

A Willful Woman

By OSCAR COX

It was in the reign of King Edward of England, the fourth of that name, that John Ochiltree, a young farmer living in the county of Kent, met a lass called Mary Griggs at a Maying and conceived a strong love for her. He danced with her around the May-pole and looked at her languishingly, but his modesty and the strength of his love tied his tongue so that he could say nothing to her.

And so he danced and ogled and ogled and danced, but never a word could he say to the girl.

Mary had been keeping company with Richard Doyle, a maker of armor, but the moment he laid eyes on John Ochiltree Doyle saw that she was lost to him in favor of his rival. He drew away sulky, thus leaving the field to the man who had supplanted him.

The day after the Maying John waited for Mary to come out of her father's thatched cottage and joined her. He managed to wish her "good morning" and said that the crops promised to be good and that one of his cows had calved, but besides this he said nothing. Mary was a girl of spirit and would not help him out. She said to herself that he should talk to her like any other man or she would have none of him. He continued to show her by his expression that he was enamored of her, and when he looked at her his eyes had a melancholy expression.

Now, as soon as John got away from her his tongue was unloosed, and he could say what he liked. He told his mother of his trouble and convinced her that it was impossible that he should tell Mary his love and ask her to marry him.

"Then," said his mother, "Mary must propose to you."

"She will never do that," sighed John.

"She must be made to. My son wishes her for a wife, and he must have her. Besides, Mary is a good girl and will have a good dowry. I wish her for a daughter-in-law. I have made up my mind that, since you are unable to ask Mary to be your wife, she shall claim you for her husband."

"And how will you do that, mother?"
"Never mind, so that I do it. We women have to get through the world by exercising our wits. We are not men, to force our way, so we have to plan."

Things went from bad to worse between John and Mary. Determined to force him to declare himself, she encouraged her former suitor. This made John ill, and so great was his ailing that his mother feared he would die. She went to Mary and, telling her of John's condition and the cause, begged her to do that which was expected of the sterner sex—ask John to be her husband. Mary vowed that she would be no man's wife who had not the courage to ask her, and, though John might die, she would not do his part for him.

Not long after this a sheep belonging to a neighbor was found in John Ochiltree's fold. John was arrested for sheep stealing and thrown into prison. "The lad has lost his mind for love of you," said John's mother to Mary. The lass was secretly troubled, but tossed her head and said that a man who was afraid of a girl had no mind to lose.

John was tried and convicted and sentenced to be hanged.

Then Mary began to regret that she had refused to be persuaded. But it was now too late. She had driven John into insanity, for she believed what his mother said, or she had unintentionally bewitched him so that he had stolen a sheep. She sat at home mourning her sad fate at loving a man so defective. John's mother brought a request from her son that Mary would be present at his execution. Mary declared that she could not endure such a sight and would not go. But she was at last persuaded to grant this last boon to a man she was now persuaded she had driven to the scaffold, and on the morning of the hanging she went there with her lover's mother.

A crowd was gathered around the culprit. John, with the rope around his neck, had ascended a few steps of the ladder. He stopped and, seeing Mary below, said to her:

"Mary, save me!"

"How can I do that, John?"

"It is the law that if one about to be executed be claimed in marriage by any woman he shall go free."

"Is that so?" Mary asked of the sheriff.

"If you claim this man in marriage I dare not hang him."

"Oh, Mary," cried John, "have mercy on me!"

"Save him," whispered the culprit's mother.

Mary hesitated. "No," she said at last, "let him hang."

John staggered, then seemed relieved,

He climbed nimbly up the other rungs of the ladder, and the sheriff was about to swing him off when Mary cried:

"Hold! I claim this man in marriage!"

John was taken down, and the lovers, of whom the one couldn't and the other wouldn't until death was imminent, fell into each other's arms.

John's mother had stolen the sheep and placed it in her fold to bring about the result and force Mary to make the proposition. And yet we are told that women have not the heads that men have to accomplish results.

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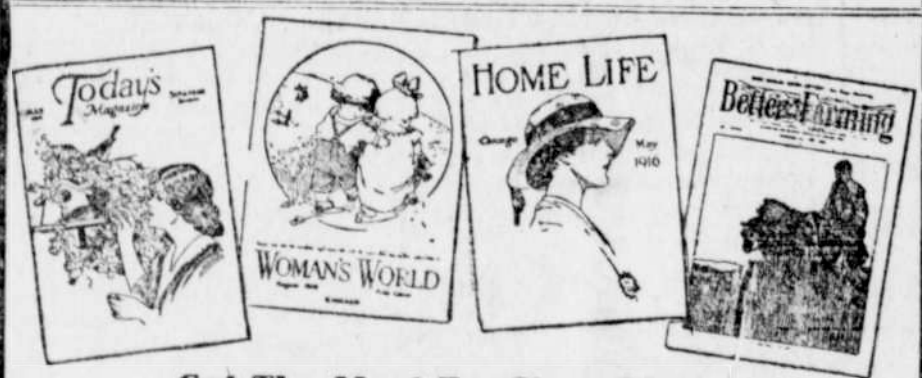
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