The Little Maid at the Door

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman

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JOSEPH BAYLEY and his wife Ann came riding down from Salem village. They had started from their home in Newbury the day before, and had stayed overnight with their relative, Sergeant Thomas Putnam, in Salem village; they were on their way to the election in Boston. The road wound along through the woods from Salem to Lynn; it was some time since they had passed a house.

May was nearly gone; the pinks and the blackberry vines were in flower. All the woods were full of an indefinite and composite fragrance, made up of the breaths of myriads of green plants and seen and unseen blossoms, like a very bouquet of spring. The newly leaved trees cast shadows that were as much a part of the tender surprise of the spring as the new flowers. They flickered delicately before Joseph Bayley and his wife Ann on the grassy ridges of the road, but they did not remark them. Their own fancies cast gigantic projections which eclipsed the sweet show of the spring and almost their own personalities. That year the leaves came out and the flowers bloomed in vain for the people in and about Salem village. There was epidemic a disease of the mind which deafened and blinded to all save its own pains.

Ann Bayley on the pillion snuggled closely against her husband's back; her fearful eyes peered at the road around his shoulder. She was a young and handsome woman; she had on her best mantle of sad−colored silk, and a fine black hood with a topknot, but she did not think of that.

"Joseph, what is that in the road before us?" she whispered, timorously.

He pulled up the horse with a great jerk.

"Where?" he whispered back.

"There! there! at the right; just beyond that laurel thicket. 'Tis some what black, an' it moves. There! there! Oh, Joseph!"

Joseph Bayley sat stiff and straight in his saddle, like a soldier; his face was pale and stern, his eyes full of horror and defiance.

"See you it?" Ann whispered again. "There! now it moves. What is it?"

"I see it," said Joseph, in a loud, bold voice. "An' whatever it be, I will yield not to it; an' neither will you, goodwife."

Ann reached around and caught at the reins. "Let us go back," she moaned, faintly. Oh, Joseph, let us not pass it. My spirit faints within me. I see its back among the laurel blooms. 'Tis the black beast they tell of. Let us turn back, Joseph, let us turn back!"

"Be still, woman!" returned her husband, jerking the reins from her hand. "What think ye 'twould profit us to turn back to Salem village? I trow if there be one black beast here, there is a full herd of them there. There is naught

left but to ride past it as best we may. Sit fast, an' listen you not to it, whatever it promise you." Joseph looked down the road towards the laurel bushes, his muscles now as tense as a bow. Ann hid her face on his shoulder. Suddenly he shouted, with a great voice like a herald: "Away with ye, ye cursed beast! away with ye! We are not of your kind; we are gospel folk. We have naught to do with you or your master. Away with ye!"

The horse leaped forward. There was a great cracking among the laurel bushes at the right, a glossy black back and some white horns heaved over thorn, then some black flanks plunged heavily out of sight.

"Oh!" shrieked Ann, "has it gone? Goodman, has it gone?"

"The Lord hath delivered us from the snare of the enemy," answered Joseph, solemnly.

"What looked it like, Joseph, what looked it like?"

"Like no beast that was saved in the ark."

"Had it fiery eyes?" asked Ann, trembling.

"'Tis well you did not see them."

"Ride fast! oh, ride fast!" Ann pleaded, clutching hard at her husband's cloak. "It may follow on our track." The horse went down the road at a quick trot. Ann kept peering back and starting at every sound in the woods. "Do you mind the tale Samuel Endicott told last night?" she said, shuddering. "How on his voyage to Barbadoes he, sitting on the windlass on a bright moonshining night, was shook violently, and saw the appearance of that witch Goody Bradbury, with a white cap and a white neckcloth on her? It was a dreadful tale."

"It was naught to the sight of Mercy Lewis and Sergeant Thomas Putnam's daughter Ann, when they were set upon and nigh choked to death by Goody Proctor. Know you that within a half−mile we must pass the Proctor house?"

Ann gave a shuddering sigh. "I would I were home again," she moaned. "They said 'twas full of evil things, and that the black man himself kept tavern there since Goodman Proctor and his wife were in jail. Did you mind what Goodwife Putnam said of the black head, like a hog's, that Goodman Perley saw at the keeping−room window as he passed, and the rumbling noises, and the yellow birds that flow around the chimney and twittered in a psalm tune? Oh, Joseph, there is a yellow bird now in the birch−tree−see! see!"

They had come into a little space where the woods were thinner. Joseph urged his horse forward.

"We will not slack our pace for any black beasts nor any yellow birds," he cried, in a valiant voice.

There was a passing gleam of little yellow wings above the birch−tree.

"He has flown away," said Ann. "'Tis best to front them as you do, goodman, but I have not the courage. That looked like a common yellowbird; his wings shone like gold. Think you it has gone forward to the Proctor house?"

"It matters not, so it but fly up before us," said Joseph Bayley.

He was somewhat older than Ann; fair−haired and fair−bearded, with blue eyes set so deeply under heavy brows that they looked black. His face was at once stern and nervous, showing not only the spirit of warfare against his foes, but the elements of strife within himself.

They rode on, and the woods grew thicker; the horse's hoofs made only a faint liquid pad on the mossy road. Suddenly he stopped and whinnied. Ann clutched her husband's arm; they sat motionless, listening; the horse whinnied again.

Suddenly Joseph started violently, and stared into the woods on the left, and Ann also. A long defile of dark evergreens stretched up the hill, with mysterious depths of blue−black shadows between them; the air had an earthy dampness.

Joseph shook the reins fiercely over the horse's back, and shouted to him in a loud voice.

"Did you see it?" gasped Ann, when they had come into a lighter place. "Was it not a black man?"

"Fear not; we have outridden him," said her husband, setting his thin intense face proudly ahead.

"I would we were safe home in Newbury," Ann moaned. "I would we had never set out. Think you not Dr. Mather will ride back from Boston with us to keep the witches off? I will bide there forever, if he will not. I will never come this dreadful road again, else. What is that? Oh, what is that? 'Tis a voice coming out of the woods like a great roar. Joseph! What is that? That was a black cat run across the road into the bushes. 'Twas a black cat. Joseph, let us turn back! No; the black man is behind us, and the beast. What shall we do? What shall we do? Oh, oh, I begin to twitch like Ann and Mercy last night! My feet move, and I cannot stop them! Now there is a pin thrust in my arm! I am pinched! There are fingers at my throat! Joseph! Joseph!"

"Go to prayer, sweetheart," shouted Joseph. "Go to prayer. Be not afraid. 'Twill drive them away. Away with ye, Goody Bradbury! Away, Goody Proctor! Go to prayer, go to prayer!"

Joseph bent low in the saddle and lashed the horse, which sprang forward with a mighty bound; the green branches rushed in their faces. Joseph prayed in a loud voice. Ann clung to him convulsively, panting for breath. Suddenly they came out of the woods into a cleared space.

"The Proctor house! the Proctor house!" Ann shrieked. "Mercy Lewis said 'twas full of devils. What shall we do?" She hid her face on her husband's shoulder, sobbing and praying.

The Proctor house stood at the left of the road; there were some peach−trees in front of it, and their blossoms showed in a pink spray against the gray unpainted walls. On one side of the house was the great barn, with its doors wide open; on the other, a deep ploughed field, with the plough sticking in a furrow. John Proctor had been arrested and thrown into jail for witchcraft in April, before his spring planting was done.

Joseph Bayley reined in his horse opposite the Proctor house. "Ann," he whispered, and his whisper was full of horror.

"What is it?" she returned, wildly.

"Ann, Goodman Proctor looks forth from the chamber window, and Goody Proctor stands outside by the well, and they are both in jail in Boston." Joseph's whole frame shook in a strange rigid fashion, as if his joints were locked. "Look, Ann!" he whispered.

"I cannot."

"Look!"

Ann turned her head. "Why," she said, and her voice was quite natural and sweet, it had even a tone of glad relief in it, "I see naught but a little maid in the door."

"See you not Goodman Proctor in the window?"

"Nay," said Ann, smiling; "I see naught but the little maid in the door. She is in a blue petticoat, and she has a yellow head, but her little cheeks are pale, I trow."

"See you not Goodwife Proctor in the yard by the well?" asked Joseph.

"Nay, goodman; I see naught but the little maid in the door. She has a fair face, but now she falls a−weeping. Oh, I fear lest she be all alone in the house."

"I tell you, Goodman Proctor and Goodwife Proctor are both there," returned Joseph. "Think you I see not with my own eyes? Goodman Proctor has on a red cap, and Goodwife Proctor holds a spindle." He urged on the horse with a sudden cry. "Now the prayers do stick in my throat," he groaned. "I would we were out of this devil's nest!"

"Joseph," implored Ann, "prithee wait a minute! The little maid is calling 'mother' after me. Saw you not how she favored our little Susanna who died? Hear her! There was naught there but the little maid. Joseph, I pray you, stop."

"Nay; I'll ride till the nag drops," said Joseph Bayley, with a lash. "This last be too much. I tell ye they are there, and they are also in jail. 'Tis hellish work."

Ann said no more for a little space; a curve in the road hid the Proctor house from sight. Suddenly she raised a great cry. "Oh! oh!" she screamed, "'tis gone; 'tis gone from my foot." Joseph stopped. "What is gone?"

"My shoe; but now I missed it from my foot. I must alight, and go back for it."

Joseph started the horse again.

Ann caught at the reins. "Stop, goodman," she cried, imperatively. "I tell you I must have my shoe."

"And I tell you I'll stop for no shoe in this place, were it made of gold."

"Goodman, you know not what shoe 'tis. 'Tis one of my fine shoes, in which I have never taken steps. They have the crimson silk lacings. I have even carried them in my hand to the meeting−house on a Sabbath, wearing my old ones, and only put them on at the door. Think you I will lose that shoe? Stop the nag."

But Joseph kept on grimly.

"Think you I will go barefoot or with one shoe into Boston?" said Ann. "Know you that these shoes, which were a present from my mother, cost bravely? I trow you will needs loosen your purse strings well before we pass the first shop in Boston. Well, go on, an' you will, when 'tis but a matter of my slipping down from the pillion and running back a few yards."

Joseph Bayley turned his horse about; but Ann remonstrated.

"Nay," said she; " I want not to go thus. I am tired of the saddle. I would like to feel my feet for a space."

Her husband looked around at her with wonder and suspicion. Dark thoughts came into his mind.

She laughed. "Nay," said she, "make no such face at me. I go not back to meet any black man nor sign any book. I go for my fine shoe with the crimson lacing."

"'Tis but a moment since you were afraid," said Joseph. "Have you no fear now?" His blue eyes looked sharply into hers.

She looked back at him soberly and innocently. "In truth, I feel no such fear as I did," she answered. "If I mistake not, your bold front and your prayers drove away the evil ones. I will say a psalm as I go, and I trow naught will harm me."

Ann slipped lightly down from the pillion, and pulled off her one remaining shoe and her stockings; they were her fine worked silk ones, and she could not walk in them over the rough road. Then she set forth very slowly, peering here and there in the undergrowth beside the road, until she passed the curve and the reach of her husband's eyes. Then she gathered up her crimson taffeta petticoat and ran like a deer, with long, graceful leaps, looking neither to right nor left, straight back to the Proctor house.

In the door of the house stood a tiny girl with a soft shock of yellow hair. She wore a little straight blue gown, and her baby feet were bare, curling over the sunny door−step. When she saw Ann coming she started as if to run; then she stood still, her soft eyes wary, her mouth quivering .

Ann Bayley ran up quickly, and threw her arms around her, kneeling down on the step.

What is your name, little maid?" said she, in a loving, agitated voice.

"Abigail Proctor," replied the little maid, shyly, in her sweet childish treble. Then she tried to free herself, but Ann held her fast.

"Nay, be not afraid, sweet," said she. "I love you. I once had a little maid like you for my own. Tell me, dear heart, are you all alone in the house?"

Then the child fell to crying again, and clung around Ann's neck.

"Is there anybody in the house, sweet?" Ann whispered, fondling her, and pressing the wet baby cheek to her own. "The constables came and took them," sobbed the little maid. "They put my poppet down the well, and they pulled mother and Sarah down the road. They took father before that, and Mary Warren did gibe and point. The constables pulled Benjamin away too. I want my mother."

"Your mother shall come again," said Ann. "Take comfort, dear little heart, they cannot have the will to keep her long away. There, there, I tell you she shall come. You watch in the door, and you will see her come down the road."

She smoothed back the little maid's yellow hair, and wiped the tears from her little face with a corner of her beautiful embroidered neckerchief. Then she saw that the face was all grimy with tears and dust, and she went over to the well, which was near the door, and drew a bucket of water swiftly with her strong young arms; then she wet the corner of the neckerchief and scrubbed the little maid's face, bidding her shut her eyes. Then she kissed her over and over.

"Now you are sweet and clean," said she. "Dear little heart, I have some sugar cakes in my bag for you, and then I must be gone."

The little maid looked at her eagerly, her cheeks were waxen, and the blue veins showed in her full childish forehead. Ann pulled some little cakes out of a red velvet satchel she wore at her waist, and Abigail reached out for one with a hungry cry. The tears sprang to Ann's eyes; she put the rest of the cakes in a little pile on the door−stone, and watched the child eat. Then she gathered her up in her arms.

"Good−bye, sweetheart," she said, kissing the soft trembling mouth, the sweet hollow under the chin, and the clinging hands. "Before long I shall come this way again, and do you stand in the door when I go past."

She put her down and hastened away, but little Abigail ran after her. Ann stopped and knelt and fondled her again.

"Go back, deary," she pleaded; "go back, and eat the sugar cakes."

But this beautiful kind vision in the crimson taffeta, with the rosy cheeks and sweet black eyes looking out from the French hood, with the gleam of gold and delicate embroidery between the silken folds of her mantilla, with the ways like her mother's, was more to little deserted Abigail Proctor than the sugar cakes, although she was sorely hungry for them. She stood aloof with pitiful determined eyes until Ann's back was turned, then, as she followed, Ann looked around and saw her and caught her up again.

"My dear heart, my dear heart," she said, and she was half sobbing, "now must you go back, else I fear harm will come to you. My goodman is waiting for me yonder, and I know not what lie will do or say. Nay; you must go buck. I would I could keep you, my little Abigail, but you must go back." Ann Bayley put the little maid down and gave her a gentle push. "Go back," she said, smiling, with her eyes full of tears; "go back, and eat the sugar cakes."

Then she sped on swiftly; as she neared the curve in the road she thrust a band in her pocket, and drew forth a dainty shoe with dangling lacings of crimson silk. She glanced around with a smile and a backward wave of her hand the glowing crimson of her petticoat showed for a minute through the green mist of the undergrowth; then she disappeared.

The little maid Abigail stood still in the road, gazing after her, her soft pink mouth open, her hands clutching at her blue petticoat, as if she would thus hold herself back from following. She heard the tramp of a horse's feet beyond the curve; then it died away. She turned about and went back to the house, with the tears rolling over her cheeks; but she did not sob aloud, as she would have done had her mother been near to hear. A pitiful conviction of the hopelessness of all the appeals of grief was stealing over her childish mind. She had been alone in the house three nights and two days, ever since her sister Sarah and her brother Benjamin had been arrested for witchcraft and carried to jail. Long before that her parents, John and Elizabeth Proctor, had disappeared down the Boston road in charge of the constables. None of the family was spared save this little Abigail, who was deemed too young and insignificant to have dealings with Satan, and was therefore not thrown into prison, but was left alone in the desolate Proctor house in the midst of woods said to be full of evil spirits and witches, to die of fright or starvation as she might. There was but little mercy shown the families of those accused of witchcraft.

"Let some of Goody Proctor's familiars minister unto the brat," one of the constables had said, with a stern laugh, when Abigail had followed wailing after her brother and sister on the day of their arrest.

"Yea," said another; " she can send her yellow−bird or her black hog to keep her company. I wot her tears will be soon dried."

Then the stoutly tramping horses had borne out of sight and bearing the mocking faces of the constables; Sarah's fair agonized one turned backward towards her little deserted sister, and Benjamin raised a brave youthful clamor of indignation.

"Let us loose!"' Abigail heard him shout; "let us loose, I tell ye! Ye are fools, rather than we are witches; ye are fools and murderers! Let us loose, I tell ye!"

Abigail waited long, thinking her brother's words would prevail; but neither he nor Sarah returned, and the sounds all died away, and she went back to the house sobbing. The damp spring night was settling down in a palpable mist, and the woods seemed full of voices. The little maid had heard enough of the terrible talk of the day to fill her innocent head with vague superstitious horror. She threw her apron over her head and fled blindly through the woods, and now and then she fell down and bruised herself, and rose up lamenting sorely, with nobody to hear her.

As soon as she was in the house she shut the doors, and barred them with the great bars that had been made as protection against Indians, and now might wax useless against worse than savages, according to the belief of the colony.

All night long the little maid shrieked and sobbed, and called on her father and her mother and her sister and her brother. Men faring in the road betwixt Boston and Salem village heard her with horror, and fled past with psalm and prayer, their blood cold in their veins. They related the next day to the raging, terror−stricken people how at midnight the accursed Proctor house was full of flitting infernal lights, and howling with devilish spirits, and added a death−dealing tale of some godly woman of the village who outrode their horses on a broomstick and disappeared in the Proctor house.

The next day the little maid unbarred the door, and stood there watching up and down the road for her mother or some other to come. But they came not, although she watched all day. That night she did not sob and call out; she had become afraid of her own voice, and discovered that it had no effect to bring her help. Then, too, early in the night, she heard noises about the house which frightened her, and made her think that perchance the dreadful black beast of which she had heard them discourse was abroad.

The next morning she found that the two horses and the cow and calf were gone from the barn; also that there was left scarce anything for her to eat in the house. There had been some loaves of bread, some boiled meat, and some cakes; now they were all gone, and also all the meal from the chest, and the potatoes and pork from the cellar. But for that last she did not care, since she was not old enough to make a fire and cook. She had left for food only a little cold porridge in a blue bowl, and that she ate up at once and had no more, and a little buttermilk in a crock, which, she being not over−fond of it, served her longer. But that was all she had had for a day and a night, until Goodwife Ann Bayley gave her the sugar cakes. These she ate up at once on her return to the house. Then again she stood watching in the door, but nothing passed along the road save a partridge or a squirrel. It was accounted a bold thing for any solitary traveler to come this way, save a witch, and she, it was supposed, might find many comrades in the woods beside the road and in the Proctor house, which was held to be a sort of devils' tavern. But now no witch came, nor any of her uncanny friends, unless indeed the squirrel and the partridge were familiar demons in disguise. Nothing was too harmless and simple to escape that imputation of the devil's mask.

Abigail took her little pewter porringer from the cupboard, and got herself a drink of water from the bucketful that Goodwife Bayley had drawn; then she stood on a stone, and peered into the well, leaning over the curb. Her poppet was in there, her dear rag doll that Sarah had made for her, and dressed in a beautiful silver brocade made from a piece of a wedding−gown that was brought from England. One of the constables had caught sight of little Abigail Proctor's poppet, and being straightway filled with suspicion that it was an image whereby Goody Proctor afflicted her victims by proxy, had seized it and thrown it into the well. The other constables had chidden him for such rashness, saying it should have been carried to Boston and produced as evidence at the trial; and little Abigail had shrieked out in a panic for her poppet.

She could see nothing of it now, and she went back to her watching−place in the door.

In the afternoon she felt sorely hungry again, and searched through the house for food; then she went out in the sunny fields behind the house, and found some honeysuckles on the rocks, and sucked the honey greedily from their horns. On her return to the house she found a corn−cob, which she snatched up and folded in her apron, and began tending. She sat down in the doorway in her little chair, which she dragged out of the keeping−room, and hugged the poor poppet close, and crooned over it.

"Be not afraid," said she. "I'll not let the black beast harm you; I promise you I will not."

That night she formed a new plan for her solace and protection in the lonely darkness. All the garments of her lost parents and sister and brother that she could find she gathered together, and formed in a circle on the keeping−room floor; then she crept inside with her corn−cob poppet, and lay there hugging it all night. The next day she watched again in the door; but now she was weak and faint, and her little legs trembled so under her that she could not stand to watch, but sat in her small straight−backed chair, holding her poppet and peering forth wistfully.

In the course of the day she made shift to creep out into the fields again, and lying flat on the sun−heated rocks, she sucked some more honey drops from the honeysuckles. She found, too, on the edge of the woods, some young wintergreen leaves, and she even pulled some blue violets and ate them. But the delicate, sweet, and aromatic fare in the spring larder of nature was poor nourishment for a human baby.

Poor little Abigail Proctor could scarcely creep home, still clinging fast to her poppet; scarcely lift herself into her chair in the door; scarcely crawl inside her fairy−ring of her loved ones' belongings at night. She rolled herself tightly in an old cloak of her father's, and it was a sweet and harmless outcome of the dreadful superstition of the day, grafted on an innocent childish brain, that it seemed to partake of the bodily presence of her father, and protect her.

All night long, as she lay there, her mother cooked good meat and broth and sweet cakes, and she ate her fill of them; but in the morning she was too weak to turn her little body over. She could not get to her watching−place in the door, but that made no difference to her, for she did not fairly know that she was not there. It seemed to her that she sat in her little chair looking up the road and down the road; she saw the green branches weaving together, and hiding the sky to the northward and the southward; she saw the flushes of white and rose in the flowering undergrowth; she saw the people coming and going. There were her father and mother now coming with store of food and presents for her, now following the constables out of sight. There was that fine pageant passing, as she had seen it pass once before, of the two magistrates, their worshipful masters John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin, with the marshal, constables, and aids, splendid and awe−inspiring in all their trappings of office, to examine the accused in the Salem meeting−house. There were the ministers Parris and Noyes coming, with severe malignant faces, to question her mother as to whether she had afflicted Mary Warren, their former maidservant, who was now bewitched. There went Benjamin, clamoring out boldly at his captors. There came Sarah with the poppet, which she had drawn out of the well, shaking the water from its silver brocade.

All this the little maid Abigail Proctor saw through her half−delirious fancy as she lay weakly on the keeping−room floor, but she saw not the reality of her sister Sarah coming about four o'clock in the afternoon.

Sarah Proctor, tall and slender, in her limp bedraggled dress, with her fair severe face set in a circle of red shawl, which she had pinned under her chin, came resolutely down the road from Boston, driving a black cow before her with a great green branch. She was nearly fainting with weariness, but she set her dusty shoes down swiftly among the road weeds, and her face was as unyielding as an Indian's.

When she came in sight of the Proctor house she stopped a second. "Abigail!" she called; "Abigail!"

There was no answer, and she went on more swiftly than before. When she reached the house she called again, "Abigail!" but did not wait except while she tied the black cow, by a rope which was around her neck, to a peach−tree. Then she ran in, and found the little maid, her sister Abigail, on the floor in the keeping−room.

She got down on her knees beside her, and Abigail smiled up in her face waveringly. She still thought herself in the door, and that she had just seen her sister come down the road.

"Abigail, what have they done to you?" asked Sarah, in a sharp voice; and the little maid only smiled.

"Abigail, Abigail, what is it?" Sarah took hold of the child's shoulders and shook her; but she got no word back, only the smile ceased, and the eyelids drooped faintly.

"Are you hungry, Abigail?"

The little maid shook her head softly.

"It cannot be that," said Sarah, as if half to herself; "there was enough in the house; but what is it? Abigail, look at me; how long is it since you have eaten? Abigail!"

"Yesterday," whispered the little maid, dreamily.

"What did you eat then?"

"Some posies and leaves out in the field."

"What became of all the bread that was baked, and the cakes, and the meat?"

"I−−have forgot."

"No, you have not. Tell me, Abigail."

"The black beast came in the night and did eat it all up, and the cow, and calf, and the horses, too."

"The black beast!"

"I heard him in the night, and in the morning 'twas gone."

Sarah sprang up. "Robbers and murderers!" she cried, in a fierce voice; but the little maid on the floor did not start; she shut her eyes again, and looked up and down the road.

Sarah got a bucket quickly, and went out in the yard to the cow. Down on her knees in the grass she went and milked; then she carried in the bucket, strained the milk with trembling haste, and poured some into Abigail's little pewter porringer. "She was wont to love it warm," she whispered, with white lips.

She bent close over the little maid, and raised her on one arm, while she put the porringer to her mouth. "Drink, Abigail," she said, with tender command. "'Tis warm−−the way you love it."

The little maid tried to sip, but shut her mouth, and turned her head with weak loathing, and Sarah could not compel her. She laid her back, and got a spoon and fed her a little, by dint of much pleading to make her open her mouth and swallow.

Afterwards she undressed her, and put her to bed in the south−front room, but the child was so uneasy without the ring of garments which she had arranged, that Sarah was forced to put them around her on the bed; then she fell asleep directly, and stood in her dream watching in the door.

Sarah herself stood in the door, looking up and down the road. There was the sound of a galloping horse in the distance; it came nearer and nearer. She went down to the road and stood waiting. The horse was reined in close to her, and the young man who rode him sprang off the saddle.

"It is you, Sarah; you are safe home," he cried, eagerly, and would have put his arm about her; but she stood aloof sternly.

"For what else did you take me−−my apparition?" she said, in a hard voice.

"Sweetheart!"

Know you that I have but just come from the jail in Boston, where I have lain fast chained for witchcraft? See you my fine apparel with the prison air in it? Know you that they called me a witch, and said that I did afflict Mary Warren and the rest? I marvel not that you kept your distance, David Carr; I might perchance have hurt you, and they might have accused you, since you were in fellowship with a witch. I marvel not at that. I would have no harm come to you, though far greater than this came to me, but wherefore did you let my little sister Abigail starve? That can I not suffer, coming from you, David."

The young man took her in his arms with a decided motion; and indeed she did not repulse him, but began to weep.

"Sarah," said he, earnestly, "I was in Ipswich. I knew naught of you and Benjamin being cried out upon until within this hour, when I returned home, and my mother told me. I knew not you were acquitted, and was on my way to Boston to you when I saw you at the gate. And as for Abigail, I knew naught at all; and so 'twas with my mother, for she but now wept when she said the poor little maid had been taken with the rest. But you mean not that, sweetheart; she has not been let to starve?"

"They stole away the food in the night," said Sarah, "and the horses and the cow and calf. I found the cow straying in the woods but now, on my way home, and drove her in and milked her; but Abigail would take scarce a spoonful of the warm milk. She has had but little to eat for three days, and has been distracted with fear, being left alone. She has ever been but a delicate child, and now I fear she has a fever on her, and will die, with her mother away."

"I will go for my mother, sweetheart," said David Carr, eagerly.

"Bring her under cover of night, then," said Sarah; "else she may be suspected if she come to this witch tavern, as they call it. Oh, David, think you she will come? I am in a sore strait."

"I will bring her without fail, sweet, and a flask of wine also, and needments for the little maid," cried David. "Only do you keep up good heart. Perchance, sweet, the child will amend soon, and the others be soon acquit. Nay, weep not, poor lass! poor lass! Thou hast me, whatever else fail thee, poor solace though that be, and I will fetch thee my mother right speedily. She has ever set great store by the little maid, and knows much about ailments; and I doubt not they will be soon acquit."

"The say my mother will," answered Sarah, tearfully; "and Benjamin is acquit now, but had best keep for a season out of Salem village. But my father will not be acquit; he has spoken his mind too boldly before them all."

"Nay, sweetheart," said David Carr, mounting, "'twill all have passed soon; 'Tis but a madness. Go in to the little maid, and be of good comfort."

Sarah went sobbing into the house, but her face was quite calm when she stood over little Abigail. The child was still asleep, and she could arouse her only for a moment to take a few spoonfuls of milk; then she turned her head on her pillow with weary obstinacy, and shut her eyes again. She still held the poor corn−cob poppet fast.

Sarah washed herself, braided her hair, and changed her prison dress for a clean blue linen one; then she sat beside Abigail, and waited for David Carr and his mother, who came within an hour.

Goodwife Carr was renowned through Salem village for her knowledge of medicinal herbs and her nursing. She had a gentle sobriety and decision of manner which placed her firmly in her neighbors' confidences, they seeing how she abode firmly in her own, and arguing from that. Then she had too the good fortune to have made no enemies, consequently her ability had not incurred for her the suspicion of being a witch.

Goodwife Carr brought a goodly store of healing herbs, of bread and cakes and meat, and she brewed drinks, and bent her face, pale and soberly faithful, in her close white cap, untiringly over Abigail Proctor. But the little maid never arose again. A fever, engendered by starvation and fright and grief, had seized upon her, and she lay in the bed with her little corn−cob baby a few days longer, and then died.

They made a straight white gown for her, and dressed her in it, after washing her and smoothing her yellow hair; and she lay, looking longer and older than in life, all set about with flowers−−pinks and lilacs and roses−−from Goodwife Carr's garden, until she was buried. And they had the Ipswich minister come for the funeral, for David Carr cried out in a fury that Minister Parris, who had prosecuted this witchcraft business, was her murderer, and blood would flow from her little body if he stood beside it, and that it was the same with Minister Noyes; and Sarah Proctor's pale face had flushed up fiercely in assent.

The morning after the little maid Abigail Proctor was buried, Joseph Bayley and his wife Ann came riding down the road from Boston, and they were in brave company, and needed to have but little fear of witches; for the great minister Cotton Mather rode with them, his Excellency the Governor of the colony, two worshipful magistrates, and two other ministers−−all on their way to a witch trial in Salem.

And is they neared the Proctor house there was much discourse concerning it and the inmates thereof, many strange and dreadful accounts, and much godly denunciation. And as they reached the curve in the road they came suddenly insight of a young man and a tall fair maid standing together at the side by some white−flowering bushes. And Sarah Proctor, even with her little sister Abigail dead and her parents in danger of death, was smiling for a second's space in David Carr's face, for the love and hope in tragedy that make God possible, and the selfishness of love that makes life possible, were upon her in spite of herself.

But when she saw the cavalcade approaching, saw the gleam of rich raiment, and heard the tramp and jingling, the smile faded straightway from her face, and she stood behind David in the white alder bushes. And David stood before her, and gazed with a stern and defiant scowl at the gentry as they passed by. And the great Cotton Mather gazed back at that beautiful white face rising like another flower out of the bushes, and he speculated with himself if it were the face of a witch.

But Goodwife Ann Bayley thought only on the little maid at the door. And when they came to the Proctor house she leaned eagerly from the pillion, and she smiled and kissed her hand.

"Why do you thus, Ann?" her husband asked, looking about at her.

"See you not the little maid in the door?" she whispered low, for fear of the goodly company. "I trow she looks better than she did. The roses are in her checks, and they have combed her yellow hair, and put a clean white gown on her. She holds a little doll, too."

"I see nobody," said Joseph Bayley, wonderingly.

"Nay, but she stands there. I never saw naught shine like her hair and her white gown; the sunlight lies full in the door. See! see! she is smiling! I trow all her griefs be well over."

The cavalcade passed the Proctor house, but Goodwife Ann Bayley's sweet face was turned backward until it was out of sight, towards the little maid in the door.