

"Mary Dyre"

By Miss Sedgwick

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The subject of the following sketch, a Quaker Martyr, may appear to the fair holiday readers of souvenirs, a very unfit personage to be introduced into the romantic and glorious company of lords and ladye loves; of doomed brides; and all-achieving heroines; chivalric soldiers; suffering outlaws; and Ossianic sons of the forest. But of such, it is not now "our hint to speak." Neither have we selected the most romantic heroine that might have been found in the annals of the sober-suited sect. A startling tale might be wrought from the perilous adventures of Mary Fisher, the maiden missionary, who, after being cast into prison, for saying "thee" instead of "you," was examined before a judicial tribunal, and "nothing found but innocence;" who, released from durance, travelled over the continent of Europe, to communicate her faith; visited the court of Mahomet the Fourth, then held at Adrianople; was presented by the Grand Vizier to the Sultan, who listened to her with deference, and was, or affected to be, persuaded of her truth. A guard to Constantinople was gallantly offered her by Mahomet, which she refused; and safe and unmolested, in her armour of innocence, she proceeded to that city, receiving everywhere from the Turks the gentle usage that was denied her by those professing a more generous faith.

A tale of horrors, of cowed monks, and instruments of torture, might be framed from the "hair breadth

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scapes" of Catherine Evans and Sarah Chevers, the Quaker heroines who suffered with constancy, in the Inquisition at Malta. We have passed by these tempting themes, to tell a briefer story, and present a character in its true and natural light, as it stands on the historic page, without the graces of fiction, or any of those aids, by which the romance writer composes his picture - exaggerating beauties, placing them in bright lights, and omitting or gracefully shading defects. There are manifestations of moral beauty so perfect that they do not require the aids of fiction, as there are scenes in the material world, that no illusion of the imagination can improve.

Mary Dyre belonged to the religious society of "Friends;" a society, that, after having long resisted the tempest of intolerance and persecution, is melting away under the genial sun of universal toleration, and the ignoble, but no less resistless influence, of the tailor's shears, and the milliner's craft. As Voltaire predicted, some sixty years since, "Les enfans enrichis par l'industrie de leurs peres veulent jouir avoir des honneurs, *des boutons, et des manchettes.*"

Mary Dyre was among those, who, in 1657, sought in New England an asylum from the oppression of the mother country. But the persecuted had become persecutors; and, instead of an asylum, these harmless people found a prison, and were destined, for their glory and our shame, to suffer as martyrs in the cause of liberty of conscience.

Sewal, the historian "of the people called Quakers," to whom we are indebted for most of the following particulars, has given very slight notice of Mary Dyre's private history. "She was," he says, "of a comely and grave countenance, of a good family and estate, and the mother of several children; but her husband, it seems, was of another persuasion." From another document, which we have been so fortunate as to obtain, it appears that this defect of religious sympathy,

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had, in no degree, abated the affection and confidence of her husband.

Thus she possessed whatever comes within the aspiration of a woman's ambition or affections; - beauty, for this is no violent paraphrase of the Quaker historian's stinted courtesy, rank, fortune, conjugal and maternal happiness; yet she counted all these but loss, believing that her obedience to the inspirations of God required their sacrifice.

The Pilgrims, finding the penalties of fine, imprisonment, scourging with the "three-corded whip," cutting off the ears, and boring the tongue with a red-hot iron, ineffectual in extirpating the "cursed heresy of the Quakers," or "preventing their pestilent errors and practices," proceeded to banish them from their jurisdiction, on pain of death.

This violence was done under a statute enacted in 1658. Mary Dyre, with many others, sought a refuge from the storm in Rhode-Island. Christian liberty, in its most generous sense, was the noble distinction of that Province. But she could not forget her suffering brethren in the Massachusetts Colony. She meditated on their wrongs till she "felt a call" to return to Boston. Two persons, distinguished for zeal and integrity, accompanied her; William Robinson, and Marmaduke Stevenson. Their intention and hope was, to obtain a repeal or mitigation of the laws against their sect. Their return was in the autumn of 1659. On their appearance in Boston, they were immediately seized, and committed to prison, and a few days subsequent, after a summary and informal examination before Governor Endicot, and the associate Magistrates, they were sentenced to suffer the penalty of death, which had been already decreed to such as, after being banished, should return.

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Mary's companions replied to the annunciation of their sentence, in terms that savoured strongly of human resentment, which, alas for human weakness! is often betrayed in the anticipation of the judgments of Heaven. "Give ear, ye magistrates," said Stevenson, "and all ye who are guilty, for this the Lord hath said concerning you, and will perform his word upon you,

that the same day ye put his servants to death, shall the day of your visitation pass over you, and ye shall be cursed forevermore." The passions of our infirm nature are sometimes confounded with the religion that accompanies them, as the cloud is, to an ignorant eye, identified with the prismatic rays it reflects.

Mary's pure and gentle spirit dwelt in eternal sunshine; its elements were at peace. When the fearful words were pronounced, "Mary Dyre, you shall go to the prison whence you came, thence to the place of execution, and be hanged there till you are dead," she folded her hands, and replied, with a serene aspect, "The will of the Lord be done."

Her friends have described her demeanour at this moment, as almost supernatural, as if the outward temple were brightened by the communications of the Spirit within. They say, the world seemed to have vanished from her sight; her eyes were raised, and fixed in the rapture of devotion; her lips were moved by the ecstasy of her soul, though they uttered no articulate sound.

Governor Endicot seems to have felt an irritation at her tranquillity, not more dignified than a child's when he vents his wrath in blows on an insensible substance.

"Take her away, Marshal," he said harshly.

"I return joyfully to my prison," she replied; and then turning to the Marshal, she added, "You may leave me, Marshal, I will return alone."

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"I believe you, Mrs. Dyre," replied the Marshal; "but I must do as I am commanded."

The prisoners were condemned on the twentieth of October. The twenty-seventh was the day appointed for the execution of the sentence. With a self-command and equanimity of mind rare in such circumstances, Mary employed the interval in writing an "Appeal to the Rulers of Boston;" an appeal, not in her own behalf, not for pardon, nor life, but for a redress of the wrongs of her persecuted brethren. "I have no self-ends, the Lord knoweth," she says, "for if life were freely granted by you, it would not avail me, so long as I should daily see or hear of the sufferings of my people, my dear brethren, and the seed with whom my life is bound up. Let my counsel and request be accepted with you to repeal all such laws, that the truth and servants of the Lord may have free passage among you, and you kept from shedding innocent blood, which I know there be many among you would not do, if they knew it so to be." - "In love and in the spirit of meekness, *for I have no enmity to the persons of any*, I again beseech you." There is not, throughout this magnanimous appeal the slightest intimation of a wish that her sentence should be remitted, no craven nor natural shrinking from death, no apologies for past offences, but the courage of an apostle contending for the truth, and the tenderness of a woman feeling for the sufferings of her people. Could it matter to so noble a creature, where, according to the quaint phrase of her sect, her "outward being dwelt," or how soon it should be dissolved?

On the evening of the twenty-sixth, William Dyre, Mary's eldest son, arrived in Boston, and was admitted to her prison. He came in the hope of persuading his mother to make such concessions in regard to her faith, as to conciliate her judges, and procure a reprieve. All night he remained with her. The particulars of

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this interview have not been preserved. Mary's enemies have not been scrupulous in the record of her virtues, and her friends appear to have considered the affections of her nature scarcely worth a memorial, amidst the triumphs of her faith. We know the temper of a woman, the tenderness and depth of a mother's love. We may imagine the intense feelings of the son, on the eve of his mother's threatened execution, pleading for the boon of her life; we may imagine the conflict between the yearnings of the mother, and the resistance of the saint; and we may be sure that we cannot exaggerate its violence, nor its suffering. The saint was triumphant, and on the following morning, Mary was led forth, between her two friends to the place of execution. A strong guard escorted the prisoners, and, as if to infuse the last drop of bitterness in their cup, Mr. Wilson, "the minister of Boston," attended them. There were coarse and malignant spirits among the spectators. "Are you not ashamed," said one of them tauntingly to Mary, "are you not ashamed to walk thus hand in hand between two young men?"

"No," she replied, "this is to me an hour of the greatest joy I could have in the world. No eye can see nor hear, nor tongue utter, nor heart understand the sweet incomes and refreshings of the spirit of the Lord, which I now feel." Death could not appal a mind so lofty and serene. Man could not disturb a peace so profound. Her companions evinced a like composure. They all tenderly embraced at the foot of the scaffold. Robinson first mounted it, and called on the spectators to witness for him that he died, not as a malefactor, but for testifying to the light of Christ. Stevenson, the moment before the hangman performed the last act, said, "This day we shall be at rest with the Lord."

Mary was of a temper, like the intrepid Madame Roland, to have inspired a faltering spirit by her ex-

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ample; far more difficult she must have found it, to behold the last quiverings and strugglings of mortality, in the persons of her friends. But even after this, she was steadfast, and ascended the scaffold with an unblenching step. Her dress was scrupulously adjusted about her feet, her face covered with a handkerchief, and the halter put around her neck.

The deep silence of this awful moment was broken by a piercing cry. "Stop! she is reprieved!" was sent from mouth to mouth, till one glad shout announced the feeling of the gazing multitude. Was there one of all those gathered to this fearful spectacle, whose heart did not leap with joy? - Yes - the sufferer and the victim, she, to whom the gates of death had been opened. "Her mind," says her historian, "was already in heaven, and when they loosed her feet

and bade her come down, she stood still, and said she was willing to suffer as her brethren had unless the magistrates would annul their cruel law.”

Her declaration was disregarded, she was forced from the scaffold, and reconducted to prison. There she was received in the arms of her son, and she learnt from him that she owed her life to his prolonged intercession.

Fortitude, the merit of superior endurance, has often been conceded to woman. One of our most celebrated surgeons had the magnanimity to say to a patient on whom he had just performed an excruciating operation, “Sir you have borne it like a *woman*.” But the most devoted champions of the weaker and timid sex, must concede, that they are inferior to man in courage to brave circumstances, and encounter danger; yet among all the valiant hearts in manly frames, that have illustrated our race, we know not where we shall find a more indomitable spirit, than Mary Dyre’s. The tribunal of her determined enemies; the prison; the scaffold; the actual presence of death; the joy of recovered life; and, more potent than all, the meltings of maternal love, did not abate one jot of her purpose. On the morning after her reprieve, she dispatched from her prison a letter to her judges, beginning in the following bold, and, if the circumstances are considered, sublime strain; -

“Once more to the General Court assembled in Boston, speaks Mary Dyre, even as before. My life is not accepted, neither availeth me, in comparison of the lives and liberty of the truth, and servants of the living God, for which, in the bowels of meekness and love I sought you.” She proceeds to charge them, most justly, with having neglected the measure of light that was in them, and thus concludes; “When I heard your last order read, it was a disturbance unto me, that was freely offering up my life to Him that gave it me, and sent me hither so to do; which obedience being his own work, he gloriously accompanied with his presence, and peace, and love in me, in which I rested from my labour.”

The minds of the magistrates must have been wonderfully puffed up, and clouded with an imagined infallibility, and their hearts indurated by dogmatical controversy, or they would at once have perceived, that Mary Dyre was maintaining a righteous claim to the same privilege for which they had made their boasted efforts and sacrifices; - the privilege of private judgement.

Whatever intimations they may have received from their conscience, they were not made public; no answer was returned to Mary’s letters, and no concessions made to her sect; but it was thought prudent to commute Mary’s sentence into banishment, with penalty of death in case of her return, and she was accordingly sent, with a guard, to Rhode Island.

The sympathies of the good people of Boston had been awakened by the firmness of the prisoners in their extremity. The tide of feeling was setting in

favour of their cause, murmurs of dissatisfaction with the proceedings of the magistrates were running through the little community, and it was thought best to allay the ferment, by manifesto, which is throughout a lame defense, and which concludes in a manner worthy of the style of Cromwell and the school of the Jesuits. "The consideration of our gradual proceedings," say they, "will vindicate us from the clamorous accusations of severity; our own just and necessary defence calling upon us, other means failing, to offer the point which these persons have violently and wilfully rushed upon, and thereby become *felones de se*, which, might it have been prevented, and the sovereign law, *salus populi*, been preserved, out former proceedings, as well as the sparing of Mary Dyre upon an inconsiderable intercession, will evidently evince we desire their lives absent, rather than their deaths present."

Would the tragedy had ended here! But the last and saddest scene was yet to be enacted. We who believe that woman's duty as well as happiness lies in the obscure, safe, and not very limited sphere of domestic life, may regret that Mary did not forego the glory of the champion, and the martyr, for the meek honours of the wife and mother. Still we must venerate the courage and energy of her soul, when, as she said, "moved by the spirit of God so to do," she again returned to finish, in her own words, "her sad and heavy experience, in the bloody town of Boston."

She arrived there on the twenty-first of May, 1660, and appears to have remained unmolested, till the thirty-first, when she was summoned before the General Court, which had cognizance of all civil and criminal offences. In this court, Governor Endicot was the presiding officer. He began her examination by asking her, if she were the same Mary Dyre that was there before.

It appears that another Mary Dyre had made some

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disturbance in the Colony, and the Governor, probably pitying the rashness of our heroine, was willing to allow her an opportunity of evasion, but she replies unhesitatingly, "I am the same Mary Dyre that was here at the last General Court."

"Then you own yourself a Quaker, do you not?"

"I own myself to be reproachfully called so."

"I must then repeat the sentence once before pronounced upon you."

After he had spoken the words of doom, "This is no more," replied Mary calmly, "than thou saidst before."

"But now it is to be executed; therefore prepare yourself for nine o'clock to-morrow."

Still steadfast in what she believed her divinely authorised mission, she replied, "I came in obedience to the will of God, to the last General Court, praying you to repeal your unrighteous sentence of banishment, on pain of death, and that same is my work now, and earnest request, although I told you, that if you refused to repeal them, the Lord would send others of his servants to witness against them."

"Are you a prophetess?" asked Endicot.

"I spoke the words which the lord spoke to me; and now the thing is come to pass."

"Away with her!" cried the Governor; and Mary was reconducted to prison. We lament the imperfection of human intelligence, and the infirmity of human virtue, for "perfection easily bears with the imperfections of others;" but we rejoice, that, in the providence of God, the vice of one party elicits the virtue of another; that bigotry and persecution bring forth the faith and heroic self-sacrifice of the martyr. The fire is kindled and burns fiercely, but the Phoenix rises; the furnace, heated with seven-fold heat, does not consume, but purifies.

Mary Dyre's family was plunged into deep distress, by her again putting her life in jeopardy. As her

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husband's religious faith did not accord with her own, he could not of course perfectly sympathize with her zeal in behalf of her persecuted sect, but the following letter, addressed to the Governor, which has not, we believe, before been published, bears ample testimony, that his conjugal affection had borne the hard test of religious disagreement.

"Honoured Sir - It is with no little grief of mind and sadness of heart, that I am necessitated to be so bold as to supplicate your honoured self, with the honourable assembly of your General Court, to extend your mercy and favour once again, to me, and my children. Little did I dream, that I should have occasion to petition in a matter of this nature; but so it is, that through the divine providence and your benignity, my son obtained so much pity and mercy at your hands, to enjoy the life of his mother. Now my supplication to your honours is, to beg affectionately the life of my dear wife. 'Tis true, I have not seen her above this half yeare, and cannot tell how, in the frame of her spirit, she was moved thus againe to run so great a hazard to herself, and perplexity to me and mine, and all her friends and wellwishers.

"So it is, from Shelter Island, about by Peynod, Narragansett, &c., to the town of Providence, she secretly and speedily journeyed, and as secretly from thence came to your jurisdiction. Unhappy journey, may I say, and woe to that generation, say I, that gives occasion thus of grief (to those that desire to be quiett), by helping one another to hazard their lives to, I know not what end, nor for what purpose.

“If her zeal be so great, as thus to adventure, oh! let your pitty and favour surmount it, and save her life. Let not your love and wonted compassion be conquered by her inconsiderate maddness, and how greatly will your renoune be spread, if by so conquering, you become victorious. What shall I say more! I know you are all sensible of my condition - you

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see what my petition is, and what will give me and mine peace.

“Oh! let Mercy’s wings soar over Justice’s ballance, and then whilst I live, I shall exalt your goodness; but otherways’t will be a languishing sorrow - yea, so great, that I should gladly suffer the blow at once, much rather. I shall forbear to trouble you with words, neither am I in a capacity to expatiate myself at present. I only say this, yourselves have been, and are, or may be husbands to wives; so am I, yea to one most dearly beloved. Oh! do not deprive me of her, but I pray give her me once again. I shall be so much obliged forever that I shall endeavour continually to utter my thanks and render you love and honour most renowned. Pitty me! I beg it with tears, and rest your humble suppliant, W. Dyre.”

It does not appear what answer, or that any answer was vouchsafed to this touching appeal. It is enough to know that it was unavailing, and that on the very next day after her condemnation, the first of June, Mary Dyre was led forth to execution.

Some apprehensions seem to have been entertained that the mob might give inconvenient demonstrations of their pity for the prisoner, for she was strongly guarded, and during her whole progress from her prison to the place of execution, a mile’s distance, drums were beaten before and behind her.

The scaffold was erected on Boston Common. When she had mounted it, she was asked if she would have the Elders to pray for her?

“I know never an Elder here,” she replied.

“Will you have none of the people to pray for you?” persisted her attendant.

“I would have all the people of God to pray for me,” she replied.

“Mary Dyre! O repent! O repent!” cried out Mr. Wilson the minister; “be not so deluded and carried away by the deceits of the devil.”

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“Nay, man,” she answered, “I am not now to repent.”

She was reproached with having said she had already been in paradise.



To this she replied, "I have been in paradise many days."

She spoke truly. Her mind was the paradise of God. The executioner did his office. He *could* kill the body, demolish the temple, but the pure and glorious spirit of the martyr passed unharmed, untouched, into the visible presence of its Creator.

The scene of this tragedy was the Boston Common; that spot, so affluent in beauty, so graced by the peace, and teeming with the loveliness of nature, was desecrated by a scaffold! stained with innocent blood! We would not dishonour this magnificent scene by connecting with it, in a single mind, one painful association. But let those send back one thought to the Quaker Martyr, who delight to watch the morning light and the evening shadows stealing over it; to walk under the bountiful shadow of its elms; to see the herds of cattle banqueting there; the birds daintily gleaning their food ; the boys driving their hoops, flying their kites, and launching their mimic vessels on the mimic lake; whilst the little *faineants*, perhaps the busiest in thought among them, are idly stretched on the grass, seemingly satisfied with the bare consciousness of existence. The Boston Common, as it is, preserved and embellished, but not spoiled by art, still retaining its natural and graceful undulations, shaded by trees of a century's growth, with its ample extent of uncovered surface, affording in the heart of a populous city, that first of luxuries, space; trodden by herds of its natural and *chartered* proprietors; encompassed by magnificent edifices, the homes of the gifted, cultivated, and liberal; with its beautiful view of water (Heaven forgive those who abated it!) and of the surrounding,

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cultured, and enjoyed country; crowned by Dorchester Heights, and the Blue Hills; - Boston Common, had always appeared to us one of the choicest of nature's temples. The memory of the good is worthy such a temple; and we trust we shall be forgiven, for having attempted to fix there this slight monument to a noble sufferer in that great cause, that has stimulated the highest of minds to the sublimest actions; that calls its devotees from the gifted, its martyrs from the moral heroes of mankind; the best cause, the fountain of all liberty - *liberty of conscience!*