

### Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight!

A few years ago, I found and held to a piece of poetry that locked itself to my heart. It was the poem, *Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight* written in the Victorian era by Rose Hartwick Thorpe. It was based on a story she had read by Lydia H. (Huntley) Sigourney entitled "Love and Loyalty" which was published in the September, 1865 issue of *Peterson's Magazine* -- about 3 months after Sigourney's demise in June of that same year. This poem was one of the favorites of Her Majesty's Queen Victoria. It had nearly become obsolete. I have carried this piece of poetry with me for years, forgetting my original source. I often think of these words when I think of the love between a Christian man and woman. The words reminds us also of the great love of Christ and His Bride, the Church.

I have hope that these words may warm your heart and remind you, as it has mine of the beauty of unconditional, sacrificial love. Allow me to give you the background story. The English Civil War was raging. The cavaliers of King Charles were defending the crown against the Roundheads of Oliver Cromwell. A young lady named Bessie was madly in love with a young cavalier named Basil Underwood. They were engaged and soon to be married. A sentence of death was passed upon young Basil, convicted of spying. The execution was to be carried out at the setting of the sun when the curfew bell tolled. The beautiful fiancée begged the judges and even Cromwell himself to release Basil and not carry this sentence out against a youth who thought he was only doing his duty, albeit for an unworthy king. The judgment stood; it would not be changed.

Bessie petitioned the sexton who had rung the bell faithfully for years. She frantically conveyed the message, "Do not ring the bell at curfew!" but could not prevail against his determined mind to ring the bell. For one hundred years the bell had tolled curfew without fail. With her options of appeal exhausted, she raced up the belfry tower, for time was fleeting; soon her beloved would die. She came to the massive bell as the sexton prepared to carry out his duty. Just as the bell was lifted and the underneath was revealed she threw herself with abandon at the clapper and tenaciously hung on, at the peril of her life. Not being able to hear, the deaf sexton pulled with all his strength again and again. Back and forth went Bessie, bruised, broken and bleeding... yet she did not let go. Lest I spoil it further, read these favorite words of Queen Victoria and marvel at a royal love that eclipses even the House of Hanover:

#### Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight

Slowly England's sun was setting o'er the hilltops far away,  
 Filling all the land with beauty at the close of one sad day;  
 And its last rays kissed the forehead of a man and maiden fair --  
 He with steps so slow and weary; she with sunny, floating hair;  
 He with bowed head, sad and thoughtful, she, with lips all cold and white,  
 Struggling to keep back the murmur, "Curfew must not ring tonight!"

"Sexton," Bessie's white lips faltered, pointing to the prison old,  
 With its walls tall and gloomy, moss-grown walls dark, damp and cold --  
 "I've a lover in the prison, doomed this very night to die  
 At the ringing of the curfew, and no earthly help is nigh.  
 Cromwell will not come till sunset;" and her lips grew strangely white,  
 As she spoke in husky whispers, "Curfew must not ring tonight!"

"Bessie," calmly spoke the sexton (every word pierced her young heart

Like a gleaming death-winged arrow, like a deadly poisoned dart),  
Long, long years I've rung the curfew from that gloomy, shadowed tower;  
Every evening, just at sunset, it has tolled the twilight hour.  
I have done my duty ever, tried to do it just and right:  
Now I'm old, I will not miss it. Curfew bell must ring tonight!"

Wild her eyes and pale her features, stern and white her thoughtful brow,  
As within her secret bosom, Bessie made a solemn vow.  
She had listened while the judges read, without a tear or sigh,  
"At the ringing of the curfew, Basil Underwood must die."  
And her breath came fast and faster, and her eyes grew large and bright;  
One low murmur, faintly spoken. "Curfew must not ring tonight!"

She with quick step bounded forward, sprang within the old church-door,  
Left the old man coming slowly, paths he'd trod so oft before.  
Not one moment paused the maiden, But with eye and cheek aglow,  
Staggered up the gloomy tower, where the bell swung to and fro;  
As she climbed the slimy ladder, on which fell no ray of light,  
Upward still, her pale lips saying, "Curfew shall not ring tonight!"

She has reached the topmost ladder, o'er her hangs the great dark bell;  
Awful is the gloom beneath her, like the pathway down to hell.  
See! the ponderous tongue is swinging; 'tis the hour of curfew now,  
And the sight has chilled her bosom, stopped her breath, and paled her brow.  
Shall she let it ring? No, never! Her eyes flash with sudden light,  
As she springs, and grasps it firmly: "Curfew shall not ring tonight!"  
Out she swung -- far out. The city seemed a speck of light below --

There twixt heaven and earth suspended, as the bell swung to and fro.  
And the sexton at the bell-rope, old and deaf, heard not the bell,  
Sadly thought that twilight curfew rang young Basil's funeral knell.  
Still the maiden, clinging firmly, quivering lip and fair face white,  
Stilled her frightened heart's wild throbbing: "Curfew shall not ring tonight!"

It was o'er, the bell ceased swaying; and the maiden stepped once more  
Firmly on the damp old ladder, where, for hundred years before,  
Human foot had not been planted. The brave deed that she had done  
Should be told long ages after. As the rays of setting sun  
Light the sky with golden beauty, aged sires, with heads of white,  
Tell the children why the curfew did not ring that one sad night.

O'er the distant hills comes Cromwell. Bessie sees him; and her brow,  
Lately white with sickening horror, has no anxious traces now.  
At his feet she tells her story, shows her hands, all bruised and torn;  
And her sweet young face, still haggard, with the anguish it had worn,  
Touched his heart with sudden pity, lit his eyes with misty light.  
Go! your lover lives," said Cromwell. "Curfew shall not ring tonight!"

Wide they flung the massive portals, led the prisoner forth to die,  
All his bright young life before him. Neath the darkening English sky,  
Bessie came, with flying footsteps, eyes aglow with lovelight sweet;

Kneeling on the turf beside him, laid his pardon at his feet.  
In his brave, strong arms he clasped her, kissed the face upturned and white,  
Whispered, "Darling, you have saved me, curfew will not ring tonight."

Rose Hartwick Thorpe certainly captures our imagination doesn't she? I leave you with thoughts from words of Jesus: "*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13). And Solomon said, "*Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death...*" (Song of Solomon 8:6).

- Pastor Pope -

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