

"You're all wrought up!"

"I am not wrought up!" shouted William. "Why should I be charged with—"

"Now, now!" Mrs. Baxter said. "You'll feel better tomorrow."

"What do you mean by that?" he de- manded, breathing deeply.

For reply she only shook her head in an odd little way.

"You'll be all right, Willie," she said softly and closed the door.

Alone, William lifted clinched hands in a series of tumultuous gestures at the ceiling; then he moaned and sank into a chair at his writing table. Presently a comparative calm was restored to him, and with reverent fingers he took from a drawer a one pound box of candy, covered with white tissue paper, gilded with blue ribbon. He set the box gently beside him upon the table, then from beneath a large green blotter drew forth some scribbled sheets. These he placed before him and, taking infinite pains with his handwriting, lowly opined:

Dear Lola—I resume when you are reading these lines it will be this afternoon, and you will be on the train moving rapidly away from this old place here further and further from it all. As I sit here at my old desk and look back upon it all while I am writing this farewell letter I hope when you are reading it you also will look back upon it all and think of me who called (an' delph) Little Boy Baxter. As I sit here this morning that you are going away at last I look back and I can't remember any summer in my whole life which has been like this summer. He cause a great change has come over in this summer. If you would like to know what this means it was something like said when John Watson got there yester- day afternoon and interrupted what I said. May you enjoy this candy and think of the giver. I will put something in with this letter. It is something maybe you would like to have and in exchange you would give all I possess for one of you. You would send it to me when you are home. Please do this for now my heart is breaking. Yours sincerely,

WILLIAM S. BAXTER.

GALLARD LITTLE BOY BAXTER.

CHAPTER XXI.

The Last Sad Rites.

WILLIAM opened the box of candy and placed the letter upon the top layer of chocolate. Upon the letter he placed a small photograph, wrapped in tissue paper, of himself. Then with a pair of scissors he trimmed an oblong of white cardboard to fit into the box. Upon this piece of cardboard he laboriously wrote, copying from a tortured lily sheet before him:

In Dream

By WILLIAM S. BAXTER.

The sunset light
Fades into night
But never will I forget
The smile that haunts me yet



I Would See Thee In Dream.

foundation in fact he was satisfied that no rival farewell poem would be offered her, and so it may be that he thought "In Dream" might show her at last in one blaze of light what her eyes had sometimes fleetingly intimat- ed she did perceive in part—the difference between William and such everyday, rather well meaning, fairly good hearted people as Joe Bullitt, Wallace Banks, Johnnie Watson and others. Yes, when she came to read "In Dream" and to "look back upon it all" she would surely know—at last!

And then, when the future four long years—while receiving his education— had passed he would go to her. He would go to her, and she would take him by the hand and lead him to her father and say, "Father, this is Wil- liam."

But William would turn to her, and with the old dancing light in his eyes, "No, Lola," he would say, "not Wil- liam, but Ickle Boy Baxter. Always and always just that for you, oh, my dear!"

And then, as in story and film and farce and the pleasanter kinds of drama, her father would say, with kindly railings, "Well, when you two young people get through you'll find me in the library, where I have a pretty good business proposition to lay before you, young man."

And when the white waistcoated, white sideburned old man had, chuck- ling, left the room William would slowly lift his arms. But Lola would move back from him a step—only a step—and after laying a finger archly upon her lips to check him, "Wait, sir," she would say. "I have a question to ask you, sir."

"What question, Lola?"

"This question, sir," she would re- ply: "In all that summer, sir, so long ago, why did you never tell me what you were until I had gone away and it was too late to show you what I felt? Ah, Ickle Boy Baxter, I never understood until I looked back upon it all after I had read 'In Dream' on the train that day! Then I knew!"

"And now, Lola?" William would say. "Do you understand me now?"

Shyly she would advance the one short step she had put between them, while he, with lifted, yearning arms, this time destined to no disappoint- ment—

At so vital a moment did Mrs. Bax- ter knock at his door and consoling reverie cease to minister unto William. He started, placed the sacred box out of sight and spoke gruffly.

"What you want?"

"I'm not coming in, Willie," said his mother. "I just wanted to know—I thought maybe you were looking out of the window and noticed where those children went—Jane and that little girl from across the street—Kirsted, her name must be."

"No; I did not."

"I just wondered," Mrs. Baxter said timidly. "Genesis thinks he heard the little Kirsted girl telling Jane she had plenty of money for car fare. He thinks they went somewhere on a street car. I thought maybe you noticed whet?"

"I told you I did not."

"All right," she said placidly. "I didn't mean to bother you, dear."

Following this there was a silence, but no sound of receding footsteps in- dicated Mrs. Baxter's departure from the other side of the closed door.

"Well, what you want?" William shouted.

"Nothing—nothing at all," said the compassionate voice. "I just thought I'd have lunch a little later than usual, not till half past 1—that is, if—well, I thought probably you meant to go to the station to see Miss Pratt off on the 1 o'clock train."

"How'd you find out she's going at 1 o'clock?"

"Why—why, Jane mentioned it," Mrs. Baxter replied, with obvious timidity. "Jane said—"

(To be continued)

Col. House is giving evidence of having associated with the French people. He has broken his customary silence long enough to assure a reporter who interviewed him that the American mission was a success.

Certain gentlemen in Congress who during the last session were extreme- ly pugacious in asserting their rights to oppose all war measures now are as meek as lambs. Can it be they have heard a voice from home?

An exchange says that "Bolshevi- ki" leaders are all right except in lacking the minor qualities of intel- ligence, experience, morals and patri- otism." Sounds a good deal like the old cooper's definition of "nothing"—"an empty bung-hole without a barrel."

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"Look!" she said. "Look at me!"

ward and her remarkably flexible spine inward until a profile view of her was grandly semicircular.

Jane watched her attentively, but without comment. However, no one could have doubted that the processes of acquaintance were progressing favorably.

"Let's go in our yard," said Jane. The little girl straightened herself with a slight gasp and accepted the invitation. Side by side the two passed through the open gate, walked gravely forth upon the lawn and halted as by common consent. Jane there-