

BEGGING A HUSBAND.

(This curious story was found in the archives of the H—family, of Boston, and is of undoubted authenticity. They are a family proud of their Puritan ancestry, directly descended from the pair mentioned in the story, and a careful record of their deeds of valor and heroism has always been kept. That this is regarded as such is proven by the careful detailed record of her act; an act, considering the times, of unparalleled courage and devoted love. It was made possible by the existence of a curious law, not even at that time in active use, but not yet repealed, known as "Begging a Husband." The gist of the law was, that if a woman, as the executioner was about to occur, asked publicly of the sheriff the condemned man for a husband, his life could be saved no matter what the crime, if he chose to accept her for a wife. If not the execution went on. There have been but two or three instances recorded of the law having been brought into force, as it subjected the woman to shameful criticism; and it was either a very bold and shameless, or simple and loving woman who could brave public opinion in such a matter.

The time for the noon-tide meal was at hand, and Mistress Sylvia was in the dairy getting the milk for Farmer Comber's dinner. As usual with her of late she had fallen in to reverie, and stood near the window gazing down Chantry-way, which lane ran back of the house. Her head leant on her one hand, while the other, grasping the milk skimmer, hung listlessly at her side. Her lips curved in a tender smile showing the scolloped edges of her small white teeth, and the sparkle of her dove-blue eyes was softened like a mist unto an awakening babe's. In the rose bloom of her cheek a dimple worked in and out at every change of feeling. She drew from her bosom the ring threaded on a blue ribbon and was fitting it on her finger—the same that he—the subject of her thoughts—had placed it, when she was startled to hear her name gently called: "Mistress Sylvia, make no noise to betray me."

She leaned a little out of the casement, and him of whom her mind was full. At first she took him to be a part of her musings. A look into his pale, hunted face brought to her a realization of danger.

"What brings thee here, sir?" she faltered low.

"The soldiers pursue me, and are even now turning into Chantry lane!"

As he spoke there came faintly on the calm yellow air the thud of horses' feet and faint hurtle of arms.

"Canst hide me?"

Quick as a flash she said: "Yes, Make for the ricks!"

He did as she bade, and she, slipping over to the rick-yard, said: "Burrow into the rick's middle. Bide here till I warn thee." This he did speedily, and she pulled the hay in place, and covered the breathing-hole skilfully with a truss, then quickly let in the old red cow and suckling calf and let them munch at the same rick wherein the gallant lay concealed.

Mistress Sylvia sped back to the house with the pitcher of milk, and was dutifully pouring it for her father, when a great clatter and hurley arose in the yard. In a moment an officer and his men came in with scant ceremony at the open hall door.

"Entrance in the King's name!" he cried. "What's your will?" said the farmer, his face blanching, for those were perilous times, but otherwise showing no fear.

"We seek a highwayman, leader of a band of rebels. We must search your house. We saw him creep through a shard but now, and he must be hidden somewhere about."

"I've seen none," said the farmer; "but do your will!" and he waved his right arm about to indicate that the whole place was open to search.

The soldiers proceeded to their duty, and not a crack or cranney, nor cupboard nor loft was there that was not peered into. Just as they had finished Jock rushed in from the meadow, bellowing: "The young cattle's in the ricks! Som'muns left open the gate!"

Sylvia turned pale and quaked with fright. Her father and all the soldiers, bent now on being friendly as the farmer had not hindered, but helped in the search, set off to the ricks to do him a good turn. In a moment the cattle were turned out. The rick where the cavalier lay hidden was badly torn, but Sylvia was joyed to see that only stupid Jock was left to right it, while the soldiers proceeded to search the out-buildings.

They found naught, and the officer said: "S gad! 'Scaped us again! He rides the witches' broomstick, or he's the Devil's own!"

The farmer fed the soldiers bountifully, nor spared his good home-brewed ale, so when they left it was with great good will to Farmer Comber and all his. Then Mistress Sylvia breathed freely, for she knew the danger was past. The idle compliments of the officers she could not brook, and at the over-bold gaze of the boorish soldiers she felt offended.

The same evening at early rise of the moon she stole to the rick where the red cow had eaten, and carried with her food and drink for the prisoner. He hastily ate and drank. Meanwhile she noticed he no longer wore his brave finery, but had on a jerkin of coarse homespun cloth and leather breeches such as boors commonly wore, over all was thrown a rough gray cloak. But to her indulgent fancy he was just as goodly as when attired in his gentleman's dress. When he had done eating he took her hand and tenderly kissed it, then lowered his head till his lips nearly touched hers, but on a swift thought, the shadow of which lingered in his softened eyes, raised it again, and said in a voice full of feeling: "I knew when first I set eyes on thee thou wert a good angel, but little did I think how soon thou'dst be a ministering spirit to me!"

"Go! go!" she urged. "I fear me some one will come! Take safety in flight!"

In the darkness he crept away under cover of the hedge, and turned back to the lane by which he had come.

Three months passed and Mistress Sylvia had no tidings of the gallant whom she had saved. But she knew he was alive; for was not her carnelian heart bright and red as the blood that flowed in his lusty veins? And

would it not pale and fade when that red current ceased to flow? Nor had Farmer Comber ever got back a farthing of his silver from the sale of his beast, neither had his pad-nag been found. In its stall stood Mistress Sylvia's dun palfrey bought last market day. The farmer had lodged his complaint with the magistrate, and one gusty morning in January there rode up to the door a bailiff and sundry followers, with a writ summoning John Comber, Yoeman, to appear at the Assizes, and prove property found in the possession of one Richard Darcy, Gent., accused of highway robbery and sundry felonies against his gracious Majesty the King.

While the man read the summons to her father, Mistress Sylvia was modestly peeping from her casement window behind the muslin curtains. At the close of the reading they all passed into the kitchen to partake of the farmer's hospitality so urgently pressed upon them; for they had ridden a matter of twenty miles through muck and mire, in the teeth of a frosty wind. The bailiff was last. He had paused to pat the neck of his horse, a noble beast, black as night, with four white feet and a round white spot in his rump. Mistress Sylvia knew the horse at a glance. For had she not sat on its back and rode with her hands clasping the middle of the charmingest gallant that ever was seen. But how came this lout by that steed?

As if in answer to her question asked mentally, the man turned to Farmer Comber and said in a seeming reply to his words: "Aye, 'Tis a noble beast! It was that bawlock's Dick Darcy o' Thistleworth. 'Tis mine now for hounding him down!"

Sylvia shrank back behind the curtain, but was not much shocked. For were not the most gallant of men reduced to such practices in these troubled times? So, then, her gallant gentleman was Dick o' Thistleworth, a name as well-known in those parts as the King's or Cromwell's!

What maid of true and tender heart was ever known to think less of a man when in dire calamity. She watched her father ride away with fearful heart. What would they do to poor Dick? Her mind was filled with dark foreboding, for she had heard gruesome tales of clanking chains and whirling birds rising in clouds from long black objects, the stench from which was borne for miles by very winds which swayed them in their gyves. Perhaps he, too, would go by Tyburn-Tree way and hang in chains to rot! At thought of all this comeliness doomed to such fearful plight her heart grew hot, and love that had only smoldered like the waiting spark within the flint, was ruck into burning flame by the steel of suffering.

All that night she lay, now planning, now weeping, now suffering silently, then praying, as women have done for the first death for men they love, but to no avail. Nothing opened up a way to save him! All the next week she went listlessly about her tasks, waiting for a message from her father, which he promised to send by Jock, who had gone along to fetch back the stolen pad-nag.

At the end of the week, in the cold dimness of the early winter evening Jock returned bearing a letter from Farmer Comber to his wife. He said: I got back all the bloody villians robbed me off, and my evidence condemned the man. Without favor he will be hanged tomorrow on the gallows, at the end of Hingham, a most doleful, lonesome place, reached only by a muddy lane. Dastard that he is! His carcass will be hung in chains and left food for the ravens. There is no escape for him, as the sheriff will not take a fine. There is only one way he may go scott-free, but that is not likely; for in those times no maid could be found of such unseemly boldness."

Then followed an explanation of Dick's only chance of escape. Sylvia listened eagerly. Here was the one chance! The only one! She would take it, bold and unseemly it might be. As night drew in she made her plans, and when all were safe abed she slipped from the house to the stable where stood her own palfrey. She quickly threw on the pillion and mounted. Then took the road for Shrewsbury. The dark, cold night through she rode, one great fear swallowing up lesser ones. She could only go at a foot-pace, and at the break of day found herself approaching the town through a miry lane. Already people were abroad on horse and on foot, moving toward the town. The fame of "Gentleman Dick" had gone forth, and it would be a brave sight to see him hang.

The gray light brightened, and for a moment the sun shon through parted clouds, then retreated sullenly. At times Mistress Sylvia's resolution wavered, with a maid's natural timidity. Again she was full of ecstatic elation at the thought of being able to save that most noble gallant. At the edge of the town she stopped at the cottage of a former maid-servant of her mother's to wait the hour set. As it reared her courage grew stronger, while she trembled at the unmaidenly boldness of her design. When the hour had come at her earnest appeal, Martha Hoskins went with her down Hingham lane afoot. It was alive with folks bent on seeing the hanging, who stared and jeered at them for drabs out to see such a sight.

When they reached the place Sylvia turned pale and quaked with fear to see high in air a gallows-tree of new white timber, from which dangled two new white hempen ropes and the horrid chains which now and again clanked together, making baleful music. In them his lifeless carcass was to be left for the birds after the rope had done its cruel work. All eyes were turned down the lane, whence soon issued a slow procession of sheriff, bailiff, witnesses, and but one prisoner, guarded by men holding staves in their hands, and now and again belaboring some wight who pressed too close to the prison. A whisper ran through the crowd that the King had accepted ransom money from the other one, and he was free. But there was no freedom for "Dick the padder."

The train came to a stand under the gallows-tree, and all were tersely silent while the death warrant was read. The prisoner was pale, but kept his proud and haughty bearing. His black eyes flashed, and not a tremor shook his stalwart frame when the chains were flung together by a fierce blast of icy wind till they rang again. The crowd stood agape in the silence of satiated curiosity, when suddenly from the midst of it broke a young maid, so pale and agitated that none could look upon her but in pity. The prison-

er's eyes were bent upon the ground, and he alone of all the gaping crowd saw her not. She made her way to the sheriff, and standing before him said in clear, low, but decisive tones:

"My Lord, I bespeak that man of you for a husband."

Darcy raised his eyes, half a smile hovering on his lips, expecting to see some ill-favored wench who would thus boldly "beg" a husband under the shadow of the gallows. But when he saw the maid whose image lay in his heart, and beheld the wanness of her erstwhile round pink cheeks now hollowed in by woe, and the flash of the dove-blue eyes quenched by many tears, he faltered for the first time, and his falcon-eyes filled. He half extended his shackled hands, then let them drop again as he bent over the maid so near him, and said in low trembling tone: "Truly Mistress Sylvia, thou hast done much for me, but I never dared 'hope' that thou would'st have 'begged' me!"

The sheriff and the officers, taken aback, consulted together, then the sheriff said to the wondering men. "The execution must be stayed while the matter hath examination. There is such a law, and it has never been repealed, but seldom has it been brought into force as today."

Turning to "Gentleman Dick," who stood looking at Mistress Sylvia, surprise and love showing in his handsome face, he said: "It's 'Rope or Ring' with thee, good sir; the parson or the hangman! Thou'st the power of choice it seems, since this fair maid hath 'begged' thee. It is no task to guess which 'twill be, and right glad am I too that it should be so! For a more winsome maid and a braver gentleman I'm not likely again to see made one under the shadow of Tyburn-Tree!"

"How little we know what is in store for us!" murmured the cabbage, as it hurtled through the air. "A month ago I never dreamed of going on the stage."

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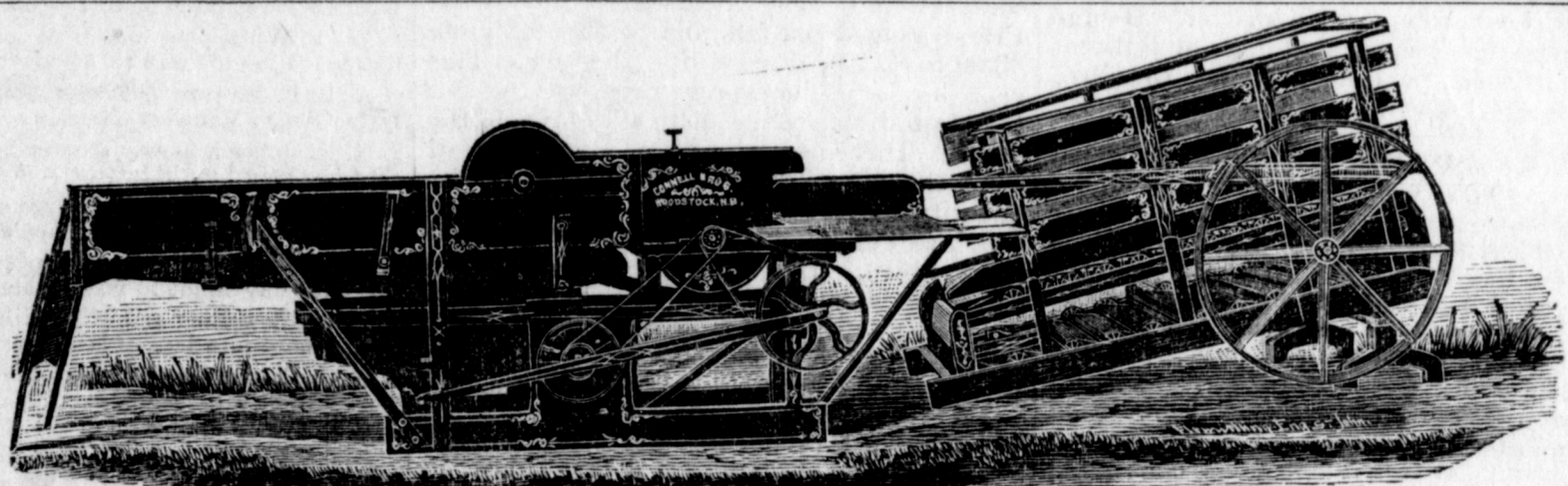
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