

Seventeen

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

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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She was kneeling by the loud, desperate sound of William's flat smiting his writing table, so sensitive was his condition. "This is just unbearable!" he cried. "Nobody's business is safe from that child!"

"Why, Willie, I don't see how it matters!"

He uttered a cry. "No! Nothing matters! Nothing matters at all! Do you s'pose I want that child, with her insults, discussing when Miss Pratt is or is not going away? Don't you know there are some things that have no business to be talked about by every Tom, Dick and Harry?"

"Yes, dear," she said. "I understand, of course. Jane only told me she met Mr. Patcher on the street, and he mentioned that Miss Pratt was going at 1 o'clock today. That's all!"

"You say you understand," he wailed, shaking his head drearily at the closed door, "and yet, even on such a day as this, you keep talking! Can't you see sometimes there's times when a person can't stand to—"

"Yes, Willie," Mrs. Baxter interposed hurriedly. "Of course! I'm going now. I have to go hunt up those children, anyway. You try to be back for lunch at half past 1, and don't worry, dear. You really will be all right."

He went to his mirror and, gazing long and piercingly at the William there limed, enacted almost unconsciously a little scene of parting. The look of suffering upon the mirrored face slowly altered. In its place came one still sorrowful, but tempered with sweet indignation. He stretched out his hand as if he set it upon a head at about the height of his shoulder.

"Yes, it may mean—it may mean forever," he said in a low, tremulous voice. "Little girl, we must be brave."

And the while his eyes gazed into the mirror they became expressive of a momentary pleased surprise, as if even in the arts of sorrow he found himself doing better than he knew. But his sorrow was none the less genuine because of that.

Then he noticed the ink upon his forehead and went away to wash. When he returned he did an unusual thing—he brushed his coat thoroughly, removing it for this special purpose. After that he earnestly combed and brushed his hair and retied his tie. Next he took from a drawer two clean handkerchiefs. He placed one in his breast pocket, part of the colored border of the handkerchief being left on exhibition, and with the other he carefully wiped his shoes. Finally he sawed it back and forth across them and, with a sigh, languidly dropped it upon the floor, where it remained.

Returning to the mirror, he again brushed his hair. He went so far this time as to brush his eyebrows, which seemed not much altered by the operation. Suddenly he was deeply affected by something seen in the glass.

"By George!" he exclaimed aloud. Seeing a small hand mirror, he placed it in juxtaposition to his right eye and closely studied his left profile as exhibited in the larger mirror. Then he examined his right profile, subjecting it to a like scrutiny, emotional, yet attentive and prolonged.

"By George!" he exclaimed again.

"By George!" he exclaimed again. He had made a discovery. There was a downy shadow upon his upper lip. What he had just found out was that this down could be seen projecting beyond the line of his lip, like a tiny nimbus. It could be seen in profile.

"By George!" William exclaimed. He was still occupied with the two mirrors when his mother again tapped softly upon his door, rousing him as from a dream, brief but engaging, to the heavy realities of that day.

"What do you want now?"

"I won't come in," said Mrs. Baxter. "I just came to see."

"See what?"

"I wondered—I thought perhaps you needed something. I knew your watch was out of order."

"For evan's sake, what if it is?"

She offered a murmur of plaintive laughter as her apology and said:

"Well, I just thought I'd tell you because, if you did intend going to the station, I thought you probably wouldn't want to miss it and get there too late. I've got your hat here, all nicely brushed for you. It's nearly twenty minutes of 1, Willie."

"What?"

"Yes, it is. It's—"

She had no further speech with him.

Breathless, William flung open his door, seized the hat, ricketed down the stairs and out through the front door, which he left open behind him.

Eight seconds later he returned at a gallop, hurried up the stairs and into his room, emerging instantly with something concealed under his coat.

Mrs. Baxter sighed and went to a window in her own room and looked out.

William was already more than half-way to the next corner, where there was a car line that ran to the station.

But the distance was not too great for Mrs. Baxter to comprehend the nature of the symmetrical white parcel now carried in his right hand. Her face became pensive as she gazed after the flying slender figure. There came to her mind the recollection of a seventeen-year-old boy who had brought a box of candy—a small one, like William's—to the station once, long ago, when she had been visiting in another town. For just a moment she thought of that boy she had known so many years ago, and a smile came vaguely upon her lips. She wondered what kind of a woman he had married and how many children he had and whether he was a widower.

The fleeting recollection passed. She turned from the window and shook her head, puzzled.

"Now, where on earth could Jane and that little Kirsted girl have gone?" she murmured.

At the station William, descending from the street car, found that he had six minutes to spare. Measured of so much by the great clock in the station tower, he entered the building and, with calm and dignified steps, crossed the large waiting room. Those calm and dignified steps were taken by feet which little betrayed the trepidatiousness of the knees above them.

He made sure that the person he sought was not in the waiting room. Therefore he turned to the doors which gave admission to the tracks, but before he went out he paused for an instant of displeasure. Hard by the door stood a telephone booth, and from inside this booth a little girl of nine or ten was peering eagerly out at William, her eyes just above the lower level of the glass window in the door.

Even a prospect thus curtailed revealed her as a smudged and dusty little girl. To William she suggested nothing familiar. As his glance happened to encounter hers the peering eyes grew instantly brighter with excitement. She exposed her whole countenance at the window and impulsively made a face at him.

Three seconds later the dusty faced little girl and her nose were sped utterly from William's mind. For as the doors swung together behind him he saw Miss Pratt. There were no gates nor iron barriers to obscure the view. There was no train shed to darken the air. She was at some distance, perhaps 200 feet, along the tracks, where the sleeping cars of the long train would stop. But there she stood, unmistakable for no other on this wide earth.



There Was a Downy Shadow Upon His Upper Lip.

There she stood—a glowing little figure in the hazy September sunlight, her hair an amber mist under the adorable little hat, a small bunch of violets at her waist, a larger bunch of fragrant but less expensive sweet peas in her right hand, half a dozen pink roses in her left, her little dog Flop in the crook of one arm and a one pound box of candy in the crook of the other—

radiant, starry, she stood!

Near her also stood her young hostess and Wallace Banks, Johnnie Watson and Joe Bullitt, three young gentlemen in a condition of solemn tenseness. Miss Patcher saw William as he emerged from the station building, and she waved her parasol in greeting, attracting the attention of the others to him, so that they all turned and stared.

Seventeen sometimes finds it embarrassing, even in a state of deep emotion, to walk 200 feet or thereabout toward a group of people who steadfastly watch the long approach. And when the watching group contains the lady of all the world before whom she wishes to appear most debonaire, and contains not only her, but several rivals who, though fairly good hearted, might hardly be trusted to neglect such an opportunity to murmur something jocular about one—No, it cannot be said that William appeared to be wholly without self-consciousness.

In fancy he had prophesied for this moment something utterly different. He had seen himself parting from her, the two alone as within a cloud. He had seen himself gently placing his box of candy in her hands, some of his fingers just touching some of hers and remaining thus lightly in contact to the very last. He had seen himself bending toward the sweet blond head to murmur the few last words of simple eloquence, while her eyes lifted in mysterious appeal to his. And he had put no other figures, not even Miss Patcher's, into this picture.

Parting is the most dramatic moment in young love, and if there is one time when the lover wishes to present a lofty but graceful appearance it is at the last. To leave with the loved one for recollection a final picture of manly dignity in sorrow—that, above all things, is the lover's desire. And yet, even at the beginning of William's 200 foot advance, later so much discussed, he felt the heat surging over his ears, as he took off his hat, thinking to wave it faintly in reply to Miss Patcher.

er, he made out an uncertain gesture of it, so that he wished he had not tried it. Moreover, he had covered less than a third of the distance when he became aware that all of the group were staring at him with unaccountable eagerness and had begun to laugh.

William felt certain that his attire was in no way disordered nor in itself a cause for laughter. All of these people had often seen him dressed as he was today and had preserved their gravity. But in spite of himself he took off his hat again and looked to see if anything about it might explain this mirth, which at his action increased. Nay, the laughter began to be shared by strangers.

CHAPTER XXII. The Bride to Be.

WILLIAM'S inward state became chaotic.

He tried to smile carelessly to prove his composure, but he found that he had lost almost all control over his features. He had no knowledge of his actual expression except that it hurt him. In desperation he fell back upon—



They Were Walking With Their "Stumicks Out of Joint."

He managed to frown and walked proudly. At that they laughed he more. Wallace Banks rudely pointed again and again at William, as not till the on-coming sufferer reached a spot within twenty feet of these delighted people did he grasp the significance of Wallace's repeated gesture of winking. Even then he understood only when the gesture was supplemented by half articulate shouts.

"Behind you! Look behind you!"

The stung youth turned. There, directly behind him, he beheld in exclusive little procession consisting of two dancings in single file, the best soiled with house moving, the sand with apple sauce.

For greater caution they had removed their shoes, and each damsel as straggled dangled from each far extended hand a shoe. And both dancings whether beneath apple sauce or dirt mud, were sufficed with the raucure of a great mockery.

"They were walking with their 'stumicks out of joint.'"

At sight of William's face they squeaked. They turned and ran. They got themselves out of sight.

Simultaneously the air filled with solid thunder and the pompous tread of the golden girl and honey-suckle of the world—meant to and would, not dashing one iron second!

Now a porter had her handbag.

Dear heaven, to be a porter—yes, a colored one! What of that now? Just to be a simple porter and journey with her to the far, strange pearl among files whence she had come!

The gentle porter bowed her toward the steps of his car, but first she gave Flop into the hands of May Patcher or a moment and whispered a word to Wallace Banks, then to Joe Bullitt, then to Johnnie Watson; then she ran to William.

She took his hand.

"Don't forget," she whispered—"don't forget Lola."

He stood stock still. His face was blank.

She inhaled May Patcher, kissed her devotedly; then, with Flop on her more under her arm, she ran and—



"Why, Willie Baxter!" she cried, blinking at him.

jumped upon the steps just as the train began to move. She stood there on the lowest step, slowly gliding away from them, and in her eyes there was a sparkle of tears, left, it may be from her laughter at poor William's pageant with Jane and Rannle Kirsted or, it may be, not.

She could not wave to her friends in answer to their gestures of farewell for her arms were too full of Flop and roses and candy and sweet peas, but she kept nodding to them in a way that showed them how much she thanked them for being gone.

...and made it clear that she was sorry too and loved them all.

"Goodbye!" she meant.

Faster she glided. The engine passed from sight round a curve beyond a culvert, but for a moment longer they could see the little figure upon the steps, and to the very last glimpse they had of her the small, golden head was still nodding "Goodbye!" Then those steps whereon she stood passed in their turn beneath the culvert, and they saw her no more.

Lola Pratt was gone!

Wet eyed, her young hostess of the long summer turned away and stumbled against William. "Why, Willie Baxter!" she cried, blinking at him.

The last car of the train had rounded the curve and disappeared, but William was still waving farewell, not with his handkerchief, but with a symmetrical one pound parcel, wrapped in white tissue paper, girdled with blue ribbon.

"Never mind," said May Patcher. "Let's all walk uptown together and talk about her on the way, and we'll go by the express office, and you can send your candy to her by express, Willie."

In the smallest house which all summer long, from morning until late at night, had resounded with the voices of young people, echoing their songs, murmurous with their theories of love or vibrating with their glee, sometimes shaking all over during their more bolsterous moods—in that house, now comparatively so vacant, the proprietor stood and breathed deep breaths.

"Hah!" he breathed sonorously. He gave himself several resounding slaps upon the chest, then went out to the porch and sat in a rocking chair near his wife. He spread himself out expansively. "My glory," he said, "I believe I'll take off my coat! I haven't had my coat off outside of my own room all summer. I believe I'll take a vacation! By George, I believe I'll stay home this afternoon!"

"That's nice," said Mrs. Patcher.

"Hah!" he said. "My glory, I believe I'll take off my shoes!"

And, meeting no objection, he proceeded to carry out this plan.

"Hah-ah!" he said and placed his stockings feet upon the railing, where a number of vines, running upon strings, made a screen between the porch and the street. He lit a large cigar. "Well, well," he said, "that tastes good! If this keeps on I'll be in as good shape as I was last spring before you know it!" Leaning far back in the rocking chair, his hands behind his head, he smoked with fervor, but suddenly he jumped in a way which showed that his nerves were far from normal. His feet came to the floor with a thump, he jerked the cigar out of his mouth and turned a face of consternation upon his wife.

"What's the matter?"

"Suppose," said Mr. Patcher huskily—"suppose she missed her train!"

Mrs. Patcher shook her head.

"Think not!" he said brightening. "I ordered the livery stable to have a carriage here in lots of time."

"They did," said Mrs. Patcher severely; "about \$5 worth."

"Well, I don't mind that," he returned, putting his feet up again. "After all, she was a mighty fine little girl in her way. The only trouble with me was that crowd of boys. Having to listen to them liked to kill me, and I believe if she'd stayed just one more day I'd been a goner!"

"Mr. Patcher!" a youthful voice repeated.

He rose and, separating two of the vines which screened the end of the porch from the street, looked out. Two small maidens had paused upon the sidewalk and were peering over the picket fence.

"Mr. Patcher," said Jane as soon as his head appeared between the vines—"Mr. Patcher, Miss Pratt's gone. She's gone away on the cars."

"You think so?" he asked gravely.

"We saw her," said Jane. "Rannle an' I were there. Willie was goin' to chaze us, I guess, but we went in the baggage room behind trunks, an' we saw her go. She got on the cars, an' it went with her in it. Honest, she's gone away, Mr. Patcher."

Before speaking Mr. Patcher took a long look at this telepathic child. In his fond eyes she was a marvel and a darling.

"Well, thank you, Jane," he said.

Jane, however, had turned her head and was staring at the corner, which was out of his sight.

"Oo-oo-oo!" she murmured.

"What's the trouble, Jane?"

"Willie!" she said. "It's Willie an' that Joe Bullitt an' Johnnie Watson an' Miss May Patcher. They're comin' right here!"

Mr. Patcher gave forth a low moan and turned pathetically to his wife, but she cheered him with a laugh.

"They've only walked up from the station with May," she said. "They won't come in. You'll see!"

Relieved, Mr. Patcher turned again to speak to Jane, but she was not there. He caught but a glimpse of her, running up the street as fast as she could, hand in hand with her companion.

"Run, Rannle, run!" painted Jane. "I got to get home an' tell mamma about it before Willie! I bet I ketch Hall Columbia, anyway, when he does get there!"

And in this she was not mistaken; she caught Hall Columbia. It lasted all afternoon.

It was still continuing after dinner that evening, when an oft repeated yodel, followed by a shrill wailed "Jane-ee! Oh, Jane-nee-ee!" brought her to an open window downstairs. In the early dusk she looked out upon the washed face of Rannle Kirsted, who stood on the lawn below. "Come on out, Jane. Mamma says I can stay outdoors an' play 'til half past 8."

(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 extremely pugnacious 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 "Bolshevik" leaders are all right except in lacking the minor qualities of intelligence, experience, morals and patriotism. "Sounds a good deal like the old cooper's definition of 'nothing'—'an empty bung-hole without a barrel.'"

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