

BUDGET

November 25, 2002

Louis M. Prince

Intro

Over the years fiction has not been the foremost category at The Literary Club. Many members, however, have written short stories, ranging from exaggerated reminiscences to total fantasy. Clarke Firestone, who wrote river stories, and John Uri Lloyd, the subject of John Diehl's recent paper, were two well known Club members whose fiction was published.

Among contemporary members who do fiction well, and more or less regularly, Muff Gail, Fred McGavran, Rollin Workman, Lew Gatch, Milo Beran, and Bob Hansel come to mind. Every fiction writer dreams of being published, but today the publishing market for non-pornographic short stories is pretty limited. Nevertheless I wish more members would try fiction, especially in Budget papers. It's fun.

Lately I have been attempting to write fiction myself. I like to make up stories and use satire therein for social commentary. My preferred venue is upper middle class America in the 1920's. I love Fitzgerald and the Jazz Age. I also choose war time, not because I like war, but because it is such a fertile source for invented Realism.

Tonight, I am going to read two stories by two different members. Any similarity between the characters and real persons would be strictly coincidental, and regrettable, if not expensive – considering the proliferation of libel suits these days and the number of lawyers in our Club.

I will read the first paper first because it is first. I will read the second one next because the paper is of better quality (meaning the literary technique, not what it is printed on), and because it is by a published author. I like to save the best for last, so please bear with me through the first.

LMP

I

Jacob's Promise

The clang of streetcars, the noise of early make autos with funny horns, steam whistles everywhere – that was the sound of River City in the 1920s. The iceman and the milkman still made deliveries by horse and wagon, so a pleasant aroma of manure rose from the streets, especially in the better class neighborhoods. Every evening a man came by on foot to light the street lamps, and in the summer an organ grinder with his monkey might be playing on the corner. Coolidge had the White House, flappers had “bobbed” hair, and the middle class had what one now calls “live-in” help.

Moira and her husband, Isadore, were ecstatic because they had determined that life could continue just as in the past. Added to their bliss was the exhilaration that procreation brings to certain couples. Now they had Barbara.

Barbara was not the child. Barbara was the nursemaid they had hired to care for the child, their new-born son, Jacob. Barbara was big and homely, of Irish descent, and just recently displaced from a small family farm in Kentucky.

When Moira arrived home with Jacob, straight from the maternity hospital, Barbara was at the front door, arms outstretched ready to cuddle the tiny baby, her big heart overflowing with affection. As she folded little Jacob into her arms, it was love at first sight for both of them. Immediately she assumed complete responsibility for Jacob. Her bed was right next to his crib in the nursery, and the nursery was remote enough to prevent disturbing noises from reaching the master bedroom. So life did go on.

Isadore’s life was selling stocks on margin at a downtown brokerage firm in which he was a partner. He had several assistants, so he took a long time for lunch each day, usually to play dominoes at his club. Stock prices, he perceived, rose ever higher and clients bought, whether or not he was at his desk. Sometimes, instead of eating lunch he went to the movies for a nap. They were silent, although there was organ accompaniment, but that could be soothing, especially during the love scenes.

Moira drove a navy blue Packard coupe, with bright red wheels. After breakfast in bed she would telephone orders to the grocer, butcher and baker, to be delivered during the day. While still on the telephone, the arrival of the manicurist, hair dresser or seamstress might be announced. When Moira finally got into the Packard, it would be time for late lunch and mah-jong at her women’s club.

Most nights of the week Moira and Isadore were with friends, playing bridge, dining out or entertaining at home. Sometimes they attended a musical revue or concert and visited an upscale speakeasy. On Sunday mornings, as was the custom of that era, they made calls on friends and relatives, leaving an engraved card if no one was at home. On Sunday afternoons they might play golf, or just collapse from burning the candle at both ends. Then, very late in the afternoon, if there was time, Barbara would bring Jacob into the living room for display.

During these gilded years of the Jazz Age, it was obviously Barbara who raised little Jacob. It was Barbara who taught him to walk and talk. When he tripped and fell, it

was Barbara who hugged him and kissed him where it hurt. In the fury of lightning and thunder, or in the terror of a bad dream, it was in Barbara's bed that he snuggled. It was Barbara who walked him for miles and miles, who taught him the names of the wildflowers and birds in the woods, who played toss in the nursery or garden. And it was also she who, in her colorful Kentucky way, taught him right from wrong. Don't cheat, never tell a lie or your nose will grow longer, et cetera. But, especially never *ever* break a promise . . .

One fine sunny Sunday afternoon in summer, when Jacob was little more than five years old, Barbara was walking him toward the small apartment in nearby Chipsoville where her widowed mother lived. John, Barbara's younger brother, lived in the apartment also. For a living John helped make a brand of soap that miraculously floated instead of sinking to the bottom of the bathtub. For fun he had recently spent his entire savings on a used Model T Ford sedan, of which he was very proud. Just as Barbara and Jacob entered the little street, they caught sight of John cranking up the motor. When they reached him, John, ready to roll, shouted at them above the din:

“Hey Barb, lemme take you two for a spin!”

Barbara was hesitant, but Jacob had already scrambled up onto the running board. The two climbed into the back seat. They all laughed and shouted as the car lurched over the rough brick paving. But it was a bad decision.

At Mitchell Avenue there was no traffic in sight, so John took the turn going much, much too fast. The car turned over on its side with a horrible crash and scraping noise, followed by the tinkling of shattered glass. Gasoline leaked onto the street with an ominous odor, as one wheel kept idly turning.

The scream was from Barbara:

“Oh dear God, save our baby Jacob!”

John, thrown down to the passenger side, peered into the backseat and said:

“Barbara, for God's sake, quit yelling and move! You're smothering the kid. See if he's hurt.”

No one was hurt. John climbed out through his door which was now on top. He took Jacob from Barbara as she lifted him up to the rear door, then Barbara climbed out herself. Shards of glass were everywhere, but the windows had been mostly open or it would have been much worse. Only John had a little cut on one forearm.

“Take Jacob over to Mom's flat and wash up,” said John. “I'm going to stay with my machine.”

Even though she had freshened up a little, the walk back to Jacob's home seemed very long to Barbara. But Jacob was buoyant. He had enjoyed the adventure, so much so, in fact, that Barbara was having trouble getting through to him. Finally she knelt down on the sidewalk and took his little hand in hers:

"Jacob, listen to your Baba. You must make me a promise and keep it always. Forever. Never tell anyone that we rode in the car. Never. I have to tell you that if your Mama and Papa ever hear about the car, they will make me go away and we will never see each other again. So promise me."

When Jacob saw the tears in Barbara's eyes, he shuddered with an intense fear that he had never known.

"Baba, I promise you, I promise you. I love you so!" Jacob hugged her, and he kept his promise.

During the following winter Little Sister arrived after an unplanned and inconvenient pregnancy. Moira hired a second nursemaid, and a second nursery was established. But it was not as blissful as the last time.

One evening there was a discussion in the master bedroom. Uncharacteristically, Barbara had gone out at noon, in a hurry. So Jacob, unsupervised, took a notion to eavesdrop outside the master bedroom door.

"We simply had to make a change," Moira's voice was petulant. "He's too old to have a nurse – what he needs is a governess. Would you believe that Barbara let Clara teach him the Charleston? Imagine a five year old boy doing the Charleston on the sidewalk in front of our house. I can't think of anything more *common*!"

"Who is Clara?" asked her husband.

"Isadore! If you ever went in the kitchen, you'd know Clara is our cook."

"Well then, cupcake, you should fire the cook, not Barbara. And, incidentally, I've seen *you* do a pretty *common* Charleston yourself after three or four martinis. Oh – 'five foot two, eyes of blue' kitchy kitchy koo!"

"Oh stop it, Izzy. You can't sing – and that most certainly isn't the Charleston. She also taught him all the words to Yes We Have No Bananas. Horrors!"

"How many times have I told you not to call me Izzy? You should know the words to Yes We Have No Bananas are not hard to learn – there aren't many. And, by the way, shouldn't we be glad the *boy* can sing?"

"You are being absolutely preposterous! In any event I have found a perfectly divine governess. Fraulein Menger came over from Germany several months ago. She

has an aristocratic Prussian background – sort of – and speaks a really gorgeous high German. Fortunately she’s penniless. It’s a great opportunity for Jacob to learn a second language, and she will eat at the table with us.”

“Does she speak English?” Isadore had survived the Meuse-Argonne offensive not too many years before.

“Her English is improving,” Moira conceded.

“I think we should have a young man instead – a student maybe – he could teach Jacob to throw a football and ride a two-wheeler.”

“But that’s what you should be doing, my pet.”

“Touché. I’ve done my best.” He knew he had done nothing.

“Anyway, Fraulein Menger starts tomorrow at eleven. Barbara is gone. I dismissed her this morning and saw to it she’ll try not to see Jacob again . . .”

At that moment Jacob burst into the room, wailing loudly and shouting:

“I want my Baba!”

“Stop this at once!” His mother could shout too. “Big boys don’t cry. You will go to your room this instant! Isadore get me an aspirin, I feel a headache coming on – Oh look at the clock – we have to dress for theatre!”

The upstairs girl and Little Sister’s nursemaid both did their best to calm and console Jacob during the turbulent night that followed. Next day Fraulein Menger arrived. She was a tall skinny disciplinarian, hair wound into a severe bun on top of her head. She could have passed for a temperance agitator in a Judge Magazine cartoon.

The woman’s hands were full from the beginning. On the second day, while she was in the bathroom, Jacob took the receiver off the hook in the front hall. When the operator said “Number please” he repeated Barbara’s mother’s number into the mouthpiece, or so he thought. Was it 648-Y or 468-Y or 864-Y?

“What do you do on the telephone?” Fraulein Menger’s harsh voice was coming from behind him.

“I’m trying to call my Barbara,” answered Jacob, who did not lie to anyone.

“That is verboten! You know. I punish you now. You will learn to speak the 23rd Psalm! We start. Now say after me

‘Der Herr ist mein Hirte . . .’”

Devastated at having to leave Jacob, Barbara had to look for another job. Good references from Moira were crucial, so she accepted the terms: Leave, without even saying goodbye to Jacob. Soon there was another youngster for her to care for, in another family, a family which suddenly moved away, taking Barbara with them. For almost twenty years other little boys and girls would know her loving care, until the fateful year of 1944. In June of that year she fell ill and died in a charity nursing home in St. Louis. She had adored all “her children”, but Jacob, her first, had remained by far her favorite throughout all those years. She had always hoped to go back one day just to catch a glimpse of Jacob grown up.

As for little Jacob, wretched without his Barbara, a crushing thought soon deepened his distress. Must not Barbara believe that she had been dismissed because he had broken his promise and told about the car ride? In time the thought became an obsession of pseudo-guilt, sometimes intrusive and depressing. Barbara must surely think that he had told the secret.

Cynics may proclaim that Barbara’s humble homespun teachings of morality were irrelevant to 20th Century pragmatism. Let those cynics observe, then, the overturned car was a chrysalis from which a most curious being had emerged: Someone who came to regard the sanctity of a promise, his promise, as inviolable. Because, throughout his short life, Jacob viewed his every responsibility, his every commitment, even each serious attachment as a promise, a promise he had made.

He was, perforce, faithful in relationships – with close friends, household pets, and girls. In school he was impeccable – doing homework was, after all, a promise to his teacher. As an athlete he excelled in track – extending himself to the fullest was, after all, a promise to his teammates. And, finally, having been drafted for War in Europe, he kept firing his B.A.R. while others fell or fled – the oath at induction had implied perseverance ‘til the end, right? That’s what soldiering is all about, he reasoned.

While growing up, Jacob had tried to locate Barbara. But Barbara’s mother had died, and John, her brother, had enlisted in the Army – or was it the Navy? The neighbors did not remember. Barbara had left no trace of any kind, yet Jacob never gave up hope of finding her some day. He wanted, more than anything, for her to know that he had kept his promise.

In late June of fateful 1944, in Normandy, Jacob lay on a litter in the mud, filthy dirty, bleeding, and delirious with pain and morphine. He was to be transported to the rear with other casualties. But it was too late.

A Lutheran chaplain, on his rounds, was startled to hear this dying American soldier muttering words from the 23rd Psalm in German:

“Der Herr ist mein Hirte . . .”

He squatted down to listen. The soldier's eyes opened and seemed to brighten. Just as the Spirit was about to leave him, Jacob said quite clearly:

“I can see my Barbara now. She knows I didn't tell.”

The chaplain, wondering, laid his hand on Jacob's bloodied head and blessed him.

Barbara, arms outstretched, would be laughing and crying at the same time. Of course she knew, had always known. After all wasn't it she who had taught him, long ago, that a promise is . . . a promise?
