

The May-Pole of Merrymount

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The people of Merrymount—unsanctified in the eyes of their Puritan neighbors, for were they not Episcopal, who had pancakes at Shrovetide and wassail at Christmas?—were dancing about their May-pole one summer evening, for they tried to make it May throughout the year. Some were masked like animals, and all were tricked with flowers and ribbons. Within their circle, sharing in song and jest, were the lord and lady of the revels, and an English clergyman waiting to join the pair in wedlock. Life, they sang, should be all jollity: away with care and duty; leave wisdom to the weak and old, and sanctity for fools. Watching the sport from a neighboring wood stood a band of frowning Puritans, and as the sun set they stalked forth and broke through the circle. All was dismay. The bells, the laughter, the song were silent, and some who had tasted Puritan wrath before shrewdly smelled the stocks. A Puritan of iron face—it was Endicott, who had cut the cross from the flag of England—warning aside the “priest of Baal,” proceeded to hack the pole down with his sword. A few swinging blows, and down it sank, with its ribbons and flowers.

“So shall fall the pride of vain people; so shall come to grief the preachers of false religion,” quoth he. “Truss those fellows to the trees and give them half a dozen of blows apiece as token that we brook no ungodly conduct and hostility to our liberties. And you, king and queen of the May, have you no better things to think about than fiddling and dancing? How if I punish you both?”

“Had I the power I’d punish you for saying it,” answered the swain; “but, as I have not, I am compelled to ask that the girl go unharmed.”

“Will you have it so, or will you share your lover’s punishment?” asked Endicott.

“I will take all upon myself,” said the woman.

The face of the governor softened. “Let the young fellow’s hair be cut, in pumpkin-shell fashion,” he commanded; “then bring them to me but gently.”

He was obeyed, and as the couple came before him, hand in hand, he took a chain of roses from the fallen pole and cast it about their necks. And so they were married. Love had softened rigor and all were better for the assertion of a common humanity. But the May-pole of Merrymount was never set up again. There were no more games and plays and dances, nor singing of worldly music. The town went to ruin, the merrymakers were scattered, and the gray sobriety of religion and toil fell on Pilgrim land again.

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