

# The Piano Next Door

By Elia W. Peattie

Babette had gone away for the summer; the furniture was in its summer linens; the curtains were down, and Babette's husband, John Boyce, was alone in the house. It was the first year of his marriage, and he missed Babette. But then, as he often said to himself, he ought never to have married her. He did it from pure selfishness, and because he was determined to possess the most illusive, tantalizing, elegant, and utterly unmoral little creature that the sun shone upon. He wanted her because she reminded him of birds, and flowers, and summer winds, and other exquisite things created for the delectation of mankind. He neither expected nor desired her to think. He had half-frightened her into marrying him, had taken her to a poor man's home, provided her with no society such as she had been accustomed to, and he had no reasonable cause of complaint when she answered the call of summer and flitted away, like a butterfly in the morning sunshine, to the place where the flowers grew.

He wrote to her every evening, sitting in the stifling, ugly house, and poured out his soul as if it were a libation to a goddess. She sometimes answered by telegraph, sometimes by a perfumed note. He schooled himself not to feel hurt. Why should Babette write? Does a goldfinch indict epistles; or a humming-bird study composition; or a glancing, red-scaled fish in summer shallows consider the meaning of words?

He knew at the beginning what Babette was -- guessed her limitations -- trembled when he buttoned her tiny glove -- kissed her dainty slipper when he found it in the closet after she was gone -- thrilled at the sound of her laugh, or the memory of it! That was all. A mere case of love. He was in bonds. Babette was not. Therefore he was in the city, working overhours to pay for Babette's pretty follies down at the seaside. It was quite right and proper. He was a grub in the furrow; she a lark in the blue. Those had always been and always must be their relative positions.

Having attained a mood of philosophic calm, in which he was prepared to spend his evenings alone -- as became a grub -- and to await with dignified patience the return of his wife, it was in the nature of an inconsistency that he should have walked the floor of the dull little drawing-room like a lion in cage. It did not seem in keeping with the position of superior serenity which he had assumed, that, reading Babette's notes, he should have raged with jealousy, or that, in the loneliness of his unkempt chamber, he should have stretched out arms of longing. Even if Babette had been present, she would only have smiled her gay little smile and coquetted with him. She could not understand. He had known, of course, from the first moment, that she could not understand! And so, why the ache, ache, ache of the heart! Or WAS it the heart, or the brain, or the soul?

Sometimes, when the evenings were so hot that he could not endure the close air of the house, he sat on the narrow, dusty front porch and looked about him at his neighbors. The street had once been smart and aspiring, but it had fallen into decay and dejection. Pale young men, with flurried-looking wives, seemed to Boyce to occupy most of the houses. Sometimes three or four couples would live in one house. Most of these appeared to be childless. The women made a pretence at fashionable dressing, and wore their hair elaborately in fashions which somehow suggested boarding-houses to Boyce, though he could not have told why. Every house in the block needed fresh paint. Lacking this renovation, the householders tried to make up for it by a

display of lace curtains which, at every window, swayed in the smoke-weighted breeze. Strips of carpeting were laid down the front steps of the houses where the communities of young couples lived, and here, evenings, the inmates of the houses gathered, committing mild extravagances such as the treating of each other to ginger ale, or beer, or ice-cream.

Boyce watched these tawdry makeshifts at sociability with bitterness and loathing. He wondered how he could have been such a fool as to bring his exquisite Babette to this neighborhood. How could he expect that she would return to him? It was not reasonable. He ought to go down on his knees with gratitude that she even condescended to write him.

Sitting one night till late, -- so late that the fashionable young wives with their husbands had retired from the strips of stair carpeting, -- and raging at the loneliness which ate at his heart like a cancer, he heard, softly creeping through the windows of the house adjoining his own, the sound of comfortable melody.

It breathed upon his ear like a spirit of consolation, speaking of peace, of love which needs no reward save its own sweetness, of aspiration which looks forever beyond the thing of the hour to find attainment in that which is eternal. So insidiously did it whisper these things, so delicately did the simple and perfect melodies creep upon the spirit -- that Boyce felt no resentment, but from the first listened as one who listens to learn, or as one who, fainting on the hot road, hears, far in the ferny deeps below, the gurgle of a spring.

Then came harmonies more intricate: fair fabrics of woven sound, in the midst of which gleamed golden threads of joy; a tapestry of sound, multi-tinted, gallant with story and achievement, and beautiful things. Boyce, sitting on his absurd piazza, with his knees jambed against the balustrade, and his chair back against the dun-colored wall of his house, seemed to be walking in the cathedral of the redwood forest, with blue above him, a vast hymn in his ears, pungent perfume in his nostrils, and mighty shafts of trees lifting themselves to heaven, proud and erect as pure men before their Judge. He stood on a mountain at sunrise, and saw the marvels of the amethystine clouds below his feet, heard an eternal and white silence, such as broods among the everlasting snows, and saw an eagle winging for the sun. He was in a city, and away from him, diverging like the spokes of a wheel, ran thronging streets, and to his sense came the beat, beat, beat of the city's heart. He saw the golden alchemy of a chosen race; saw greed transmitted to progress; saw that which had enslaved men, work at last to their liberation; heard the roar of mighty mills, and on the streets all the peoples of earth walking with common purpose, in fealty and understanding. And then, from the swelling of this concourse of great sounds, came a diminuendo, calm as philosophy, and from that, nothingness.

Boyce sat still for a long time, listening to the echoes which this music had awakened in his soul. He retired, at length, content, but determined that upon the morrow he would watch -- the day being Sunday -- for the musician who had so moved and taught him.

He arose early, therefore, and having prepared his own simple breakfast of fruit and coffee, took his station by the window to watch for the man. For he felt convinced that the exposition he had heard was that of a masculine mind. The long, hot hours of the morning went by, but the front door of the house next to his did not open.

"These artists sleep late," he complained. Still he watched. He was too much afraid of losing him to go out for dinner. By three in the afternoon he had grown impatient. He went to the house next door and rang the bell. There was no response. He thundered another appeal. An old woman with a cloth about her head answered the door. She was very deaf, and Boyce had difficulty in making himself understood.

"The family is in the country," was all she would say. "The family will not be home till September."

"But there is some one living here?" shouted Boyce.

"I live here," she said with dignity, putting back a wisp of dirty gray hair behind her ear. "It is my house. I sublet to the family."

"What family?"

But the old creature was not communicative.

"The family that lives here," she said.

"Then who plays the piano in this house?" roared Boyce. "Do you?"

He thought a shade of pallor showed itself on her ash-colored cheeks. Yet she smiled a little at the idea of her playing.

"There is no piano," she said, and she put an enigmatical emphasis to the words.

"Nonsense," cried Boyce, indignantly. "I heard a piano being played in this very house for hours last night!"

"You may enter," said the old woman, with an accent more vicious than hospitable.

Boyce almost burst into the drawing-room. It was a dusty and forbidding place, with ugly furniture and gaudy walls. No piano nor any other musical instrument stood in it. The intruder turned an angry and baffled face to the old woman, who was smiling with illconcealed exultation.

"I shall see the other rooms," he announced. The old woman did not appear to be surprised at his impertinence.

"As you please," she said.

So, with the hobbling creature, with her bandaged head, for a guide, he explored every room of the house, which being identical with his own, he could do without fear of leaving any apartment unentered. But no piano did he find!

"Explain," roared Boyce at length, turning upon the leering old hag beside him. "Explain! For surely I heard music more beautiful than I can tell."

"I know nothing," she said. "But it is true I once had a lodger who rented the front room, and that he played upon the piano. I am poor at hearing, but he must have played well, for all the neighbors used to come in front of the house to listen, and sometimes they applauded him, and sometimes they were still. I could tell by watching their hands. Sometimes little children came and danced. Other times young men and women came and listened. But the young man died. The neighbors were angry. They came to look at him and said he had starved to death. It was no fault of mine. I sold his piano to pay his funeral expenses -- and it took every cent to pay for them too, I'd have you know. But since then, sometimes -- still, it must be nonsense, for I never heard it -- folks say that he plays the piano in my room. It has kept me out of the letting of it more than once. But the family doesn't seem to mind -- the family that lives here, you know. They will be back in September. Yes."

Boyce left her nodding her thanks at what he had placed in her hand, and went home to write it all to Babette -- Babette who would laugh so merrily when she read it!