

"COURTING MRS. FIELDS"

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

Winter gives way to spring as snowmelt rushes down a wash. Sprigs of grass poke up through the ice. And all along the slope, exposed rocks are visible as a small caravan of BOYS treks down after their last sled runs. But they're too busy to notice the change of seasons while exchanging tales of death-defying feats of downhill navigation.

Two stragglers on the hill, CONRAD and NICK, spot a lone HORSE tied to a tree. Beside it, someone's mangy-looking DOG is digging for gophers.

TOP OF HILL

High above the boys' view, SARAH ORNE JEWETT, 16, makes her move on the slope. Sarah checks to see that the coast is clear, and from her perspective, it is. So she drops her sled down on the snow, secures her bonnet and lunges off.

BASE OF HILL

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

NICK

Whose horse is that?

SARAH'S SLED - BOYS' POV

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

CONRAD (O.S.)

Wow!

CLOSE ON SARAH

The trees pass by her in a blur as she navigates around some particularly jagged, rock-laden terrain.

SLOPE

The sled goes airborne again, causing Sarah's loosened skirts to catch the breeze like a white sail. Not sure what they're seeing, the boys are amazed and delighted.

NICK

Criminy, look at that!

THE SLED

skirts around a boulder, narrowly missing an even more dangerous exposed outcrop.

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. It 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. She deftly turns over on her back and rolls off the sled just as -

THE SLED

slams into a boulder and splits spectacularly into two.

BOTTOM OF HILL

The boys are now running towards the crash site.

CONRAD

Wow, 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 face up in the snow, her face framed in the white ice. She is either dazed or experiencing the rapture, it's hard to tell. A robin alights on her forehead and chirps.

SKY - 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. But help arrives in the form of pretty and petite KATE BIRKHEAD, 16. 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?

Only now coming out of her daze:

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

(a beat)

Guess what?

KATE

What?

SARAH

I finished my story.

KATE

Did you.

SARAH

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

KATE

You mean that fellow with the scraggly beard?

SARAH

Mr. James Fields. The very same. Some day I'll be famous, just like Mrs. Stowe and the Brontë sisters.

At this inopportune moment, the mangy dog returns and slobbers 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.

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

CUT TO:

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

On that same day, a hundred miles to the southwest (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, there's 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, with that
scraggly beard, sits at a small cherry wood desk stirring
his tea. Two other Boston Brahmins, OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES,
55, and THOMAS HIGGINSON, hover around.

HIGGINSON

In the sacred precinct of Demeter.

HOLMES

Oh. I take it that's somewhere due
east 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 event 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.

HAWTHORNE

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

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 simple work smock. A dark, beehive swarm of 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, looking 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

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 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 decides not to pry, empties the last drops from his teapot into the cup on his desk . Holmes wanders over 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?

FIELDS

(ignoring Holmes)

So 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.

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 an
otherwise 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 deeper into the garden, towards a Roman-style
stone bench surrounded by a 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, or rather like an ark
retreating from the flood of
babble.

He glances up at the window he was staring down from
earlier.

ANNIE

I'm glad you like it. It's a
refuge to me as well.

Their eyes meet, making for an awkward moment. But Annie
rallies her courage and shakes off the rush of emotion.

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 looks down at the ground. Annie decides not to press the
point. She sweeps back the bangs that now hang over his
eyes. .

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's
about to kiss her anyway. Fortunately for Annie, FOOTSTEPS
now beat up the walk.

FIELDS

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

Annie alights from the bench in a heartbeat.

ANNIE

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

FIELDS

Don't give it a thought. Holmes
and that other chatterbox up there
are 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. All that effort to come outside, and now they're dragging him back to the doorway.

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 maid, dashes in with his cloak and cane.

FIELDS

Are you sure you won't stay for luncheon?

HAWTHORNE

There's the train to worry about.

FIELDS

Pity. 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 he reaches the street, the Fields watch TWO PANHANDLERS start begging Hawthorne for coins. He shoos them away, crosses the street and strides away as the POSTMAN approaches the steps.

FIELDS

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

Annie takes this as a putdown of her writing and leaves him behind in the doorway to accept the day's mail. It's a rather daunting stack of letters and manuscripts.

End excerpt

Copyright © 2017

For info:

rregello@thecityedition.com