

## Two Mrs. Tabors and The Silver King

By Kathleen Watt

IN MARCH OF 1935, Baby Doe Tabor was found frozen to death in her one-room shack, among her diaries, twelve thousand scribbled notes, and seventeen precious scrapbooks—many in code. In 1956, the year that Baby’s simple code was cracked, *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, by composer Douglas Moore, was first presented. The opera is chock full of the real names, dates and places that made a legend of America’s Old West—drawn from the pages of history, colored by secrets revealed in Baby’s records.

Librettist John LaTouche coaxes poetry from historical fact. But be assured—these things really happened. The opera’s miners, saloon girls and cronies accurately catalogue Horace Tabor’s shenanigans, the bitter complaints of his first wife, Augusta, the scandals of his second wife, Baby Doe. Soprano Adelina Patti, who so entralls the ladies in Act I, was only one of many luminaries who appeared at Leadville’s Tabor Opera House. Presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan’s grandiloquent “Cross of Gold” speech of 1896 made him famous. On stage, LaTouche turns even political oration into a dramatic *tour de force*. And in Moore’s folksy melody and period harmonies, history reaches the heart.

Both Augusta Pierce Tabor and Elizabeth “Baby” McCourt Doe Tabor were pretty, principled, courageous women, from solidly middle-class families. Horace Tabor fell in love with just those qualities, in both women. In Act I, Augusta acknowledges that she’s become “harsh and stingy,” and in Act II, Scene iv, we hear Baby’s mother call Augusta “a mean old termagant (nineteenth century English for a quarrelsome, furious, scolding woman).” But Augusta hadn’t always been that.

Twenty years before the opera begins, Augusta had been the boss’ daughter, lovely and clever. Horace had been her swain—a stonemason in her father’s employ, ambitious and affable. Newlywed in 1857, they’d ridden the train from Maine to St. Louis—the end of the line—pushing west by riverboat, homesteading with Free Soilers in Kansas Territory’s anti-slavery colonies. To stay the howling Kansas wind, Augusta papered their rude log walls with the *New York Tribune*, “...putting the newspapers right side up, that I might read them at my leisure...” There, the first Tabor child, Maxcy, was born. Augusta often spent days alone with her infant son, listening for wolves, “border ruffians,” or desperate Cheyenne, reading and rereading the

*Tribune*'s old news—the political caterwauling, Horace Greeley's trenchant editorials. Then, in 1859, the Tabors joined the gold rush to Pike's Peak.

A brutal tramp across six hundred miles of unsettled wilderness with a wagonload of bare necessities, a yoke of oxen, a couple of cows, and a baby will toughen the spirit and callous the hand. For eighteen years, the Tabors criss-crossed the Mosquito Range, intermittently panning and sluicing. Horace was no different than a hundred thousand unlucky greenhorns gulled by easy "blossom rock"—except that he'd married the indomitable Augusta. Together they settled into a seasonal life following the camps that chased the big strikes, selling services and supplies, running a post office, weighing the ore, wintering in a boomtown below. They were partners, known from Oro City to Leadville as "sturdy merchants," honest and generous. By the late 1870's, when Colorado gold veins had begun to pinch out and business slowed, the Tabors had raised and educated their son Maxcy, and thanks to Augusta's industry and relentless thrift, they had amassed about \$40,000.

Now fifty, Horace had retired his bonanza fantasy, instead enjoying it vicariously through ragtag hangers-on. Sometimes he'd even provide the food and other necessary supplies for their pitiful mountain forays. And that's how, against all odds, Horace Tabor struck paydirt. One April Sunday in 1878, two woebegone old-timers took \$64.75 worth of supplies and a whiskey jug from Tabor's shelves, in return for a one-third stake in what turned out to be the richest lode of silver in the gulch. By year's end that unwitting investment had made Tabor a millionaire twice over. He discovered he hadn't lost his appetite for a bonanza after all.

And Baby Doe was about to arrive in Leadville. Like Augusta, Lizzie McCourt Doe was more than she first appeared. As a budding beauty in Wisconsin, she had aspired to the theater. She'd won a boys-only ice skating championship. She'd tended her father's prominent clothing business. But Lizzie would always be "shanty Irish" to Protestant blue-bloods. So, in 1877, when Oshkosh society wag Harvey Doe, Jr. proposed to Lizzie, all the McCourts graciously accepted their upward mobility. The groom's father, senior partner of the Sierra Madre Investment Corporation, made a propitious wedding gift of one of his silver mines in Central City, Colorado. Though it would take some hard work to develop the mine, Harvey and his dew-kissed bride seemed headed for the good life.

But Harvey was an idler and a tippler. His mine never produced—not until Lizzie herself devised an auxiliary shaft. Lizzie donned coveralls and shoveled alongside day-wage miners, igniting a spirit that Harvey couldn't. In town, respectable eyebrows raised, but “Cousin Jack” (the Cornishmen who sang lusty harmony in the mines) bestowed upon Lizzie the name by which she would be favored in frontier legend. “Baby.”

Of course, Baby Doe was no stranger to scandal. It wasn't only her mother, Mama McCourt, who often said that “...[her] beauty deserved to find a man...so rich...so powerful, that he could give [her] anything...like a princess in olden days... (Act I, iv)” For one, there was Jake Sandelowsky, Central City's handsome haberdasher. Harvey had already begun to find everything about his wife difficult—especially her moxie. When he abandoned Baby for a bottle—at least twice—Jake was there. When Baby bore a stillborn son, some said he looked a lot like Jake. Baby divorced Harvey with foresight and courage that was ahead of her time, but she miscalculated the stigma that would attach to her. A beautiful divorcée in 1880 stood on a social rung below actress—just above prostitute. When Jake invited her to Leadville, Baby seized her opportunity to leave Central City behind.

Horace Tabor's midlife scandals were incidental, by comparison. He was merely oafish and uncouth. In sheer pleasure at being rich, Horace threw money around. He loved to be called “Silver King.” He paraded his Highland Guards down Main Street, in full Royal Stewart regalia, sporrans swinging. Horace longed to give Augusta everything her heart desired, but she desired so little. He wanted to establish her in an opulent Denver mansion. Mortified, Augusta moved into the servants' quarters. Horace was making money faster than he could spend it, and had nobody to enjoy it with him. Nobody to buy white lace gloves for. Then he met Baby Doe.

Untrammelled, Tabor's exuberance exploded. He became by turns Leadville's mayor, banker, newspaper publisher, postmaster, Colorado State Legislator, Lieutenant Governor, and U.S. Senator *pro tem*. He fell completely in love with Baby Doe. He rid himself of Augusta in an illegal secret divorce, ensconcing his paramour as wife, with ermine, emeralds, and two weddings—one in Washington, D.C., attended by President Arthur. Their palatial home occupied an entire Denver block, with a hundred live peacocks, and five enameled carriages, each with a color-coordinated team of horses, and four liveried coachmen. These Tabors squandered twelve million dollars in ten years.

Denver society mocked them as the “Tabor Circus.” The *Denver Tribune* fulminated, “Tabor is an utter disgrace to the State... Essentially a vulgarian of doubtful antecedents, he strove to buy his way into political position... He is a social and political outcast in all senses of the word.”

Baby Doe had envisioned something quite different. But she loved Horace. As Baby sings in Act I, “I needed help, and he was kind to me...” Together they had two daughters, Lillie and Rose (called “Silver Dollar”), who grew up in the limelight of celebrities and presidents. When the silver crash of 1893 made Horace a poor man and an outcast even faster than he’d become rich, Baby sold her finery. When Horace, at 67, resorted to hauling slag for \$3 a day, Baby importuned old politicians to appoint Horace as Denver’s postmaster. When he died in 1899, Horace was not bitter. Baby was at his side for a sleepless week, and she heard his urgent last words:

“Hang onto the Matchless!”

Baby was still famously beautiful in 1899. Nevertheless, for thirty-five lonely years she made the Matchless Mine her life. Desperately poor, she worked the mine herself, alongside her daughters. When Lillie deserted her, in teenaged bewilderment and shame, Baby and Silver Dollar moved into the mine’s supply shack. When Silver eventually left to pursue journalism in Denver, Baby found solace in her pine-bough shrine to the Virgin—and in her Ouija board. In 1925, word came of Silver’s death—scalded to death by her own teapot, in a flophouse on Chicago’s South Side. “Drink and Dope Blamed for Death of Once Wealthy Daughter of Senator,” blared the *Chicago Herald-Examiner*. Baby slipped increasingly into delusion.

Augusta had died in California in 1895—wealthy, having shrewdly invested her divorce settlement. By the time of her death in 1935, most of Baby Doe’s valuables had long since been sold. There remained only a Tiffany tea set, a diamond and sapphire ring, the ermine collar and cuffs—just a token—of her regal opera coat. Tabor’s preposterous watch-fob was there. Twenty-odd trunks, boxes, and bundles were filled with the vestiges of legend. Among them were 250 love letters from Horace. And Augusta Tabor’s calling card.