

# A Stroll With Mrs. Barnard

By HAMBLEN SEARS

MRS. BARNARD took my eye and heart the moment I met her. She was beautiful beyond question, so beautiful that anyone would have an instinctive desire to caress her. When we came out after supper she sat down on the edge of the piazza close to my chair, and there in the twilight, surrounded by the trees and the topography of the foot-hills of the Adirondacks, the desire getting the better of me, I almost put my arm around her neck. Fortunately, I pulled up in time; for, to tell the truth, we had known each other for only about ten minutes.

Yet when Captain Barnard left us a moment later I knew that something was going to happen. The chords of my throat instinctively drew themselves into that old ditty about being in the gloaming, and then she looked up at me with those great brown eyes. That settled it. It was only a little movement quietly to draw her head down upon my knee, and in the silence that followed I was tenderly brushing the brown hair out of her eyes, murmuring all sorts of ridiculous things—when the Captain suddenly appeared on the piazza again.

We both straightened up in haste and in some natural embarrassment, and yet, plain as the whole thing must have been, that ridiculously old man did not appear to have noticed anything at all. He was certainly a ridiculous man. In the first place he was seventy-four years old, gray and shaggy, and though he criticized the President, the Philippines and Cuba, he had been to neither Havana nor Manila, nor had he ever so much as laid eyes on the chief executive of this great country, for the simple reason that he had never been seventy-five miles away from the house upon the piazza of which he now sat. It was ridiculous enough for him to criticize automobiles, for example, which everybody criticizes and which never got within a hundred miles of his home, nor for that matter ever can, until some one has intelligence enough to make a road out of the old brook-bed which we had used that afternoon to the disgust of the horses and the complaints of a wagon. But of course that was nothing to his strident criticisms on the Philippines and Cuba, for everyone will agree that it is ridiculous in this country for a man to give out harsh and decisive comment on men and places which he has never seen.

But the thing that made the Captain ridiculous beyond all else, as I considered it afterward, was that he took no notice of the rather unconventional attitude of Mrs. Barnard at the moment when he appeared on that sentimental piazza. I wondered too—not then, but afterward—how many other masculine hands had softly brushed the hair out of those beautiful brown eyes.

Instead of taking notice, the Captain turned to me and said: "Would you like to try the woodcock early in the morning?"

I hesitated a moment, and then remarked in what I tried to make a nonchalant tone: "Would Mrs. Barnard go too?"

"Oh, she's the best of us all."

That was enough. When I heard that we might roam together all day through the alders I turned and looked down at her. She must have seen the joy in my eyes, for she did something that gave me one of those tortured moments of ecstasy and pain such as are felt only at rare intervals by mankind, and mostly in novels at that. She turned her beautiful face up to me, and without further comment put her foot into my lap.

After the evening of sentiment, the morning of action. After the bustle of town, the calmness of the woods. It is such changes as these that make the spice of life and the health of the mind. Here this morning, for example, I awoke with a start, looked at my watch and realized that there was only a scant half-hour to dress, eat breakfast and catch the something train for the office, and then I sank back with calm relief to think over the incontrovertible fact that that train was a good two hundred fifty miles away, and that it was not to know me in several days to come. Let it start exactly at something something. Let it be delayed up the line. Let the passengers curse the



"Captain, Am I Crazy, or Are Those Ducks?"

company again and run to their offices for fear of losing nine and one-quarter minutes.

I cared not a whit. I had only to turn over to look out upon the forest primeval, or upon the second growth at any rate; and for all I cared or could do at that moment offices and trains might slip into what somebody has politely termed the Inner Kettle of the Other Place; for by seven o'clock Barnard and I were seated in one of the hardy wagons that alone can stand the brook-beds of that country, with Mrs. Barnard apparently satisfied to lie under the seat. So we drove through the wet, glistening morning out on the flat valley to one of the alder marshes, tied the old horse, and then started forward.

It is a strange country that these little, long-billed, stub-tailed woodcock prefer—a marsh with the center of the earth for its bottom and with its surface covered by alder-bushes that seem planned to prevent anyone except woodcock from getting through them.

Mrs. Barnard, however, seemed to know the place, for she set to work at once when the Captain, who spoke to her colloquially as "Lady," requested her to get into the covert and report progress. This particular swale was long and narrow, and thus each of us took a side and moved cautiously along the edge of the alders ready for any sudden progress that her ladyship might report. The autumn day was up now and in full blast, cold, clear and fine. The leaves were gone, and the black alder twigs stuck up spitefully toward Heaven. Now and then we wiped from either eye a cold tear which the keen October air had brought there. Meantime the Captain kept talking over things with Mrs. Barnard. She said nothing, but moved on through the covers with scarcely a sound.

So we walked on, now and then giving a hoot to one another to keep the line and to be sure that we should not fire a couple of dozen small but penetrating shot into something besides the birds' feathers. Occasionally I got a glimpse of Mrs. Barnard's graceful body moving along cautiously. She made no comments, but was thinking hard and studying everything that came within reach of her senses—when of a sudden she stopped and changed to stone. It was none of your picture points with lifted front paw—not at all. She crouched down close to Mother Earth,

or rather close to the bottomless bog, with one foot well in front, one hind leg stretched far back, and with that long, keen nose pushed forward to its utmost extent.

There must be something there; and asking her to keep still for a space I tried to get in there to her. But the alders were good fighters, and it became necessary to get down on all fours and crawl along by the roots. So we came opposite one another with not more than twenty feet between us, and somewhere in that half-dozen yards stood a tiny woodcock, bright-eyed and intent, but so keen and so well matched with the brown autumn that neither human nor canine eye could see her, look as either might. Nothing except a surer sense than sight knew that she was there.

"Where be she, Lady; where, old gal?" And the Captain's burly form loomed up behind Mrs. Barnard.

Not a quiver of the body did she make, only her brown eyes brightened a bit and turned in their sockets toward her lord and master.

I took another step forward—and the whole scene changed. Up got Madam Woodcock between us, moving straight for me and not over a foot above the ground, the quaint, depressed bill hanging low, the wide brown wings spread stiffly out.

I do not claim to be a shot—far from it. They tell me no one who can pull a trigger will say he is a shot. Still occasionally I can hit the traditional barn-door, and one would say that when a bird just clears the end of your barrel in plain view there might—nay there really is some slight resemblance between the animate and the inanimate tradition. And yet that woodcock came at least ten feet at me straight as a die and low in under the bushes, and I—I not only never fired, but, with shame be it said, I literally dodged the little fellow for fear he would hit my head. After he

had passed I pulled trigger, however, with what came nigh to being unerring aim; for the voice of the Captain lifted itself above the murmurings that I was confiding to the alders:

"Hi, man!" cried he, "them shot o' yourn makes holes! Duggumit, ain't you seen me?"

Checking my expletives to the alders, I asked one of those intelligent questions as to whether the shot had gone near him.

"Not so doggoned fur off that I couldn't hear 'em zipping," he muttered. "Ain't you never took a come-on bird afore?"

I told him I had been in the come-on game once or twice, but with birds of another feather, and always in New-York; but after all his sarcasm was nothing compared to the expression in Mrs. Barnard's eyes. She could not understand it. She looked at me in wonder, and then, feeling that she must be wrong, she ranged here and there about the place searching for the little bird, who is to this day chuckling all the way up his long bill at the manner in which he walked out of as bad a mess as ever woodcock got into.

There is little to be said in such cases for publication. The guest is not inclined to interview, and the host, being of gentle breeding, even when he has never traveled seventy-five miles from his home, is apt to think more than he says. And as to the third party? Well, if you happen to wish to make a good impression upon her, it is more or less an unfortunate episode. I could only say to myself that at the next shot I'd be hornswoggled if I didn't blow the whole bird into the next world!

The opportunity came soon enough. Mrs. Barnard moved slowly on into the alders, and this time I followed in her wake. The bog got looser and more deceptive as we proceeded, but I paid not the slightest attention to the Captain's remarks about the way these swamps had of letting one down, and so we wallowed on. In a few moments the water was to the tops of my long boots, and that uncomfortable sucking repeated itself regularly as one foot after another came up and out under protest. Lady was just ahead jumping gaily from lump to lump of sturdy swamp grass—then she suddenly dropped to a point again.

It was useless for me to try to move, since the