

J. M. Barrie

**The Little White Bird;
or, Adventures in
Kensington gardens**

The Little White Bird

or adventures in Kensington gardens

J.M. Barrie

Publio Kiadó

2013

Minden jog fenntartva!

I. David and I Set Forth Upon a Journey

Sometimes the little boy who calls me father brings me an invitation from his mother: "I shall be so pleased if you will come and see me," and I always reply in some such words as these: "Dear madam, I decline." And if David asks why I decline, I explain that it is because I have no desire to meet the woman.

"Come this time, father," he urged lately, "for it is her birthday, and she is twenty-six," which is so great an age to David, that I think he fears she cannot last much longer.

"Twenty-six, is she, David?" I replied. "Tell her I said she looks more."

I had my delicious dream that night. I dreamt that I too was twenty-six, which was a long time ago, and that I took train to a place called my home, whose whereabouts I see not in my waking hours, and when I alighted at the station a dear lost love was waiting for me, and we went away together. She met me in no ecstasy of emotion, nor was I surprised to find her there; it was as if we had been married for years and parted for a day. I like to think that I gave her some of the things to carry.

Were I to tell my delightful dream to David's mother, to whom I have never in my life addressed one word, she would droop her head and raise it bravely, to imply that I make her very sad but very proud, and she would be wishful to lend me her absurd little pocket handkerchief. And then, had I the heart, I might make a disclosure that would startle her, for it is not the face of David's mother that I see in my dreams.

Has it ever been your lot, reader, to be persecuted by a pretty woman who thinks, without a tittle of reason, that you are bowed down under a hopeless partiality for her? It is thus that I have been pursued for several years now by the unwelcome sympathy of the tender-hearted and virtuous Mary A——. When we pass in the street the poor deluded soul subdues her buoyancy, as if it were shame to walk happy before one she has lamed, and at such times the rustle of her gown is whispered words of comfort to me, and her arms are kindly wings that wish I was a little boy like David. I also detect in her a fearful elation, which I am unaware of until she has passed, when it comes back to me like a faint note of challenge. Eyes that say you never must, nose that says why don't you? and a mouth that says I rather wish you could: such is the portrait of Mary A—— as she and I pass by.

Once she dared to address me, so that she could boast to David that I had spoken to her. I was in the Kensington Gardens, and she asked would I tell her the time please, just as children ask, and forget as they run back with it to their nurse. But I was prepared even for this, and raising my hat I pointed with my staff to a clock in the distance. She should have been overwhelmed, but as I walked on listening intently, I thought with displeasure that I heard her laughing.

Her laugh is very like David's, whom I could punch all day in order to hear him laugh. I dare say she put this laugh into him. She has been putting qualities into David, altering him, turning him forever on a lathe since the day she first knew him, and indeed long before, and all so deftly that he is still called a child of nature. When you release David's hand he is immediately lost like an arrow from the bow. No sooner do you cast eyes on him than you are thinking of birds. It is difficult to believe that he walks to the Kensington Gardens; he always seems to have alighted there: and were I to scatter crumbs I opine he would come and peck. This is not what he set out to be; it is all the doing of that timid-looking lady who affects to be greatly surprised by it. He strikes a hundred gallant poses in a day; when he tumbles, which is often, he comes to the ground like a Greek god; so Mary A—— has willed it. But how she suffers that he may achieve! I have seen him climbing a tree while she stood beneath in unutterable anguish; she had to let him climb, for boys must be brave, but I am sure that, as she watched him, she fell from every branch.

David admires her prodigiously; he thinks her so good that she will be able to get him into heaven, however naughty he is. Otherwise he would trespass less light-heartedly. Perhaps she has discovered this; for, as I learn from him, she warned him lately that she is not such a dear as he thinks her.

"I am very sure of it," I replied.

"Is she such a dear as you think her?" he asked me.

"Heaven help her," I said, "if she be not dearer than that."

Heaven help all mothers if they be not really dears, for their boy will certainly know it in that strange short hour of the day when every mother stands revealed before her little son. That dread hour ticks between six and seven; when children go to bed later the revelation has ceased to come. He is lapt in for the night now and lies quietly there, madam, with great, mysterious eyes fixed upon his mother. He is summing up your day. Nothing in the revelations that kept you together and yet apart in play time can save you now; you two are of no age, no experience of life separates you; it is the boy's hour, and you have come up for judgment. "Have I done well to-day, my son?" You have got to say it, and nothing may you hide from him; he knows all. How like your voice has grown to his, but more tremulous, and both so solemn, so unlike the voice of either of you by day.

"You were a little unjust to me to-day about the apple; were you not, mother?"

Stand there, woman, by the foot of the bed and cross your hands and answer him.

"Yes, my son, I was. I thought—"

But what you thought will not affect the verdict.

"Was it fair, mother, to say that I could stay out till six, and then pretend it was six before it was quite six?"

"No, it was very unfair. I thought—"

"Would it have been a lie if I had said it was quite six?"

"Oh, my son, my son! I shall never tell you a lie again."

"No, mother, please don't."

"My boy, have I done well to-day on the whole?"

Suppose he were unable to say yes.

These are the merest peccadilloes, you may say. Is it then a little thing to be false to the agreement you signed when you got the boy? There are mothers who avoid their children in that hour, but this will not save them. Why is it that so many women are afraid to be left alone with their thoughts between six and seven? I am not asking this of you, Mary. I believe that when you close David's door softly there is a gladness in your eyes, and the awe of one who knows that the God to whom little boys say their prayers has a face very like their mother's.

I may mention here that David is a stout believer in prayer, and has had his first fight with another young Christian who challenged him to the jump and prayed for victory, which David thought was taking an unfair advantage.

"So Mary is twenty-six! I say, David, she is getting on. Tell her that I am coming in to kiss her when she is fifty-two."

He told her, and I understand that she pretended to be indignant. When I pass her in the street now she pouts. Clearly preparing for our meeting. She has also said, I learn, that I shall not think so much of her when she is fifty-two, meaning that she will not be so pretty then. So little does the sex know of beauty. Surely a spirited old lady may be the prettiest sight in the world. For my part, I confess that it is they, and not the young ones, who have ever been my undoing. Just as I was about to fall in love I suddenly found that I preferred the mother. Indeed, I cannot see a likely young creature without impatiently considering her chances for, say, fifty-two. Oh, you mysterious girls, when you are fifty-two we shall find you out; you must come into the open then. If the mouth has fallen sourly yours the blame: all the meannesses your youth concealed have been gathering in your face. But the pretty thoughts and sweet ways and dear, forgotten kindnesses linger there also, to bloom in your twilight like evening primroses.

Is it not strange that, though I talk thus plainly to David about his mother, he still seems to think me fond of her? How now, I reflect, what sort of bumpkin is this, and perhaps I say to him cruelly: "Boy, you are uncommonly like your mother."

To which David: "Is that why you are so kind to me?"

I suppose I am kind to him, but if so it is not for love of his mother, but because he sometimes calls me father. On my honour as a soldier, there is nothing more in it than that. I must not let him know this, for it would make him conscious, and so break the spell that binds him and me together. Oftenest I am but Captain W—— to him, and for the best of reasons. He addresses me as father when he is in a hurry only, and never have I dared ask him to use the name. He says, "Come, father," with an accursed beautiful carelessness. So let it be, David, for a little while longer.

I like to hear him say it before others, as in shops. When in shops he asks the salesman how much money he makes in a day, and which drawer he keeps it in, and why his hair is red, and does he like Achilles, of whom David has lately heard, and is so enamoured

that he wants to die to meet him. At such times the shopkeepers accept me as his father, and I cannot explain the peculiar pleasure this gives me. I am always in two minds then, to linger that we may have more of it, and to snatch him away before he volunteers the information, "He is not really my father."

When David meets Achilles I know what will happen. The little boy will take the hero by the hand, call him father, and drag him away to some Round Pond.

One day, when David was about five, I sent him the following letter: "Dear David: If you really want to know how it began, will you come and have a chop with me to-day at the club?"

Mary, who, I have found out, opens all his letters, gave her consent, and, I doubt not, instructed him to pay heed to what happened so that he might repeat it to her, for despite her curiosity she knows not how it began herself. I chuckled, guessing that she expected something romantic.

He came to me arrayed as for a mighty journey, and looking unusually solemn, as little boys always do look when they are wearing a great coat. There was a shawl round his neck. "You can take some of them off," I said, "when we come to summer."

"Shall we come to summer?" he asked, properly awed.

"To many summers," I replied, "for we are going away back, David, to see your mother as she was in the days before there was you."

We hailed a hansom. "Drive back six years," I said to the cabby, "and stop at the Junior Old Fogies' Club."

He was a stupid fellow, and I had to guide him with my umbrella.

The streets were not quite as they had been in the morning. For instance, the bookshop at the corner was now selling fish. I dropped David a hint of what was going on.

"It doesn't make me littler, does it?" he asked anxiously; and then, with a terrible misgiving: "It won't make me too little, will it, father?" by which he meant that he hoped it would not do for him altogether. He slipped his hand nervously into mine, and I put it in my pocket.

You can't think how little David looked as we entered the portals of the club.

II. The Little Nursery Governess

As I enter the club smoking-room you are to conceive David vanishing into nothingness, and that it is any day six years ago at two in the afternoon. I ring for coffee, cigarette, and cherry brandy, and take my chair by the window, just as the absurd little nursery governess comes tripping into the street. I always feel that I have rung for her.

While I am lifting the coffee-pot cautiously lest the lid fall into the cup, she is crossing to the post-office; as I select the one suitable lump of sugar she is taking six last looks at the letter; with the aid of William I light my cigarette, and now she is re-reading the delicious address. I lie back in my chair, and by this time she has dropped the letter down the slit. I toy with my liqueur, and she is listening to hear whether the postal authorities have come for her letter. I scowl at a fellow-member who has had the impudence to enter the smoking-room, and her two little charges are pulling her away from the post-office. When I look out at the window again she is gone, but I shall ring for her to-morrow at two sharp.

She must have passed the window many times before I noticed her. I know not where she lives, though I suppose it to be hard by. She is taking the little boy and girl, who bully her, to the St. James's Park, as their hoops tell me, and she ought to look crushed and faded. No doubt her mistress overworks her. It must enrage the other servants to see her deporting herself as if she were quite the lady.

I noticed that she had sometimes other letters to post, but that the posting of the one only was a process. They shot down the slit, plebeians all, but it followed pompously like royalty. I have even seen her blow a kiss after it.

Then there was her ring, of which she was as conscious as if it rather than she was what came gaily down the street. She felt it through her glove to make sure that it was still there. She took off the glove and raised the ring to her lips, though I doubt not it was the cheapest trinket. She viewed it from afar by stretching out her hand; she stooped to see how it looked near the ground; she considered its effect on the right of her and on the left of her and through one eye at a time. Even when you saw that she had made up her mind to think hard of something else, the little silly would take another look.

I give anyone three chances to guess why Mary was so happy.

No and no and no. The reason was simply this, that a lout of a young man loved her. And so, instead of crying because she was the

merest nobody, she must, forsooth, sail jauntily down Pall Mall, very trim as to her tackle and ticketed with the insufferable air of an engaged woman. At first her complacency disturbed me, but gradually it became part of my life at two o'clock with the coffee, the cigarette, and the liqueur. Now comes the tragedy.

Thursday is her great day. She has from two to three every Thursday for her very own; just think of it: this girl, who is probably paid several pounds a year, gets a whole hour to herself once a week. And what does she with it? Attend classes for making her a more accomplished person? Not she. This is what she does: sets sail for Pall Mall, wearing all her pretty things, including the blue feathers, and with such a sparkle of expectation on her face that I stir my coffee quite fiercely. On ordinary days she at least tries to look demure, but on a Thursday she has had the assurance to use the glass door of the club as a mirror in which to see how she likes her engaging trifle of a figure to-day.

In the meantime a long-legged oaf is waiting for her outside the post-office, where they meet every Thursday, a fellow who always wears the same suit of clothes, but has a face that must ever make him free of the company of gentlemen. He is one of your lean, clean Englishmen, who strip so well, and I fear me he is handsome; I say fear, for your handsome men have always annoyed me, and had I lived in the duelling days I swear I would have called every one of them out. He seems to be quite unaware that he is a pretty fellow, but Lord, how obviously Mary knows it. I conclude that he belongs to the artistic classes, he is so easily elated and depressed; and because he carries his left thumb curiously, as if it were feeling for the hole of a palette, I have entered his name among the painters. I find pleasure in deciding that they are shocking bad pictures, for obviously no one buys them. I feel sure Mary says they are splendid, she is that sort of woman. Hence the rapture with which he greets her. Her first effect upon him is to make him shout with laughter. He laughs suddenly haw from an eager exulting face, then haw again, and then, when you are thanking heaven that it is at last over, comes a final haw, louder than the others. I take them to be roars of joy because Mary is his, and they have a ring of youth about them that is hard to bear. I could forgive him everything save his youth, but it is so aggressive that I have sometimes to order William testily to close the window.

How much more deceitful than her lover is the little nursery governess. The moment she comes into sight she looks at the post-office and sees him. Then she looks straight before her, and now she is observed, and he rushes across to her in a glory, and she starts—positively starts—as if he had taken her by surprise. Observe her hand rising suddenly to her wicked little heart. This is the moment when I stir my coffee violently. He gazes down at her in such rapture that he is in everybody's way, and as she takes his arm she gives it a little squeeze, and then away they strut, Mary doing nine-tenths of the talking. I fall to wondering what they will look like when they grow up.

What a ludicrous difference do these two nobodies make to each other. You can see that they are to be married when he has twopence.

Thus I have not an atom of sympathy with this girl, to whom London is famous only as the residence of a young man who mistakes her for someone else, but her happiness had become part of my repast at two P.M., and when one day she walked down Pall Mall without gradually posting a letter I was most indignant. It was as if William had disobeyed orders. Her two charges were as surprised as I, and pointed questioningly to the slit, at which she shook her head. She put her finger to her eyes, exactly like a sad baby, and so passed from the street.

Next day the same thing happened, and I was so furious that I bit through my cigarette. Thursday came, when I prayed that there might be an end of this annoyance, but no, neither of them appeared on that acquainted ground. Had they changed their post-office? No, for her eyes were red every day, and heavy was her foolish little heart. Love had put out his lights, and the little nursery governess walked in darkness.

I felt I could complain to the committee.

Oh, you selfish young zany of a man, after all you have said to her, won't you make it up and let me return to my coffee? Not he.

Little nursery governess, I appeal to you. Annoying girl, be joyous as of old during the five minutes of the day when you are anything to me, and for the rest of the time, so far as I am concerned, you may be as wretched as you list. Show some courage. I assure you he must be a very bad painter; only the other day I saw him looking longingly into the window of a cheap Italian restaurant, and in the end he had to crush down his aspirations with two penny scones.

You can do better than that. Come, Mary.

All in vain. She wants to be loved; can't do without love from morning till night; never knew how little a woman needs till she lost that little. They are all like this.

Zounds, madam, if you are resolved to be a drooping little figure till you die, you might at least do it in another street.

Not only does she maliciously depress me by walking past on ordinary days, but I have discovered that every Thursday from two to three she stands afar off, gazing hopelessly at the romantic post-office where she and he shall meet no more. In these windy days she is like a homeless leaf blown about by passers-by.

There is nothing I can do except thunder at William.

At last she accomplished her unworthy ambition. It was a wet Thursday, and from the window where I was writing letters I saw the forlorn soul taking up her position at the top of the street: in a blast of fury I rose with the one letter I had completed, meaning to write the others in my chambers. She had driven me from the club.

I had turned out of Pall Mall into a side street, when whom should I strike against but her false swain! It was my fault, but I hit out at him savagely, as I always do when I run into anyone in the street. Then I looked at him. He was hollow-eyed; he was muddy; there was not a hair left in him. I never saw a more abject young man; he had not even the spirit to resent the testy stab I had given him with my umbrella. But this is the important thing: he was glaring wistfully at the post-office and thus in a twink I saw that he still adored my little governess. Whatever had been their quarrel he was as anxious to make it up as she, and perhaps he had been here every Thursday while she was round the corner in Pall Mall, each watching the post-office for an apparition. But from where they hovered neither could see the other.

I think what I did was quite clever. I dropped my letter unseen at his feet, and sauntered back to the club. Of course, a gentleman who finds a letter on the pavement feels bound to post it, and I presumed that he would naturally go to the nearest office.

With my hat on I strolled to the smoking-room window, and was just in time to see him posting my letter across the way. Then I looked for the little nursery governess. I saw her as woe-begone as ever; then, suddenly—oh, you poor little soul, and has it really been as bad as that!

She was crying outright, and he was holding both her hands. It was a disgraceful exhibition. The young painter would evidently explode if he could not make use of his arms. She must die if she could not lay her head upon his breast. I must admit that he rose to the occasion; he hailed a hansom.

"William," said I gaily, "coffee, cigarette, and cherry brandy."

As I sat there watching that old play David plucked my sleeve to ask what I was looking at so deedly; and when I told him he ran eagerly to the window, but he reached it just too late to see the lady who was to become his mother. What I told him of her doings, however, interested him greatly; and he intimated rather shyly that he was acquainted with the man who said, "Haw-haw-haw." On the other hand, he irritated me by betraying an idiotic interest in the two children, whom he seemed to regard as the hero and heroine of the story. What were their names? How old were they? Had they both hoops? Were they iron hoops, or just wooden hoops? Who gave them their hoops?

"You don't seem to understand, my boy," I said tartly, "that had I not dropped that letter, there would never have been a little boy called David A——." But instead of being appalled by this he asked, sparkling, whether I meant that he would still be a bird flying about in the Kensington Gardens.

David knows that all children in our part of London were once birds in the Kensington Gardens; and that the reason there are bars on nursery windows and a tall fender by the fire is because very little people sometimes forget that they have no longer wings, and try to fly away through the window or up the chimney.

Children in the bird stage are difficult to catch. David knows that many people have none, and his delight on a summer afternoon is to go with me to some spot in the Gardens where these unfortunates may be seen trying to catch one with small pieces of cake.

That the birds know what would happen if they were caught, and are even a little undecided about which is the better life, is obvious to every student of them. Thus, if you leave your empty perambulator under the trees and watch from a distance, you will see the birds boarding it and hopping about from pillow to blanket in a twitter of excitement; they are trying to find out how babyhood would suit them.

Quite the prettiest sight in the Gardens is when the babies stray from the tree where the nurse is sitting and are seen feeding the birds, not a grownup near them. It is first a bit to me and then a bit to you, and all the time such a jabbering and laughing from both sides of the railing. They are comparing notes and inquiring for old friends, and so on; but what they say I cannot determine, for when I approach they all fly away.

The first time I ever saw David was on the sward behind the Baby's Walk. He was a missel-thrush, attracted thither that hot day by a hose which lay on the ground sending forth a gay trickle of water, and David was on his back in the water, kicking up his legs. He used to enjoy being told of this, having forgotten all about it, and gradually it all came back to him, with a number of other incidents that had escaped my memory, though I remember that he was eventually caught by the leg with a long string and a cunning arrangement of twigs near the Round Pond. He never tires of this story, but I notice that it is now he who tells it to me rather than I to him, and when we come to the string he rubs his little leg as if it still smarted.

So when David saw his chance of being a missel-thrush again he called out to me quickly: "Don't drop the letter!" and there were tree-tops in his eyes.

"Think of your mother," I said severely.

He said he would often fly in to see her. The first thing he would do would be to hug her. No, he would alight on the water-jug first,

and have a drink.

"Tell her, father," he said with horrid heartlessness, "always to have plenty of water in it, 'cos if I had to lean down too far I might fall in and be drowned."

"Am I not to drop the letter, David? Think of your poor mother without her boy!"

It affected him, but he bore up. When she was asleep, he said, he would hop on to the frilly things of her night-gown and peck at her mouth.

"And then she would wake up, David, and find that she had only a bird instead of a boy."

This shock to Mary was more than he could endure. "You can drop it," he said with a sigh. So I dropped the letter, as I think I have already mentioned; and that is how it all began.

III. Her Marriage, Her Clothes, Her Appetite, and an Inventory of Her Furniture

A week or two after I dropped the letter I was in a hansom on my way to certain barracks when loud above the city's roar I heard that accursed haw-haw-haw, and there they were, the two of them, just coming out of a shop where you may obtain pianos on the hire system. I had the merest glimpse of them, but there was an extraordinary rapture on her face, and his head was thrown proudly back, and all because they had been ordering a piano on the hire system.

So they were to be married directly. It was all rather contemptible, but I passed on tolerantly, for it is only when she is unhappy that this woman disturbs me, owing to a clever way she has at such times of looking more fragile than she really is.

When next I saw them, they were gazing greedily into the window of the sixpenny-halfpenny shop, which is one of the most deliciously dramatic spots in London. Mary was taking notes feverishly on a slip of paper while he did the adding up, and in the end they went away gloomily without buying anything. I was in high feather. "Match abandoned, ma'am," I said to myself; "outlook hopeless; another visit to the Governesses' Agency inevitable; can't marry for want of a kitchen shovel." But I was imperfectly acquainted with the lady.

A few days afterward I found myself walking behind her. There is something artful about her skirts by which I always know her, though I can't say what it is. She was carrying an enormous parcel that might have been a bird-cage wrapped in brown paper, and she took it into a bric-a-brac shop and came out without it. She then ran rather than walked in the direction of the sixpenny-halfpenny shop. Now mystery of any kind is detestable to me, and I went into the bric-a-brac shop, ostensibly to look at the cracked china; and there, still on the counter, with the wrapping torn off it, was the article Mary had sold in order to furnish on the proceeds. What do you think it was? It was a wonderful doll's house, with dolls at tea downstairs and dolls going to bed upstairs, and a doll showing a doll out at the front door. Loving lips had long ago licked most of the paint off, but otherwise the thing was in admirable preservation; obviously the joy of Mary's childhood, it had now been sold by her that she might get married.

"Lately purchased by us," said the shopwoman, seeing me look at the toy, "from a lady who has no further use for it."

I think I have seldom been more indignant with Mary. I bought the doll's house, and as they knew the lady's address (it was at this shop that I first learned her name) I instructed them to send it back to her with the following letter, which I wrote in the shop: "Dear madam, don't be ridiculous. You will certainly have further use for this. I am, etc., the Man Who Dropped the Letter."

It pained me afterward, but too late to rescind the order, to reflect that I had sent her a wedding present; and when next I saw her she had been married for some months. The time was nine o'clock of a November evening, and we were in a street of shops that has not in twenty years decided whether to be genteel or frankly vulgar; here it minces in the fashion, but take a step onward and its tongue is in the cup of the ice-cream man. I usually rush this street, which is not far from my rooms, with the glass down, but to-night I was walking. Mary was in front of me, leaning in a somewhat foolish way on the haw-er, and they were chatting excitedly. She seemed to be remonstrating with him for going forward, yet more than half admiring him for not turning back, and I wondered why.

And after all what was it that Mary and her painter had come out to do? To buy two pork chops. On my honour. She had been trying to persuade him, I decided, that they were living too lavishly. That was why she sought to draw him back. But in her heart she loves audacity, and that is why she admired him for pressing forward.

No sooner had they bought the chops than they scurried away like two gleeful children to cook them. I followed, hoping to trace them to their home, but they soon out-distanced me, and that night I composed the following aphorism: It is idle to attempt to overtake a pretty young woman carrying pork chops. I was now determined to be done with her. First, however, to find out their abode, which was probably within easy distance of the shop. I even conceived them lured into taking their house by the advertisement, "Conveniently situated for the Pork Emporium."

Well, one day—now this really is romantic and I am rather proud of it. My chambers are on the second floor, and are backed by an anxiously polite street between which and mine are little yards called, I think, gardens. They are so small that if you have the tree

your neighbour has the shade from it. I was looking out at my back window on the day we have come to when whom did I see but the whilom nursery governess sitting on a chair in one of these gardens. I put up my eye-glass to make sure, and undoubtedly it was she. But she sat there doing nothing, which was by no means my conception of the jade, so I brought a fieldglass to bear and discovered that the object was merely a lady's jacket. It hung on the back of a kitchen chair, seemed to be a furry thing, and, I must suppose, was suspended there for an airing.

I was chagrined, and then I insisted stoutly with myself that, as it was not Mary, it must be Mary's jacket. I had never seen her wear such a jacket, mind you, yet I was confident, I can't tell why. Do clothes absorb a little of the character of their wearer, so that I recognised this jacket by a certain coquetry? If she has a way with her skirts that always advertises me of her presence, quite possibly she is as cunning with jackets. Or perhaps she is her own seamstress, and puts in little tucks of herself.

Figure it what you please; but I beg to inform you that I put on my hat and five minutes afterward saw Mary and her husband emerge from the house to which I had calculated that garden belonged. Now am I clever, or am I not?