

"twinkling of an eye," as it were. Finally May Eavesdrop, who was always first to suggest a new idea, looked up, and said, "I have it; you know that Samuel Gallant thinks we admire him. Now we must get him to let us in. He will do it if Belle asks him, I know."

After debating the question somewhat, it was decided that that was the best plan, and the next day Belle started out on her errand. She found him and made known her mission; after a great deal of coaxing and teasing, such as only a woman can do, she got his reluctant consent to be admitted on the following conditions:

1. That they should all dress in male attire, to appear as visiting brethren.
2. That they should not come until twelve o'clock at night, and then unattended. He being authority for the statement that they did not initiate any one until that hour, the time previous to that being occupied by social amusements in which they would surely be detected.
3. That they would strictly obey his instructions.
4. That Belle should marry him immediately after the Lodge adjourned. This latter Belle promised, fully determined to run away from him at that time.

You may imagine the party were very hopeful when they met again and heard Belle's report. They were warm in their praises of her skill, and confident of final success, for what was to hinder them from obtaining the secrets, while they had such a powerful ally as the Tyler of the Lodge.

Before proceeding further let us become acquainted with some of the officers of the Lodge. The W. M. is Horatio Stillman, a bachelor of considerable wealth, whom the matrons of Steadytown had made every effort to secure as son-in-law without success. He was the physician of the place and a man highly esteemed by all.

William Shingle was the Treasurer—a man eloquent of speech, but whose size was mean and contemptible. He was the curiosity of the town—an honest lawyer.

In the Senior Steward's seat sat Hezekiah Cotton, the village merchant, whose reputation for coquetry and honesty was equally good. He often remarked he should lose half his trade were he to marry.

The other officers of the Lodge were men esteemed in the various walks and callings of life, but as they do not take an active part in the remainder of the story we will forbear making their acquaintance.

The night arrived, but a new obstacle presented itself—that of fear. The girls had never been out at that late hour without attendants. But May was not to be put back in that manner, and she at last hit upon a plan. Biddy Mulcadey was in the kitchen, and she was just as full of sport as any of them, and as fearless as one could well be. With her for a protector they need fear no evil, so it was decided to take her, regardless of Gallant's positive instructions to the contrary. After being informed she readily acceded to the plan; thus every objection seemed to be removed and they started for the hall.

Very cautiously was the signal given, and answered by Gallant as agreed upon. After repeated instructions to keep quiet, he left them in the ante-room, while he went in to announce the visitors. They were standing thus, half frightened, half amused, when suddenly the lights were extinguished, and there was a cold gust of air passed by, that made them shiver. They looked about them and trembled, for, in letters of ghastly hue, they read:

"Tis now the very witching time of night,
When church-yards yawn and spectres stalk abroad."

Another instant all was light again and everything was the same as when Samuel Gallant left them a moment before. Could they be dreaming? they dare not speak lest the scene would be repeated with awful intensity. For full five minutes did they wait in fearful suspense.

At last Gallant returned, and told them to advance one by one, and conductors inside the door would attend to it that they were properly seated and cared for. They advanced single file, into impenetrable darkness, but no guides appeared. The door was closed upon them, so they, like the original conquerors of Mexico, who burned their ships behind them, had only the courage of desperation. At last, after sundry gropings in the darkness, during which Belle suddenly found herself in a kneeling position, they found four chairs, and sat down to rest. But immediately the chairs began to sink down, down, while in the distance was heard a sepulchral voice: "And thou shalt go down to the bottomless pit, there to be bound a thousand years."

All was silent, save ever and anon was heard a deep drawn sigh from the inquisitive females, who seemed to be paying the penalty of their inquisitiveness, but the end was not yet. Gurgling noises were heard, and they found themselves slowly sinking deeper and deeper, into the domains of Neptune; while afar off they could hear sounds of the "merry, merry dance." Just as despair was lifting his hideous face and they were preparing to bid farewell to this life, strong arms seized them and stalwart men