

A Bad Night's Sleep

Thick tethers of rain were hanging down from the skies, generously creating bigger and bigger pools in the muddy-green grass and even covering the usually desiccated walkway, as far as one could tell by gazing out through filthy windows.

This thawy weather was just adding to the dampness of the place and challenging the decades-old roof. The County Poor House was just as fit for heavy rain as it was a warm home to its sixty three children inhabitants.

One day before, there were sixty five. During the course of a long rainy morning, Thomas was acquitted from his pneumonia and joined his parents while his friend moved to Bovina to become a servant in the household of Mr. Liddle.

“Foote, Ann, aged 8 years "on June 15 last", Indentured to John Liddle, of Bovina, until age 18 as servant to learn housekeeping. Indenture is dated February 1, 1838 and was filed Feb 2, 1839. Identification number 9.135.”

Mr. Liddle seemed satisfied with the prospect of having a girl in house for more than five years at last. Ten years, at least ten – since servants like Ann were likely to become pregnant in the following ten years and thus had to be punished by staying a few years longer... He smirked. It was a good bargain, she cost him less than his hat.

A narrow attic window yawned in the middle of the night. The one who made it produce such a daring sound stood petrified below, hand still stretched, ears strained. With feet bare, head raised towards the moon and tired eyes wide open, sparkling in its light, her little figure could look like it belonged to a fairy, and would look even more so if she had untied her fair hair and let it down her back. Yet she couldn't do that. Her back... She had been flogged more than ever today and blood tricked down the before white dress, boldly contrasting with the paleness of girl's skin.

The pain of whipping consisted of two parts – the act itself and recovery. Now she was about to face the second, having to pull the bloodsoaked and at places conglutinated dress over her head and then wash in a tub of ice cool water – a process both tedious and rewarding.

It began raining. Just as heavily as on her first day here, a year and a half ago. The shagged child was already deep asleep, but the window still remained open. Just below it was a bucket of dark red water, strawberry-coloured dress and towel and a puddle of blood, all left unwanted as Ann ended with her duty half asleep. No wonder this made the skies cry.

Exactly one floor below, some very vivid nightmares were fretting the housemistress. She dreamed that red drops, more similar to blood than anything else in the world, were oozing

on her face, the blood of a slave her husband so carelessly got rid of that day. Stop it, you're just dreaming. It can't be blood; he is lying on the riverbank a mile away. Mrs. Liddle was becoming very annoyed. She wanted to wake up and not to feel wet. She even thought her periods returned to her after a decade, but that wasn't the case. When she lit the candle, she saw there really was a blood-like liquid, dribbling on her bed from above. Fall on my husband, not on me, commanded she, but it didn't obey.

"Why could you not pick more, you... are you a woman? Child? That you work like you had just one hand?"

"I have, master. You injured my other hand yesterday."

"Liar! You did it and how you dare! No, this is not to be tolerated.

Eleanor, darlin', what are you doing here? Send me Tim with a lash and a rope for Rob. "

She woke up and dressed in dry clothes. That vain death could have been prevented so easily. I never knew he would beat him to death – that he would be able to do it – with the things I provided him.

"None touch him. He doesn't deserve a burial. His flesh will rot here."

It was useless to change sheets because that liquid didn't cease to fall from the ceiling. It was breaking Mrs. Liddle's nerves. She felt far too uncomfortable to go to sleep. Walking around the room, she could not bear it. Finally she knew, what was asked of her.

I cannot go there. Not at this time and in these clothes. Ann will not refuse me the service.

Blinded by stress, endeavouring to find balance between penitence and pride – she had to express both - she sailed in to the attic room. How cold it was in there! In the meanwhile, it stopped raining and gentle wind had parched most of the puddle, with the help of an old dingy rug. Most of the watery blood, however, couldn't be prevent from entering a tiny, yet plunging leak. But Mrs. Liddle couldn't be bothered by such details. She rushed to Ann, shaking her slender body and whispering straight into her ear "Hurry up, get it done fast, bring me peace and him too."

Having instructed the girl, she then went to check if that liquid stopped pouring on her bed - and to her relief, no more drips were falling down indeed. It is a pleasant feeling is when you get such a tricky problem sorted and Mrs. Liddle had to make herself a cup of tea as a warm reward.

"Carlo, please, wake up. It is important. Please."

„ You are not going to wake resurrect him by whisper. He'd been working hard whole day. What is it that you need so important?“

The girl froze at the sound of a man's voice. It was coming somewhere from the middle of the crowded room, filled from wall to wall by panting black bodies. As a tiny mouse, she began to withdraw but he stood up and carefully, not to step on anyone, advanced to her.

“ I will help you. Couldn't get sleep anyway.“

Mr. Liddle was suffering vivid dreams too. I shouldn't have beaten little Ann too much. I sometimes just omit the difference between a slave and a servant, and don't see that she is not even black. He turned to side and realised something wet waking him up; with a horror, he realised that instead of his wife he was touching a puddle of blood.

His stormy character led him to the slaves' room immediately. Armed with his best gun, a candle, pyjamas and slippers, he run down the stairs, swore when he realised he has to return for the keys, but in the very next moment blasphemed even more because the door was open – “murderer out” he murmured.

“Dig here.“

“Can you hold that light a bit more up, Ann? Don't be scared of that face, his soul's watching us from heaven. He was a good man.“

„ You too – are strong and all... I would die with fear alone... And you see – I can hardly look at the corpse so how could I lift it?“ she attempted to smile but he was too busy working to notice her expressions.

Mrs. Liddle heard someone curse at the door and with a calmer mind and seeing that her husband's bed is empty, deduced right. Instead of chasing him outside, an experienced wife went to change the bed sheets. She didn't wait long for hurried footsteps.

“Where the hell have I put the slaves' key? I am as sure I locked them as I well know one of them got out and I don't know which one.“

„ Don't you wanna leave it till the morning, John? Why would they escape anyway?“

„Eh -Elen – yes – why would they – you're here. I had a bad dream.“

“Done. “

“Thank you, Ben. I have no idea what happened that Mistress sent us in the middle of the night.”

“You heard master – no one can touch Rob, we had to go unseen. She surprised me at this. True, when she wants to get something done, she doesn’t hesitate. No waiting. Just go and bury him in the middle of the night, so that I can sleep in peace.”

“ Rob deserves his peace.”