

Walter Barrington

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

I first met Walter Barrington at a children's party, to which I had taken my child. He was an insignificant-looking little man, and, as it seemed to me at the time, after many efforts to converse with him, despairingly dull. He sat in a corner, and when his eyes were not upon his children, he closed them with a shading hand, as though they pained him. A doleful figure for a children's party, I thought, and commenced to talk to him. I tried many subjects, yet failed to awaken his interest. It was a last effort that drew him out.

"I had to bring my little girl myself," I said; "my wife was not very well."

He awoke at once and looked around.

"I have three little ones here," he answered eagerly. "My eldest girl would not come; she is fifteen, and thought herself too old," he added smiling. "I have a son a year older. Of course he would not think of coming. He is just the age to be afraid of getting chaffed, you see, and is very sensitive, poor lad! And I couldn't trust the little ones with servants."

"No," I replied, remembering my wife's words. "You cannot trust them to be careful when the little ones come out of the hot rooms and into the cold air." I dropped my voice and hesitated. "You have no wife, perhaps?"

"She is away just now. Yes, in the country for a time." He looked at me rather sharply, I fancied; then turned to the children. "That is my Lily over there, see—the pretty little dark girl. Doesn't she dance well? Look how light she is; you can hardly see her feet. And that—no, not the girl with the red head—"

"That's *my* little girl," I said, not offended, for Milly was really the prettiest child in the room; but he did not seem to hear, and took no notice.

"You see that fine little chap leaning against the door, quite like a man of many seasons, he continued, laughing. "Isn't he a funny little fellow? That's my Bobby." He raised his voice. "Bobby, I want you."

Bobby did not pretend to hear till he was called three times, then he sauntered over looking bored.

"What is it?" he demanded, looking me up and down.

"I only want to introduce you to this gentleman; he has got a little girl here for you to dance with."

"But I don't want to dance with his little girl," Bobby cried, dragging himself from his father's hands. "Do let me go. You always worry so!"

"He is very shy," the father said; "poor little chap!"

But he did not attempt to retain his son. I saw Bobby a few minutes after counting with his eyes the dishes upon the supper-table, which he intended to raid as soon as he got an opportunity.

The little dull man and I continued a disjointed conversation for the rest of the evening. I found he lived in the next house to my own.

"I have often seen you passing," he said.

I wondered if I had ever seen him; but realized that if I had I must have passed him unnoticed—the little grey, insignificant man.

A few days after this my wife gave a little party, when amongst those invited I saw the names of Agnes and William Barrington. I asked, thinking of the old man, who they were. My wife seemed to know all about them.

“Oh! they are the eldest children of that old man who lives next door on the right. You may have seen him. It’s an awfully dull home for the children, poor things! He seldom goes anywhere with them, and never entertains. He is always busy, or ill, or something.”

I asked her if she had ever spoken to him; but she had not—she had only met the children, who she was so sorry for.

“The mother is away,” I remarked. “I suppose it’s better when she is at home?”

My wife laughed. “She is never at home,” she said. “They are separated—incompatibility of temper. One can hardly wonder when she was married to that—”

“You are uncharitable, dear,” I said, smiling. “One cannot always help being dull, and he seemed, from the few minutes’ talk I had with him, to be kind, and fond of his children.”

“I have only heard the children’s story,” my wife said. “And of course it looks bad, the wife leaving him; he must have a bad temper.”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, it’s funny that a mother should leave all her children behind. You have never met her?”

“No,” my wife answered thoughtfully; “but I respect her. It’s better if things are going badly between husband and wife that they should separate. It’s awful for the children when there is constant bickering and quarrelling going on around them; but it would take a great deal to make a mother leave her children.”

My wife looked, with her heart in her eyes, towards the other end of the room, where our one dear child was playing. I caught her in my arms, and drew her down upon my knee.

“And what do you know of bickering and quarrelling, uncharitable little wife?” I said; and Milly came like a small whirlwind upon us.

“Let me come up, too, father!” she cried in peals of laughter.

I was nearly smothered between them.

In the midst of the frolic Agnes Barrington was announced by the smiling servant. Her face sobered us, so doleful was it.

“I don’t think I can come to your dance, Mrs. Bryson,” she said at once, ignoring me.

“Oh, you must not disappoint us,” I answered, holding out my hand. She shook it languidly, and continued to my wife,—

“It’s father,” she said, on the verge of tears. “He has another attack, and I am afraid we can’t leave.”

“Poor dear!” My wife took her hands and stroked them. “It’s really hard,” she said, turning to me. “Just imagine, this poor child and her brother are the responsible people at home, like father and mother; are you not, dear?”

“Of course,” the girl said, “when father is ill there’s no one but us to look after things; and, then, Herbert is very selfish—all men are!” She looked at me defiantly, as my wife shook her head. “He goes off to clubs and places, leaving everything to me.” She burst into tears. “I want to enjoy myself when I am young like other girls, and travel about and see things; but I have to sit at home and nurse and look after the young ones.”

“You must be brave,” my wife said sympathetically. “Your father will be better soon, and you can go about again.”

“Oh, but he won’t,” the girl flashed in. The last time there was an operation it was weeks and months before he was better. We had an awful time, stuck in the house in constant attendance

upon him. My complexion has never been the same since, with late hours and unhealthy invalid atmosphere." She began to cry again.

"An operation! What's the matter with your father?" I said sharply.

"Oh, I don't know; he is always complaining." She turned from me. "And it's to be on the night of your party, the doctor says. Of all the nights, to pick out that one night; but it's just my fate, I had my dress made and everything."

"Never mind, Agnes," said my wife, comforting her. "We will have another party when your father is well again, especially for you."

Agnes smiled a wan smile. She was certainly a pretty girl, when the habitual look of discontent left her face.

"It's very well to joke," she said; "but it *is* hard, when one is young, not to be able to go about I know a house where there are three old maids; all because they had to stay at home and nurse their father and mother till they died. Then the girls were too old to get married, or do anything for themselves. All their youth and freshness had passed away by sick beds, and when they were free they were old themselves. I suppose I shall be like them." She rose and began walking up and down. "I know another girl, too, who is beginning to look faded—she was so pretty. She has to stay at home and mind her bedridden grandmother. The old woman is a bundle of nerves and temper, and she won't let Annie have a friend in, because the talking worries her. She may not even keep a bird, because the singing annoys her. And there is the young girl fading, fading, fading all the time. I hate old people, I hate illness. I want to be with young, healthy people; I want to live."

My wife took the girl by her shoulder and drew her to a seat.

"The poor old people," she said softly (I knew she was thinking of her parents, whom she loved), "who have taken care of us when we were helpless and a burden to them. Agnes, I have known little ones who have made men give up their dreams of fame and settle down to earning bread and butter for the infant mouths—clever men who have given up studies that they loved for their children's sake and women who have had to stay at home, to sit up at night, to wear their hearts out with love for their children. Cannot the children spare a little love in return?"

I saw the girl was only half listening; her mind was on her own troubles.

"The world should be for the young," she said. "All the things that I want to do now I shall not want to do when I am old and free to do them. Do you think I shall care to go to dances when I am fifty; or where will my pretty dress be; and what will it matter what colour I wear?" She went to the door.

My wife laughed. "Silly child!" she said, bidding her good-bye. "When you are fifty you will have more sense. If your father is better, come in to our dance; after all, it's only from door to door."

"It is hard on the poor thing," she added as the door closed. "You see, she has plenty of brains, and is not domesticated."

"She can think, but not feel," I said; then repented. "Well, it is hard, as you say, after all. So much beauty, life, movement shut away from light and enjoyment in that dull house. Youth and crabbed age, my dear."

"Yes," she answered; "perhaps things would be different if there was not something missing in the house—"

"Mother! mother!" Milly called; "I want you."

"That's it, she smiled, catching the child in her arms.

II

When I passed Walter Barrington's house in the days that followed, I always looked up at the windows, wondering if I should see the little old man. It was curious that he had up to this been unnoticed by me, or, if noticed, only as part of the moving traffic of the street. He had been like the milkman's little pony which stopped by our gate each day, or the dog which, every morning when the door of the house opposite was opened, rushed forth in a volley of barks, or like the lamplighter who lit up the street lamp by lamp. I suppose the old man had closed his door behind him every morning about the time that I left mine, and his bent shoulders and grey locks had passed before me unnoticed. Now the little man had a personality for me; he became a human being, an individual for the first time.

So every morning I looked up, but never saw him. Only once I saw Agnes at the window, looking through the dirty glass, her face pale, the picture of woe. I couldn't help pitying her, on these beautiful, bright mornings—shut in there. I wondered what was wrong with the old man. Once, meeting the younger children, I stopped them and asked how he was. Lily said he was "all right." She didn't know what was the matter with him. Bobby giggled, "Spect he is shamming," and asked me how "Carrots" was. I suppose he meant my daughter; the nickname evidently slipped out, he got so furiously red. He certainly was one of the ugliest little boys I have ever seen.

On the night of the party Agnes and her brother turned up, all smiles. The girl was dressed in a pretty pink frock, and looked almost beautiful. I was glad to see her with the frown off her face, and to feel the poor thing was happy and in the enjoyment of her youth. She was soon surrounded by an admiring crowd of young men, all begging for dances.

"Father insisted upon my coming," she whispered to my wife, who stood looking on with tears not far from her eyes.

"I do love to see her so," she murmured. "Now, doesn't she seem in her element? I declare when I look up at that dim house next door, and see the young faces looking out into the world, like birds in a dark cage, it almost makes me cry. I am sure I don't know what that old man does with his money; he certainly does not spend it on taking his children about, for he only takes them to museums and free picture-galleries, zoological gardens and things like that. He never has company for them—only such children as they ask in themselves."

"Perhaps he is saving," I said; "and a sick man can't do much in the way of entertaining, especially if he has to work hard at the same time."

"Ah, poor fellow! no," my wife answered. "I suppose it's hard; only it's worse for the children: and he is such a dull-looking old fellow to be the father of these bright creatures."

She had hardly spoken when a servant whispered to me—a woman wished to speak to me in the hall. I had hardly got down the stairs when she came quickly towards me—a decent old woman, like a servant.

"You are Mr. Bryson?" she said. "Will you come in next door? The master is very bad; he wants to see you."

"I will be with you at once," I said. "Shall I call his son and daughter to come with us

"I'll send for them later on," the old woman muttered. "Let them be—let them be; the house is too full of noise as it is."

I followed the old woman to Walter Barrington's house. What first struck me on entering, in contrast to mine, was its utter want of taste in the little decoration I saw; the dinginess, the wear

and tear upon every thing; the worn stair-carpets, the dirty hall paper, the lack of a woman's touch to make the home comfort I knew and loved.

"Clean everything is, but what is done here is by the servant at my side," I thought. "All honour to her for her endeavours. Otherwise what a house it would be for dirt! Agnes has no hand in this. Look at her hat with torn ribbons upon the hall rack, and her little velvet jacket flung upon the chair. Untidy Agnes!"

As we reached the door of his room I heard the sound of squabbling inside. At the noise the woman flung the door open and rushed in. I saw her seize the two younger children by the arms and force them apart Bobby and Lily were fighting over a toy.

"I told you not to come in here, disturbing your father when he's ill!" the woman shouted; "get out of here, both of you!"

She pushed them roughly to the door, Lily scratching and Bobby kicking.

"I want my train!" he roared, escaping from her and running back for his toy. He caught it by the leading string, and drew it out after him, the iron wheels creaking and rattling over the wooden floor.

A low groan from the bed made me look round. Walter Barrington lay there, older, more insignificant than ever, his face withered with pain. I went to his side, full of pity; he motioned me to be seated. For some minutes he could not speak, seeming to be in great agony. I looked round the room, seeking something to ease him, but did not know what to do. I was struck with the untidy, bare room, the uncarpeted floor, the uncurtained windows, the medicine bottles and details of an invalid chamber all about within sight of the sick man. Through the walls came the sound of music—gig—gig—gig. It burst upon me with a shock; it was from my own house.

"I must stop that dancing," I said aloud; "it's horrible!"

Walter Barrington shook his head. "No, no; I like it," he whispered. "Agnes is there; I made her go. Agnes is dancing."

"She is there," I said, "looking so pretty." He smiled feebly. "But you must not be worried with noises.

He shook his head again. "It's nothing. I like it." Then he looked pleadingly at me. "I sent for you. You are kind to come."

"I am glad to come," I said. "What can I do for you?"

"I am dying," he said feebly. "I want you to help me to die in peace. I worry about my children. What is to become of them? who is to look after them? Will you promise? Would you promise? It will be more difficult than you think Will you be trustee for them? You are the only one I can ask; the only one who has been kind to me."

"I have done nothing for you," I said, ashamed. "Anything I can do now I will."

"You and your wife have been so kind to my darlings, so very kind."

The door was opened with a kick. Bobby thrust his head in, laughing. Walter Barrington gave a moan, his poor, thin hands raised to his head. I felt I could strangle the little boy. My "Hush!" was so stern that he came on tip-toe to the bed in his nailed boots.

"Is father asleep?" he questioned in a loud whisper.

Walter Barrington drew his hands from his face and turned upon his son the loveliest smile I have ever seen.

"He is so thoughtful, poor little child! Sit by me, my love."

The boy sat himself by his father's side, and commenced whittling a bit of stick. "I am making a whistle," he volunteered; "but it won't blow."

"If it does," I said to myself, "out you go."

"I am doing a curious thing," the old man muttered; "but it must be done. If you will look after the interests of my children, my housekeeper, whom you have seen, will keep the home together." He hesitated. "My wife—" he looked distressed.

"I know," I hastened to tell him. "I understand all about it; you could not agree, so you separated. It was best for the children. But now that you are so ill, could you not forget? A mother would be best to look after her children, after all."

His face contracted in a terrible sorrow.

"It is impossible," he said; then looked fiercely at me. "We did not agree." He spoke in a strong voice. "Remember, incompatibility of temper; make no mistake, incompatibility of temper." With a hoarse cry he put his weak arms about the boy, as though to protect him from what I might think.

Bobby peevishly put away his feeble clasp. "Father, you are so silly!" he cried. "Look! you nearly broke my whistle."

"If she should come back," the old man continued, struggling with shame and pain, "and make any trouble about the will, remember, I was quite sane when I spoke to you and named you as trustee."

"Is mother coming back?" Bobby asked, lifting his face and smiling. "She is so long away. Mother is so gay," he added, turning to me; "she was always laughing and playing with us. When will she come home?"

Walter Barrington moved restlessly. "Oh, my God!" I heard him mutter, "my God!" I thought he was in pain, but saw the agony was in his soul.

Bobby seemed to be remembering something; his face changed into anger.

"You would not let her in." He turned on his father. "You would not let her in when she came home last time."

"Be silent!" the dying man commanded sternly, his face already dead. Then, his voice changing to infinite tenderness, "Hush, darling, hush, my love!"

"You did!" the boy began to shout. "When she came home last time, long ago, you wouldn't let her in. It was in the middle of the night, and she stood on the doorstep, and you wouldn't let her in."

I ran to put the boy from the room. He turned to me. As I came near him and took his hand, he began to sob.

"He did! he did! he wouldn't let her in; and she cried and cried."

"You never heard it," Walter Barrington shouted, half raising himself. "Hush! hold your tongue!"

"I did!" the boy screamed back. "I was at the little window upstairs; and she cried and cried, and I called, 'Mother! Mother! Mother!' but she did not hear me."

"It was a dream," I said pityingly, leading the boy to the door, "only a dream."

"No," he sobbed, "it wasn't, for I heard her singing in the darkness as she went away, and I knew the song, and I went to bed and cried and cried, and then I fell asleep and forgot; but I know it was she, for she sang, 'Sleep, Little Baby,' and she always sang that to Lily. It is like this—" He opened his mouth, but I bid him go and buy sweets, giving him a shilling, I closed the door upon him.

When I turned to Walter Barrington, his face was hidden by his hands, but through the fingers tears rolled glistening. Poor dying creature! may I never behold such grief again! What would I not have given to make peaceful the few hours that remained? I laid my hands across his thin shoulders as a woman might, and he seemed to lean towards me as if for comfort. Poor creature! so lonely, so deserted, so miserable in the grasp of death!

“Be at peace,” I whispered earnestly. “Trust your children to me. I will see no one interferes, and—I understand, my poor friend, I understand.”

He fell back half fainting, and I laid him upon his pillows. I sat with him till he somewhat recovered, then rose to go. As I did so, the door opened, and Agnes entered, a whirl of perfume and beauty.

“Is father better?” she said; then bent and gave him a peck of a kiss. “Oh, he is. See my card, father; I danced every dance. I’ll read you out all the names and tell you of all my conquests.” She sat down, a flutter of silk and laces, by his bed. “Do I worry you? No. Well, first, Mrs. Bryson is wondering where her husband is, so we shall say goodnight, and thank you, Mr. Bryson.”

“You must not stay long with your father; he is very tired talking to me,” I said, smiling.

“Oh, no.” The sick man smiled, holding my hand in a long, grateful clasp. “I love to have her. Herbert will show you out. Thank you, my friend, for the comfort you have given me.”

Herbert came sauntering into the room at the moment, his pipe in his mouth. “Hope you don’t object to smoke,” he said, with a laugh. “Hallo, Governor, how are you?—feeling fit?”

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The next time I entered the Barringtons’ house Walter Barrington had left it for ever. But a strange, loud woman was going from room to room, evidently noting down the things.

“Did you ever hear of such a thing?” she raged, when I met her. “I am not to come near my own children, and am not mentioned in the will. The *housekeeper*, if you please, is to have charge of them till they are of age, and a trustee is to have all the money; but I shall dispute the will.”

I turned from her in disgust, asking the maid where Agnes and the others were. She pointed to a door, and resumed her work, staring open eyes and mouth at the new arrival, and answering at random all the questions that that individual was putting to her.

I opened the door she had directed me to and entered. Agnes was standing before the mirror trying on a large red hat belonging, as I guessed, to Walter Barrington’s wife. As she turned and twisted before the glass, the tears were running down her face.

“Poor father!” she sobbed, when she saw me; “I did not know he was really so ill and going to die.”

Bobby and Lily came out of the corner where they had been playing with a lot of chairs. Their faces were full of importance and gravity.

“Father was put into a box,” Lily whispered in my ear as I lifted her in my arms, “and taken away. There were four black horses to his hearse.”

“We are playing at funerals,” Bobby said, pointing to the row of chairs. “These are the carriages.”