

Hard-Hearted Barbary Allen. A Kentucky Mountain Sketch

Lucy Furman

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ONE Friday morning when Miss Loring was setting forth to take the corn to mill, the heads of the settlement school asked her to extend her trip, make a day of it, and bring back some coverlets and homespun from Aunt Polly Ann Wyant's, over on the head of Wace. "Just follow Right Fork of Perilous until you come to Devon Mountain, then cross over, and follow Wace for two or three miles," were the directions. How she was to know Devon from any other mountain or Wace from any other creek was not explained.

Two miles up Perilous Creek the miller lifted the poke of corn from her saddle, and soon afterward she turned up Right Fork. There was no road except the rocky creek-bed, and on both sides mountains rose steeply, covered mostly with virgin forest, though here and there a corn-field stretched half-way up, and a small log house nestled at the base. Once she stopped to ask a woman spinning in a porch how much farther on Devon Mountain was; another time she made the inquiry of a gentle-faced young mother, surrounded by her brood of five, "battling" clothes on a stump beside the creek; still later she called up to a group of men "snaking" logs down a mountainside with teams of oxen, and one of them left his work and walked some distance to set her on the way up Devon. The trail was wild and lonely and beautiful, and from the summit green mountains billowed away endlessly. In going down the other side, a small, dashing stream crossed the bridle-path many times. Following this until it became a large branch, she drew rein at last before a comfortable log house.

A tall, fine-looking, elderly woman rose from a loom in the hooded porch and came out to the fence. Yes, she was Polly Ann Wyant, and the coverlets were ready and waiting; but the visitor must alight and stay to dinner, and a week if she could.

In the porch a young woman with a sickly baby in her arms was introduced as Jane, Reuben's wife. Aunt Polly Ann resumed her seat on the loom-bench, beneath bright strings of red peppers, and conversed while she threw the swift shuttle. The visitor had already heard that she was the finest weaver in four counties, and was interested to see in her that dignity of bearing and authority of manner which usually accompany marked success. Having first politely inquired Miss Loring's age, she stated her own, which was sixty-seven. She told of her labors and struggles after she was left a widow at thirty-two, with thirteen living children and nothing but the farm and her talent for "pretty weaving." People, she said, would journey from thirty miles around to buy her work; and now, since "the women" had come in with their school, and had told folks out in the "level country" about her, she had more orders than she could fill. She said that her children were long since married and gone, and that she had raised a "whole passel" of grandchildren, and, with a gesture toward the baby, was now starting in on the greats. From the looks of the "great," it did not seem probable that she would raise him.

Hearing a movement within the house at this time, Miss Loring glanced in, and saw on the hearth a young girl dropping alternate pieces of chicken and dough into a pot that swung over the open fire. "Come out and see the woman, Beldory," commanded her grandmother; and holding the floury, wooden bowl on one arm, Beldora came, greeting with quiet graciousness the visitor, who sat stricken almost dumb by the shock of her beauty. The splendid lines of her brow and head and shoulders would have delighted a sculptor; the bronze of her hair, the blue of her wide eyes, and the rich tints of her skin would have been a painter's joy. Bearing her vigorous young body with the freedom of a goddess, she was a picture of Aurora herself, with something of the conquering glance of Venus added.

After Beldora returned to her domestic duties, Miss Loring could not forbear expressing her admiration.

"Yes, Beldory's right smart of a good-looker," agreed Aunt Polly Ann. Then she sighed long and deeply. "The women," she continued, "have wanted her in their school these four year', and I am keen for her to go. Having been raised sixty mile' from a school-house or church-house, I hain't got learning myself, though if there'd 'a' been any flitting around I'd 'a' had it or died, such is my ambition. But Beldory is different; she sets a sight more store by the outside of her head-piece than the inside, and won't go nary step. And since she won't, I'd feel

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might'ly eased in my mind about her if she was married to a masterly man." Again she sighed.

"Married? Why, how old is she?" inquired the guest.

"Fifteen come November."

"But isn't that entirely too young to think of marriage?"

"Young?" repeated Aunt Polly Ann. "Fifteen hain't young. I married at thirteen, and my maw at twelve, and none of my daughters wasn't sixteen. I'd 'a' been right smart worried about 'em if they had been. I've heard them other school-women argue again' it same as you. Now, you women have got book-learning, and a heap of it, — I grant you that, — but air you competent to speak on marrying? No, because hain't nary one of you ever had a husband!"

She dropped the shuttle, sighed heavily again, and leaned forward with anxious eyes and troubled brow. "Woman," she said, "I am minded to unburden my heart to you. God knows it is heavy-laden, and about that very same Beldory. Now and again into this world of trials and tribulations a female is born, commonly with pretty looks and fetching ways, purely and solely for to make trouble. Her looks and her ways goes to men's heads like liquor, and sets them plumb beside themselves; she fomented hatred and revenge, and war follows in her trail. Woman, Beldory is one of them females, and a more vain-minded and mischievous-hearted never trod sole-leather. From a child she has knowed her power, and has laid awake of nights planning to use it. Boys from far and near has come a-courting her, and nary single grain does she care for one or all; but she gives 'em false encouragement, and aggs 'em on, and sets t' other again' which, till they fall out and quarrel and maybe fight, and it's a God's mercy some hain't been killed before now. And as sure as me and you set here, the day is a-coming when life is aiming to be poured out on her account. Right now she has the two Towles boys, Robert and Adriance, own cousins, keen as death about her, and keeps a-aggravating and whetting them again' each other, till it's more than human nature, or, anyhow, man nature, can stand. I see the drift; but all in vain I lift up my voice and warn and denounce. And every night now I go to bed fearful of what the morrow may bring forth."

Miss Loring endeavored to cheer Aunt Polly Ann and to dissipate these fears, and during dinner she looked with increased interest and speculation at the lovely creature in faded blue cotton who handed around chicken and dumplings, beans and corn, with the air of a Hebe. Thoughts of Beldora were side-tracked, however, by the spectacle of the sickly baby being fed from its mother's plate.

"Don't you think a milk diet might be safer for your baby?" she inquired of Jane.

"It don't want milk all the time; it craves meat and beans and roasting-years."

"But it doesn't have to get what it craves," was the suggestion.

"Oh," replied the young mother, "I couldn't be mean enough to eat victuals myself and not give it none. I don't see why it don't pick up faster."

"The babe is puny because you air, Jane," declared Aunt Polly Ann, with a contemptuous shake of her fine, strong head. "Women nowadays is a sorry lot. T' hain't a grandchild of mine can do what I call a day's weaving."

After dinner, Aunt Polly Ann took the guest into "t' other house" (the other main room) to show off her "pretty work," beautiful coverlets in elaborate patterns the very names of which were fascinating. "Dogwood Blossom and Trailing Vine" was one, "Queen Anne's Flower-Pot" was another, "June Posies and Winter Wreath" was a third. There were piles of bright-colored blankets, and hanging from the joists, dozens of gaily striped linsey petticoats. For the last she said there was always a steady sale, and specially of late, when more and more women were getting too trifling to do their own weaving.

"But all the world's getting trifling," she complained, "both women and men. Now, maybe you won't believe it when I tell you there's a sight of men nowadays would rather buy a bedstead than make one. Look at them two 'steads there. My man made 'em fifty-three year' gone, and they good as they ever were. T' hain't nary thing in my house that hain't hand-made." She displayed other substantial articles of furniture, and also pointed with pride to an old flint-lock musket which had accompanied her great-grandfather through the Revolution.

Beneath the musket, on the fire-board," lay a spindle-shaped, wooden object, black with age. "A dulcimer," Aunt Polly Ann explained. "My man made it, too, always-ago. Dulcimers used to be all the music there was in this country, but banjos is coming in now."

Miss Loring knew that the dulcimer was an ancient musical instrument very popular in England three centuries ago. She gazed upon the interesting survival with reverence, and expressed a wish to hear it played.

"Beldory she'll pick and sing for you gladly when she gets the dishes done," promised Aunt Polly Ann.

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"Picking and singing is her strong p'int, and she knows any amount of song-ballads."

At last Beldora came out on the porch and seated herself on a low stool near the loom. Laying the dulcimer across her knees, she began striking the strings with two quills, using both shapely hands. The music was weird, but attractive; the tune she played, minor, long-drawn, and haunting. Miss Loring received the second shock of the day when she caught the opening words of the song: All in the merry month of May, When the green buds they were swelling, Young Jemmy Grove on his death-bed lay, For the love of Barbary Allen.

Often had she read and heard of the old English ballad "Barbara Allen"; never had she thought to encounter it in the flesh. As she listened to the old song, long since forgotten by the rest of the world, but here a warm household possession; as she gazed at Beldora, so young, so fair against the background of ancient loom and gray log wall, she felt as one may to whom the curtain of the past is for an instant lifted, and a vision of dead-and-gone generations vouchsafed.

When the long recital of the cruelty of Barbara and the sufferings and death of Jemmy was ended, the wailing of the baby claimed everybody's attention, and by the time his little stomach had been quieted with generous doses of corn-liquor, it was necessary for Miss Loring to depart. She could not forbear another reference to an exclusive milk diet.

"Yes," replied Aunt Polly Ann, with elaborate patience, "them other school-women has said the same; but I naturely couldn't have the heart to treat a poor, dumb creetur' like that. I always give mine what they craved, and most of 'em lived through it. And, anyway, I ax myself what authority has them school-women to speak on babies when nary one of 'em hain't never had no baby."

Beldora went off to fetch the nag, and Aunt Polly Ann accompanied the guest to the horse-block, laying an anxious hand on her arm.

"You heared the song-ballad Beldory sung to you. She knows dozens, but that's always her first pick. It's her favor rite, and why? Because it's similar to her own manoeuvres. Light and cruel and leading poor boys on to destruction is her joy and pastime, same as Barbary's. Did you mind her eyes when she sung them words about As she were walking through the streets, She heared them death-bells knelling, And every stroke it seemed to say, 'Hard-hearted Barbary Allen!' like it was something to take pride in, instead of sorrow for? Yes, woman, them words, 'Hard-hearted Barbary Allen,' is her living description, and will be to the end of time." TEN days later the shocking news reached the school that Robert and Adriance Towles had fought on the summit of Devon Mountain for Beldora Wyant's sake, and Robert had fallen dead, with five bullets in him, Adriance being wounded, though not fatally. It was said that Beldora, pressed to choose between the two, had told them she would marry the best man; that thereupon, with their bosom friends, they had ridden to the top of Devon, measured off paces, and fired. Adriance had fled, but word came the next day that, weak from loss of blood, he had been captured and was on the way to jail in the county-seat near the school.

In the weeks until court sat and the trial came off there was much excitement. Sympathy for Adriance and blame for Beldora were everywhere felt. Most of the county and all of the school-women attended the trial, and interest was divided between the haggard, harassed young face of Adriance and the calm, opulent loveliness of Beldora. When she took the stand, people scarcely breathed. Yes, she had told the Towles boys she would marry the best man of them. She had had to tell them something, — they were pestering her to death, — and the law didn't allow her to marry both. She had had no notion they would be such fools as to try to kill each other. Miss Loring and the other women watched anxiously for some sign of pity or remorse in her, but there was not so much as a quiver of the lips or a tremor in her voice. As she sat there in the lone splendor of her beauty, somewhat scornfully enjoying the gaze of every eye in the court-room, one phrase of her "favor rite" song ran ceaselessly through Miss Loring's head — "Hard-hearted Barbary Allen." Her lack of feeling intensified the sympathy for Adriance, and, to everybody's joy, the light verdict of only one year in the penitentiary was brought in.

Half an hour later, Aunt Polly Ann, tragic in face and air, and with Beldora on the nag behind her, drew rein before the settlement school.

"Women," she said with sad solemnity on entering, "for four year' you have been bidding Beldory come and set down and partake at your feast of learning and knowledge; for four year' she has spurned your invite. At last she is minded to come. Here she is. Take her, and see what you can accomplish on her. My raising of her has requited me naught but tenfold tribulation. In vain have I watched and warned and denounced and prophesied; her inordinate light-mindedness and perfidity has now brung one pore boy to a' ontimely grave and another to

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Frankfort. Take her, women, and see if you can learn her some little demeanor and civility. Keep her under your beneficent and God-fearing roof, and direct her mind off of her outward and on to her inward disabilities! Women, I now wash my hands."

Receiving Beldora into the school was felt to be a somewhat hazardous undertaking, but affection and sympathy for Aunt Polly Ann moved the heads to do it. To the general surprise, Beldora settled down very adaptably to the new life, being capable enough about the industries, and passably so about books. But it was in music that she excelled. Miss Loring gave her piano lessons, and rarely had teacher a more gifted pupil.

Needless to say, when Beldora picked the dulcimer and sang song-ballads at the Friday night parties, all the children and grown-ups sat entranced. For three or four weeks, on these occasions, she had the grace to choose other ballads than "Barbara Allen"; but one night in early November, after singing "Turkish Lady" and "The Brown Girl," she suddenly struck into the haunting melody and tragic words of "Barbara Allen." A thrill and a shock went through all her hearers. Miss Loring saw Howard Cleves start forward in his chair with a look of horror, almost repulsion, on his fine, intelligent face.

Howard was the most remarkable boy in the school. Five years before, when not quite fifteen, he had walked over, barefoot, from his home on Millstone, forty miles distant, and presented himself to "the women" with this plea: "I hear you women run a school where boys and girls can work their way through. I am the workingest boy on Millstone, and have hoed corn, cleared new-ground, and snaked logs sence I turned my fifth year. I have heard tell, over yander on Millstone, that there is a sizable world outside these mountains, full of strange, foreign folk and wonderly things. I crave to know about it. I can't set in darkness any longer. My hunger for learning ha'n'ts me day and night, and burns me like a fever. I'll pine to death if I don't get it. Women, give me a chance. Hunt up the hardest job on your place, and watch me toss it off."

They gave him the chance; and never had they done anything that more richly rewarded them. Not only were his powers of work prodigious, but his eager and brilliant mind opened amazingly day by day, progressing by leaps and bounds. The women set their chief hopes upon Howard, believing that in him they would give a great man to the nation. Promise of a scholarship in the law school of a well-known university had already been obtained for him, and in one more year, such was his astonishing progress, he would be able to enter it, if all went well. Miss Loring had observed that, in common with every other boy, big or little, in the school, Howard had been at first much taken with Beldora's looks, and it was with relief that she beheld his expression of repulsion at Beldora's complacent singing of "Barbara Allen."

The first real warning came at the Thanksgiving party. During a game of forfeits, Beldora was ordered to "claim the one you like the best." Miss Loring saw her first approach Howard with a dazzling and tender look in her splendid eyes, and even put out a hand to him; then suddenly, with a wicked little smile, she turned and gave both hands to Spalding Drake, a young man from the village. A deep flush sprang to Howard's face, his jaws clenched, his eyes blazed tigerishly. It might have been only chagrin at the public slight; still, it made Miss Loring anxious enough to have a long talk with Beldora next day and explain to her the hopes and plans for Howard's future and the tragedy and cruelty of interfering with them in any way.

One morning, three days before Christmas, Beldora's bed had not been slept in at all, and under the front door was a note in Howard's handwriting, as follows: Dear Friends:

Beldora told me last week she aimed to marry Spalding Drake Christmas. Though he is a nice boy and I like him, I knew, if she did, I would kill him on the spot. Rather than do this, it is better for me to marry her myself beforehand. I have hired a nag, and we will ride to Tazewell by moonlight for a license and preacher.

I know a man is a fool that throws away his future for a woman, that Beldora is not worth it, and that I am doing what I will never cease to regret. It is like death to me to know I will never accomplish the things you set before me, and be the man you wanted me to be. I wish I had never laid eyes on Beldora. I have agonized and battled and tried to give her up; but she is too strong for me. I can fight no longer with fate. It would be better if women like Beldora never was created. She has cost the life of one boy, the liberty of another, and now my future. But it had to be.

Respectfully yours,
Howard.