SPANISH PEGGY

A STORY OF YOUNG ILLINOIS

By MARY HARTWELL CATHERWOOD

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and seven miles of drift had to be cut through to Concord burying ground. The entire population, as well as men from Clary's Grove, crowded the tavern. People stared when Don Pedro Lorimer came in with Redmond Clary, richly and warmly dressed, as if he had not found it unprofitable to plead the annexation of Cuba. His shining black hair and olive face had a placid, worldly look. One hard-working woman whispered to another that you would not think butter could melt in his mouth, and he appeared the last man to rob an orphan or to run her off with him against her will.

Peggy saw him through her tears with indignation. She sat beside Antywine on one of three chairs which Ann Rutledge had placed at the head of the coffin for Shickshack's family. But the third chair remained vacant until the preacher stood in embarrassment, undecided whether or not to raise a hymn while all the mourners gathered.

Shickshack's widow finally entered the tavern muffled from the snow in a blanket, carrying a basket on her arm. The crowded assembly opened to let her pass. She set her basket down, and with a vicious pounce took Antywine and Peggy by the ear. Antywine visibly restrained himself and walked unresisting with Peggy to the foot of the coffin. Sally shoved the chairs after them, and returned to her own place as chief mourner.

"This isn't your funeral!" the bereaved woman explained sourly to them. "He wasn't no kin to either of ye!"

Solemn-featured neighbors relaxed in countenance and looked sidelong at one another. They watched Sally lay off the blanket and take from her basket a rusty mourning shawl, a black bonnet and crape veil. In this regalia, kept for her husband's funerals, she dressed herself publicly, and, having completed her preparations, sat down, heaving a deep sigh. The sight of her beard under widow's weeds so affected one of the Grove boys that he disgraced himself by an audible snort. He did not mind disturbing meeting, but a funeral was different; and he whispered apologetically to the man beside him: "I bet God laughed when He made that woman!"

Candles were lighted in the tavern before the masculine population of New Salem—for only those went who could shovel snow and help dig a grave—returned from burying Shickshack. A river of icy air flowing out of the northwest had by that time cleared the storm away. Peggy and Antywine were to spend the second night of their peculiar orphanage at the Rutledges', in order to settle the business of Peggy's own inheritance, which Shickshack had silently passed on to his successors.

They sat down with Lincoln and Ann Rutledge in the best room, and he put the rattlesnake skin before them on a table. Peggy looked at it curiously, having never before seen her fortune, or the case which held it. The spots described by scales made her shudder. Ann also saw it with aversion, and wondered why Shickshack preferred that to a strong piece of buckskin.

"A rattlesnake," said Lincoln, "when you get over the first shock of introduction to him, is a mighty pretty fellow. See his combine of colors! He has lost his first freshness and his rattles, trying to bruise the tough hide of mankind. But I doubt if he ever stung anybody; he wouldn't unless he was crowded."

Through an open door the tavern kitchen displayed a roaring hearth, where the Dutch oven, with coals on its head and beneath its feet, held a joint of venison. A coffee pot, standing on a trivet over embers, sent perfume abroad. Johnnycakes of parched corn ground in the hand-mill were browning on boards slanted towards the fire—"the best bread that ever was e't!" testifies a surviving New Salemite. Hominy hissing in pork fat sent its song through the room, while the younger Rutledge girls helped their mother bring to the table cold turkey, cream and butter, fruits preserved in maple syrup, and honey found in the wild-bee tree.

Plenty of food, an abundance of candle-light, and the heartening warmth of the Franklin stove near her, may have suggested visions to Peggy as she inquired of her friends, "What must I do with this money?"

"Sieur Abe has kept it safe," suggested Antywine.

"There is no one trustier!" spoke Ann.

"Will you keep it for me, Mr. Lincoln?"

"I am not a good money-getter," he laughed, "and I doubt if I am a good money-keeper. The only thing I could do would be to carry it around for you and guarantee it shouldn't fall into worse hands."

"The sweetheart knows you are the strongest man in New Salem," said Antywine, resting his cheek upon his hand and lifting eyes of confidence to his elder.

"But I haven't measured with Clary's Grove yet."

"Antywine and I both know," said Peggy, "how everybody looks up to you. We could not keep it ourselves as well as you could do it for us, Mr. Lincoln."

Ann stretched out one slim, long-fingered hand to caress Peggy's cheek.

"Well, children, I'm of age, and Ann is 18. I reckon we'll have to father and mother you. Do you know how much money you have in this bank of Shickshack's, Peggy?"

"I don't."

"Do you know, Antywine?"

"Me? No. I have never inquire', and Shickshack have not sho' me."

"If the trust is to be put into my hands I must know the amount."

Lincoln untied the leather cord which bound the snake's neck, and shook it by the tail. Out gushed all the yellow pieces with the ring of gold upon the table; Spanish doubloons and French louis, which cost him some trouble to calculate. He set them in cylindrical piles, row after row. Wood snapped in the open Franklin stove, and no other sound could be heard in the room but the liquid clink of gold. Ann, Peggy and Antywine watched the counting.

Viane Rutledge, looking through the door at the silent company, beckoned little Jane to stare at such amazing wealth.

"Whose is it?" whispered Jane.

"Peggy Shickshack's, of course. Where would Antywine La Chance, or Mr. Abe Lincoln, or Ann get it? The old Indian must have been a miser. But I wouldn't be her—and a Spaniard—for all her money."

"Two thousand and fifty dollars," announced Lincoln. He began to return the gold to its pouch.

"Two thousand dollars is a large amount," said Ann.

"Am I very rich?" inquired Peggy.

"Well, one hundred dollars will buy eighty acres of land, or two horses. You are therefore worth sixteen

THE KNIFE SHOT PAST HIS HEAD AND STUCK QUIVERING IN THE OPPOSITE WALL.

hundred acres of land, and something over for calico and linsey; and, considering the times and the country, may call yourself fairly well off."

"Must I buy sixteen hundred acres of land?"

Lincoln's eyes twinkled, losing for a moment their usual expression of dark blue wistfulness. He was not much older than the Canadian boy who venerated him as an oracle, but he had already begun to guide the destinies of others.

"You'd better let your husband decide that matter when you are older," he answered, and while the words were being spoken, Pedro Lorimer entered the tavern in a whirl of winter air. He closed the outer door, made his salutations with grace, and approached the table where the money counters sat. Lincoln deliberately filled the snake skin, tied its neck shut, and sat with it in his large hands, pleasantly returning the visitor's greeting. The tavern was free to all comers. Yet Antywine at once stood up in front of Peggy, his blond head towering above the swart arrival.

"What you do here, eh? You drive Shickshack around, so he die in the drift! When I see you to-day I think I will throw you in the street! Go off—get some states hannex' to Cuba!"

"My pretty fellow," returned Pedro Lorimer, "I rode here through very biting cold to see my young cousin. I shall now take charge of her."

"Tell him I won't go with him, Antywine," said Peggy.

"The gentleman must understand," spoke Lincoln, "that he cannot force guardianship on a girl of Peggy's age—except by kidnaping. We folks in New Salem have not measured ourselves with the great people in the world, but we rather reckon that a New Orleans gambler would make a mighty poor guardian."

The foreigner's olive skin, chilled by the cold from which he had just entered, took a swift greenish pallor. He stepped forward hissing, and snapped his fingers in Lincoln's face. Antywine was upon him like a tiger, dragging him to the door, throwing him out into the snow, and shooting the bolt behind him.

"Goody!" Peggy exclaimed with passionate approval.

Ann put her hands to her eyes and Lincoln laughed.

"Take care, Antywine."

The oiled paper of the window through which Peggy had watched Ann Rutledge from the hand-mill, was slashed by a knife. Antywine flattened himself against the door. The knife shot past his head and stuck quivering in the opposite wall.

If New Salem folks had distrusted this erratic and intermittent visitor from the first, they quite made up their minds about him when he disappeared once more after Shickshack's funeral. It became generally known how he had followed that poor Indian to rob a girl. The winter of the deep snow gave shut-in householders plenty of time to talk. The fact that Pedro Lorimer had been harbored at Clary's Grove added no sweetness to his reputation. Some were afraid he would come back and organize the wild spirits there for any kind of local annexation which might strike his fancy. But the northern winter, from which a tropical nature shrank, went by without disturbance. If Black Hawk had stirred in the northwest, he settled down to await a better season. People no longer rode in sleds over buried stake-and-ridered fences. Vast white frosted loaves of prairies, and forests standing knee-deep in snow, returned to their natural aspect. Streams ran brimful, and Rock Creek covered half the valley during the spring thaw.

Peggy had plenty of chances to loan her money at a high rate of interest to impecunious people, with little prospect of getting it back. Lincoln said he was not a good adviser, for he had failed at storekeeping, and made debts which must cost him years of hard work. But it appeared to him that her gold was safer in the snakeskin coiled around his waist than it would be turned into anything else, until she could buy and hold land.

Antywine and Peggy had gone back to Sally's cabin. But as the season advanced and it was time to take up the work of surveying again, Antywine consulted Lincoln.

"I have made up my mind," he declared, "not to live with that woman some more at all. She have my father's goods, and her first man's goods, and Shickshack's cabin. She is well off. There is that Onslow house at the west end of the road. I can buy it myself for some trade. We will keep house."

"Peggy and you?"

"Yes," replied Antywine, with innocent enthusiasm. "I will take care of her. Me, I can make moccasins; I can kill plenty deer and cure venison. When I am away with you to carry the chain, she can bar the door and keep Sally out, and I sleep easy. I not sleep easy, Sieur Abe, to go away and leave her alone with that Sally, who may cast an evil eye or a stick of wood at her the minute my back is turn'!"

"You better put off the housekeeping until we come home," suggested Lincoln, smiling, "and let Peggy board at the tavern while we are away. She has plenty of money."

Antywine's blue eyes flashed joy at the unfolding of this brilliant plan. He had never thought of Peggy's money as currency which might be put to use. It was simply a valuable possession, hoarded for her.

Peggy was directly received into the Rutledge family, where she had an abundance of good food and Ann's teaching and companionship for a stipulated sum in shillings and fips amounting to less than two dollars a week. To her it was a season of joy and rapid development. Viane Rutledge, herself budding into girlhood, watched the Spaniard with surprise and reluctant approval. Peggy's angles disappeared. She shot up taller. Her lissome limbs were round, and her halting step without a crutch had an appealing charm. Her little face gathered a sweetness which provoked kisses; it had the clean polish of a flower petal. She was so good and so happy, so busy learning how to manage the affairs of daily living, and so glad to draw her breath, that everybody said, "She is growing pretty! Whoever imagined that little weazened Spaniard would turn out like this?"

Antywine and Lincoln were away until early in June. They came driving an ox-wagon from the west into New Salem one evening at sunset, and drew up at the vacant cabin which Antywine intended to make his own. It stood waiting for him in primitive security. The ox-wagon carried a squat, low chest of drawers, evidently bought at second-hand, but bright and rosy through its old mahogany surface, and Antywine's first housekeeping investment. Lincoln helped him unload it, and they set it on the sward before the cabin door.

"I lift him into the house myself," said Antywine. So Lincoln drove the borrowed cattle on, knowing he was welcome to put them into anybody's pasture until he and his chain bearer returned them.

Antywine opened the door of the playhouse he was intending to make for Peggy. Though the sensitive part of him, which Peggy said was like a woman, quivered with delight, he had a free, bold spirit, ready to dare anything. On long tramps and rides and through days of mechanical labor with a master mind he had been coming to his own as a man.

"There's a mighty difference," Lincoln once said to him, "between studying with the outside of your eyeballs and studying with your eyes open clear to the bottom of your brain."

Antywine saw that new oiled paper would have to be put into the weather-beaten windows, over which Peggy would hang short white curtains, perhaps like those that could be shoved apart on strings at the tavern. He selected the corner for his chest of drawers, and was silently calculating how long it would take to turn out chairs and tables at the cooper's shop, when the smell of a cob pipe made him shut the door to keep Sally from looking into his house. Sally had come up behind him and was examining the chest of drawers. In earlier days, before beard grew upon her face, or avarice and vindictiveness hewed it, her piercing black eyes may have been admired. She fixed them on Antywine.

He touched his cap with the courtesy his father had taught him to show all women, and said, "Good day, Sally." He heard Lincoln's gee-hawing to the oxen turn to "W'oa, Buck!" and saw that Slicky Green and young Yates had come down the road to meet the surveyor.

"Have you heard about Peggy's death?" inquired Sally.

"Her death?" Antywine repeated.

"Yes. She was buried a week ago."

CHAPTER VI.

"I not believe you!" said Antywine.

"You ask them Rutledges, then, that was hired to take such fine care of her! Why don't you go and ask them?"

"I not believe you!' trembled Antywine. He sat down on the doorstep holding his blinded head between his hands.

"You and Peggy thought you would go to yourselves, didn't you? But she lays in Concord buryin'-ground now, right alongside of Shickshack; and you know where he lays. The new grave's there."

"I not believe you! I not believe you! I not believe you!"

Antywine leaped from the doorsill and ran like a deer to the tavern, passing the young men and the oxen without noticing or hearing them. Ann Rutledge was sewing by an open window with her back toward him. The two young girls were in the garden with their mother. He did not see Peggy anywhere. A hush was upon the house, and as Ann turned and saw him with a frightened look on her face, he could not ask any question, but took the path down to Rock creek, and ran to the stone where Peggy used to hide her book for him. The sun was down and a ribbon of mist wavered in front of the closed schoolhouse.

Nobody would ever wait for him at that rock again. He ran along the ravine below the gardens and returned to his house, barring the door and drawing the latch-string in. Lying on the floor in the darkest corner, he hid his weeping, and made no answer to the young men, who called his name through the window.

Sally was asleep in her own cabin long before Antywine crept out of his and took the road to Concord burying-ground. It was a long walk under blurred stars, for the wind changed after midnight, belying the promise of a fair sunset.

Antywine tried to bring Peggy's face before him, with its many flitting expressions. Her eyes were hazel, or black, or gray, by changeable turns, swarming with points of light. He remembered drinking from the gourd after her, on the very side where she had drank, and the pleased trembling of her lips when she noticed it. All the ways and traits which went to the making of the companion he called sweetheart were present to his mind, when groping among saplings in the thinly peopled burying-ground he came to Shickshack's sunken grave which he had himself helped to make, and found a fresh clay hillock beside it.

The latter part of the night rain poured upon the chest of drawers which Antywine had left standing in front of the cabin and streamed down its polished sides. Rain beat upon Antywine through sapling boughs, saturating his linsey hunting-shirt and darkening his worn buckskins.

Drenched grass and a tangle of little trees he scarcely felt or saw when sodden and miserable daylight came. By the end of the afternoon some light crept out from sunset, and there was a clearing up in the west. Lincoln climbed the burying-ground fence, and found Antywine lying asleep across the new-made grave. He was so ghastly that Lincoln at once shook him, feeling relieved when he opened his eyes.

The boy looked up at the mole like a warm pulsing heart on his friend's cheek. But his friend's eyes twinkled.

"What are you doing here on old Daddy Cameron's grave, Antywine?"

Antywine sprang as from a rattlesnake. He was exhausted, so that Lincoln gave him both hands to help him rise.

"Daddy Cameron died last week and they buried him in the same row with Shickshack. He was a fine old man, but if I were you I wouldn't lie out all night and all day on his grave!"

"Sally have tell me this is where she is bury'!"

"Who? Peggy?"

"Yes, Sieur Abe. Where is she?"

"At the tavern."

"She is not dead?"

"Not a bit!"

"But Sally have tell me——"

"Haven't you summered and wintered Sally long enough to know when she is paying you a grudge?"

"But I run to the tavern myself—"

"And scare Ann, and run away again without asking any questions. I've had a long jaunt through the mud and searched the better part of a day for you."

Antywine threw his arms around Lincoln and sobbed and laughed like a woman. He swayed, and could scarcely stand.

"You've made yourself sick being so downhearted when you ought to have kept your wits. That Lorimer fellow is back at the Grove again, and he's making a bold stand now. If he had known I carry that snakeskin I reckon he would have followed our chain. But Dick Yates is here. We tried to find you last night, and couldn't."

"I tell Sally I not believe her!" shivered Antywine.

"And then you leg it out here and pass a sentimental night and a watery day on Daddy Cameron's grave! I'm surprised at you!"

The American way of joking over what had been tragedy seemed delicious to the Canadian boy as he tramped back the long seven miles. When he reached his house at the end of the village Lincoln did not think it advisable to take him any farther. Antywine was so ill that he lay down upon the floor, resisting any suggestion of food.

Through delirious eyes he saw the blaze, which Lincoln contrived to start in the chimney, interlace sticks piled there months before in readiness for a first house-warming.

Lincoln was on his knees blowing it when he heard Slicky Green pant through the door:

"Are you here, Abe? You're wanted at the tavern."

"What's the matter at the tavern?"

"The Grove boys are coming to throw everything out of doors if you don't give that Lorimer man the Spaniard and her money."

"How do you know?"

"Martha Bell Clary slipped off on her father's horse and brought word."

"Where's Dick?"

"He's looking somewhere else for you."

Lincoln stood up and glanced at Antywine, who had suffered, but was unable to fight, resting like a log at the hearth corner.

"Poor Antywine!" he whispered, and carefully shut the door as he went out to settle the unconscious boy's fate.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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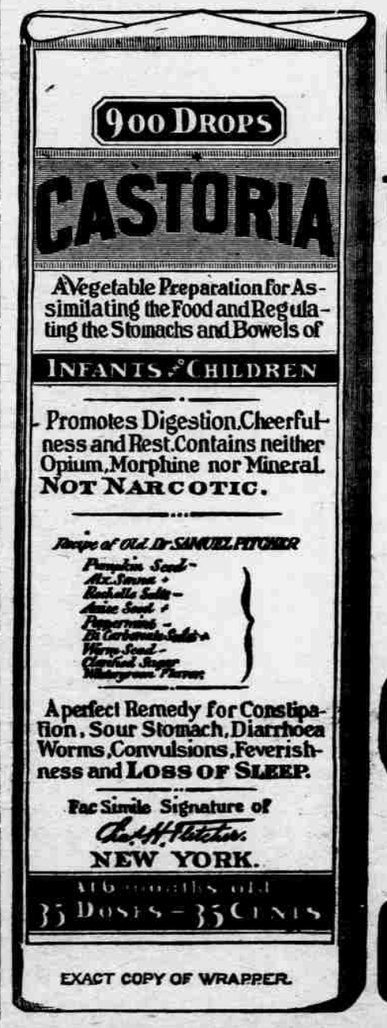

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