

# **Partial recoveries**

**Barbara Gamble**

**Constable : London**

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For Hilda, life has improved with the years and especially with the death of her brutal husband Harry. But Robin's parents, Henry and Margaret, are quarrelling their way drearily through their retirement, and Margaret has even suggested divorce.

Barbara Gamble's perceptive, ironic, and humorous novel explores the difficult and unhappy lives of the family as further accidents of fate—some lucky, some tragic—overwhelm them, and as, struggling with their circumstances and with their memories of the past, each of them achieves eventually a measure of dignity, hope, and love.

*Also by Barbara Gamble*

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**For Mum and Dad  
and for Mildred**

No state of life endures; pleasure and pain take each  
their turn, and pleasure's turn is shorter.

*Thyestes* by Seneca, translated by E. F. Watling

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## Prologue

Both families were taken aback when, five years ago, Robin and Kate decided to get married. Almost everyone who knew them agreed that such a union was ill-matched and the more cynical among their mutual friends predicted the marriage would end in the divorce courts within three years. 'They're incompatible,' people said, citing Kate's kindness, Robin's dourness, her easy-going temperament, his moodiness, the fact that while he enjoyed Westerns, she cried at old Hollywood melodramas. 'Incompatible,' they claimed, hoping to be proved right.

When Kate told her mother she was marrying Robin, the first thing that came to Hilda's mind was that Kate must be pregnant. Round her way, people didn't get married unless they had to, and it had been like that for as far back as she could remember. 'You're not showing yet,' she told Kate and was surprised when Kate laughed and shook her head and said she wasn't expecting. 'We love each other,' she replied.

Hilda filled the kettle for tea and rummaged around the kitchen for some cake. 'Love's not enough,' she told Kate, pouring the tea strong, adding three sugars. In the back yard the washing hung, not drying properly, and moss grew on the brickwork. Drinking the tea, Hilda listened while Kate told her how much she loved Robin, when the wedding was to be, about their plans for a honeymoon in the Lake District.

'Nice, though, that Robin of yours,' she said when Kate had stopped talking at last. Kate had to smile at the way her mum made the man she was going to marry sound like a tame bird.

Robin told his parents over Sunday lunch, as his father carved the joint and his mother inspected the linen tablecloth for flaws. The meat was overdone and the smell of horseradish sauce made Robin wince.

'Broccoli?' asked his mother, spoons hovering over the vegetables.

'I'm marrying Kate,' he said.

‘Or French beans?’ Robin asked himself whether his mother had heard.

‘We’re getting married,’ he said again, and Henry, his father, said ‘Ah,’ and muttered something vague about Kate being a nice girl.

‘Pass the horseradish, please,’ said his mother, with disapproval in her voice.

The mealtime passed. Henry talked about work and Margaret about her headache. Robin considered the inscrutability of parents everywhere. Over dessert, he explained that the marriage would be taking place quite soon and the ceremony was to be conducted in a registry office. His father looked relieved at this piece of defiant information, explaining that he could not abide churches, calling them funereal places. ‘Lugubrious music on an untuned organ,’ he said, with his mouth half-full of mousse, ‘unimaginative flowers, that smell of must and piety. Your mother and I married in a church, you know,’ he added, ‘and it was a dreary day for all concerned.’

‘A large reception?’ Margaret inquired over coffee. ‘In a hotel?’

And both families became accustomed to the idea of Robin and Kate marrying. Margaret told herself she did not mind the fact that Kate was from the wrong sort of background, that she held her knife and fork incorrectly, that she used the word ‘lavatory’ too often. She tried in a half-hearted and haphazard manner to lose weight and toured the town’s most exclusive dress shops for a wedding outfit. Henry, when pressed on the subject of the wedding, said such ceremonies were all very well, as long as he was not expected to attend them.

For the first time in her life, Hilda visited a hairdresser. ‘My Kate’s getting wed Saturday,’ she told the girl who washed her hair, emphasising the fact that the wedding was to be white and the reception to be held – courtesy of the Bakers – in a large and posh hotel. She tipped the girl and hoped aloud that her varicose veins would be up to all that standing about.

The ceremony was short, a scant seven minutes, timed by Henry on his digital watch as he stood in the small and stuffy room, thinking his wife’s new hat absurd and fretting over his new dentures. While Kate and Robin signed the register, Hilda blew her nose vigorously and wished she’d worn her support stockings. ‘Killing, these veins of mine,’ she whispered to Margaret. Unable to decipher the accent, Margaret merely smiled a

little, adjusted her hat and thought it odd Kate's mother should wish to talk of murder during her daughter's wedding.

At the reception, Henry sat in a corner in order to avoid both his wife's relatives and his wife. A waitress, dispensing cheap sherry in expensive glasses, offered to get him something from the bar. 'Whisky, please. Large,' said Henry, smiling as he noticed his wife's hat slip from its moorings and tilt, ridiculous, over her right eye.





It is while performing his daily bowel movement in the small downstairs lavatory of his home that Henry Baker hears the first cuckoo of the year. The demented two-tone seems not merely to preface summer, but to confirm that all is right with the world in general and with his bowels in particular. For it is as the call is repeated that Henry releases his sphincteral muscles and defecates punctually as the clock in the hall strikes eleven a.m.

Henry is punctilious about his bowels, believing they ought to perform soundlessly, painlessly and regularly. Margaret thinks such attention to the workings of his body both unnecessary and distasteful. 'You will damage yourself,' she had often claimed, warning grimly of piles. But Henry and Margaret have been married for thirty-four years and Henry pays little attention to what his wife says and continues to take his crossword into the lavatory at five to eleven every morning and to emerge, triumphant, at five past.

And it was towards his bowels that Henry's thoughts moved, on the day of his retirement, four weeks ago. He looked forward to the luxury of defecating in his own home, to escaping – after so many years – the comfortless cubicles of the Inland Revenue Gents', with its stark yellow walls and its austere lavatory paper. He cleared out his desk, he waited for the clock to strike five, and he thought about his bowels.

Shortly before five o'clock, the office party which had been arranged for Henry's retirement began. He had been a popular man and all the staff attended. Everyone agreed that Henry was an easy-going person, kind to the typists, pleasant to his subordinates, quietly deferential to his superiors. Sherry was served in plastic tumblers and several of the typists giggled after drinking two glasses on empty stomachs. Henry smiled at everyone and bequeathed the potted cactus that had stood on his desk for at least a decade to a colleague. A presentation was made and kind things said about his work as a tax inspector. 'A model to us all,' said Mr Porter, his superior. A collection had