

What Happened to Peggy

The string of Peggy's sunbonnet had become untied—so had her right shoe. These were not unusual accidents to a country girl of ten, but as both of her hands were full she felt obliged to put down what she was carrying. This was further complicated by the nature of her burden—a half-fledged shriek and a baby gopher—picked up in her walk. It was impossible to wrap them both in her apron without serious peril to one or the other; she could not put either down without the chance of its escaping. "It's like that dreadful riddle of the ferryman who had to take the wolf and the sheep in his boat," said Peggy to herself, "though I don't believe anybody was ever so silly as to want to take a wolf across the river." But, looking up, she beheld the approach of Sam Bedell—a six-foot tunnelman of the "Blue Cement Lead," and, hailing him, begged him to hold one of her captives. The giant, loathing the little mouse-like ball of fur, chose the shriek. "Hold him by the feet, for he bites awful," said Peggy, as the bird regarded Sam with the diabolically intense frown of his species. Then, dropping the gopher unconcernedly in her pocket, she proceeded to re-arrange her toilet. The tunnelman waited patiently until Peggy had secured the nankeen sunbonnet around her fresh but freckled cheeks, and, with a reckless display of yellow flannel petticoat and stockings like peppermint sticks, had double knotted her shoe-strings viciously, when he ventured to speak.

"Same old game, Peggy? Thought you got rather discouraged with your happy family" after that new owl o' yours had gathered 'em in."

Peggy's cheeks flushed slightly at this ungracious allusion to a former collection of hers, which had totally disappeared one evening after the introduction of a new member in the shape of a singularly venerable and peaceful-looking horned owl.

"I could have tamed him too," said Peggy, indignantly, "if Ned Myers, who gave him to me, hadn't been training him to keep things, and never let on anything about it to me. He was a regular game owl!"

"And wot are ye goin' to do with the colonel here," said Sam, indicating under that gallant title the infant shriek, who, with his claws deeply imbedded in Sam's finger, was quivering like a malignant hunchback and resisting his transfer to Peggy. "Won't he make it rather lively for the others? He looks pow'ful discontented for one so young."

"That's his nater," said Peggy, promptly. "Jess wait till I tame him. El he'd been left alone o' his folks, he'd grow up like 'em. He's a butcher bird—wot they call a 'nine killer'—kills nine birds a day! Yes, true ez you live! Sticks 'em up on thorns outside his nest, jest like a butcher's shop—till he gets hungry. I've seen 'em!"

"And how do you kalkilate to tame him?" asked Sam.

"By bein' good to him and lovin' him," said Peggy, stroking the head of the bird with infinite gentleness.

"That means you've got to do all the butcherin' for him?" said the cynical Sam.

Peggy shook her head, disdaining a verbal reply.

"Ye can't bring him up on sugar and crackers—like a Polly," persisted Sam.

"Ye ken do anythin' with critters, if you ain't afeard o' 'em and love 'em," said Peggy, shyly.

The tall tunnelman, looking down into the depths of Peggy's sunbonnet, saw something in the round, blue eyes and grave little mouth that made him think so, too. But here Peggy's serious little face took a shade of darker concern as her arm went down deeper into her pocket, and her eyes got rounder.

"It's—it's—burred out!" she said, breathlessly.

The giant leaped briskly to one side. "Hol' on," said Peggy, absently. With infinite gravity she followed, with her fingers, a seam of her skirt down to the hem, popped them quickly under it, and produced, with a sigh of relief, the missing gopher.

"You'll do," said Sam, in fearful admiration. "Mebbee you'll make anythin' out o' the Colonel, too. But I never took stock in that there owl. He was too darned self-righteous for decent bird. Now, run along afore anythin' else fetches loose again. So long!"

He patted the top of the sunbonnet, gave a little pull to the short brown cord that hung behind her tempting neck, and watched her flutter off with her spoils. He had done so many times before, for the great,

foolish heart of the Blue Cement Ridge had gone out to Peggy Baker, the little daughter of the blacksmith, quite early. There were others of the family, notably two elder sisters, invincible at picnics and dances, but Peggy was as necessary to these men as the blue jay that swung before them in the dim woods, the squirrel that whisked across their morning path, or the woodpecker who beat his tattoo at their midday meal from the hollow pine above them. She was part of the nature that kept them young. Her truncheons and vagrancies concerned them not; she was a law to herself, like the birds and squirrels. There were bearded lips to hail her wherever she went, and a blue or red-shirted arm always stretched out in any perilous path or dangerous crossing.

Her peculiar tastes were an outcome of her nature, assisted by her surroundings. Left a good deal to herself in her infancy, she made play-fellows of animated nature around her, without much reference to selectness or fitness, but always with a fearlessness that was the result of her own observations, and unhampered by tradition or other children's timidity. She had no superstition regarding the venom of toads, the poison of spiders, or the ear-penetrating capacity of ear-wigs. She had experiences and revelations of her own—which she kept sacredly to herself, as children do—and one was in regard to a rattlesnake, partly induced, however, by the indiscreet warning of her elders. She was cautioned not to take her bread and milk into the woods, and was told the affecting story of the little girl who was once regularly visited by a snake that partook of her bread and milk, and who was ultimately found rapping the head of the snake for gorging more than his share and not "taking a poon" as he do. It is needless to say that this incautious caution fired Peggy's adventurous spirit. She took a bowlful of milk to the haunt of a "rattler," near her home, but, without making the pretense of sharing it, generously left the whole to the reptile. After repeating this hospitality for three or four days she was amazed one morning on returning to the home to find the snake—an elderly one with a dozen rattles—devoutly following her. Alarmed, not for her own safety nor that of her family, but for the existence of her grateful friend-in-danger of the blacksmith's hammer, she took a circuitous route leading it away. Then recalling a bit of woodland lore once communicated to her by a charcoal burner, she broke a spray of the white ash and laid it before her in the track of the rattlesnake. He stopped instantly and remained motionless without crossing the slight barrier. She repeated this experiment on later occasions, until the reptile understood her. She kept the experience to herself, but one day it was witnessed by a tunnelman. On that day Peggy's reputation was made!

From this time henceforth the major part of Blue Cement Ridge became serious collectors for what was known as "Peggy's Menagerie," and two of the tunnelmen constructed a stockaded inclosure—not half a mile from the blacksmith's cabin, but unknown to him—for the reception of specimens. For a long time its existence was kept a secret between Peggy and her loyal friends. Her parents, aware of her eccentric tastes only through the introduction of such smaller creatures as lizards, toads, and tarantulas into their house—which usually escaped from their tin cans and boxes and sought refuge in the family slippers—had frowned upon her zoological studies. Her mother found that her woodland rambles entailed an extraordinary wear and tear of her clothing. A pinafore reduced to ribbons by a young fox, and a straw hat swallowed by a mountain kid, did not seem to be a natural incident to an ordinary walk to the schoolhouse. Her sisters thought her tastes "low," and her familiar association with the miners inconsistent with their own dignity. But Peggy went regularly to school, was a fair scholar in elementary studies (in fact, she knew of natural history, what quite startled her teachers), and being only a teachable child, was allowed some latitude. As for Peggy herself she kept her own faith unshaken; her little creed, whose shibboleth was not "to be afraid" of God's creatures but to "love 'em," sustained her through reprimand, torn clothing, and it is to be feared, occasional bites and scratches from the loved ones themselves.

The unsuspected contiguity of the "Menagerie" to the house had its drawbacks, and once nearly exposed her. A mountain wolf cub, brought especially for her from the higher Northern Sierras with great trouble and expense by Jack Ryder of the Lone Star Lead, unfortunately escaped from the menagerie just as the child seemed in a fair way of taming it. Yet it had been already familiarized enough with civilization to induce it to stop in its flight and curiously examine the blacksmith's shop. A shout from the blacksmith and a hurled hammer sent it flying again, with Mr. Baker and his assistant in full pursuit. But it quickly distanced them with its long, tireless gallop, and they were obliged to return to the forge, lost in wonder and conjecture. For the blacksmith had recognized it as a stranger to the locality, and as a man of oracular pretension had a startling theory to account for its presence. This he confided to the editor of the local paper, and the next issue contained an editorial paragraph: "Our presage of a severe winter in the higher Sierras and consequent spring floods in the valleys has been startlingly confirmed! Mountain wolves have been seen in Blue Cement Ridge, and our esteemed fellow-citizen, Mr. Ephraim Baker, yesterday encountered a half-starved cub entering his premises in search of food. Mr. Baker is of the opinion that the mother of the cub, driven down by stress of weather, was in the immediate vicinity." Nothing but the distress of the only responsible mother of the cub—Peggy—and loyalty to her, kept Jack Ryder from exposing the absurdity publicly, but for weeks the camp fires of Blue Cement Ridge shook with the suppressed and unhalloved joy of the miners, who were in the guilty secret.

But unfortunately for Peggy, the most favored of her cherished possessions was not obliged to be kept secret. That one exception was an Indian dog! This was also a gift, and had been procured with great "difficulty" by a "packer" from an Indian encampment on the Oregon frontier. The "difficulty" was, in plain English, that it had been stolen from the Indians at some peril to the stealer's scalp. It was a mongrel of all appearances, of no recognized breed or outward significance, yet of a quality distinctly its own. It was absolutely and totally uncivilized.

Whether this was an hereditary trait or the result of a degeneracy no one knew. It refused to enter a house; it would not stay in a kennel. It would not eat in public, but gorged ravenously and stealthily in the shadows. It had the slink of a tramp, and in its patched and mottled hide seemed to simulate the rags of a beggar. It had the tirelessness without the affected limp of a coyote. Yet it had none of the ferocity of barbarians. With teeth that could gnaw through the stoutest rope and toughest lariat, it never bared them in anger. It was cringing without being amiable or submissive; it was gentle without being affectionate.

Yet almost insensibly it began to yield to Peggy's faith and kindness. Gradually it seemed to single her out as the one being in this vast white-faced and fully clothed community that it could trust. It presently allowed her to half drag, half lead it to and from school, although on the approach of a stranger it would bite through the rope, or frantically endeavor to efface itself in Peggy's petticoats. It was trying, even to the child's sweet gravity, to face the ridicule excited by its appearance on the road, and its habit of carrying its tail between its legs—at such an inflexible curve that, on the authority of Sam Bedell, a misstep caused it to "turn a back summersault"—was painfully disconcerting. But Peggy endured all this, as she did the greater dangers of the High Street in the settlement, where she had often, at her own risk, absolutely to drag the dazed and bewildered creature from under the wheels of carts and the heels of horses. But this shyness wore off—rather was eventually lost in the dog's complete and utter absorption in Peggy. His limited intelligence and imperfect perceptions were excited for her alone. His singular keen scent detected her whenever or how remote she might be.

Her passage along a "blind trail," her deviations from the school path, her more distant excursions were all mysteriously known to him. It seemed as if his senses were concentrated in this one faculty. No matter how unexpected or unfamiliar the itinerary, "Lo, the poor Indian!"—as the men had nicknamed him (in possible allusion to his "untutored mind")—always arrived promptly and silently.

It was to this singular faculty that Peggy owed one of her strangest experiences. One Saturday afternoon she was returning from an errand to the village when she was startled by the appearance of Lo in her path. For the reason already given she no

longer took him with her to these active haunts of civilization, but had taught him on such occasions to remain as a guard outside the stockade which contained her treasures. After reading him a severe lecture on this flagrant abandonment of his trust, enforced with great seriousness and an admonitory forefinger, she was concerned to see that the animal appeared less agitated by her reproach than by some other disturbance. He ran ahead of her instead of at her heels, as was his usual custom, and barked—a thing he rarely did. Presently she thought she discovered the cause of this in the appearance from the wood of a dozen men armed with guns. They seemed to be strangers; but among them she recognized the deputy sheriff of the settlement. The leader noticed her, and after a word or two with the others the deputy approached her.

"You and Lo had better be scooting home by the high road, outer this—or ye might get hurt," he said, half playfully, half seriously.

Peggy looked fearlessly at the men and their guns.

"Look ez ef you was huntin'!" she said curiously.

"We are!" said the leader.

"Wot you huntin'?"

The deputy glanced at the others.

"Bar!" he replied.

"Bar!" repeated the child with the quick resentment which a palpable falsehood always provoked in her. "There ain't no bar in ten miles! See yourself huntin' bar!"

The men laughed. "Never you mind, Missy," said the deputy, "you trol' along!" He laid his hand gently on her head, faced her sunbonnet toward the near highway, gave the usual parting pull to her brown pigtail, added: "Make a bee line home," and turned away.

Lo uttered the first growl known in his history. Whereat Peggy said, with lofty forbearance, "Serve you jest right ef I set my dog on you."

But force is no argument, and Peggy felt this truth even of herself and Lo. So she trotted away. Nevertheless, Lo showed signs of hesitation. After a few moments Peggy herself hesitated and looked back. The men had spread out under the trees, and were already lost in the woods. But there was more than one trail through it, and Peggy knew it.

And here an alarming occurrence startled her. A curiously striped brown and white squirrel whisked past her and ran up a tree. Peggy's round eyes became rounder. There was but one squirrel of that kind in all the length and breadth of Blue Cement Ridge, and that was in the menagerie! Even as she looked it vanished. Peggy faced about and ran back to the road in the direction of the stockade, Lo bounding before her. But another surprise awaited her. There was the clutter of short wings under the branches and the sunlight flashed upon the iris throat of a wood-duck as it swung out of sight past her. But in this single glance Peggy recognized one of the latest and most precious of her acquisitions. There was no mistake now! With a despairing little cry to Lo: "The menagerie's broke loose!" she ran like the wind toward it. She cared no longer for the mandate of the men; the trail she had taken was out of their sight; they were proceeding so slowly and cautiously that she and Lo quickly distanced them in the same direction. She would have yet time to reach the stockade and secure what was left of her treasures before they came up and drove her away. Yet she had to make a long circuit to avoid the blacksmith's shop and cabin before she saw the stockade—lifting its four-foot walls around an inclosure a dozen feet square, in the midst of a manzanita thicket. But she could see also broken coops, pens, cages and boxes lying before it, and stopped once, even in her grief and indignation, to pick up a ruby-throated lizard, one of its late inmates that had stopped in the trail—stiffened to stone at her approach. The next moment she was before the rootless walls and then stopped—stiffened like the lizard. For out of that peaceful ruin which had once held the wild and untamed vagabonds of earth and sky arose a type of savagery and barbarism the child had never before looked upon—the head and shoulders of a hunted, desperate man!

His head was bare and his hair matted with sweat over his forehead; his face was ashen and the back roots of his beard showed against the deadly pallor of his skin except where it was scratched by thorns, or where the red spots over his cheek bones made his cheeks look as if painted. His eyes were as insaniely bright; his movements were as convulsive—as those captured animals she had and it was only when with a sudden effort and groan of pain he half lifted himself above the stockade that she saw that his leg, bandaged with his cravat and handkerchief, stained a dull red, dragged

helplessly beneath him. He stared at her vacantly for a moment and then looked hurriedly into the wood behind her.

The child was more interested than frightened and more curious than either. She had grasped the situation at a glance. It was the hunted and the hunters. Suddenly he started and reached for his rifle which he had apparently set down outside when he climbed into the stockade. He had just caught sight of a figure emerging from the wood at a distance. But the weapon was out of his reach.

"Hand me that gun!" he said, roughly.

But Peggy did not stir. The figure came more plainly and quite unconsciously into full view—an easy shot at that distance.

The man uttered a horrible curse and turned a threatening face on the child. But Peggy had seen something like that in animals she had captured. She only said, gravely: "Ef you shoot that gun you'll bring 'em all down on you."

"All?" he demanded.

"Yes! a dozen folks with guns like yours," said Peggy. "You jest crouch down and lie low! Don't move! Watch me!"

The man dropped below the stockade. Peggy ran swiftly toward the unsuspecting figure, evidently the leader of the party, but deviated slightly to snatch a tiny spray from a white ash tree. She never knew that in that brief interval the wounded man, after a supreme effort, had possessed himself of his weapon and for a moment had covered her with its deadly muzzle. She ran on fearlessly until she saw that she had attracted the attention of the leader, when she stopped and began to wave the white ash wand before her. The leader halted, conferred with someone behind him—who proved to be the deputy sheriff. Stepping out he advanced directly toward Peggy and called sharply:

"I told you to get out of this! Come, be quick!"

"You'd better get out yourself," said Peggy, waving her ash spray, "and quicker, too!"

The deputy stopped, staring at the spray. "Wot's up?"

"Rattlers."

"Where?"

"Everywhere round ye—a regular nest of 'em! That's your way round!" She pointed to the right, and again began beating the underbrush with her wand.

The men had, meantime, huddled together in consultation. It was evident that the story of Peggy and her influence on rattlesnakes was well known—and, in all probability, exaggerated. After a pause the whole party filed off to the right, making a long circuit of the menagerie stockade, and were presently lost in the distance. Peggy ran back to the fugitive. The fire of savagery and desperation in his eyes had gone out—but had been succeeded by a glazing film of faintness.

"Can you get me some water?" he whispered.

The stockade was near a spring—a necessity for the menagerie. Peggy brought him water in a dipper. The

sighed a little; her "butcher bird"—now lost forever—had been the last to drink from it!

The water seemed to revive him. "The rattlesnake scared the cowards," he said, with an attempt to smile. "Were there many rattlers?"

"There wasn't any," said Peggy, a little spitefully, "cept you—a two-legged rattler!"

The rascal quite grinned at the compliment. "One-legged you mean," he said, indicating his helpless limb.

Peggy's heart relented slightly. "Wot you goin' to do now?" she said. "You can't stay in there, you know. It b'ongs to me!" She was generous, but practical.

"Were those things I fired out yours?"

"Yes."

"Mighty rough on me."

Peggy was slightly softened. "Kin you walk?"

"No."

"Kin you crawl?"

"Not as far as a rattler."

"Ef as ez that clearin'?"

"Yes."

"There's a house tethered out in that clearin'. I kin shift him to this end."

"You're white all through," said the man, gravely.

Peggy ran off to the clearing. The horse belonged to Sam Bedell, but he had given Peggy permission to ride it whenever she wished. This was equivalent, in Peggy's mind, to a permission to place him where she wished. She consequently led him to a point nearest the stockade, and, thoughtfully, close beside a stump. But this took some time, and when she arrived she found the fugitive already there, very white and weak, but still smiling.

"Ye kin turn him loose when you get through with him; he'll find his way back," said Peggy. "Now I must go."

Without again looking at the man she ran back to the stockade. Then she paused until she heard the sound of hoofs crossing the highway in the opposite direction from which the pursuers had crossed, and knew that the fugitive had got away. Then she took the astonished and still motionless lizard from her pocket, and proceeded to restore the broken coops and cages to the empty stockade.

But the news reconstructed her menagerie nor renewed her collection. People said she had tired of her whim, and that really she was getting too old for such things. Perhaps she was. But she never got old enough to reveal her story of the last wild animal she had tamed by kindness. Nor was she sure of it herself, until a few years afterwards on commencement day at a boarding school at San Jose, when they pointed out to her one of the most respectable trustees. But they said he was once a gambler, who had shot a man with whom he had quarreled, and was nearly caught and lynched by a vigilance committee.

BRET HARTE.

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