

At the
Time Appointed
by
A. Maynard Barbour



At the Time Appointed

Anna Maynard Barbour

Published: 1903

Categorie(s): Fiction, Mystery & Detective, Romance

Source: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/21892>

About Maynard Barbour:

Anna Maynard Barbour (died May 10, 1941) was an American author of best-selling fiction. A 1903 article in the *The Atlantic Monthly* stated that "A. Maynard Barbour has been generally hailed as the most successful of American writers of mystery." Anna Barbour was born in Mansfield, New York in the 19th century. Her parents died when she was young. During the late 19th century, she lived in Helena, Montana where she worked for the U. S. Government. She married an English gentleman in 1893, and her husband reportedly encouraged her writing career. In 1907 she became a Episcopal deaconess at the House of Mercy in Boston and subsequently worked in Boston and Tennessee.

Also available on Feedbooks Maynard Barbour:

- *That Mainwaring Affair* (1900)

Copyright: This work is available for countries where copyright is Life+70 and in the USA.

Note: This book is brought to you by Feedbooks

<http://www.feedbooks.com>

Strictly for personal use, do not use this file for commercial purposes.

Chapter 1

John Darrell

Upon a small station on one of the transcontinental lines winding among the mountains far above the level of the sea, the burning rays of the noonday sun fell so fiercely that the few buildings seemed ready to ignite from the intense heat. A season of unusual drought had added to the natural desolation of the scene. Mountains and foot-hills were blackened by smouldering fires among the timber, while a dense pall of smoke entirely hid the distant ranges from view. Patches of sage-brush and bunch grass, burned sere and brown, alternated with barren stretches of sand from which piles of rubble rose here and there, telling of worked-out and abandoned mines. Occasionally a current of air stole noiselessly down from the canyon above, but its breath scorched the withered vegetation like the blast from a furnace. Not a sound broke the stillness; life itself seemed temporarily suspended, while the very air pulsed and vibrated with the heat, rising in thin, quivering columns.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the rapid approach of the stage from a distant mining camp, rattling noisily down the street, followed by a slight stir within the apparently deserted station. Whirling at breakneck pace around a sharp turn, it stopped precipitately, amid a blinding cloud of dust, to deposit its passengers at the depot.

One of these, a young man of about five-and-twenty, arose with some difficulty from the cramped position which for seven weary hours he had been forced to maintain, and, with sundry stretchings and shakings of his superb form, seemed at last to pull himself together. Having secured his belongings from out the pile of miscellaneous luggage thrown from the stage upon the platform, he advanced towards the slouching figure of a man just emerging from the baggage-room, his hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets, his mouth stretched in a prodigious yawn, the arrival of the stage having evidently awakened him from his siesta.

"How's the west-bound—on time?" queried the young man rather shortly, but despite the curtness of his accents there was a musical quality in the ringing tones.

Before the cavernous jaws could close sufficiently for reply, two distant whistles sounded almost simultaneously.

"That's her," drawled the man, with a backward jerk of his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the sound; "she's at Blind Man's Pass; be here in about fifteen minutes."

The young man turned and sauntered to the rear end of the platform, where he paused for a few moments; then, unconscious of the scrutiny of his fellow-passengers, he began silently pacing up and down, being in no mood for conversation with any one. Every bone in his body ached and his head throbbed with a dull pain, but these physical discomforts, which he attributed to his long and wearisome stage ride, caused him less annoyance than did the fact that he had lost several days' time, besides

subjecting himself to numerous inconveniences and hardships, on what he now denominated a "fool's errand."

An expert mineralogist and metallurgist, he had been commissioned by a large syndicate of eastern capitalists to come west, primarily to examine a certain mine recently offered for sale, and secondarily to secure any other valuable mining properties which might happen to be on the market. A promoter, whose acquaintance he had formed soon after leaving St. Paul, had poured into his ear such fabulous tales of a mine of untold wealth which needed but the expenditure of a few thousands to place it upon a dividend-paying basis, that, after making due allowance for optimism and exaggeration, he had thought it might be worth his while to stop off and investigate. The result of the investigation had been anything but satisfactory for either the promoter or the expert.

He was the more annoyed at the loss of time because of a telegram handed him just before his departure from St. Paul, which he now drew forth, and which read as follows:

"Parkinson, expert for M. and M. on trail. Knows you as our representative, but only by name. Lie low and block him if possible.
Barnard."

He well understood the import of the message. The "M. and M." stood for a rival syndicate of enormous wealth, and the fact that its expert was also on his way west promised lively competition in the purchase of the famous Ajax mine.

"Five days," he soliloquized, glancing at the date of the message, which he now tore into bits, together with two or three letters of little importance. "I have lost my start and am now likely to meet this Parkinson at any stage of the game. However, he has never heard of John Darrell, and that name will answer my purpose as well as any among strangers. I'll notify Barnard when I reach Ophir."

His plans for the circumvention of Parkinson were now temporarily cut short by the appearance of the "double-header" rounding a curve and rapidly approaching—a welcome sight, for the heat and blinding glare of light were becoming intolerable.

Only for a moment the ponderous engines paused, panting and quivering like two living, sentient monsters; the next, with heavy, labored breath, as though summoning all their energies for the task before them, they were slowly ascending the steadily increasing grade, moment by moment with accelerated speed plunging into the very heart of the mountains, bearing John Darrell, as he was to be henceforth known, to a destiny of which he had little thought, but which he himself had, unconsciously, helped to weave.

An hour later, on returning to the sleeper after an unsuccessful attempt at dining, Darrell sank into his seat, and, leaning wearily back, watched with half-closed eyes the rapidly changing scenes through which he was passing, for the time utterly oblivious to his surroundings. Gigantic rocks, grotesque in form and color, flashed past; towering peaks loomed suddenly before him, advancing, receding, disappearing, and reappearing with the swift windings and doublings of the train; massive walls of granite pressed close and closer, seeming for one instant a threatening, impenetrable barrier, the next, opening to reveal glimpses of distant billowy ranges, their summits

white with perpetual snow. The train had now reached a higher altitude, and breezes redolent of pine and fir fanned his throbbing brow, their fragrance thronging his mind with memories of other and far-distant scenes, until gradually the bold outlines of cliff and crag grew dim, and in their place appeared a cool, dark forest through which flecks of golden sunlight sifted down upon the moss-grown, flower-strewn earth; a stream singing beneath the pines, then rippling onward through meadows of waving green; a wide-spreading house of colonial build half hidden by giant trees and clinging rose-vines, and, framed among the roses, a face, strong, tender, sweet, crowned with silvered hair—one of the few which sorrow makes beautiful—which came nearer and nearer, bending over him with a mother's blessing; and then he slept.

The face of the sleeper, with its clear-cut, well-moulded features, formed a pleasing study, reminding one of a bit of unfinished carving, the strong, bold lines of which reveal the noble design of the sculptor—the thing of wondrous beauty yet to be—but which still lacks the finer strokes, the final touch requisite to bring it to perfection. Strength of character was indicated there; an indomitable will that would bend the most adverse conditions to serve its own masterful purpose and make of obstacles the paving-stones to success; a mind gifted with keen perceptive faculties, but which hitherto had dealt mostly with externals and knew little of itself or of its own powers. Young, with splendid health and superabundant vitality, there had been little opportunity for introspection or for the play of the finer, subtler faculties; and of the whole gamut of susceptibilities, ranging from exquisite suffering to ecstatic joy, few had been even awakened. His was a nature capable of producing the divinest harmonies or the wildest discords, according to the hand that swept the strings as yet untouched.

For more than an hour Darrell slept. He was awakened by the murmur of voices near him, confused at first, but growing more distinct as he gradually recalled his surroundings, until, catching the name of "Parkinson," he was instantly on the alert.

"Yes," a pleasant voice was saying, "I understand the Ajax is for sale if the owners can get their price, but they don't want less than a cold million for it, and it's my opinion they'll find buyers rather scarce at that figure when it comes to a show down."

"Well, I don't know; that depends," was the reply. "The price won't stand in the way with my people, if the mine is all right. They can hand over a million—or two, for that matter—as easily as a thousand, if the property is what they want, but they've got to know what they're buying. That's what I'm out here for."

Taking a quiet survey of the situation, Darrell found that the section opposite his own—which, upon his return from the dining-car, had contained only a motley collection of coats and grips—was now occupied by a party of three, two of whom were engaged in animated conversation. One of the speakers, who sat facing Darrell, was a young man of about two-and-twenty, whose self-assurance and assumption of worldly wisdom, combined with a boyish impetuosity, he found vastly amusing, while at the same time his frank, ingenuous eyes and winning smile of genuine friendliness, revealing a nature as unsuspecting and confiding as a child's, appealed to him strangely and drew him irresistibly towards the young stranger. The other speaker, whom Darrell surmised to be Parkinson, was considerably older and was seated facing the younger man, hence his back was towards Darrell; while the third member of the party, and by far the eldest, of whose face Darrell had a perfect profile view, although

saying little, seemed an interested listener.

The man whom Darrell supposed to be Parkinson inquired the quickest way of reaching the Ajax mine.

"Well, you see it's this way," replied the young fellow. "The Ajax is on a spur that runs out from the main line at Ophir, and the train only runs between there and Ophir twice a week, Wednesdays and Saturdays. Let's see, this is Wednesday; we'll get into Ophir to-morrow, and you'll have to wait over until Saturday, unless you hire a rig to take you out there, and that's pretty expensive and an awfully rough jaunt besides."

"I don't mind the expense," retorted the other, "but I don't know as I care to go on any jaunts over your mountain roads when there's no special necessity for it; I can get exercise enough without that."

"I tell you what, Mr. Parkinson," said the young fellow, cordially, "you and your friend here, Mr. Hunter,"—Darrell started at the mention of the latter name,—"had better wait over till Saturday, and in the mean time I'll take you people out to Camp Bird, as we call it, and show you the Bird Mine; that's our mine, you know, and I tell you she is a 'bird,' and no mistake. You'll be interested in looking her over, though I'll tell you beforehand she's not for sale."

"Do I understand that you have an interest in this remarkable mine, Mr. Whitcomb?" Parkinson inquired, a tinge of amusement in his tone.

"Not in the way you mean; that is, not yet, though there's no telling how soon I may have if things turn out as I hope," and the boyish cheek flushed slightly. "But I know what I'm talking about all the same. My uncle, D. K. Underwood, is a practical mining man of nearly thirty years' experience, and what he doesn't know about mines and mining isn't worth knowing. He's interested in a dozen or so of the best mines in the State, but I don't think he would exchange his half-interest in the Bird Mine for all his other holdings put together. She's a comparatively new mine yet, but taking into consideration her depth and the amount of development, she's the best-paying mine in the State. Here, let me show you something." And hastily pulling a note-book from his pocket, he took therefrom a narrow slip of paper which he handed to the expert.

"There's a statement," he continued, "made out by the United States Assay Office, back here at Galena, that will show you the returns from a sixty days' run at the Bird mill; what do you think of that?"

Parkinson's face was still invisible to Darrell, but the latter heard a long, low whistle of surprise. Young Whitcomb looked jubilant.

"They say figures won't lie," he added, in tones of boyish enthusiasm, "but if you don't believe those figures, I've got the cash right here to show for it," accompanying the words with a significant gesture.

Parkinson handed the slip to Hunter, then leaned back in his seat, giving Darrell a view of his profile.

"Sixty days!" he said, musingly. "Seventy-five thousand dollars! I think I would like to take a look at the Bird Mine! I think I would like to make Mr. Underwood's acquaintance!"

Whitcomb laughed exultingly. "I'll give you an opportunity to do both if you'll stop over," he said; "and don't you forget that my uncle can give you some pointers on the Ajax, for he knows every mine in the State."

Mr. Hunter here handed the slip of paper to Whitcomb. "Young man," he said, with

some severity, gazing fixedly at Whitcomb through his eye-glasses, "do you mean to say that you are travelling with seventy-five thousand dollars on your person?"

"Certainly, sir," Whitcomb replied, evidently enjoying the situation.

Mr. Hunter shook his head. "Very imprudent!" he commented. "You are running a tremendous risk. I wonder that your uncle would permit it!"

"Oh, that's all right," said Whitcomb, confidently. "Uncle usually comes down himself with the shipments of bullion, and he generally banks the most of his money there at Galena, but he couldn't very well leave this time, so he sent me, and as he was going to use considerable money paying for a lot of improvements we've put in and paying off the men, he told me to bring back the cash. There's not much danger anyway; the West isn't as wild nowadays as it used to be."

Handing a second bit of paper to Parkinson, he added: "There's something else that will interest you; the results of some assays made by the United States Assay Office on some samples taken at random from a new strike we made last week. I'll show you some of the samples, too."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Parkinson, running his eye over the returns. "You seem to have a mine there, all right!"

"Sure thing! You'll think so when you see it," Whitcomb answered, fumbling in a grip at his feet.

At sight of the specimens of ore which he produced a moment later, his two companions became nearly as enthusiastic as himself. Leaning eagerly forward, they began an inspection of the samples, commenting on their respective values, while Whitcomb, unfolding a tracing of the workings of the mine, explained the locality from which each piece was taken, its depth from the surface, the width and dip of the vein, and other items of interest.

Darrell, who was carefully refraining from betraying any special interest in the party across the aisle, soon became aware that he was not the only interested listener to the conversation. In the section directly in front of the one occupied by Whitcomb and his companions a man was seated, apparently engrossed in a newspaper, but Darrell, who had a three-quarter view of his face, soon observed that he was not reading, but listening intently to the conversation of the men seated behind him, and particularly to young Whitcomb's share in it. Upon hearing the latter's statement that he had with him the cash returns for the shipment of bullion, Darrell saw the muscles of his face suddenly grow tense and rigid, while his hands involuntarily tightened their hold upon the paper. He grew uncomfortable under Darrell's scrutiny, moved restlessly once or twice, then turning, looked directly into the piercing dark eyes fixed upon him. His own eyes, which were small and shifting, instantly dropped, while the dark blood mounted angrily to his forehead. A few moments later, he changed his position so that Darrell could not see his face, but the latter determined to watch him and to give Whitcomb a word of warning at the earliest opportunity.

"Well," said Parkinson, leaning back in his seat after examining the ores and listening to Whitcomb's outline of their plans for the future development of the mine, "it seems to me, young man, you have quite a knowledge of mines and mining yourself."

Whitcomb flushed with pleasure. "I ought to," he said; "there isn't a man in this western country that understands the business better or has got it down any finer than

my uncle. He may not be able to talk so glibly or use such high-sounding names for things as you fellows, but he can come pretty near telling whether a mine will pay for the handling, and if it has any value he generally knows how to go to work to find it."

"Well, that's about the 'gist' of the whole business," said Parkinson; he added: "You say he can give me some 'tips' on the Ajax?"

"He can if he chooses to," laughed Whitcomb, "but you'd better not let him know that I said so. He'll be more likely to give you information if you ask him offhand."

"Well," continued Parkinson, "when we get to Ophir, I'll know whether or not I can stop over. I've heard there's another fellow out here on this Ajax business; whether he's ahead of me I don't know. I'll make inquiries when we reach Ophir, and if he hasn't come on the scene yet I can afford to lay off; if he has, I must lose no time in getting out to the mine." Parkinson glanced at Hunter, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

"I guess that's the best arrangement we can make at present," said Parkinson, rising from his seat. "Come and have a smoke with us, Mr. Whitcomb?"

Whitcomb declined the invitation, and, after Hunter and Parkinson had left, sat idly turning over the specimens of ore, until, happening to catch Darrell's eye, he inquired, pleasantly,—

"Are you interested in this sort of thing?"

"In a way, yes," said Darrell, crossing over and taking the seat vacated by Parkinson. "I'm not what you call a mining man; that is, I've never owned or operated a mine, but I take a great interest in examining the different ores and always try to get as much information regarding them as possible."

Whitcomb at once launched forth enthusiastically upon a description of the various samples. Darrell, while careful not to show too great familiarity with the subject, or too thorough a knowledge of ores in general, yet was so keenly appreciative of their remarkable richness and beauty that he soon won the boy's heart.

"Say!" he exclaimed, "you had better stop off at Ophir with us; we would make a mining man of you in less than no time! By the way, how far west are you travelling?"

"Ophir is my destination at present, though it is uncertain how long I remain there."

"Long enough, that we'll get well acquainted, I hope. Going into any particular line of business?"

"No, only looking the country over, for the present."

To divert the conversation from himself, Darrell, by a judicious question or two, led Whitcomb to speak of the expert.

"Parkinson?" he said with a merry laugh. "Oh, yes, he's one of those eastern know-it-alls who come out here occasionally to give us fellows a few points on mines. They're all right, of course, for the men who employ them, who want to invest their money and wouldn't know a mine if they saw one; but when they undertake to air their knowledge among these old fellows who have spent a lifetime in the business, why, they're likely to get left, that's all. Now, this Parkinson seems to be a pretty fair sort of man compared with some of them, but between you and me, I'd wager my last dollar that they'll lose him on that Ajax mine!"

"Why, what's the matter with the Ajax?" Darrell inquired, indifferently.

"Well, as you're not interested in any way, I'm not telling tales out of school. The Ajax has been a bonanza in its day, but within the last year or so the bottom has dropped out of the whole thing, and that's the reason the owners are anxious to sell."

"I hear they ask a pretty good price for the mine."

"Yes, they're trading on her reputation, but that's all past. The mine is practically worked out. They've made a few good strikes lately, so that there is some good ore in sight, and this is their chance to sell, but there are no indications of any permanence. One of our own men was over there a while ago, and he said there wasn't enough ore in the mine to keep their mill running full force for more than six months."

"Is this Hunter an expert also?"

"Oh, no; Parkinson said he was a friend of his, just taking the trip for his health."

Darrell smiled quietly, knowing Hunter to be a member of the syndicate employing Parkinson, but kept his knowledge to himself.

A little later, when Darrell and Whitcomb left together for the dining-car, quite a friendship had sprung up between them. There was that mutual attraction often observed between two natures utterly diverse. Whitcomb was unaccountably drawn towards the dark-eyed, courteous, but rather reticent stranger, while his own frank friendliness and childlike confidence awoke in Darrell's nature a correlative tenderness and affection which he never would have believed himself capable of feeling towards one of his own sex.

"I don't know what is the matter with me," said Darrell, as he seated himself at a table, facing Whitcomb. "My head seems to have a small-sized stamp-mill inside of it; every bone in my body aches, and my joints feel as though they were being pulled apart."

Whitcomb looked up quickly. "Are you just from the East, or have you been out here any time?"

"I stopped for a few days, back here a ways."

"In the mountain country?"

"Yes."

"By George! I believe you've got the mountain fever; there's an awful lot of it round here this season, and this is just the worst time of year for an easterner to come out here. But we'll look after you when we get to Ophir, and bring you round all right."

"Much obliged, but I think I'll be all right after a night's rest," Darrell replied, inwardly resolved, upon reaching Ophir, to push on to the Ajax as quickly as possible, though his ardor was considerably cooled by Whitcomb's report.

When they left the dining-car the train was stopping at a small station, and for a few moments the young men strolled up and down the platform. A dense, bluish-gray haze hung low over the country, rendering the outlines of even the nearest objects obscure and dim; the western sky was like burnished copper, and the sun, poised a little above the horizon, looked like a ball of glowing fire.

Just as the train was about to start Darrell saw the man whose peculiar actions he had noticed earlier, leave the telegraph office and jump hastily aboard. Calling Whitcomb's attention as he passed them, he related his observations of the afternoon and cautioned him against the man. For an instant Whitcomb looked serious.

"I suppose it was rather indiscreet in me to talk as I did," he said, "but it can't be helped now. However, I guess it's all right, but I'm obliged to you all the same."

They passed into the smoker, where Darrell was introduced to Hunter and Parkinson. In a short time, however, he found himself suffering from nausea and growing faint and dizzy.