

The Peril of Columbia

A Fourth of July Story
By EVERETT HOLBROOK

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My uncle, Stephen Westcott, is a church member and a devout man. Therefore I was the more surprised to see the figure of Satan seated at his gate as I approached the house. However, I was partially prepared for this spectacle, because I had encountered several other remarkable creatures on my way up from the wharf, and, besides, I had seen this same apparition twice before in that town.

Three years ago Bentonville decided to revive the old diversification of "Antiques and Horribles" as a part of its Fourth of July celebration, and a dramatic performance was held for the purpose of raising a fund to buy costumes. The proceeds, which were unexpectedly large, were invested with a theatrical costumer in Boston, and the general opinion was that he gave good value for the money. Among the garments which he sent was a Mephistophelian habit that had been designed for some very tall and slender man. It would not fit any of the Bentonville masqueraders who might otherwise have been willing to wear it and was eventually bestowed upon a half-witted youth named Asa Colby, who was so delighted that he wanted to wear it all the time.

"Hello, Asa!" said I. "What's the matter? Sick?"

He did not answer my question orally, and I was not surprised, for Asa was a very exceptional fool, being of few words. Instead of speaking, he wagged his head in the way of negation and then shook his left hand with his right, which was his customary sign of greeting.

My cousin Celia appeared in the doorway, clothed in the garb of Columbia, and she looked very lovely. She was at that time much too beautiful for her own good, but the vanity of a school-girl is not necessarily a permanent blemish upon her character.

"My cousin Richard!" she cried. "We had given you up. We were so disappointed!"

She shook hands with me somewhat hurriedly and listened with only half an ear while I explained that my train had been late; that I had missed the little steamer across the bay and had come over in a sailboat. I judged that I had interrupted her upon the way to some engagement connected with the part in the day's observances, but a moment later, looking through the sitting room window, I saw Columbia leaning upon the gate idly conversing with Mephisto.

Good old Aunt Anne welcomed me with that kindness which is so delightfully out of keeping with the severity of her aspect, and then I went to find Uncle Stephen, who was in the back yard, sniffing at the closed doors of a big barn long unused except as a place of storage for old furniture and queer odds and ends.

"I'm sure I smell tobacco smoke," said he after he had shaken hands with me. "Do you?"

Tobacco is his pet aversion. He can smell it a mile. I asked him how it was possible that there should be tobacco smoke in his barn, and he said that he would be obliged if I would go and help him solve the mystery.

We went into the barn by way of the long "L" which connects it with the



I REACHED THE TOP OF THE LADDER JUST IN TIME.

house, and there, to my surprise, I really smelled pipe smoke. It seemed to be drifting down from what had once been the haymow. A ladder led up to this region, and I was about to ascend when a wooden shutter in the rear of the barn was suddenly opened, and a broad shaft of light struck through the gloom above me.

I reached the top of the ladder just in time to see the face of a man who was dropping out of the window. It vanished instantly, but my glimpse of it sufficed for recognition. It was the face of Asa Colby.

But how could the witless rascal be there when I had just seen him in front of the house? It was a puzzle indeed. I crossed to the window as fast as I could, and the rubbish, and

beheld Asa running as if for his life across the field. My surprise was very greatly increased by this spectacle, for Asa was clothed in a light sack suit of elegant design, the trousers neatly tressed, and he carried a good straw hat in his hand.

Upon the floor near the window was a slender cane with a silver head. I examined it in the light and found the letters "G. S." in monogram on the metal.

My discoveries were too portentous to be disclosed to so nervous a man as Uncle Stephen. I threw the cane as far as possible out of the window, closed the shutter and descended to the lower floor.

"Some tramp," said I. "He hasn't done any harm."

But my uncle spent half an hour in the loft looking for sparks and protected by his manservant, whom he



THAT STICK BELONGS TO A BOSTON ACTOR.

greatly berated for having left the rear door of the barn unfastened. Meanwhile I went to the front of the house and found Celia still leaning upon the gate, but Mephistopheles had vanished.

From the evidence in my possession there was only one conclusion—Celia was involved in a nonsensical romance with a man who was highly objectionable to her parents. I was deeply grieved, for we were cousins. True, the tie of blood between us was as thin as a homeopathic thirty-second dilution, still I had always called her parents uncle and aunt and had thought of her as a member of my family.

Such being the case, what was my natural duty—to find the man, lead him by the ears to the end of Long wharf and drop him overboard? That was at least my first impulse, yet I could not help feeling the need of a little more information before proceeding to execute a vengeance. I would wish to act in such a way as would serve Celia best. In order to act wisely I must get at the facts.

I was not prepared to believe that Asa and the unknown Romeo had been so overbold as to choose my uncle's barn as their dressing room. More probably the exchange of raiment had been made in a thick grove of spruces which stood in the field, and the invasion of the barn had been an after-thought of Asa's.

Upon this supposition the place to entrap the bogus Mephisto was the grove, and so I withdrew to that spot as secretly as possible and waited more than an hour in vain. Meanwhile the procession had formed in front of the town hall, and the air was shuddering at the music of the Bentonville band.

I emerged from my hiding place and intercepted the procession. Mephisto was not among its attractions, and his absence was a subject of comment. He appeared later in a manner sufficiently mysterious to match the part that he played, and I satisfied myself that he was the real Asa Colby this time. I did not dare to question him, for if he supposed that his harmless burglary of the barn was unsuspected he might keep still about it, whereas, if accused, he might attempt a too public justification.

My only real clue lay in the initials on the cane. They would not fit the name of any young man in that community; they puzzled me completely. And yet "G. S." must have been in Bentonville, for Celia had not been away within a year. Perhaps he had lodged at the Bentonville hotel, and upon this theory I approached the landlord of that place of entertainment and exhibited to him the cane, which I said I had found in the woods.

"That stick belongs to a Boston actor named Gilbert Seabury," said he. "Don't you take it up to your uncle's house. If you do he'll have a fit."

"Why?" I asked, with counterfeit surprise.

"Seabury was here a couple of weeks in June," he replied. "His folks live in Lynde—a town about fifteen miles north of Bentonville. He got to know your cousin Celia, and he was talking her head full of theatrical notions. She's a bit stage struck anyhow, you know. Your Aunt Anne got on to it, and—well, you know your Aunt Anne."

Here was a very serious situation indeed, and no doubt it was my duty to lay the whole case frankly before my aunt. Yet no man likes to do that sort of thing. I resolved to find out, first, whether Seabury was still in town, and so I spent the whole afternoon hunting for him, assisted by the landlord's description and my own view of the actor's clothes. By supper time I was convinced that he had gone away, and that Celia was safe from his histrionic vapors for the present.

There was to be a display of fireworks in the evening within the fort on the hill, a relic of English occupa-

tion in the Revolutionary times. Celia had laid aside the vestments of Columbia and had appeared during the afternoon in a gown of white duck, which was very becoming. After supper, however, she clothed herself in a dark gown costume with a black hat.

I was seriously alarmed, for the plain implication to my mind was that Celia had chosen the gown most suitable for a journey. I resolved that she should not get out of my sight during the evening, but while we were sitting, with all Bentonville for company, upon the bank of the fort Celia suddenly disappeared.

With great caution I myself slipped away while a particularly vivid bomb was attracting the attention of my relatives and friends. I made the circuit of the great old earthwork, hoping to find Seabury lurking in some corner of the dry moat, but he was not there. I then increased the radius of my search and was rewarded by the discovery of a black horse and a light wagon in a little used road which runs back of the hill and joins the main highway leading out of town to the northward. So there was an elopement hidden in this mystery.

The horse was hitched to the fence by one of the reins. I tied him by the checkrein and removed the others altogether, unbuckling them from the bit. It was my intention to hide them under the seat, and my head was in the wagon when I became aware that some one was approaching.

My position was extremely favorable for concealment, and I waited. It was Celia alone who was coming. She was within five steps of the wagon before she perceived me; then by the light of one of the bombs, exploding high in air, we saw each other's face.

Well, there was a very strenuous scene, and Celia defended herself by all the arguments that romantic fiction supplies. This was the love of her life (at seventeen). Her career was before her and only stagnation and failure here. Should she bury her one talent in the earth? Mr. Seabury was not only a man of wonderful promise in his profession, but he was a man of honor.

This and much more of the same sort. As to facts, they were to be married in Lynde that evening. Seabury had left the wagon there and was waiting at the junction of the highway.

"Ride with me to the road," said she. "Talk with Mr. Seabury. See for yourself that he is all that I have described him. Give me an opportunity of telling him that I have not shown the white feather."

This seemed not altogether unreasonable, though I would have preferred to talk with Seabury alone. I helped Celia into the wagon, while debating whether I should drive to the corner or across lots to the road at another spot.

I unhitched the horse and then remembered that I had unbuckled the reins from the bits. They were lying loose over the dashboard, and I walked back to get them.

There was a swishing sound and a sharp crack. Celia had struck the horse with the whip. He leaped ahead, and I barely succeeded in catching the back of the wagon with one hand. How I managed to climb aboard I have never been able to remember, but I arrived somehow, and Celia and I



I CAUGHT CELIA IN MY ARMS.

were tearing along this trail in the fields behind a reinless steed. In an instant there was a crash. I caught Celia in my arms, and we flew through the air, on our way, as I verily believed, to join the winged hosts of heaven.

When I awoke from this dream I was lying in the ruins of an alder bush, and Celia was beside me. Dead? I dared not think of it. In fact, I was not in the best of condition to think of anything. I seized the girl in my arms and ran wildly toward the town.

In real life one does not carry a well-grown and hearty young woman as if she were an infant. She becomes more and more like a bale of hay the longer one carries her. My heart was bursting and my eyes were starting from my head when I heard a moderately calm voice say: "Put me down. I'm all right."

"Celia!" I gasped and fell forward with her. Fortunately she alighted upon her feet.

"I thought if I played dead you'd run away for help," said she. "That's what I was going to do just before you waked up. But, no! Of course you couldn't do the right thing. Don't speak to me!"

"Are you hurt?" I ventured to inquire.

"No," she snapped. "I fell on you, and just as hard as I could too."

Uncle Stephen's gate. Then I faced me sturdily.

"If you won't tell about this," she said. "I will give you my word for one year."

"Don't," said I, and we kept the bargain.

Before the year was over she had wept at the news of Gilbert Seabury's marriage—his second, I believe—and then had very sensibly forgotten his existence.

Modest Claims Often Carry the Most Conviction.

When Maxim, the famous gun inventor, placed his gun before a committee of judges, he stated its carrying power to be below what he felt sure the gun would accomplish. The result of the trial was therefore a great surprise, instead of disappointment. It is the same with Chamberlain's Colic, Cholera and Diarrhoea Remedy. They not publicly boast of all this remedy will accomplish, but prefer to let the users make the statements. What they do claim, is that it will positively cure diarrhoea, dysentery, pains in the stomach and bowels and has never been known to fail. For sale by Frank Hart, leading druggists.

FILIPINO HOBO.

The Negro that has been in this city and in the valley for the past few days, is a Filipino and some of the people in the valley are not altogether pleased with his company, as they consider his actions and conversation queer to say the least. At Willapa he endeavored to secure a school, saying that he had been a teacher in the Philippines. Later he tried to secure the hall for the purpose of giving a lecture but it turned out that his financial condition was at a very low ebb. He claimed to have a sum of money due him from the government.—Willapa Harbor Pilot.

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