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"COURTING MRS. FIELDS"

EXT. POWDERHOUSE HILL, SOUTH BERWICK, MAINE (1863) - DAY

Snowmelt rushes down a wash. Sprigs of grass poke up through the ice as winter gives way to spring. However, none of a small caravan of BOYS trekking down off the slope even notice. They've finished their last sled run of the day and are too busy recounting various death-defying feats of downhill navigation.

Two stragglers on the hill, CONRAD and NICK, spot an unclaimed HORSE tied to a tree nearby. Beside it, someone's mangy-looking DOG is digging for gophers. They scan the area but don't see anyone.

TOP OF HILL

High above the boys' view, SARAH ORNE JEWETT, 16, prepares to make her move. She checks to see that the coast is clear. Then she drops her sled down on the snow, secures her bonnet and petticoats, and plunges off on the wings of gravity.

BASE OF HILL

Conrad and Nick see the mystery sledder accelerating across the powder.

NICK

Who's that?

SARAH'S SLED - BOYS' POV

She turns to catch a precariously steep grade and lifts off into the air. She lands smoothly.

CONRAD (O.S.)

Wow!

CLOSE ON SARAH

The trees pass by her in a blur as she negotiates her way through jagged, rock-laden terrain.

SLOPE

The sled goes airborne again, causing Sarah's loosened skirts to catch the breeze. The boys are amazed and delighted.

NICK

Criminy, he's got a sail!

THE SLED

skids around a boulder, almost collides with another rock.

SARAH

wonders how she does it. Just one more corner before the straightaway. My, she's going fast.

THE SLED

takes the corner too close. The sled swerves out of traction and heads off in the wrong direction.

THE BOYS

are mortified.

CONRAD

He's going to crash into
that rock!

SARAH

cannot hope to avert disaster. So she lays on her back and rolls over the side just as -

THE SLED

slams into a boulder and splits spectacularly into two.

BOTTOM OF HILL

The boys start running towards the crash site.

CONRAD

Boy, what a ride. Did you see who it was?

NICK

I don't care, he's the captain of the treehouse. Alright?

CONRAD

But what if he's dead?

SARAH

lies motionless on her back in the snow, her face framed in white ice. Not dead, just slightly dazed. A robin alights on her forehead.

SARAH'S POV

Startled, the bird SHRIEKS and flies away. In its wake, two round and surly heads stare down at her.

CONRAD
Cripes, it's Sarah Jewett.

SLOPE

The boys grab snowballs and start pelting her. Fortunately, help arrives in the form of KATE BIRKHEAD, 16, pretty and petite. She knocks the boys aside with a healthy burst of feminine angst.

KATE
Heathen! Why don't you go
gnaw on some bark?

Unfazed, the boys cast her aside and resume their barrage. But not for long. The mangy hound we saw earlier now leaps INTO FRAME, taking a slice from Conrad's trousers. With the canine in hot pursuit, he and Nick scam down the hill.

KATE
Sarah, are you hurt?

SARAH
I am a drop of quicksilver on a
quivering white mass.

KATE
I'm getting your father.

Sarah clamps down on Kate's arm to keep her from leaving.

KATE (CONT.)
Sarah, he's a doctor. And you
may have cracked your skull.
In fact, I'm sure of it.

If Sarah's head requires examining, it's for other reasons. She touches Kate's blushing face with a bold intensity not at all in keeping with Victorian standards.

KATE (CONT.)
Don't start that. It's
shameless.

SARAH
Why do you say that?

KATE
You're not a boy. You shouldn't
even be up here. You could have
killed yourself. And those stupid
boys.

SARAH
Guess what?

KATE

What?

SARAH

I finished my new story.

KATE

Did you.

SARAH

Not only that, I sent it to *The Atlantic Monthly*.

KATE

Good for you.

SARAH

My father found out where the publisher lives. Someday, I'll be famous like the Brontë sisters.

At this inopportune moment, the mangy dog returns and starts slobbering all over Sarah's face.

KATE

Well, there's your first admirer.

Sarah reaches out a hand and Kate pulls her to her feet. They head down the hill, holding hands.

SARAH

I thought you were my first.

KATE

Not at all. You know very well I haven't the slightest interest in personal attachments.

Kate's being coy. Sarah wraps an arm around her and pulls her in close to argue the point. They saunter down the hill. But as they reach Sarah's horse, a crow CAWS from an adjacent tree. Sarah quietly notes the bad omen and wonders what it means.

CUT TO:

INT. DRAWING ROOM, 148 CHARLES STREET, BOSTON - DAY

On the same day, a hundred miles to the southwest (that is, as the crow flies), a stormy fellow by the name of NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, 63, paces before a bay window. The brooding author is in a lather about something. In fact, an intriguing, forbidden something luring him to the window.

THOMAS HIGGINSON (O.S.)

This discovery has restored for us
the legend in its artistic phase.

Hawthorne resists the urge to peep outside, but the effort's
simply killing him.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES (O.S.)

Tell us again the location of the dig.

Across the room, publisher JAMES T. FIELDS, 50, sits at a
cherry wood desk stirring his tea. Two other Boston
Brahmins, OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, 55, and THOMAS HIGGINSON,
hover around the desk.

HIGGINSON

In the sacred precinct of Demeter.

HOLMES

I take it that's somewhere north of
Beebe's Block?

HIGGINSON

On the coast of Asia Minor,
Professor Holmes. The excavators
claim there's been a volcanic
disturbance at the site.

HOLMES

How exciting. Was anyone hurt?

HIGGINSON

The eruption took place thousands
of years ago. It seems these
temples were deliberately built
over deep fissures in the earth.

FIELDS

So I've heard. It made them ideal
for various rituals and prophetic
visions.

Fields is distracted by Hawthorne's agitated manner and
wonders what's bothering him. But he politely defers.

HAWTHORNE

Finally gives into to temptation and goes to the window. He
glances down into -

EXT. A WALLED GARDEN,

where the windswept figure of MRS. ANNIE FIELDS, 30,
transplants seedlings in the soil. Her slim figure is
reserved and appealing even in a work smock. A beehive swarm
of dark hair is loosely contained in its bun.

FIELDS (CONT. O.S)

And what about this larger statue
you mentioned?

HIGGINSON (O.S.)

Possibly a priestess, or it may be
Demeter herself, depicted in her
human aspect.

Annie stops to rest. She looks out over the Charles River
and the city of Cambridge in the distance.

HOLMES (O.S.)

Yes, as she pauses from her
restless wandering in search of the
lost child. Persephone, isn't it?

INT. DRAWING ROOM

FIELDS

Yes. The girl Hades hauled down to
the underworld. So what does this
have to do with the *Atlantic
Monthly*?

HIGGINSON

Why Mr. Fields, it's a milestone in
the study of archaic history!

HOLMES

So they've dug up another obese
figure in marble. Sound the
trumpets.

The sound of Hawthorne grumbling to himself at the window
briefly derails the conversation. Fields empties the last
drops from his teapot into the cup on his desk. Holmes
wanders over to look into a glass display case.

HIGGINSON

Of course, we've long suspected
that our Christian mythology was
appropriated from a far more
ancient tradition.

HOLMES

Of course it was, there were no
copyright laws in those days. Good
God, is that a lock of Keat's hair?

He's referring to some memorabilia inside the case.

HIGGINSON

But now we have proof of it.

HOLMES

Where did you get it?

FIELDS

(ignoring Holmes)

Well, what do you have in mind?
Something in the way of thirty
pages, I imagine.

HIGGINSON

Really, I don't think I could cover
this in a single installment.

HOLMES

Touché.

Still roiling at the window, Hawthorne finally decides to
act. He roars across the room like a freight train.

HAWTHORNE

Won't you excuse me, gentlemen.

HOLMES

Yes, Hawthorne, I was about to
suggest a trip to the privy.

HIGGINSON

But won't you give us your opinion
of the marbles?

HAWTHORNE

I have no views on religion.

FIELDS

Really? Oh, Nathaniel, when you
find my wife, could you ask her to
send Lucy up with more tea?

EXT. GARDEN - DAY

Stepping outdoors, Hawthorne forgets how deceptively cold it
is on this sunny day. His body involuntarily shivers from
head to foot. Embarrassed, he retreats behind a rose bush
to collect himself.

SEEDLING PLOT

Annie notices her stalker. She's flattered, but continues
troweling. After a few moments:

ANNIE

Have you run out of refreshment or
has court ended early?

Emerging from his hideout:

HAWTHORNE

Actually, I was distracted from a riveting discussion of how the past constantly interferes with the present.

ANNIE

And what was the distraction?

HAWTHORNE

Only this crisp, vibrant first day of a New England spring.

He shivers again. Annie sees he's in distress and rushes to his side.

ANNIE

Let's get you out of the draft.

They retreat to a Roman-style stone bench surrounded by a vine-covered trellis.

ANNIE (CONT.)

Here.

They sit. Like a mother hen, Annie turns up Hawthorne's collar, buttons up his jacket, and warms his icy hands.

ANNIE (CONT.)

You should be inside.

HAWTHORNE

To the contrary, this garden is a refuge, like an ark retreating from the flood of babble.

He glances up at the window he was staring down from earlier. Annie can appreciate the sarcasm.

ANNIE

It's a refuge to me as well.

Their eyes meet. For Annie, Hawthorne's intensity is invigorating and scary at the same time. She looks away.

ANNIE

So, how is the Dolliver story coming?

HAWTHORNE

A miserable plundering of ink. Whatever propelled me to start a romance in my decaying state - delirium, I suspect.

ANNIE

The chapters you showed us are delicious. There is just one line that troubles me, where you say pleasure is only pain greatly exaggerated.

HAWTHORNE

No, you couldn't possibly appreciate that concept.

He stares down at the ground and broods. Again, like a mother hen, Annie touches his arm gently.

HAWTHORNE

If only it were not so wretchedly breezy in Boston, I should make a point of...

He can't finish the sentence.

ANNIE

Visiting more often? I wish you would.

She did not mean this in a romantic way. But Hawthorne looks into her eyes again and is on the verge of kissing her. Fortunately for Annie, FOOTSTEPS beat up the walk.

FIELDS

Are we keeping America's man of letters safe from the elements?

Annie alights from the bench in a heartbeat.

ANNIE

So, you are out of tea. Shall I go fetch Lucy?

FIELDS

Don't give it a thought. Holmes and that other chatterbox are up there debating the ulterior motives of the Hebrews. But don't you think we should take our friend into the parlor, where it's warm?

ANNIE

Yes, that's just what I suggested.

They each offer an arm and Hawthorne reluctantly gives in. They stroll back towards the house.

FIELDS

I meant to tell you, your paper on Lincoln's view of the war was a revelation.

HAWTHORNE

Pity you chose to omit the only part of it worth publishing.

FIELDS

Now we can't be describing the President as a sallow, unkempt man so tall and loose-jointed he's a spectacle to watch whenever he sits down and folds up his legs.

HAWTHORNE

Why not, if true?

Annie twirls a sprig of parsley and savors the fact that America's greatest author has a crush on her.

FIELDS

And to think you were educated abroad. The rest of the article's running in the next number.

HAWTHORNE

Yes, on the immaculate page of the Atlantic.

INT. FIRST FLOOR HALLWAY/FOYER - DAY

The Fields labor to keep pace with Hawthorne's now vigorous stride toward the exit. LUCY, the Fields' Irish maid, dashes in with his coat and cane.

FIELDS

Are you sure you won't stay for luncheon?

HAWTHORNE

There's the train to worry about.

FIELDS

I believe there are several going your way today. (No response.) Oh, did Mrs. Fields explain her reservation about your new work? The line where you say pleasure is heightened pain, or something to the effect.

HAWTHORNE

To hell with it, then. If you expect me to approximate the same rosy-cheeked flavor of the witless petticoat legions from which you draw most of your current stock, you are mistaken.

FIELDS

You mean, our women authors? No, I wouldn't dream of it.

A small, perturbed voice weighs in on the subject.

ANNIE

Actually, any one of their books has outsold the combined collections of Emerson, Longfellow, Melville..

EXT. 148 CHARLES STREET - CONTINUOUS

They step out onto the landing.

FIELDS

Yes, and I'm afraid even Hawthorne.

HAWTHORNE

Damned mob of scribbling women. They've corrupted the marketplace. As for Dolliver, the next time you go rummaging through my bureau, perhaps you'll find another manuscript collecting dust.

The Fields look at each other. This is how they found the *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne descends the steps.

ANNIE

Won't you give our love to Sophia.

HAWTHORNE

Naturally. And Fields, when you put the new article and the others we discussed into book form, I will dedicate the volume to Franklin Pierce.

FIELDS

Please, Nathaniel. Perhaps after the war, but today, with all the bad blood that's been created..

HAWTHORNE

Regardless.

The moment Hawthorne reaches the street, the Fields see TWO PANHANDLERS ambush Hawthorne, begging for coins. He shoos them away, crosses the street and strides off.

FIELDS

Well, I guess we won't be showing him any of your poetry.

Annie takes this remark as a putdown of her writing. She curtly quits the landing while he bites his lip. Coming up the steps, the POSTMAN hands Fields a huge stack of mail.

POSTMAN

You're a busy man, Mr. Fields, even at home.

FIELDS

I think I liked things better before home delivery.

POSTMAN

March of progress. Can't stop it.

FIELDS

No, I suppose not.

(end excerpt)

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