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A Story of Old Brookfield

BY FRANCES BARTLETT, OF BOSTON*



Read at the annual meeting of the Quaboag Historical Society, at West Brookfield, Mass., October 7th, 1902, and founded almost entirely on fact

* A descendant of a Brookfield family

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This booklet
is presented to the members of
THE QUABOAG HISTORICAL SOCIETY,
with the compliments of its late President,
as a token of his appreciation of
Miss Bartlett's poem,
and of his remembrance of the members
of the Society from whom he has
received so much kindness
and honor.

Columbia, South Carolina.
Christmas, 1902.

A STORY OF OLD BROOKFIELD

The mists fold closely the murmuring river,
As it croons in its sleep, of the longed for sea;
The alders rustle—the birches quiver,
The spears of the rushes droop heavily;

To the lips of the lilies the bees are clinging,
The birds flutter by, like to leaves of a tree;
From the tangled grasses, a thrush up-springing,
Floods the drowsy air with her ecstasy.

On river and fields lies a mystical glory;
The day is a-dreaming and loves to be;
And my thoughts drift back to an old time story,
I tell to you, as 'twas told to me;—

A tale of the days of "La Grande Alliance,"
When the whole of Europe was leagued 'gainst France;
And Louis, fourteenth of the name, grown old,
Felt his conquests slipping from his weak hold.
When "brave little Holland" was lord of the main;
When Philip of Anjou was King of Spain,
And two worlds were blood-drenched to hold his own.
When Queen Anne sat on old England's throne;
And the Duke of Marlborough and Prince Eugene,
Like blazing stars in Fame's sky were seen.

And as, from a stone, in a still pool cast,
The ripples widen,—until at last,
They splash midst the reeds of the farthest shore,—
So this conflict that raged the old world o'er,
Broke with sullen roar on the new world's coast,
Where the painted hordes of the savage host
That roamed her forests of pine, from of old,
Were bought by French muskets, French wines, French
gold,
To harass the English towns, that lay
'Twixt the Hudson and Massachusetts Bay.

On the rough hewn roofs of old Brookfield town,
The rays of the July sun splashed down
Like molten gold; and the maple trees
Scarce stirred 'neath the kiss of the languorous breeze;
The ruddy clover drooped low its head;
From the cheeks of the wild rose, the color sped,
As the fierce sun pushed its petals apart,
And drank the dew from its ravished heart.
So still it was, one could hear the bees,
Lords of the orchards' grassy seas,
Ploughing the feathery surf for the gold
The cups of the royal lilies hold.

And quiet the meadows that stretched away
From the Quaboag, creeping its seaward way.
Like mimic lightnings, the dragon flies
Flashed o'er the deeps of the azure skies,
In its white breast mirrored,—where, set like stars
Making fairer its beauty, and hiding all scars,
The lilies burned in their sheaths of jade,
By the flag blooms, purpling the alder's shade
On the shore; where the burnished rushes bent,
Like the spears of some faery armament.

In the Quaboag meadows, that July day,
Six men of the village were making hay;
And they sang as they mowed, an old world song,—

“Oh the banks are green, the Avon along,

Come forth, my merry men all!

Cease, lads, your straying—we go a-maying,

And the lassies await your call.

Oh, the lassies will come at your call!”

And sometimes they stopped their work to tell

The tale of the siege of that citadel,

Built of rough hewn logs, but as bravely held,

As the walls of Leyden, in days of eld!

Suddenly—riving the drowsy air,

Like thunder, from clouds creeping unaware,

From the sky's south rim, a warwhoop rang!

And forth from their covert of rushes, sprang

A legion of braves,—as ages before,

When Cadmus came from the Punic shore,

Sowed Thebes' poppied fields with the dragon's teeth,

And warriors leapt from the earth's brown sheath.

Fierce was the conflict! For English, they

Who mowed; and they fought in the English way,

When the odds are against them! But who can save

The sands, from the rush of some flood-tide wave?

As ofttimes over a tranquil sea,

When the sails of the ships drag heavily,

And like white rose petals, the clouds drift by,

O'er the fathomless depths of the summer sky,

A black squall rushes from out the west,

And lashes to fury, the old unrest

That slept for a little;—then whirls away,

And the sunlight flashes across the bay,

While the wind and waves fall sound asleep

On the sea's breast, calm as the sky's blue deep;

And Nature laughs, as she did before.

Swept the squall from westward; but on the shore,
Lies an o'erturned skiff, and a broken oar,
And a dead face turned to the pitiless sky,
To tell the wrath of the storm passed by;—
So their old time peace to the meadows came,
That slept by the river. And just the same,
The lilies burned in their sheaths of jade;
And the flag blooms purpled the alder's shade,
That dappled the shining stream, as before
The war-cry rang o'er the quiet shore,
And the painted warriors, like flames, had leapt
From the reeds, 'twixt whose barriers the river crept.
A thrush trilled forth from the fields; and the sky
Looked down with godlike tranquillity,
In the sightless eyes of five men, who lay
'Midst the trampled swaths of the new mown hay.

One man of the mowers was spared, to bring
To the French, as a welcome offering;
For his kinsmen of Marshfield were men of fame,
And would give much gold, it was thought, to reclaim
Their own. So, bound with a leathern thong,
While the Indians chanted their triumph song,
He was dragged to the liliated riverside,
Where, like brown leaves floating upon the tide,
Lay two bark canoes. An instant's pause,
When the warriors quarrelled for some slight cause;
A quick-born purpose—a silent prayer,
Resistless strength, born of grim despair,—
And John White brake from his captors' hands,
And sped o'er the blood-stained meadow lands
Toward old Brookfield town, where his mother kept
Watch o'er his children and hers, who slept
In grave-sown Plymouth. But swifter than he,
Sped the hail of the Indian musketry!
A flame leapt his wounded body through;
The earth and sky black as midnight grew;

The river faded from his dim sight;
And as falls an oak 'neath the lightning's blight,
He fell in the tangled grass. But at length,
From the unknown, creeping again to strength,
Came thought; and with thought, one purpose clear,—
To save the lives, to his lost life dear.

Then he staggered up from his grassy bed,
His heart by a great love comforted;
And although half blind with the blood, that dripped
From his wounded forehead,—he softly slipped
Through the foamy waves of the flowery sea,
Past his comrades sleeping quietly.
Victims of fate and "La Grande Alliance,"
And Louis, fourteenth of the name in France.

A yell of rage, from the river's brim,
As his baffled captors caught sight of him.
The flash and peal of their musketry,
As when lightning flames o'er the sky's black sea,
And forth from the rampart of cloud piled high,
Crashes heaven's artillery.
Once more, the hiss of the iron rain;
Once more, the stab of the fiery pain;
Once more, the mingling of earth and sky;—
Then the stricken man fell heavily,
And lay with his torn face closely pressed
'Gainst the lilies, reddening the earth's scarred breast.

Then once more silence. Save for the breeze,
Twanging the harps of the hemlock trees;
The splash of oars, from the stream near by,
Where two bark canoes sped stealthily;
The drowsy hum of the bees; the song
Of a bluebird, drifting the fields along,
With never a thought for the dead, who slept
In the feathery grass, by its soft wings swept;

Then a stifled moan—a pain-born breath,
And back from the opening gates of death,
Where the wingéd shadows of dreams abide,
And the scent of their popped hair blows wide,
Crept John White's brave soul; and within his brain
The flame of his purpose leapt forth again.

To his feet he staggered, though sore opprest,
By the pain and languor. Then toward the west,
He set his face like some knight of old,
In quest of the San Grael's chalice of gold.
Dear God—how the sun burned! And five miles lay
'Twixt his home and the meadows; and who might say
But the hoary forest with warriors teemed!
And surely bright musket barrels gleamed
From the sunlit rushes! On every hand,
Might lurk fresh hordes of the savage band,
That delighted in ambush. And each step passed,
He thought from his weakness, must be his last.
The deep grass chained him; and wingéd bands
Seemed beckoning to him, with shadowy hands;
But he swept the blood from his dimming eyes,
And his feet given strength by his heart's emprise,
Reached the old Bay Path,—which stretched that day,
From Springfield to Massachusetts Bay.

Flooding the sun-drenched aisles of the air,
Like the music of dreams, came a trumpet's blare,
The rattle of drums; the sweet shrill call
Of a fife,—as to warn the Indians all,
That old Brookfield knew of the peril near,
And challenged their legions of chilling fear!
His townsmen were warned. So he turned away,
To the fields, that 'twixt him and his dear ones lay;
And creeping by hedges and pasture walls,—
(For who gauges the spot where the lightning falls?)
He toiled 'till he came to Wickaboag's shore,

Where dwelt Massasoit, in days of yore.
He was faint and bleeding and almost blind,
And he left a trail of dull red behind,
On the rugged path he had dragged along.
But always there ran in his mind, a song
He had heard in childhood his mother sing,
When to far off Marshfield, came late the Spring:—
“When the stones are sharp and the road is long,
And skies are chill and gray,—
Keep a brave heart, lad—for to right each wrong
Love will find a way!”

All of you know where Wickaboag lies,
Reflecting the tints of the brooding skies,
Like a bit of the sky itself, set down
'Midst the pines that its shelving headlands crown.
Now flashing with sapphire, or opal, or steel,
As its deeps the mood of the hour reveal,
It croons to its shingly sands, the tale
Of how little the valors of man avail.
For the seasons come, and the seasons go,
And like tides of the ocean, that ebb and flow,
Man comes with the sunrise, and goes with the sun.
And who knows where the moaning ebb tides run?
Then, when winds and clouds fly wrathfully,—
It laughs—“Like this, leaps the far off sea,
I have n'er beheld, but I long for sore!
A gull once swept these headlands o'er,
And he told of the sea. Of its rush and roar;
Of the cool sweet breath of its treacherous lips,
That whisper of love to the white winged ships,
Till they follow—follow—follow—no more,
To behold the cliffs of the loved home shore!”
And the sands slip closer the lake, to hear
Of the sea,—their cheeks wet with many a tear.
Yea! E'en when they hear of the joy that leaps,
When the west wind over the ocean sweeps,

And its wrath is calmed; and the good ships fly
Like homing doves o'er an azure sky;
For tears are born not alone of pain.
There are tears like the drops of the summer rain;
That cools the burning cheeks of the sky;
That lifts the flowers drooping wearily;
That kisses the hair of the maple trees;
And breathes health into the feverish breeze.

And as John White knelt by Wickaboag's shore,
They were tears of joy, brimmed his wan eyes o'er,—
That in spite of the length of the unmarked way,
And the pain that was gnawing his life away,
He was near to his journey's end. Fresh strength
Crept into his wounded limbs; and at length,
He reached a pine crowned knoll—from where,
He saw, curling lazily through the air,
The smoke that witnessed the fire, which burned
On the hearth where his heart and torn feet turned,
But a strange weight lay on his strained heart.
He staggered forward,—and then apart
Seemed to fall the walls of his being. Then
Dreams of the past swept his troubled ken,
As he stumbled and fell on the dusty ground,
In the midst of the dream shapes gathering 'round.

He was back in old Marshfield. He heard the tide
Creep over the tawny marshes wide.
The lisp of the sea; the east winds cry,
Driving landward the fog's gray cavalry.
And now, he stood in the orchard grass,
Watching the birds to their new homes pass,
And the pallid blooms of the apple trees,
Blown like flakes of snow, by the warm spring breeze.
Now, he crouched by the settle of wood,
That on winter nights, at the fireplace stood,
And with round-eyed awe, heard his grandsire tell

Of the tortures of sickness and dearth befell
Those men who had braved a pitiless sea,
To worship their God in liberty!
And of how that grandsire—a baby—lay
Rocked to sleep by the waves of Provincetown Bay,—
The first of all English children, born
On Columbia's shores. And now, the morn
Crept rosily forth from the gray East's arms,
While old ocean brake into rapturous psalms,
As her warm hair blew o'er his ashen face,
Bringing back youth's color, youth's smile, youth's
grace.

And what maid is this, who at dawn of day,
Comes forth on the sands of Plymouth Bay,
To give him greeting? Oh, fair and sweet,
This Mistress Alice—a maiden, meet
For a brave lad's wooing! Half afraid,
Her face love shadowed,—as drifts the shade
Of a quivering aspen across some stream,—
As in life, she came to him now in dream!
He could even see the flush, that crept
To her girlish forehead, whose snows were swept
By tendrils of shining gold. And now,
Like some pale nun taking her convent vow,
He saw her lying with folded hands,
For the first time deaf to his love's demands.
God! They were her children—the lads at play,
In the orchard scarce half a mile away!
And across his heart swept an icy chill,
As he thought of Deerfield and Haverhill.
Fiercely he strove to rise! And at length,
Forcing the last of his sore-tired strength,
He crept on his wounded hands and knees,
Like a lost ship drifting o'er unknown seas,
From the grateful shade of the whispering pines,
Through barbéd tangles of blackberry vines,

By the stately tansy ranged row on row ;
Through thickets of hazel and elderblow ;
O'er many a barrier of turf and stone ;
Through nets, in whose meshes wild roses shone,
Like the stars that gleam on the sky's soft breast,
When the sun has swept through the gates of the west.
With infinite patience—and infinite pain,
He dragged himself to the head of the lane,
That e'en to this day, slopes gently down
From the road that leads to West Brookfield town.

There, framed in a chaplet of glistening leaves,
Lay the little house, with its mossy eaves
A-glow with pigeons that dozed and cooed,
In peaceful and happy brotherhood.
The tiger lilies that flanked the door,
Were ablaze with scarlet ; and towering o'er
The roof, waved the plumes of a giant elm,
Like those that blew from Achilles' helm.
While beneath the boughs of an apple tree,
The shade of whose leaves flickered dreamily,
On her snowy apron and kerchief and hair,
And face—whose peace seemed a silent prayer,
Sat his mother spinning ; and near her played
His motherless boys, in the leafy shade.
He could even hear his mother's song,—
 "When the stones are sharp—and the road is long,
 And skies are chill and gray,—
 Keep a brave heart, lad—for to right each wrong,
 Love will find a way!"

Like the stricken eagle, that flies to its nest,
With the life blood staining its wounded breast,
John White sped down through the shady lane,
With a cry of warning. Gone now, the pain,
The creeping languor—the awful weight
On his heart. God's mercy, in truth was great,

Who had crowned the toil of his brave heart's quest,
And had saved the lives that his life had blessed!
He sprang toward the frightened group 'neath the
tree—

“The Indians—the Indians! Hasten ye
To the cave that ye wot of, within the wood;—
I will follow!”—Then, through his chilling blood,
Crept a strange sweet warmth. His pulses thrilled;
With a glow of rapture, his worn eyes filled;
As turning—he saw in the open door,
A woman—with yellow curls tossed o'er
Her dimpled cheeks. In her tender eyes,
Sunk his own, with no shadow of surprise,—
He was past all that. On—on—he sped,
Whispering softly—“Why, Sweetheart, I thought thee
dead!”

A quiver—a stumble—a stifled cry,—
And upon his doorstep tranquilly,
He lay with his head on one outflung arm,
His young face flooded with that strange calm
They know—who have breasted Life's waters deep,
And to whom—beloved—has God sent sleep.
F'or 'though long the road,—and Hope's sky of gray,—
The love in John White's heart had found a way!



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