

SOLOMON BLUEBEARD

CHARLES MARRIOTT

I

ALL the time Barr was taking her over the great building he kept thinking about Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and when, looking round with her beautiful short-sighted eyes, she said: "The half was not told me," he chuckled aloud and his hand closed on hers. The same humorous detachment which made him decline a knighthood and confess to keen pleasure in the idea that the woman he was about to marry was Lady Frances in her own right enabled him to swallow the tribute without blinking.

"Yes, I'm a wonderful man," he said, facing her squarely before the little group of subordinates.

"I wonder if you know how wonderful," she said, in the dim voice that made him think of her eyes, and turned away.

From the roof garden where customers were given tea in summer to the rifle-range in the basement where, lying down divinely and adjusting the pince-nez she had hitherto not confessed, she had made a bull's eye—"And not a Lord Mayor's bull's eye with the marker's pencil, mind you, but well in at seven o'clock," said the attending commissionaire who cherished the pierced card and the empty shell—she had seen it all. They had finished up with tea, not in the roof-garden, for it was only May, but in the staff dining-room where the available heads of departments were presented to her, each to be won with the memorable word, so effortless and so apt, that made her lover marvel again at her perfect sympathy. It was young Pearce, the head of the house decoration department and not many years from Oxford, who had been encouraged by the memorable word to remind her that she had not seen his gray and rose room. That was why, instead of coming down to the ground floor after tea, they had stopped the lift at the second.

Here Barr good-naturedly allowed Pearce to make the running and artfully edge her interest from the professional to the

personal with allusions to his adventures among pots and patterns in Persia and Japan: to be rewarded for his complaisance with the tribute to his wonderfulness, which Pearce's coxcombry—as the young man was made to feel by the elbow of an envious colleague—had only helped to illustrate.

Now they were walking toward the lift, Pearce in the rear having it rubbed in by his colleagues in jocular undertones, that he hadn't scored by asking for preferential treatment, when she stopped and peered.

"This looks older," she said.

Barr did not answer immediately, and Pearce, with a warning kick at his tormentors, blurted out:

"It's part of the original building, Lady Frances."

She looked at Barr, who nodded and said: "It was taken in."

"Taken in?" she repeated, and then, with a swift comprehension and the faintest emphasis, murmured: "Oh, I *wonder* if you know."

"Aha!" he chuckled and, in order not to seem to be bundling her off, placed his hand affectionately on Pearce's shoulder. She turned to enter the lift.

"And what's that little room?"

"Nothing, nothing," he said on a high, careless note, though Pearce felt the pressure of his hand. She glanced at him quickly and he began:

"It's——"

"Never mind," she said, in a tone of such exaggerated soreness that Barr laughed, and the subordinates laughed, and in the momentary freedom she made her farewells.

"I must go home and think about it all. Good-bye, Mr. Pearce, and don't forget to send me the book about Persian Lustre; good-bye, Miss Harrod, Mr. Duke——" and never a name astray.

In the lift she talked to Barr about people who were to be his fellow-guests at dinner with her that evening. There wasn't a trace of preoccupation in her manner, but as, bareheaded, he bent over her hand when she took her seat in the white car he believed that she was trying not to glance up at the second floor windows.

II

There was no reason why she shouldn't have seen the little room, he said to himself, as he went smiling upstairs—for he habitually ignored the lift. If he had thought of it he would have shown it to her "first thing." If he had thought of it? . . . Honestly, he had not. That showed how unimportant it really was. But, unimportant as it was, it was not a thing to be stumbled upon as an accident of young Pearce's coxcombry. There must be a little explanation.

He hadn't been to the little room for goodness knew how long. Certainly not since—he smiled upon the inappropriate word—his courtship. That set him thinking upon the wonderful experience. He had met her—Lady Frances Yule, the widow of a famous lawyer—at a political dinner. He was interested and she was amused, was the way he summed it up at the time. Then he called upon her in Grosvenor Street; and called again with the mixture of purpose, challenge, hope and incredulity that came out in the words: "Well, will you marry me?" She said: "With all my heart," and even now he had not half exhausted the meanings of that answer, which had left him a little abashed. It was as if, though earnestly hoping that she would marry him, he had been prepared to say: "I knew you wouldn't!"

The little room that hindered the smooth run of the second floor was so evidently a kink in the organization of the great building that it would have been a miracle if she had overlooked it. A kink. . . . Well, he supposed he had a kink. He unlocked and flung open the door, standing for a moment to get what might be her impression. "It's like a birthplace," he thought, smiling broadly. The original ceiling sagged low; the boards were bare; a deal table, two cane-seated chairs and one of wickerwork with chintz-covered cushions, a cupboard and a bookcase were all the furniture. Upon the sage green walls were a few cheap reproductions of great pictures; upon the narrow mantelshef there was the photograph of a rather intense looking young woman.

More than twenty years ago George Barr had nearly starved in this room on what he quite sincerely believed to be love of literature and love of this young woman. Both beliefs had been mistaken, but they had been real while they lasted. He opened the drawer of the deal table and pulled out papers. At forty-three he blushed to read them. Almost vindictively he turned to the photograph. What on earth was it in women that made them cocker a man up in his weakness and ignore his powers?

But he could not feel vindictive when he recalled, like a sickness, the white passion that the face of Annie Swanson had inspired. It had sent him from provincial flesh pots, as they were represented by his father's business of auctioneer and estate agent, to starve in London. What was more amazing still, it had so cockered him up that he didn't quite starve, but sold enough essays, short stories and even poems to encourage the belief that he might finally succeed. And, to be strictly just, in driving him from the provincial flesh pots it had driven him into his own game. If he had not left home he would not have met Hobday, the hard-headed, bandy-legged little Birmingham dealer who had given him a room, this room, in which to starve on literature and the love of Annie Swanson.

He put down the photograph as if, as Annie said at the time, Hobday had come between them. It was Hobday who, misunderstanding the function of literature but not his man, had induced him to write the pamphlet advertising a new labor-saving device for the kitchen. He had written it reluctantly, half-ashamed of the creative joy he found in the task. He could see Hobday now, sitting on the deal table in his shirt sleeves and looking from the paper to him with a comical expression of awe which the essays, short stories and poems had never excited. "That's *your* game," he said. "Stand in with me and we'll sweep London." Of course he didn't believe Hobday and he blushed now to think of the way he had stood out; deceiving himself, when he finally consented to stand in, with the sophistry that he was doing it to help Hobday.

He could see now that the surest proof that he wasn't doing it to help Hobday was the loss of Annie. He wouldn't have given up Annie for Hobday; he gave her up for his own game.

Or, rather, she gave him up. She would marry an artist, but not a tradesman. She wrote stilted letters about "turning back from the plough," "the sacrifice of ideals," and so on. She was wrong, of course. When once he stood in with Hobday and the business began to respond he knew that he was doing his functional thing; that he was following his genius. He tried to make her see that, but it was no use. "Genius" for her meant essays, short stories and poems. "And look at 'em!" he said, now, with a disgusted eye upon the papers.

So she gave him up. At the time he was truly grieved, and there could be no doubt that the rapid success of his game owed something to the lover's contradictory desires to forget her and to justify his choice. Now he saw that, putting his game on one side, it had been a lucky escape for both of them. As he remembered her she was not the woman for the man he had become.

He had kept the room, which had been at the top of the Birmingham warehouse, and was not more sacred to Annie than to Hobday, as a sort of mascot. At one time he used to come here almost daily to renew himself, but in his new-found happiness he had forgotten all about it. He had no longer any use for it. He perceived that it would be difficult to explain all this to Lady Frances, and he wished that he had remembered to have the room dismantled before she visited the building. Not that he was ashamed of his small beginning; Lady Frances knew all about that, but it would be difficult to make her understand the feeling that caused him to keep the room as a mascot. Trying to find a phrase to describe the feeling, he could think of nothing better than the words which had come into his mind when he unlocked the door. There was a kink in his nature.

III

All through dinner he was hoping, vainly, as he knew, that she had forgotten the little room. Otherwise the dinner was a success. He was popular, and she had collected people who made him feel that his popularity was worth having: a Member of Parliament who said that he had superseded labor legisla-

tion; a Royal Academician who complained that his posters were the real pictures of the year; a pretty American girl who told him that "Barr's" was just the happiest thought in London. Barr knew that, allowing for humorous exaggeration, what they said was true; when a man played his own game everything about him fell into healthy relations. He took no credit to himself for the happy thought; he had the luck and the chance to play his own game, and the rest followed. He had enemies, but, remembering his own false start, he said that they did not understand. His attitude to the world was "Come and play with me."

"Solomon Bluebeard," she said, the moment they were alone.

"Here's the key," he said, presenting it to her.

She applied it to his heart.

"Whole strings of 'em," he said, in a tone of mock remorse.

"And are they all dead?"

"All but one, and she, poor thing, was never alive."

She nodded as if she understood, but after a moment said:

"Are you sure that she didn't come to life when you—strung her up?"

"Come," he said, with a sudden inspiration, "you shall see the little room."

"When?" she asked, eagerly.

"Now."

Not the least delightful thing about her, he thought, as upon her gesture he rang the bell for a servant, was her keen sense of adventure.

"But will it really tell me anything?" she asked, when he was fastening her rose-colored cloak.

"I'm hanged if I know," he said, in genuine despair.

Night watchmen swung doors and sped the lift with a stolid alacrity that spoke of an organization habitually tested at any hour.

"You shall unlock the door," he said, when they came to the little room. She did so with a mock-tragic gesture that covered more agitation than he knew. He switched on the light.

"And this was you," she said, softly, from the middle of the room.

"Can't deny it," he said.

"But do you want to?" she said, turning on him quickly.

"All this?" he said, indicating the visible contents of the room. "Lord, no!"

"What, then?"

"It doesn't seem to join on."

Bending short-sightedly and holding her cloak about her, she moved lightly across the floor. She made him think of a witch doctor.

"May I?" she said, indicating the photograph.

"That's what I brought you for," he said, and then rather wished he hadn't, because it seemed to put too much on Annie Swanson, who, after all, was only part of the story.

"She looks intelligent," said Lady Frances.

"She was," he complained.

"Ah, you mustn't."

"I mean she was too intelligent for the likes o' me," said Barr.

"Ah, then she wasn't."

"Wasn't what?"

"Intelligent."

"Anyhow, she gave me up."

"Really, really?" said Lady Frances. "The sweet fool!" and kissed the photograph. "Supposing I hadn't noticed the room," she went on.

"I should have cleared it out," he said frankly.

"And robbed me," she murmured.

He didn't quite understand that, but, relying on her insight, told her the story as one might tell a dream to an interpreter. He soon saw that she was inclined to make too much of Annie Swanson. Not in the sense of supposing he was, or ought to have been, still in love with her. She wanted to know what had become of Annie Swanson, with the implied reproach that he had been remiss in not finding out. He impressed upon her that Annie Swanson had given him up.

"Yes, but not *that* you," she said.

That, again, he didn't understand. He was beginning to be bored with the little room and what it stood for. He had something better, now, with which to renew himself, and he bent to kiss the slender woman at his side. For the first time she gracefully evaded him, though when they were outside the little room she kissed him warmly and said: "You dear, dear boy, I wouldn't have missed it for worlds."

IV

Barr was too good a man of business to ignore irrational fancies. That, indeed, was where he scored over his business rivals. They went by the facts while he responded to the movements in the air, of which facts are the belated confirmation. He said that he did not deal in tombstones. Though it was ridiculous that Annie Swanson should come out of that queer corner of his life to trouble him now, he recognized her potentialities between him and the woman he loved. He had no woman on his conscience, though more than one had a better right than Annie to claim his regret; but when he implied as much to Lady Frances she put the matter by as understood of a man who did not pretend to be flawless. It was only Annie, whom he had kissed once, that she found interesting—and that sort of interest was inconvenient.

His method of dealing with Annie was characteristic. He sent for Pearce, who, besides managing the house decoration department, was his personal aid, and said to him without explanation or preliminaries: "I want you to find out what became of a Miss Annie Swanson who in 1887 was governess at the Vicarage of Melhurst in Somerset."

Pearce took down the details without comment. If Barr had told him to catch butterflies or to count the red-haired women who passed the Marble Arch on a Sunday afternoon he would have accepted the task as bearing in some way known to Barr on his official duties. In half a day he came to Barr and said:

"In October, 1888, Miss Annie Swanson married Mr. George Maggs, farmer, of Wincote, Gloucestershire."

Barr laughed. Pearce continued:

"Mr. George Maggs died in May, 1905. His widow, two sons and one daughter are now living at Wincote. Mrs. Maggs runs the farm with the help of a steward. In summer she takes in paying guests."

Barr said: "The devil she does!"

Pearce allowed three seconds, and then went on to the next entry in his notebook, which concerned the price of China silk. When he had removed himself, Barr wrote to Mrs. Maggs, proposing to call on her the following week, when he would find himself in her neighborhood. Her immediate answer struck him as rather fluttered than cordial. She would be delighted to see him, of course, but between the conventional phrases he felt a prickle of uneasiness.

The plump, handsome, flushed and voluble widow who received him at a prosperous-looking Cotswold farm had no more than the eyes of Annie Swanson, and their expression was changed from yearning to complacency. Remembering his imaginary rôle of Bluebeard he called her "Fatima" at sight. She presented him to her solemn sixteen-year-old High School daughter—one of her sons was at a theological college, the other at "Blundell's"—as "a very old friend of—mine." The last word was an appealing squeak, and Barr guessed that at the last moment her conscience would not allow her to say "your father's." Barr had not known the late Mr. George Maggs, but he was prepared to swear that he had been on Annie Swanson's horizon when she gave him up. He understood that she was nervous, not so much of him as of her solemn daughter, but at the same time she was so uncertain of his motive in coming that she would not be alone with him for a moment. The embarrassed atmosphere reacted upon the child, who regarded him over the generous tea-table with disapproving eyes. He might have been the bailiff. He felt inconvenient, but amused, and observed to himself that apparently Mrs. Maggs hoped to buy him off with hot scones. Finding that beyond asking about common acquaintances of their youth he made no reference to the past, her spirits rose and by the end of the meal she was quite hilarious. She had heard of "Barr's," of course, and

said that she must come there the very next time she was in London. It mightn't be long—and then she blushed. Barr's discreet and sympathetic allusions to earlier subjects of conversation brought the coy admission that Mrs. Maggs was about to be married again. The fortunate man was the vicar of the parish, a childless widower.

"So you see," said Mrs. Maggs, as if it explained everything, "there will be a curacy for George directly he is ordained."

From her unconcealed relief when he went away Barr surmised that the reverend lover was expected to supper that evening. At the very last moment she hoped hurriedly that Barr was getting on all right. Evidently she hadn't in the least taken in that he might be considered a person of some consequence. She was too delicate to promise him an order, but she assured him again that she would not forget "Barr's" the very next time she was in London.

"Which won't be long," he said mischievously, as he pressed her hand. But for compassion of her genuine discomfort at his presence he would have contrived to put a touch of disappointment into his parting congratulations.

V

"Ah, but then, you see, I have no sense of humor," said Lady Frances when he told her the story.

"Why," he said, with a chuckle, "her sole concern was that I should not rake up an inconvenient past."

"Yes, I see that," she said, rather sadly.

Barr felt puzzled, but her manner did not encourage further discussion. That night they went to the opera, and it happened to be *Götterdämmerung*. At the fall of the curtain he said:

"But I thought Siegfried was invulnerable."

"Almost," she said, "but, if you remember, a leaf fell on his back."

The strange glance that accompanied the words, the triviality of "leaf" and "back" in the sense of the past, oppressed him. Sensitive to every inflection and expression of the woman

he loved, he felt that the little room was becoming an obsession.

Though not superstitious he had to confess that it cost him an effort to carry out what seemed to him the common-sense thing. On the morrow he gave directions that the little room on the second floor should be dismantled and its contents destroyed. At the first convenient opportunity he would have the necessary structural alterations made to throw the room into the general run of the floor.

"Have the books and pictures burnt and the furniture taken to the basement and chopped up," he said. Afterwards it struck him that the feeling of doing something ruthless had made him rather scriptural in his order. "But," as he said to himself, "there shan't be any leaves on my back."

In the afternoon he went down to see that his orders had been properly carried out. He found the room bare and an elderly charwoman pottering about before setting to work with bucket and brush. As he greeted her kindly he observed that she kept one hand behind her back and he commented on the furtive picking and hoarding of her class. "If they want to keep anything, why on earth can't they ask for it?" he thought, but he said nothing to the woman.

When he told Lady Frances what he had done she laughed and said: "Silly boy."

"It's always a mistake to keep relics of the past," he said, aggressively.

"Yes—to keep them," she agreed.

He felt that she was in a contradictory mood, but, encouraged, he went on: "I can see now that I was always getting hung up on them. Not that I ever regretted the loss of what they represented," he added, hastily.

"It was a real time," she said, repeating a phrase of his own.

"Yes—at the time," he admitted, rather crossly. "But it didn't really count; it was a false start, a kink, a twist. You surely don't mean to say that you think there was anything in it, that she was right, that I ought to have kept on?"

"Oh, no," she said; "it seems to me quite clear that she was mistaken."

VI

Still, he was not satisfied. There was no difference outwardly in her manner to him, but there was something at the back of her mind. He knew that it was not that absurd person Mrs. Maggs who, as Annie Swanson, had inspired what he now described as the moon-gazing period of his life. It was as if he had left something undone. For the life of him he could not think what it was, but the very effort of trying to find out made him recognize how immensely his love had grown since the day Lady Frances had paid her first visit to "Barr's." Accustomed to being frank with himself, he knew, or thought he knew, what had first attracted him to her. Her strange, dim beauty that many people failed to see appealed to his senses and flattered his discernment. Her slightness, her stoop, her short-sighted eyes and uncertain voice made up a personality that lurked for discovery rather than flashed upon the observer. Then, he was not ashamed to confess, her birth was part of the attraction: the title went for nothing, but race was real. For the rest, her intelligence, her wit, her social gifts and her acquaintances made her in every way desirable as a wife.

But these things, real as they were and natural in their appeal to a successful middle-aged man, were only her attributes. When he asked her to marry him he had hardly got beyond them. If she had refused him he would have been disappointed, but he would not have suffered more than a successful middle-aged man might be supposed to suffer. That, he saw, was why her answer, "With all my heart," had a little abashed him as if he had got rather more than he expected. Now it was different. It was no longer her attributes, dear as they were, but herself that he wanted. Before he would have been content with a successful alliance: now he would not be satisfied with anything short of perfect union.

While it would be too much to say that the little room had worked this change in his love it had revealed deep upon deep in a nature that more than any attribute was now the object of his love. It had been the occasion of a dozen "sayings" that

he cherished in his heart. Now in some obscure way it came between him and the woman he loved. He blessed and cursed the little room.

"You're preoccupied," she said to him one evening.

The new tenderness he felt for her prompted him to a wise simplicity and he said:

"There's something between us, dear."

Her eyes moistened, but she smiled—not ironically, but as a mother might smile upon a perverse child.

"Give me the boy who sat in that room," she said.

Not understanding her, he said:

"I would if I could, but he died long ago."

"Are you sure?" she said, meaningly.

"What do you mean?" he asked, and she said quickly:

"Then you are sorry that he died?"

At all risks he admitted: "Yes, I am."

She turned away and for a moment he thought that he had hurt her. From her writing-table she came back with something in her hands.

"There he is," she whispered. It was the photograph of Annie Swanson.

"Ah, don't be angry with me," she cried, dropping on her knees beside him. "If you knew what I went through to get it, and the extraordinary luck!"

"I'm not angry," he said, "but I don't see——"

"No, of course you don't," she said compassionately. "Poor Solomon, poor Bluebeard, they never did understand women and that's what made them cruel. You laughed at her—for what she couldn't help. Oh, I'm not blaming you for outgrowing her. She was just not quite big enough; she did not quite love you—not the real you. But for what she loved, and for what she gave me, she's sacred. And you would have robbed me!"

Dimly he began to understand what had been between them. And what he did not understand she told him between smiles and tears: the woman's need for everything, the weakness as well as the strength; the kinks, the twists, the false starts; the man, the boy, the child.

"But how did you get it?" he said, when he could speak calmly.

Pearce, it appeared, had been the unconscious instrument. "It's his fate, the dear, nice-looking boy," she said in parenthesis. Under the pretence of having left something in the little room she had got from Pearce the address of Mrs. Bone, the charwoman.

"There isn't a charwoman living who doesn't save a scrap of some sort," she told him, "though I never expected such luck as this! But all that's nothing to what it cost me. To go to my man's place, to question his subordinates, to lie, to mystify—I don't think, my dear," she concluded, "that I shall ever be called upon to do more for you than that."

But she wouldn't tell him what she gave Mrs. Bone for the photograph.

"That's women's business," she said firmly.

"There's something more," she told him presently.

"You don't want me to begin all over again, to revive him?" he said, in mock alarm.

"No, stupid, he's in my heart. But you can give him back his room."

So it was done. In the face of inquisitive subordinates he had the little room as nearly as might be reconstructed. He had made for her a little golden key and on a day they went to the room together. She drew him to the photograph of Annie Swanson, now framed in silver over the fireplace, and put her arms about him.

"Now I can kiss my man in the presence of the woman who, poor dear, wasn't quite big enough to love him," she said.

SIGNIFICANT TENDENCIES IN GERMAN POLITICS

J. SALWYN SCHAPIRO

“**H**E who doubts that Germany shall henceforth be governed in a liberal and social spirit is blind politically,” was the comment of Ernest Bassermann, the leader of the National Liberals, on the recent election to the Reichstag. In spite of the lack of concrete definite issues, no election since 1870 has been so significant as the one that was held in January, 1912. For many years the German people have been advancing with halting steps on the road to self-government. Forces which have long been at work in the politics of the Fatherland, are now for the first time beginning to make themselves felt. Germany is at the cross-roads; not at the sharp turn of revolution, but at the gentle yet decided curve of evolution toward political democracy.

The antecedents of the recent election go back to the one of 1907 when the Conservative parties, as a result of a khaki campaign over colonial expansion, won 105 seats and could count on the Liberals with their 85 members and a possible Centre support of 105. The Social Democrats were roundly beaten, having lost about half their seats, and numbered but a paltry 43 deputies. This was the high tide of Junker success, and their brilliant leader, Prince von Bülow, then Chancellor, proceeded to organize the coalition known as the “Bülowblok,” composed of Conservatives and Liberals, the representatives of national ideals as opposed to the internationalism of the Socialists and the ultramontanism of the Catholics. To all appearances the “national” combination seemed safely entrenched in power and von Bülow destined to remain in office indefinitely.

But nowhere are appearances more deceptive than in “Blok” politics. The alliance of Liberals with Conservatives was an unnatural combination of elements whose interests were mutually hostile. Middle-class industrialists representing capital and agrarian aristocrats representing land are not apt to work harmoniously except under stress of a revolution from be-