

J. M. Barrie

Echoes of the War

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Minden jog fenntartva!

THE OLD LADY SHOWS HER MEDALS

Three nice old ladies and a criminal, who is even nicer, are discussing the war over a cup of tea. The criminal, who is the hostess, calls it a dish of tea, which shows that she comes from Caledonia; but that is not her crime.

They are all London charwomen, but three of them, including the hostess, are what are called professionally 'charwomen *and*' or simply 'ands.' An 'and' is also a caretaker when required; her name is entered as such in ink in a registry book, financial transactions take place across a counter between her and the registrar, and altogether she is of a very different social status from one who, like Mrs. Haggerty, is a charwoman but nothing else. Mrs. Haggerty, though present, is not at the party by invitation; having seen Mrs. Dowey buying the winkles, she followed her downstairs, so has shuffled into the play and sat down in it against our wish. We would remove her by force, or at least print her name in small letters, were it not that she takes offence very readily and says that nobody respects her. So, as you have slipped in, you sit there, Mrs. Haggerty; but keep quiet.

There is nothing doing at present in the caretaking way for Mrs. Dowey, our hostess; but this does not damp her, caretaking being only to such as she an extra financially and a halo socially. If she had the honour of being served with an income-tax paper she would probably fill in one of the nasty little compartments with the words, 'Trade—charring; Profession (if any)—caretaking.' This home of hers (from which, to look after your house, she makes occasionally temporary departures in great style, escorting a barrow) is in one of those what-care-I streets that you discover only when you have lost your way; on discovering them, your duty is to report them to the authorities, who immediately add them to the map of London. That is why we are now reporting Friday Street. We shall call it, in the rough sketch drawn for to-morrow's press, 'Street in which the criminal resided'; and you will find Mrs. Dowey's home therein marked with a X.

Her abode really consists of one room, but she maintains that there are two; so, rather than argue, let us say that there are two. The other one has no window, and she could not swish her old skirts in it without knocking something over; its grandest display is of tin pans and crockery on top of a dresser which has a lid to it; you have but to whip off the utensils and raise the lid, and, behold, a bath with hot and cold. Mrs. Dowey is very proud of this possession, and when she shows it off, as she does perhaps too frequently, she first signs to you with closed fist (funny old thing that she is) to approach softly. She then tiptoes to the dresser and pops off the lid, as if to take the bath unawares. Then she sucks her lips, and is modest if you have the grace to do the exclamations.

In the real room is a bed, though that is putting the matter too briefly. The fair way to begin, if you love Mrs. Dowey, is to say to her that it is a pity she has no bed. If she is in her best form she will chuckle, and agree that the want of a bed tries her sore; she will keep you on the hooks, so to speak, as long as she can; and then, with that mouse-like movement again, she will suddenly spring the bed on you. You thought it was a wardrobe, but she brings it down from the wall; and lo, a bed. There is nothing else in her abode (which we now see to contain four rooms—kitchen, pantry, bedroom, and bathroom) that is absolutely a surprise; but it is full of 'bits,' every one of which has been paid ready money for, and gloated over and tended until it has become part of its owner. Genuine Doweys, the dealers might call them, though there is probably nothing in the place except the bed that would fetch half-a-crown.

Her home is in the basement, so that the view is restricted to the lower half of persons passing overhead beyond the area stairs. Here at the window Mrs. Dowey sometimes sits of a summer evening gazing, not sentimentally at a flower-pot which contains one poor bulb, nor yearningly at some tiny speck of sky, but with unholy relish at holes in stockings, and the like, which are revealed to her from her point of vantage. You, gentle reader, may flaunt by, thinking that your finery awes the street, but Mrs. Dowey can tell (and does) that your soles are in need of neat repair.

Also, lower parts being as expressive as the face to those whose view is thus limited, she could swear to scores of the passers-by in a court of law.

These four lively old codgers are having a good time at the tea-table, and wit is flowing free. As you can see by their everyday garments, and by their pails and mops (which are having a little tea-party by themselves in the corner), it is not a gathering by invitations stretching away into yesterday, it is a purely informal affair; so much more attractive, don't you think? than banquets elaborately prearranged. You know how they come about, especially in war-time. Very likely Mrs. Dowey met Mrs. Twymley and Mrs. Mickleham quite casually in the street, and meant to do no more than the time of day; then, naturally enough, the word camouflage

was mentioned, and they got heated, but in the end Mrs. Twymley apologised; then, in the odd way in which one thing leads to another, the winkle man appeared, and Mrs. Dowey remembered that she had that pot of jam and that Mrs. Mickleham had stood treat last time; and soon they were all three descending the area stairs, followed cringingly by the Haggerty Woman.

They have been extremely merry, and never were four hard-worked old ladies who deserved it better. All a woman can do in war-time they do daily and cheerfully. Just as their men-folk are doing it at the Front; and now, with the mops and pails laid aside, they sprawl gracefully at ease. There is no intention on their part to consider peace terms until a decisive victory has been gained in the field (Sarah Ann Dowey), until the Kaiser is put to the right-about (Emma Mickleham), and singing very small (Amelia Twymley).

At this tea-party the lady who is to play the part of Mrs. Dowey is sure to want to suggest that our heroine has a secret sorrow, namely, the crime; but you should see us knocking that idea out of her head! Mrs. Dowey knows she is a criminal, but, unlike the actress, she does not know that she is about to be found out; and she is, to put it bluntly in her own Scotch way, the merriest of the whole clanjamfry. She presses more tea on her guests, but they wave her away from them in the pretty manner of ladies who know that they have already had more than enough.

MRS. DOWEY. 'Just one more winkle, Mrs. Mickleham?' Indeed there is only one more.

But Mrs. Mickleham indicates politely that if she took this one it would have to swim for it. (The Haggerty Woman takes it long afterwards when she thinks, erroneously, that no one is looking.)

Mrs. Twymley is sulking. Evidently some one has contradicted her. Probably the Haggerty Woman.

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'I say it is so.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'I say it may be so.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'I suppose I ought to know: me that has a son a prisoner in Germany.' She has so obviously scored that all good feeling seems to call upon her to end here. But she continues rather shabbily, 'Being the only lady present that has that proud misfortune.' The others are stung.

MRS. DOWEY. 'My son is fighting in France.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'Mine is wounded in two places.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'Mine is at Salonaiky.'

The absurd pronunciation of this uneducated person moves the others to mirth.

MRS. DOWEY. 'You'll excuse us, Mrs. Haggerty, but the correct pronunciation is Salonikky.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN, to cover her confusion. 'I don't think.' She feels that even this does not prove her case. 'And I speak as one that has War Savings Certificates.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'We all have them.'

The Haggerty Woman whimpers, and the other guests regard her with unfeeling disdain.

MRS. DOWEY, to restore cheerfulness, 'Oh, it's a terrible war.'

ALL, brightening, 'It is. You may say so.'

MRS. DOWEY, encouraged, 'What I say is, the men is splendid, but I'm none so easy about the staff. That's your weak point, Mrs. Mickleham.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM, on the defence, but determined to reveal nothing that might be of use to the enemy, 'You may take it from me, the staff's all right.'

MRS. DOWEY. 'And very relieved I am to hear you say it.'

It is here that the Haggerty Woman has the remaining winkle.

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'You don't understand properly about trench warfare. If I had a map——'

MRS. DOWEY, wetting her finger to draw lines on the table. 'That's the river Sommy. Now, if we had barrages here——'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Very soon you would be enfiladed. Where's your supports, my lady?' Mrs. Dowey is damped.

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'What none of you grasps is that this is an artillery war—'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN, strengthened by the wink, 'I say that the word is Salonaiky.'

The others purse their lips.

MRS. TWYMLEY, with terrible meaning, 'We'll change the subject. Have you seen this week's *Fashion Chat*?' She has evidently seen and devoured it herself, and even licked up the crumbs. 'The gabardine with accordion pleats has quite gone out.'

MRS. DOWEY, her old face sparkling. 'My sakes! You tell me?'

MRS. TWYMLEY, with the touch of haughtiness that comes of great topics, 'The plain smock has come in again, with silk lacing, giving that charming chic effect.'

MRS. DOWEY. 'Oho!'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'I must say I was always partial to the straight line'—thoughtfully regarding the want of line in Mrs. Twymley's person—'though trying to them as is of too friendly a figure.'

It is here that the Haggerty Woman's fingers close unostentatiously upon a piece of sugar.

MRS. TWYMLEY, sailing into the Empyrean, 'Lady Dolly Kanister was seen conversing across the railings in a dainty *de jou*.'

MRS. DOWEY. 'Fine would I have liked to see her.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'She is equally popular as maid, wife, and munition-worker. Her two children is inset. Lady Pops Babington was married in a tight tulle.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'What was her going-away dress?'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'A champagne cream velvet with dreamy corsage. She's married to Colonel the Hon. Chingford—"Snubs," they called him at Eton.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN, having disposed of the sugar, 'Very likely he'll be sent to Salonaiky.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'Wherever he is sent, she'll have the same tremors as the rest of us. She'll be as keen to get the letters wrote with pencils as you or me.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Them pencil letters!'

MRS. DOWEY, in her sweet Scotch voice, timidly, afraid she may be going too far, 'And women in enemy lands gets those pencil letters and then stop getting them, the same as ourselves. Let's occasionally think of that.'

She has gone too far. Chairs are pushed back.

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'I ask you!'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'That's hardly language, Mrs. Dowey.'

MRS. DOWEY, scared, 'Kindly excuse. I swear to death I'm none of your pacifists.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'Freely granted.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'I've heard of females that have no male relations, and so they have no man-party at the wars. I've heard of them, but I don't mix with them.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'What can the likes of us have to say to them? It's not their war.'

MRS. DOWEY, wistfully, 'They are to be pitied.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'But the place for them, Mrs. Dowey, is within doors with the blinds down.'

MRS. DOWEY, hurriedly, 'That's the place for them.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM. 'I saw one of them to-day buying a flag. I thought it was very impudent of her.'

MRS. DOWEY, meekly, 'So it was.'

MRS. MICKLEHAM, trying to look modest with indifferent success, 'I had a letter from my son, Percy, yesterday.'

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Alfred sent me his photo.'

THE HAGGERTY WOMAN. 'Letters from Salonaiky is less common.'

Three bosoms heave, but not, alas, Mrs. Doweys'. Nevertheless she doggedly knits her lips.

MRS. DOWEY, the criminal, 'Kenneth writes to me every week.' There are exclamations. The dauntless old thing holds aloft a packet of letters. 'Look at this. All his.'

The Haggerty Woman whimpers.

MRS. TWYMLEY. 'Alfred has little time for writing, being a bombardier.'