BAB: A SUB-DEB

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Author Of "K," "The Circular Staircase," "Kings, Queens And Pawns," Etc.

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CHAPTER I. THE SUB-DEB: A THEME WRITTEN AND SUBMITTED IN LITERATURE CLASS BY BARBARA PUTNAM ARCHIBALD, 1917.

DEFINITION OF A THEME:

A theme is a piece of writing, either true or made up by the author, and consisting of Introduction, Body and Conclusion. It should contain Unity, Coherence, Emphasis, Perspecuity, Vivacity, and Precision. It may be ornamented with dialogue, description and choice quotations.

SUBJECT OF THEME:

An interesting Incident of My Christmas Holadays.

INTRODUCTION:

"A tyrant's power in rigor is exprest."—DRYDEN.

I have decided to relate with precision what occurred during my recent Christmas holiday. Although I was away from this school only four days, returning unexpectedly the day after Christmas, a number of Incidents occurred which I believe I should narrate.

It is only just and fair that the Upper House, at least, should know of the injustice of my exile, and that it is all the result of circumstances over which I had no control.

For I make this appeal, and with good reason. Is it any fault of mine that my sister Leila is 20 months older than I am? Naturally, no.

Is it fair also, I ask, that in the best society, a girl is a Sub-Deb the year before she comes out, and although mature in mind, and even maturer in many ways than her older sister, the latter is treated as a young lady, enjoying many privileges, while the former is treated as a mere child, in spite, as I have observed, of only 20 months difference? I wish to place myself on record that it is NOT fair.

I shall go back, for a short time, to the way things were at home when I was small. I was very strictly raised. With the exception of Tommy Gray, who lives next door and only is about my age, I was never permitted to know any of the Other Sex.

Looking back, I am sure that the present way society is organized is really to blame for everything. I am being frank, and that is the way I feel. I was too strictly raised. I always had a governess tagging along. Until I came here to school I had never walked to the corner of the next street unattended. If it wasn't Mademoiselle, it was mother's maid, and if it wasn't either of them, it was mother herself, telling me to hold my toes out and my shoulder blades in. As I have said, I never knew any of the Other Sex, except the miserable little beasts at dancing school. I used to make faces at them when Mademoiselle was putting on my slippers and pulling out my hair bow. They were totally uninteresting, and I used to put pins in my sash, so that they would get scratched.

Their pumps mostly squeaked, and nobody noticed it, although I have known my parents to dismiss a Butler who creaked at the table.

When I was sent away to school, I expected to learn something of life. But I was disappointed. I do not desire to criticize this institution of learning. It is an excellent one, as is shown by the fact that the best families send their daughters here. But to learn life one must know something of both sides of it, male and female. It was, therefore, a matter of deep regret to me to find that, with the exception of the dancing master, who has three children, and the gardener, there were no members of the sterner sex to be seen.

The athletic coach was a girl! As she has left now to be married, I venture to say that she was not what Lord Chesterfield so euphoniously termed "SUAVITER IN MODO, FORTATER IN RE."

When we go out to walk we are taken to the country, and the three matinees a year we see in the city are mostly Shakespeare, arranged for the young. We are allowed only certain magazines, the Atlantic Monthly and one or two others, and Barbara Armstrong was penalized for having a framed photograph of her brother in running clothes.

At the school dances we are compelled to dance with each other, and the result is that when at home at Holiday parties I always try to lead, which annoys the boys I dance with.

Notwithstanding all this it is an excellent school. We learn a great deal, and our dear principal is a most charming and erudite person. But we see very little of life. And if school is a preparation for life, where are we?

Being here alone since the day after Christmas, I have had time to think everything out. I am naturally a thinking person. And now I am no longer indignant. I realize that I was wrong, and that I am only paying the penalty that I deserve although I consider it most unfair to be given French translation to do. I do not object to going to bed at nine o'clock, although ten is the hour in the Upper House, because I have time then to look back over things, and to reflect, to think.

"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." SHAKESPEARE.

BODY OF THEME:

I now approach the narrative of what happened during the first four days of my Christmas Holiday.

For a period before the fifteenth of December, I was rather worried. All the girls in the school were getting new clothes for Christmas parties, and their Families were sending on invitations in great numbers, to various festivities that were to occur when they went home.

Nothing, however, had come for me, and I was worried. But on the 16th mother's visiting Secretary sent on four that I was to accept, with tiped acceptances for me to copy and send. She also sent me the good news that I was to have two party dresses, and I was to send on my measurements for them.

One of the parties was a dinner and theater party, to be given by Carter Brooks on New Year's Day. Carter Brooks is the well-known Yale Center, although now no longer such but selling advertizing, ecetera.

It is tragic to think that, after having so long anticipated that party, I am now here in sackcloth and ashes, which is a figure of speech for the Peter Thompson uniform of the school, with plain white for evenings and no jewelry.

It was with anticipatory joy, therefore, that I sent the acceptances and the desired measurements, and sat down to cheerfully while away the time in studies and the various duties of school life, until the Holidays.

However, I was not long to rest in piece, for in a few days I received a letter from Carter Brooks, as follows:

DEAR BARBARA: It was sweet of you to write me so promptly, although I confess to being rather astonished as well as delighted at being called "Dearest." The signature too was charming, "Ever thine." But, dear child, won't you write at once and tell me why the waist, bust and hip measurements? And the request to have them really low in the neck? Ever thine, CARTER.

It will be perceived that I had sent him the letter to mother, by mistake.

I was very unhappy about it. It was not an auspicious way to begin the holidays, especially the low neck. Also I disliked very much having told him my waist measure which is large owing to basket ball.

As I have stated before, I have known very few of the Other Sex, but some of the girls had had more experience, and in the days before we went home, we talked a great deal about things. Especially Love. I felt that it was rather over-done, particularly in fiction. Also I felt and observed at

divers times that I would never marry. It was my intention to go upon the stage, although modified since by what I am about to relate.

The other girls say that I look like Julia Marlowe.

Some of the girls had boys who wrote to them, and one of them—I refrain from giving her name had—a Code. You read every third word. He called her "Cousin" and he would write like this:

Dear Cousin: I am well. Am just about crazy this week to go home. See notice enclosed you football game.

And so on and on. Only what it really said was "I am crazy to see you."

(In giving this code I am betraying no secrets, as they have quarreled and everything is now over between them.)

As I had nobody, at that time, and as I had visions of a career, I was a man-hater. I acknowledge that this was a pose. But after all, what is life but a pose?

"Stupid things!" I always said. "Nothing in their heads but football and tobacco smoke. Women," I said, "are only their playthings. And when they do grow up and get a little intelligence they use it in making money."

There has been a story in the school—I got it from one of the little girls—that I was disappointed in love in early youth, the object of my attachment having been the tenor in our church choir at home. I daresay I should have denied the soft impeachment, but I did not. It was, although not appearing so at the time, my first downward step on the path that leads to destruction.

"The way of the transgressor is hard"—Bible.

I come now to the momentous day of my return to my dear home for Christmas. Father and my sister Leila, who from now on I will term "Sis," met me at the station. Sis was very elegantly dressed, and she said:

"Hello, Kid," and turned her cheek for me to kiss.

She is, as I have stated, but 20 months older than I, and depends altogether on her clothes for her beauty. In the morning she is plain, although having a good skin. She was trimmed up with a bouquet of violets as large as a dishpan, and she covered them with her hands when I kissed her.

She was waved and powdered, and she had on a perfectly new outfit. And I was shabby. That is the exact word. Shabby. If you have to hang your entire wardrobe in a closet ten inches deep, and put it over you on cold nights, with the steam heat shut off at ten o'clock, it does not make it look any better.

My father has always been my favorite member of the family, and he was very glad to see me. He has a great deal of tact, also, and later on he slipped ten dollars in my purse in the motor. I needed it very much, as after I had paid the porter and bought luncheon, I had only three dollars left and an I. O. U. from one of the girls for seventy-five cents, which this may remind her, if it is read in class, she has forgotten.

"Good heavens, Barbara," Sis said, while I hugged father, "you certainly need to be pressed."

"I daresay I'll be the better for a hot iron," I retorted, "but at least I shan't need it on my hair." My hair is curly while hers is straight.

"Boarding school wit!" she said, and stocked to the motor.

Mother was in the car and glad to see me, but as usual she managed to restrain her enthusiasm. She put her hands over some orchids she was wearing when I kissed her. She and Sis were on their way to something or other.

"Trimmed up like Easter hats, you two!" I said.

"School has not changed you, I fear, Barbara," mother observed. "I hope you are studying hard."

"Exactly as hard as I have to. No more, no less," I regret to confess that I replied. And I saw Sis and mother exchange glances of significance.

We dropped them at the reception and father went to his office and I went on home alone. And all at once I began to be embittered. Sis had everything, and what had I? And when I got home, and saw that Sis had had her room done over, and ivory toilet things on her dressing table, and two perfectly huge boxes of candy on a stand and a ball gown laid out on the bed, I almost wept.

My own room was just as I had left it. It had been the night nursery, and there was still the dent in the mantel where I had thrown a hair brush at Sis, and the ink spot on the carpet at the foot of the bed, and everything.

Mademoiselle had gone, and Hannah, mother's maid, came to help me off with my things. I slammed the door in her face, and sat down on the bed and RAGED.

They still thought I was a little girl. They PATRONIZED me. I would hardly have been surprised if they had sent up a bread and milk supper on a tray. It was then and there that I made up my mind to show them that I was no longer a mere child. That the time was gone when they could shut me up in the nursery and forget me. I was seventeen years and eleven days old, and Juliet, in Shakespeare, was only sixteen when she had her well-known affair with Romeo.

I had no plan then. It was not until the next afternoon that the thing sprung (sprang?) fullblown from the head of Jove.

The evening was rather dreary. The family was going out, but not until nine thirty, and mother and Leila went over my clothes. They sat, Sis in pink chiffon and mother in black and silver, and Hannah took out my things and held them up. I was obliged to silently sit by, while my rags and misery were exposed.

"Why this open humiliation?" I demanded at last. "I am the family Cinderella, I admit it. But it isn't necessary to lay so much emphasis on it, is it?"

"Don't be sarcastic, Barbara," said mother. "You are still only a child, and a very untidy child at that. What do you do with your elbows to rub them through so? It must have taken patience and application."

"Mother" I said, "am I to have the party dresses?"

"Two. Very simple."

"Low in the neck?"

"Certainly not. A small v, perhaps."

"I've got a good neck." She rose impressively.

"You amaze and shock me, Barbara," she said coldly.

"I shouldn't have to wear tulle around my shoulders to hide the bones!" I retorted. "Sis is rather thin."

"You are a very sharp-tongued little girl," mother said, looking up at me. I am two inches taller than she is.

"Unless you learn to curb yourself, there will be no parties for you, and no party dresses."

This was the speech that broke the camel's back. I could endure no more.

"I think," I said, "that I shall get married and end everything."

Need I explain that I had no serious intention of taking the fatal step? But it was not deliberate mendacity. It was despair.

Mother actually went white. She clutched me by the arm and shook me.

"What are you saying?" she demanded.

"I think you heard me, mother" I said, very politely. I was however thinking hard.

"Marry whom? Barbara, answer me."

"I don't know. Anybody."

"She's trying to frighten you, mother" Sis said. "There isn't anybody. Don't let her fool you."

"Oh, isn't there?" I said in a dark and portentous manner.

Mother gave me a long look, and went out. I heard her go into father's dressing-room. But Sis sat on my bed and watched me.

"Who is it, Bab?" she asked. "The dancing teacher? Or your riding master? Or the school plumber?"

"Guess again."

"You're just enough of a little simpleton to get tied up to some wretched creature and disgrace us all."

I wish to state here that until that moment I had no intention of going any further with the miserable business. I am naturally truthful, and deception is hateful to me. But when my sister uttered the above disparaging remark I saw that, to preserve my own dignity, which I value above precious stones, I would be compelled to go on.

"I'm perfectly mad about him," I said. "And he's crazy about me."

"I'd like very much to know," Sis said, as she stood up and stared at me, "how much you are making up and how much is true."

None the less, I saw that she was terrified. The family kitten, to speak in allegory, had become a lion and showed its claws.

When she had gone out I tried to think of some one to hang a love affair to. But there seemed to be nobody. They knew perfectly well that the dancing master had one eye and three children, and that the clergyman at school was elderly, with two wives. One dead.

I searched my past, but it was blameless. It was empty and bare, and as I looked back and saw how little there had been in it but imbibing wisdom and playing basket-ball and tennis, and typhoid fever when I was fourteen and almost having to have my head shaved, a great wave of bitterness agitated me.

"Never again," I observed to myself with firmness. "Never again, if I have to invent a member of the Other Sex."

At that time, however, owing to the appearance of Hannah with a mending basket, I got no further than his name.

It was Harold. I decided to have him dark, with a very small black mustache, and passionate eyes. I felt, too, that he would be jealous. The eyes would be of the smoldering type, showing the green-eyed monster beneath.

I was very much cheered up. At least they could not ignore me any more, and I felt that they would see the point. If I was old enough to have a lover—especially a jealous one with the aforementioned eyes—I was old enough to have the necks of my frocks cut out.

While they were getting their wraps on in the lower hall, I counted my money. I had thirteen dollars. It was enough for a plan I was beginning to have in mind.

"Go to bed early, Barbara," mother said when they were ready to go out.

"You don't mind if I write a letter, do you?"

"To whom?"

"Oh, just a letter," I said, and she stared at me coldly.

"I daresay you will write it, whether I consent or not. Leave it on the hall table, and it will go out with the morning mail."

"I may run out to the box with it."

"I forbid your doing anything of the sort."

"Oh, very well," I responded meekly.

"If there is such haste about it, give it to Hannah to mail."

"Very well," I said.

She made an excuse to see Hannah before she left, and I knew THAT I WAS BEING WATCHED. I was greatly excited, and happier than I had been for weeks. But when I had settled myself in the library, with the paper in front of me, I could not think of anything to say in a letter. So I wrote a poem instead.

> "To H——
> "Dear love: you seem so far away,
> I would that you were near.
> I do so long to hear you say
> Again, 'I love you, dear.'
>
> "Here all is cold and drear and strange
> With none who with me tarry,
> I hope that soon we can arrange
> To run away and marry."

The last verse did not scan, exactly, but I wished to use the word "marry" if possible. It would show, I felt, that things were really serious and impending. A love affair is only a love affair, but marriage is marriage, and the end of everything.

It was at that moment, 10 o'clock, that the strange thing occurred which did not seem strange at all at the time, but which developed into so great a mystery later on. Which was to actually threaten my reason and which, flying on winged feet, was to send me back here to school the day after Christmas and put my seed pearl necklace in the safe deposit vault. Which was very unfair, for what had my necklace to do with it? And just now, when I need comfort, it—the necklace—would help to relieve my exile.

Hannah brought me in a cup of hot milk, with a Valentine's malted milk tablet dissolved in it.

As I stirred it around, it occurred to me that Valentine would be a good name for Harold. On the spot I named him Harold Valentine, and I wrote

the name on the envelope that had the poem inside, and addressed it to the town where this school gets its mail.

It looked well written out. "Valentine," also, is a word that naturally connects itself with AFFAIRS DE COUR. And I felt that I was safe, for as there was no Harold Valentine, he could not call for the letter at the post office, and would therefore not be able to cause me any trouble, under any circumstances. And, furthermore. I knew that Hannah would not mail the letter anyhow, but would give it to mother. So, even if there was a Harold Valentine, he would never get it.

Comforted by these reflections, I drank my malted milk, ignorant of the fact that destiny, "which never swerves, nor yields to men the helm"—Emerson, was stocking at my heels.

Between sips, as the expression goes, I addressed the envelope to Harold Valentine, and gave it to Hannah. She went out the front door with it, as I had expected, but I watched from a window, and she turned right around and went in the area way. So THAT was all right.

It had worked like a Charm. I could tear my hair now when I think how well it worked. I ought to have been suspicious for that very reason. When things go very well with me at the start, it is a sure sign that they are going to blow up eventually.

Mother and Sis slept late the next morning, and I went out stealthily and did some shopping. First I bought myself a bunch of violets, with a white rose in the center, and I printed on the card:

"My love is like a white, white rose. H." And sent it to myself.

It was deception, I acknowledge, but having put my hand to the plow, I did not intend to steer a crooked course. I would go straight to the end. I am like that in everything I do. But, on deliberating things over, I felt that Violets, alone and unsupported, were not enough. I felt that If I had a photograph, it would make everything more real. After all, what is a love affair without a picture of the Beloved Object?

So I bought a photograph. It was hard to find what I wanted, but I got it at last in a stationer's shop, a young man in a checked suit with a small mustache—the young man, of course, not the suit. Unluckily, he was rather blonde, and had a dimple in his chin. But he looked exactly as though his name ought to be Harold.

I may say here that I chose "Harold," not because it is a favorite name of mine, but because it is romantic in sound. Also because I had never known any one named Harold and it seemed only discrete.

I took it home in my muff and put it under my pillow where Hannah would find it and probably take it to mother. I wanted to buy a ring too, to hang on a ribbon around my neck. But the violets had made a fearful hole in my thirteen dollars.

I borrowed a stub pen at the stationer's and I wrote on the photograph, in large, sprawling letters, "To YOU from ME."

"There," I said to myself, when I put it under the pillow. "You look like a photograph, but you are really a bomb-shell."

As things eventuated, it was. More so, indeed.

Mother sent for me when I came in. She was sitting in front of her mirror, having the vibrator used on her hair, and her manner was changed. I guessed that there had been a family counsel over the poem, and that they had decided to try kindness.

"Sit down, Barbara," she said. "I hope you were not lonely last night?"

"I am never lonely, mother. I always have things to think about."

I said this in a very pathetic tone.

"What sort of things?" mother asked, rather sharply.

"Oh—things," I said vaguely. "Life is such a mess, isn't it?"

"Certainly not. Unless one makes it so."

"But it is so difficult. Things come up and—and it's hard to know what to do. The only way, I suppose, is to be true to one's belief in one's self."

"Take that thing off my head and go out, Hannah," mother snapped. "Now then, Barbara, what in the world has come over you?"

"Over me? Nothing."

"You are being a silly child."

"I am no longer a child, mother. I am seventeen. And at seventeen there are problems. After all, one's life is one's own. One must decide——"

"Now, Barbara, I am not going to have any nonsense. You must put that man out of your head."

"Man? What man?"

"You think you are in love with some driveling young Fool. I'm not blind, or an idiot. And I won't have it."

"I have not said that there is anyone, have I?" I said in a gentle voice. "But if there was, just what would you propose to do, mother?"

"If you were three years younger I'd propose to spank you." Then I think she saw that she was taking the wrong method, for she changed her tactics. "It's the fault of that silly school," she said. (Note: These are my mother's words, not mine.) "They are hotbeds of sickly sentimentality. They——"

And just then the violets came, addressed to me. Mother opened them herself, her mouth set. "My love is like a white, white rose," she said. "Barbara, do you know who sent these?"

"Yes, mother," I said meekly. This was quite true. I did.

I am indeed sorry to record that here my mother lost her temper, and there was no end of a fuss. It ended by mother offering me a string of seed pearls for Christmas, and my party dresses cut V front and back, if I would, as she phrased it, "put him out of my silly head."

"I shall have to write one letter, mother," I said, "to—to break things off. I cannot tear myself out of another's life without a word."

She sniffed.

"Very well," she said. "One letter. I trust you to make it only one."

I come now to the next day. How true it is, that "Man's life is but a jest, a dream, a shadow, bubble, air, a vapor at the best!"

I spent the morning with mother at the dressmakers and she chose two perfectly spiffing things, one of white chiffon over silk, made modified Empire, with little bunches of roses here and there on it, and when she and the dressmaker were haggling over the roses, I took the scissors and cut the neck of the lining two inches lower in front. The effect was positively impressive. The other was blue over orchid, a perfectly passionate combination.

When we got home some of the girls had dropped in, and Carter Brooks and Sis were having tea in the den. I am perfectly sure that Sis threw a cigarette in the fire when I went in. When I think of my sitting here alone, when I have done NOTHING, and Sis playing around and smoking cigarettes, and nothing said, all for a difference of 20 months, it makes me furious.

"Let's go in and play with the children, Leila," he said. "I'm feeling young today."

Which was perfectly silly. He is not Methuselah. Although thinking himself so, or almost.

Well, they went into the drawing room. Elaine Adams was there waiting for me, and Betty Anderson and Jane Raleigh. And I hadn't been in the room five minutes before I knew that they all knew. It turned out later that Hannah was engaged to the Adams' butler, and she had told him, and he had told Elaine's governess, who is still there and does the ordering, and Elaine sends her stockings home for her to darn.

Sis had told Carter, too, I saw that, and among them they had rather a good time. Carter sat down at the piano and struck a few chords, chanting "My Love is like a white, white rose."

"Only you know" he said, turning to me, "that's wrong. It ought to be a 'red, red rose.'"

"Certainly not. The word is 'white.'"

"Oh, is it?" he said, with his head on one side. "Strange that both you and Harold should have got it wrong."

I confess to a feeling of uneasiness at that moment.

Tea came, and Carter insisted on pouring.

"I do so love to pour!" he said. "Really, after a long day's shopping, tea is the only thing that keeps me going until dinner. Cream or lemon, Leila dear?"

"Both," Sis said in an absent manner, with her eyes on me. "Barbara, come into the den a moment. I want to show you mother's Christmas gift."

She stocked in ahead of me, and lifted a book from the table. Under it was the photograph.

"You wretched child!" she said. "Where did you get that?"

"That's not your affair, is it?"

"I'm going to make it my affair. Did he give it to you?"

"Have you read what's written on it?"

"Where did you meet him?"

I hesitated because I am by nature truthful. But at last I said:

"At school."

"Oh," she said slowly. "So you met him at school! What was he doing there? Teaching elocution?"

"Elocution!"

"This is Harold, is it?"

"Certainly." Well, he WAS Harold, if I chose to call him that, wasn't he? Sis gave a little sigh.

"You're quite hopeless, Bab. And, although I'm perfectly sure you want me to take the thing to mother, I'll do nothing of the sort."

SHE FLUNG IT INTO THE FIRE. I was raging. It had cost me a dollar. It was quite brown when I got it out, and a corner was burned off. But I got it.

"I'll thank you to burn your own things," I said with dignity. And I went back to the drawing room.

The girls and Carter Brooks were talking in an undertone when I got there. I knew it was about me. And Jane came over to me and put her arm around me.

"You poor thing!" she said. "Just fight it out. We're all with you."

"I'm so helpless, Jane." I put all the despair I could into my voice. For after all, if they were going to talk about my private affairs behind my back, I felt that they might as well have something to talk about. As Jane's second cousin once removed is in this school and as Jane will probably write her all about it, I hope this theme is read aloud in class, so she will get it all straight. Jane is imaginative and may have a wrong idea of things.

"Don't give in. Let them bully you. They can't really do anything. And they're scared. Leila is positively sick."

"I've promised to write and break it off," I said in a tense tone.