

THE MAN IN THE CORN-HOUSE.

By SEWELL FORD.

Although these incidents occurred during the War of 1812 they had nothing at all to do with the beginning or end of that struggle. They might, barring a few details, have happened yesterday. So don't expect history.

Do you know how clear and cold a December morning in Lower Quebec, just across the Vermont line, can be? Well, it was just that kind of a morning when Elizabeth Brewster went to the corn-house and had an adventure. She was after an ear of corn for her pet horse. As she unlatched the corn-house door she heard a rustling sound within. "Rats," thought Elizabeth, and was undisturbed. But as she opened the door she saw a man. He had been facing away from the door, probably peering through the cracks in the direction of the road, but he had turned as she opened it. He was a tall man and a young one. He wore the cocked hat of the American militiaman, but otherwise his dress was that of a civilian.

"Well, sir," said Elizabeth inquiringly. She was startled but not frightened.

"Well, young mistress?" returned the intruder, looking her coolly in the face.

"May I ask the nature of the business which brings you to my father's corn-house?" Tramps were unheard of in those days and thieves were equally unknown in that section.

"You may ask, but I would rather not answer."

"But I insist, sir."

"Then I obey. The garrison of the fortress in the village is to be paraded in yonder field today. I came here to watch the evolution. I entered your father's corn-house because its open walls offered an excellent place of observation and shelter."

"Why not make your observation in the open?"

"Because I wish to see without being seen."

"Then you are a Yankee spy."

"Your eyes are gray."

"You are an enemy of my country."

"I am your sincere admirer."

"Your words are unbecoming. I have not met you before, sir."

"Nor I you, but the best of good fortune comes when least expected."

"This meeting can mean no good fortune to you, sir."

"And why not?"

"Because I must deliver you to the authorities as a captured spy."

"I became your captive the moment I looked into your eyes."

"You are pleased to speak very lightly of your situation, sir."

"Not so; I was never more serious in my life. Falling in love is no light matter."

"You seem to make no hard work of it."

"It was no task at all."

"We are not talking sense, sir. What am I to do with you?"

"What do you usually do with your captives?"

"I—I never had one before."

"Then all men hereabouts must be blind."

"I am in earnest, sir. I find you hiding in my father's corn-house, and you admit—"

"That I think your eyes are beautiful."

Elizabeth made a gesture of impatience at the interruption.

"My father and Captain Rylance, of the Garrison Guards, are at this moment within call," she continued. "Should I shout they would come and take you prisoner. It is my duty to tell them—"

"Liz-beth! 'Liz-beth!"

The voice came from the direction of the house.

"Yes, mother!" responded the girl.

"What are you doing?"

"I—why, I am getting some corn," Elizabeth stammered.

"The man in the corn-house laughed easily and Elizabeth for the first time flushed.

"Do not think it is because of your fine words that I have not exposed you," she said. "It is because I have not to do with war and wish you no harm. You—you may go, now, sir, and pray be quick."

"I thank you, Elizabeth, but believe me, I never saved my neck with such reluctance. Since I have learned your name I will tell you mine: it is Matthew Alden. I am of Vermont, and am on the staff of General Hampton. Good-by; but remember, I am still your captive," and before Elizabeth could stop him the tall young man had held her for a second in his arms and touched his lips to hers. Then he had disappeared behind the barn.

Just what were Elizabeth's thoughts for the next few hours I do not pretend to know. Not being a young woman, and never having been kissed by a strange young man in a corn-house, I don't see how I could be expected to know. I might guess, but so could you. Neither do I know how she felt when, four hours later, she learned that Matthew Alden had been captured after a desperate struggle and lodged in the village prison as a spy.

I do know, however, what she did. She managed to slip away from home after night-fall and go to the rear of the prison which was a substantial old stone house standing on the main street.

It was a bright moonlight night and she stood in the shadow of the building. Through a barred window on the second floor came a dim light.

Elizabeth picked up a piece of an icicle which had fallen from the eaves and made an effort to throw it against the window-pane. She missed the window by at least 5 feet. The clavicule in Elizabeth's right shoulder was fashioned just exactly the same as that bone is in the shoulders of other women. Three times she tried and three times she failed. Then the window was opened and Matthew Alden looked out.

"What are you about down there?" he asked.

"It is I—Elizabeth," came back the rejoinder.

"O-o-o-oh! I am very sorry that I can't ask you in."

"Why didn't you go away?" the girl anxiously inquired.

"I tried to after I had done what I was sent to do, but your soldiers objected."

"You are held as a spy?"

"Yes."

"And you will be shot?"

"Yes."

"Oh, this is dreadful!"

"Do you wish to help me?"

"No, no; I could not do that; it would be treason. But how could I help you?"

"By getting me some pewter."

"What do you want of pewter?"

"I want to make a key for the prison door."

"Could you?"

"I think so. I am something of a locksmith, and the key is a simple one. The jailer showed it to me to-day. He seems to be proud of it. I believe I could get an impression of it in some softened bread."

"Then how would you make it?"

"Why, by melting some pewter in my water cup and moulding it in the ashes of the fireplace. Do you think you could smuggle something of the kind in to me?"

"No, no! Don't ask me to do such a thing. Why don't you use the spoons?"

"He is careful to take them away with him."

"He is a good man. Would silver do as well?"

"Yes, of course. Why?"

"I was going to suggest that he search you for coins."

"It's useless; I haven't any."

"That is fortunate. I only came to tell you that you ought to apologize for what you did just before you left me this morning."

I humbly ask your pardon—for not making two."

"You are very rude, sir. Good-night."

"Oh, Elizabeth! Elizabeth!"

"It was no use to call; she was gone."

The fact that Captain Rylance, since his company had been quartered in the little border town, had looked with admiration into Elizabeth's gray eyes has some bearing on this narrative. Another fact of equal interest is that up to this time Elizabeth had given the captain but little opportunity of looking into them. Captain Rylance felt that she was avoiding him, and it cut him, for he was accustomed to easy conquests in love if not in war.

But this village beauty showed no appreciation of his fine figure, brilliant uniform and clever talk. Therefore he was somewhat pleased and surprised to receive a visit from Elizabeth on the morning after the capture.

She came accompanied by her father, with whom Captain Rylance was on terms of quite friendly intimacy. Mr. Brewster explained that Elizabeth was anxious to see how the soldiers lived.

With much gallantry Captain Rylance showed her about the fortress. Elizabeth was especially gracious, and when she had seen all there was to be seen she said: "You may walk home with me, Captain."

Opposite the prison Elizabeth stopped. One of the windows facing the street was open, and Matthew Alden was standing there looking out.

"Oh, Captain," said Elizabeth, "is that the Yankee spy who was captured yesterday?"

"That is the very fellow," said the Captain. "Are you loyalist enough to wish to see him shot?"

"Not quite. I should not wish to see any man shot. Still, if he is a Yankee spy he ought to be punished. I wish I could—well—snowball him." She said this with a light laugh which the Captain thought was especially charming.

"And so you shall," he replied, entering into the spirit of her odd whim.

Elizabeth took her hands from her muff and made a round ball of sunsoftened snow, the Captain standing by and laughing heartily at her prankish mood. The man in the window watched them somewhat wonderingly and not altogether cheerfully.

"Oh, but I couldn't hit him," said Elizabeth. "You throw it for me, Captain."

"All right; now watch. I used to be thought a good bowler at cricket; perhaps I have not yet lost the knack."

Straight up toward the astonished prisoner the snowball sailed and Alden was compelled to dodge as it went through the bars and was shattered against the opposite wall of the room.

"Good! Good!" shouted Elizabeth in glee. "Here, let me make you another one."

Alden viewed the preparations for the second throw with a perplexed expression on his face, but after the third snowball had whizzed past his head he seemed to enjoy the fun as much as the Captain or Elizabeth.

"He's a good-natured fellow, at least, even if he is a spy," said Elizabeth. "Come, let us leave him," and on they went.

It was singular behavior on Elizabeth's part. Captain Rylance, however, knowing nothing of the corn-house incident, put it down merely as the freak of a vivacious and charming young woman. But still more singular was the conversation which took place that evening between Alden at the rear window of the prison and Elizabeth, in the shadow below.

"Did Captain Rylance send you enough silver?" asked Elizabeth.

"Yes. But how did you happen to think of such a clever ruse?"

"Oh, it was quite by accident. You see, I could not bring myself to help one of my country's enemies escape, but I thought that if Captain Rylance wished to do it no one could blame me. I had the coins in my muff so—so that if—well, I had there anyway and I suppose some of them must have slipped into the snowballs when I made them."

This was not all their talk but the rest is of no consequence to us at this late day. Alden did make the key, and he did escape long before his death warrant was signed. How he met Elizabeth on two other occasions before the war was ended; how he carried her away at last in spite of the efforts of Captain Rylance and her father are matters I need not relate in detail.

I may add, though, that one of the most valued treasures of the dear gray-haired, grey-eyed old lady who told me this story is a crudely fashioned key of silver which was given to her by her mother whose eyes were gray and whose married name was Elizabeth Alden.

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