

# PRECIOUS BANE

BY MARY WEBB

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

STANLEY BALDWIN

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## MARY MEREDITH WEBB

(1881-1927)

### A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR OF "PRECIOUS BANE"

Mary Webb died in 1927 almost unnoticed. She had lived obscurely in the village of Shrewsbury, a frail woman in delicate health who had to earn her living by raising vegetables and flowers and selling them in person at market. The daughter of a schoolmaster, George Edward Meredith, she received her education at home, except for two years of schooling at Southport. At thirty she married Henry B. L. Webb, and together they tried to eke out a living from a grudging land. The dream of writing found its first reality in a novel, *The Golden Arrow*, published in 1916. There followed *Gone to Earth*, *The House in Dormer Forest* and *Seven for a Secret*. All of these novels suffered the same indifference that the world had shown their author. Then she wrote *Precious Bane*. A handful of people were moved by it and sung its praises. It was awarded the *Prix Femina* as the best English novel of 1925. Like its predecessors, *Precious Bane* might have languished unnoticed by the world at large and its author, now dead at 46, might have been forgotten, had not a busy Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, paused to introduce and champion Mary Webb in 1928. Then the world began to take notice, and posthumously, at least, a dream of fame was fulfilled for the author of *Precious Bane*.

## Introduction

MARY MEREDITH, the author of *Precious Bane*, was born in the little village of Leighton, near Cressage, under the Wrekin, on March 25th, 1881, and died at St. Leonards, October 8th, 1927, and was buried at Shrewsbury. She was the daughter of George Edward Meredith, a schoolmaster of Welsh descent, by his marriage with Sarah Alice Scott, daughter of an Edinburgh doctor of the clan of Sir Walter Scott. She was the eldest of six children and spent her early girlhood at The Grange, a small country house near Much Wenlock; from 12 to 21 she lived at Stanton-on-Hine-Heath, six miles north-east of Shrewsbury, and for the next ten years at The Old Mill, Meole Brace, a mile from Shrewsbury. In 1912 Mary Meredith married Mr. Henry Bertram Law Webb, a Cambridge graduate and a native of Shropshire. After two years at Weston-super-Mare, where Mr. Webb had a post in a school, Mr. and Mrs. Webb returned to Shropshire, living at Pontesbury and Lyth Hill, working as market gardeners and selling the produce at their own stall in Shrewsbury market. Mrs. Webb had written stories and poems from childhood, but it was at this period that she seriously turned her mind to writing novels. A volume of essays on nature, *The Spring of Joy*, and three novels, *The Golden Arrow*, *Gone to Earth*, and *The*

*House in Dormer Forest*, had been published before she came to live in London in 1921. *Seven for a Secret* followed in 1922 and *Precious Bane* in 1924. It was awarded the "Femina Vie Heureuse" Prize for 1924-5 given annually for the best work of imagination in prose or verse descriptive of English life by an author who had not attained sufficient recognition.

I am indebted for these biographical particulars to Mr. Webb to whom *Precious Bane* is inscribed. I never met Mary Webb and knew nothing of her work until I read *Precious Bane* at Christmas, 1926. I am glad to think that I was in time to send her a few words of appreciation.

The stupid urban view of the countryside as dull receives a fresh and crushing answer in the books of Mary Webb. All the novels except *Precious Bane* are set in the hill country of south-west Shropshire, between the Clee Hills and the Breiddens, and between Shrewsbury and Ludlow. The scene of *Precious Bane* is the country of north Shropshire meres—the Ellesmere district, but the dialect is that of south Shropshire. It is the country of the Severn lowlands and of isolated upland ridges where Celt and Saxon have met and mingled for centuries. For the passing traveller it is inhabited by an uncommunicative population dwelling among places with names like Stedment and Squilver and Stiperstone, Nipstone and Nind. There are of course the old castles and timbered black and white houses for the motoring visitors. But to the imaginative child brought up among the ploughlands and pools and dragonflies there is "a richness on the world, so it looked what our parson used to call

sumptuous." It is this richness which Mary Webb saw and felt as a girl and remembered with lyrical intensity as a woman.

She has interlaced with this natural beauty the tragic drama of a youth whose whole being is bent on toil and thrift and worldly success only to find himself defeated on the morrow of the harvest by the firing of the cornricks by the father of his lover. The dour figure of Gideon Sarn is set against that of his gentle sister, Prudence, who tells the tale. She is a woman flawed with a hare-shotten lip and cursed in the eyes of the neighbours until her soul's loveliness is discerned by Kester Woodseaves, the weaver. And so there comes to her at the end of the story the love which is "the peace to which all hearts do strive."

The strength of the book is not in its insight into human character, though that is not lacking. Nor does it lie in the inevitability with which the drama is unfolded and the sin of an all-absorbing and selfish ambition punished. It lies in the fusion of the elements of nature and man, as observed in this remote countryside by a woman even more alive to the changing moods of nature than of man. Almost any page at random will furnish an illustration of the blending of human passion with the fields and skies.

"So they rode away, and the sound of the people died till it was less than the hum of a midge, and there was nothing but a scent of rosemary, and warm sun, and the horse lengthening its stride towards the mountains, whence came the air of morning." (p. 117).

One reviewer compared *Precious Bane* to a sampler

stitched through long summer evenings in the bay window of a remote farmhouse. And sometimes writers of Welsh and Border origin, like William Morris, have had their work compared to old tapestries. But while these comparisons suggest something of the harmonies of colour they fail to convey the emotional force which glows in these pages. Nature to Mary Webb was not a pattern on a screen. Her sensibility is so acute and her power over words so sure and swift that one who reads some passages in *Whitehall* has almost the physical sense of being in Shropshire cornfields.

*Precious Bane* is a revelation not of unearthly but of earthly beauty in one bit of the England of Waterloo, the Western edge, haunted with the shadows of superstition, the legendary lore and phantasy of neighbours on the Border, differing in blood and tongue. This mingling of peoples and traditions and turns of speech and proverbial wisdom is what Mary Webb saw with the eye of the mind as she stood at her stall in Shrewsbury market, fastened in her memory, and fashioned for us in the little parcel of novels which is her legacy to literature.

STANLEY BALDWIN

10 Downing Street, S.W.1.

October, 1928

## *Foreword*

TO conjure, even for a moment, the wistfulness which is the past is like trying to gather in one's arms the hyacinthine colour of the distance. But if it is once achieved, what sweetness!—like the gentle, fugitive fragrance of spring flowers, dried with bergamot and bay. How the tears will spring in the reading of some old parchment—"to my dear child, my tablets and my ring"—or of yellow letters, with the love still fresh and fair in them though the ink is faded—"and so good night, my dearest heart, and God send you happy." That vivid present of theirs, how faint it grows! The past is only the present become invisible and mute; and because it is invisible and mute, its memoried glances and its murmurs are infinitely precious. We are to-morrow's past. Even now we slip away like those pictures painted on the moving dials of antique clocks—a ship, a cottage, sun and moon, a nosegay. The dial turns, the ship rides up and sinks again, the yellow painted sun has set, and we, that were the new thing, gather magic as we go. The whirr of the spinning-wheels has ceased in our parlours, and we hear no more the treadles of the loom, the swift, silken noise of the flung shuttle, the intermittent thud of the batten. But the imagination hears them, and theirs is the melody of romance.

When antique things are also country things, they

are easier to write about, for there is a permanence, a continuity in country life which makes the lapse of centuries seem of little moment.

Shropshire is a county where the dignity and beauty of ancient things lingers long, and I have been fortunate not only in being born and brought up in its magical atmosphere, and in having many friends in farm and cottage who, by pleasant talk and reminiscence have fired the imagination, but also in having the companionship of such a mind as was my father's—a mind stored with old tales and legends that did not come from books, and rich with an abiding love for the beauty of forest and harvest field, all the more intense, perhaps, because it found little opportunity for expression.

In treating of the old subject of sin-eating I am aware that William Sharpe has forestalled me and has written with consummate art. But sin-eaters were as well known on the Welsh border as in Scotland, and John Aubrey tells of one who lived "in a cottage on Rosse highway," and was a "lamentable poore raskell."

My thanks are due to the authors of *Shropshire Folk Lore* for the rhymes of "Green Gravel" and "Barley Bridge," and for the verification of various customs which I had otherwise only known by hearsay, and to the Somerset weavers, who recently let me see both hand looms and spinning wheels in use.

MARY WEBB

*March, 1926.*



## Contents

### BOOK ONE

CHAP.	PAGE
1 SARN MERE	1
2 TELLING THE BEES	7
3 PRUE TAKES THE BIDDING LETTERS	22
4 TORCHES AND ROSEMARY	27
5 THE FIRST SWATH FALLS	36
6 "SADDLE YOUR DREAMS BEFORE YOU RIDE 'EM"	47
7 PIPPINS AND JARGONELLES	57

### BOOK TWO

1 RIDING TO MARKET	65
2 THE <i>MUG OF CIDER</i>	80
3 "OR DIE IN 'TEMPTING IT"	91
4 THE WIZARD OF PLASH	99
5 THE LOVE-SPINNING	106
6 THE GAME OF COSTLY COLOURS	114
7 "THE MAISTER BE COME"	128
8 RAISING VENUS	134
9 THE GAME OF CONQUER	141

### BOOK THREE

1 THE HIRING FAIR	157
2 THE BAITING	171
3 "THE BEST TALL SCRIPT, FLOURISHED"	183
4 JANCIS RUNS AWAY	199
5 DRAGON-FLIES	227

## BOOK FOUR

CHAP.	PAGE
1 HARVEST HOME	239
2 BECUILDY SEEKS A SEVENTH CHILD	262
3 THE DEATHLY BANE	286
4 ALL ON A MAY MORNING	301
5 THE LAST GAME OF CONQUER	323
6 THE BREAKING OF THE MERE	336
7 "OPEN THE GATES AS WIDE AS THE SKY"	351

# PRECIOUS BANE

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## *Book One*

### CHAPTER ONE: *Sarn Mere*

**I**T was at a love-spinning that I saw Kester first. And if, in these new-fangled days, when strange inventions crowd upon us, when I hear tell there is even a machine coming into use in some parts of the country for reaping and mowing, if those that mayhappen will read this don't know what a love-spinning was, they shall hear in good time. But though it was Jancis Beguildy's love-spinning, she being three-and-twenty at that time and I being two years less, yet that is not the beginning of the story I have set out to tell.

Kester says that all tales, true tales or romancings, go farther back than the days of the child; aye, farther even than the little babe in its cot of rushes. Maybe you never slept in a cot of rushes; but all of us did at Sarn. There is such a plenty of rushes at Sarn, and old Beguildy's missus was a great one for plaiting them on rounded barrel-hoops. Then they'd be set on rockers, and a nice clean cradle they made, soft and green, so that the babe could feel as big-sorted as a little caterpillar (painted butterflies-as-is-to-be, Kester

calls them) sleeping in its cocoon. Kester's very set about such things. Never will he say caterpillars. He'll say, "There's a lot of butterflies-as-is-to-be on our cabbages, Prue." He won't say "It's winter." He'll say, "Summer's sleeping." And there's no bud little enough nor sad-coloured enough for Kester not to callen it the beginnings of the blow.

But the time is not yet come for speaking of Kester. It is the story of us all at Sarn, of Mother and Gideon and me, and Jancis (that was so beautiful), and Wizard Beguildy, and the two or three other folk that lived in those parts, that I did set out to tell. There were but a few, and maybe always will be, for there's a discouragement about the place. It may be the water lapping, year in and year out—everywhere you look and listen, water; or the big trees waiting and considering on your right hand and on your left; or the unbreathing quiet of the place, as if it was created but an hour gone, and not created for us. Or it may be that the soil is very poor and marshy, with little nature or goodness in the grass, which is ever so where reeds and rushes grow in plenty, and the flower of the paigle. Happen you call it cowslip, but we always named it the paigle, or keys of heaven. It was a wonderful thing to see our meadows at Sarn when the cowslip was in blow. Gold-over they were, so that you would think not even an angel's feet were good enough to walk there. You could make a tossy-ball before a thrush had gone over his song twice, for you'd only got to sit down and gather with both hands. Every way you looked, there was nought but gold, saving towards Sarn, where the woods began, and the great stretch of

grey water, gleaming and wincing in the sun. Neither woods nor water looked darksome in that fine spring weather, with the leaves coming new, and buds the colour of corn in the birch-tops. Only in our oak wood there was always a look of the back-end of the year, their young leaves being so brown. So there was always a breath of October in our May. But it was a pleasant thing to sit in the meadows and look away to the far hills. The larches spired up in their quick green, and the cowslip gold seemed to get into your heart, and even Sarn Mere was nothing but a blue mist in a yellow mist of birch-tops. And there was such a dream on the place that if a wild bee came by, let alone a bumble, it startled you like a shout. If a bee comes in at the window now to my jar of gilly-flowers, I can see it all in clear colours, with Plash lying under the sunset, beyond the woods, looking like a jagged piece of bottle glass. Plash Mere was bigger than Sarn, and there wasn't a tree by it, so where there were no hills beyond it you could see the clouds rooted in it on the far side, and I used to think they looked like the white water-lilies that lay round the margins of Sarn half the summer through. There was nothing about Plash that was different from any other lake or pool. There was no troubling of the waters, as at Sarn, nor any village sounding its bells beneath the furthest deeps. It was true, what folks said of Sarn, that there was summat to be felt there.

It was at Plash that the Beguildys lived, and it was at their dwelling, that was part stone house and part cave, that I got my book learning. It may seem a strange thing to you that a woman of my humble sta-

tion should be able to write and spell, and put all these things into a book. And indeed when I was a young wench there were not many great ladies, even, that could do much more scribing than to write a love-letter, and some could but just write such things as "This be quince and apple" on their jellies, and others had ado to put their names in the marriage register. Many have come to me, time and again, to write their love-letters for them, and a bitter old task it is, to write other women's love-letters out of your own burning heart.

If it hadna been for Mister Beguildy I never could have written down all these things. He learned me to read and write, and reckon up figures. And though he was a preached-against man, and said he could do a deal that I don't believe he ever could do, and though he dabbled in things that are not good for us to interfere with, yet I shall never forget to thank God for him. It seems to me now a very uncommon working of His power, to put it into Beguildy's heart to learn me. For a wizard could not rightly be called a servant of His, but one of Lucifer's men. Not that Beguildy was wicked, but only empty of good, as if all the righteousness was burnt out by the flame of his fiery mind, which must know and intermeddle with mysteries. As for love, he did not know the word. He could read the stars, and tell the future, and he claimed to have laid spirits. Once I asked him where the future was, that he could see it so plain. And he said, "It lies with the past, child, at the back of Time." You couldn't ever get the better of Mister Beguildy. But when I told Kester what he said, Kester would not have it

so. He said the past and the future were two shuttles in the hands of the Lord, weaving Eternity. Kester was a weaver himself, which may have made him think of it thus. But I think we cannot know what the past and the future are. We are so small and helpless on the earth that is like a green rush cradle where mankind lies, looking up at the stars, but not knowing what they be.

As soon as I could write, I made a little book with a calico cover, and every Sunday I wrote in it any merry time or good fortune we had had in the week, and so kept them. And if times had been troublous and bitter for me, I wrote that down too, and was eased. So when our parson, knowing of the lies that were told of me, bade me write all I could remember in a book, and set down the whole truth and nothing else, I was able to freshen my memory with the things I had put down Sunday by Sunday.

Well, it is all gone over now, the trouble and the struggling. It be quiet weather now, like a still evening with the snow all down, and a green sky, and lambs calling. I sit here by the fire with my Bible to hand, a very old woman and a tired woman, with a task to do before she says good night to this world. When I look out of my window and see the plain and the big sky with clouds standing up on the mountains, I call to mind the thick, blotting woods of Sarn, and the crying of the mere when the ice was on it, and the way the water would come into the cupboard under the stairs when it rose at the time of the snow melting. There was but little sky to see there, saving that which was reflected in the mere; but the sky that is in the

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mere is not the proper heavens. You see it in a glass darkly, and the long shadows of rushes go thin and sharp across the sliding stars, and even the sun and moon might be put out down there, for, times, the moon would get lost in lily leaves, and, times, a heron might stand before the sun.



## CHAPTER TWO: *Telling the Bees*

**M**Y brother Gideon was born in the year when the war with the French began. That was why Father would have him called Gideon, it being a war-like name. Jancis used to say it was a very good name for him, because it was one you couldn't shorten. You can make most names into little love-names, like you can cut down a cloak or a gown for children's wearing. But Gideon you could do nought with. And the name was like the man. I was more set on my brother than most are, but I couldna help seeing that about him. If nobody calls you out of your name, your name's like to be soon out of mind. And most people never even called him by his Christian name at all. They called him Sarn. In Father's life it was old Sarn and young Sarn. But after Father died, Gideon seemed to take the place to himself. I remember how he went out that summer night, and seemed to eat and drink the place, devouring it with his eyes. Yet it was not for love of it, but for what he could get out of it. He was very like Father then, and more like every year, both to look at and in his mind. Saving that he was less tempersome and more set in his ways, he was Father's very marrow. Father's temper got up despart quick, and when it was up he was a ravening lion. Maybe that was what gave Mother that married-all-o'er look. But Gideon I only saw angered, to call angered, three