

Our Young Folks' Story-Teller
Detective Polly Bree
by Elizabeth Bigelow

THAD BREWSTER lived away down on the heel of that booted leg which Massachusetts thrusts out into the sea. If you look on the map, you can't fail to find the very place. Thad meant to be somebody in the world; a Cape Cod boy generally does.

He believed that "the sea is the road of the bold," but he was the only son of his mother, and she a widow, and he had promised her never to be a sailor. The next best thing, it seemed to Thad, was to cultivate his trading bump. (Cape Cod boys have those bumps just as naturally as fishes have scales.)

Thad's mother kept a variety store, small in size but great in variety. His father had been the captain of a vessel, and once well-to-do, but disasters had overtaken him before the final one when his vessel was lost with all on board, and the wolf had his nose fairly in at the door when the sign was hung out. Much custom came to the little shop, with its queer assortment of wares, from mackerel nets to hair crimpers, and the wolf slunk away with his tail between his legs, and apples and gingerbread never failed to go around, and Thad and his sisters, Prissy and little Martha, never had to be afraid they should hop-and-skip their toes through their shoes before more could be bought.

That was when the shop was first opened. Now Colonyville was growing, and there was more competition. And a man from Boston had opened a fancy-goods store almost opposite theirs, with a brand-new stock, and a great many novelties and bargains, which he advertised in the Colonyville *Journal* in such an enticing way as to bring customers all the way from Fleetwell and Trooline and Hyson.

His mother said things would right themselves, but Thad's Yankee blood was all on fire with emulation. And Thad had an opinion which, I am afraid, is not confined to Cape Cod boys. He thought he knew more than his mother. She did not think that novelties "paid," and whenever he wished to buy even the most fascinating ones, she would remind him of the whole box full of little, brass flatiron needle-cases on the top shelf. They were useful as well as pretty, but the Colonyville people were thrifty, and they had grandmothers and aunts to make needle-cases for them, and there they were on the top shelf, and Thad's mother threw them in his face, figuratively speaking, so often, that he was tempted to row away out to deep-sea soundings, and throw them overboard.

The man from Boston had opened his shop just before Christmas, and he had taken the holiday trade, every bit of it; and now that February had come, his windows displayed such utterly irresistible valentines as had never before been seen in that region, and Saint Valentine has never lost his popularity down at the Cape.

Thad's mother said that sensible people would not spend money for valentines, and foolish people never had any money, so it would not pay to keep them. Thad was desperate. He confided to his friend, Dukey Doane, that he felt as if his trading bump was being *driven in*, and his head

would soon be as bumpless as a cocoanut, and he should have to go to the idiot school.

“There’s your seven dollars,” said Dukey Doane. “And Simon Silva is going to Boston tomorrow in his vessel—he’ll be back inside of a week—and his brother, the one who used to keep the barber’s shop here, has a large periodical stand in Boston, and would know just how to select a stock of valentines. Of course, seven dollars won’t buy a great many, but Simon Silva would charge you only a small commission.”

“I’m afraid seven dollars is too much to trust Simon Silva with,” said Thad.

He felt so eager and excited at Dukey’s suggestion, that his heart seemed to be beating in his ears; but still he had a prudent mind.

“He hasn’t the reputation of being honest, but no one knows anything against him. If he and his brother were suspected of burning the barber’s shop to get the insurance, there was no proof, and the company had to pay the insurance. Anyway, they would be straight enough about a little thing like that.”

Thad’s mother declared she “wouldn’t trust Simon Silva, and if nothing could be proven against him, it was only because he was so sly and tricky; and anyway, valentines would only go to keep the flatiron needle-cases company on the top shelf.”

But Thad was persistent, and the seven dollars was his own money that he had earned by doing odd jobs; and, at last, his mother said he “might throw it away, if he wanted to;” and in two minutes after this reluctant permission was given, Thad was rushing down to the wharf where Simon Silva’s schooner, the “Joseph and Mary,” already had her sails spread. Simon, a small man, with little, restless black eyes, that never looked one straight in the face, was very affable, and readily undertook the commission, and promised to secure “a most beautiful bargain.” And if he had fair winds and good luck with his cargo of coal which he was to bring back, he should be at home next Wednesday.

And that would be only the 6th of February—before any one had begun to buy valentines. Thad watched the “Joseph and Mary” rounding the point, and reflected upon the many instances in which a small venture was the beginning of a great fortune.

It rained a little Tuesday night, and there was so thick a fog on Wednesday morning, that it seemed as if the world came to an end at the Colonyville piers. An occasional tooting of horns in the gray space was the only sign that there was any life there. The boys stayed on the wharf almost all day, hoping for the joyful sight of the “Joseph and Mary’s” bow cutting its way through the fog. Late in the afternoon there came a report that the “Joseph and Mary” had gone aground on Dutchman’s Reef, and was a total wreck! Simon Silva and Dick Burgess, his mate, had been picked up by a Fleetwell fisherman, and the Portuguese sailors by a Boston-bound brig.

“I don’t believe it! How could any one know it?” cried Dukey Doane, while poor Thad turned pale.

“Simon Silva and the mate came off the fishing-vessel in a small boat; they landed right there by Simon’s house,” said Tribby Coffin, a boy who had a genius for news.

Thad and Dukey ran over to Simon’s house as fast as they could go.

It was true. Simon was the picture of dejection. His “most beautiful sheep, which was all he had, was lost!”

In the face of so great a calamity it seemed trivial and selfish to mention valentines, but Thad did it after he had listened for a long time to Simon’s bewailings. Simon clasped his hands piteously. He had forgotten them! It was a shame; but then what could be expected? They had saved nothing but their lives. He had bought “a most beautiful lot, worth tree, four times the money that Thad had given him;” he had put them in his locker in the cabin; by this time they were at the bottom of the sea, or floating—who could tell where?

“The mermaids will have a great valentine’s day,” said Dukey.

Although he had been the adviser, he could joke; they were not his valentines. Thad turned away without a word. There was a great lump in his throat that would not allow him to speak.

“But I’m not going to give up yet!” he said, suddenly, interrupting Dukey’s numerous comments. “Dutchman’s Ledge isn’t more than a mile from Nickerson’s Core. Uncle Cy Nickerson will lend me a boat, and if it’s anything like clear weather tomorrow morning, I’m going to row out to that wreck!”

“It’s six miles up to Nickerson’s Cove, the nearest way,” and I don’t believe it will do a bit of good; but it will be a lark, and I’ll go with you!” said Dukey Doane. “If she were holding together at all, you know,” he added, “Simon Silva would be thinking of trying to save some of the cargo.”

“You may be sure he is insured, and what does he care?” said Thad.

“The company has got to pay Simon Silva a lot of money for his vessel,” said Dukey.

“I wonder,” said Thad, suddenly, “if he could have done it on purpose?”

“I’ve heard father say it was a patched-up old vessel, and insured for all it was worth; but then, the best pilot in the world might get out of his course in such a fog. There’s no way to prove that he did.”

“Voluntines? *Voluntines* aboard of a wrack out en Dutchman’s Ledge? Well, if I ever did! And you appear young to be crazy, too! If I hadn’t thought you must have come off a wrack yourselves, you wouldn’t have got me out of my bed this time of night!”

It was Uncle Cy Nickerson who had, at last, appeared at his window in response to the boy’s urgent demands. It was five o’clock, but still very dark; happily a west wind had blown away the

fog, and a few faint stars were visible. Thad was very anxious to reach the wrecked vessel while the tide was low, but Uncle Cy was deaf and slow and suspicious. The gray dawn came creeping along over the water before he decided to let them have the boat, and after he had given them the key to the padlock, he called after them to wait for him, as he “calc’lated he should like to see the wrack himself.”

But Uncle Cy made up for lost time by rowing vigorously. The ledge was only half submerged, but long before they saw the rocks, they could see the bow of the “Joseph and Mary” sticking sharply up against the sky. Her stern was completely under water. The ledge was covered with broken timbers.

“She’s caught there between them sharp rocks, and they’re a-grindin’ her,” said Uncle Cy. “And her cargo has all gone to the bottom—good coal that would have kept a great many poor folks warm. As for your voluntines—well, there don’t seem to be much chance of gettin’ them!”

The sea was smooth, but there were breakers around the ledge, and alone the two boys would not have been able safely to effect a landing; but Uncle Cy was skilled in handling all sorts of craft. He grumbled, and “didn’t believe it was a mite of use,” but Thad persisted. He had a faint, desperate hope of getting into the ship’s cabin and finding the valentines.

There was a great hole in the ship’s side, and Thad, after repeated efforts, succeeded in climbing up to it. It looked as if he might make his way into the cabin, and he was not to be deterred from the attempt by Uncle Cy’s reminder that at high tide the waves must have dashed through the cabin, and probably washed away everything there was in it.

Dukey Doane also climbed up to the opening in the vessel’s side, but the aspect of the interior did not encourage him to follow Thad. One might find the cabin, but the vessel was so nearly perpendicular that, unless one could cling like a fly, there was great danger of slipping down into that roaring and grinding abyss, which threatened to engulf the whole ship before long. Uncle Cy insisted upon tying a rope which he had in his boat around Thad’s waist before he would let him go. And thankful enough was Thad for this precaution, for the straining and shaking of the vessel were so violent it seemed as if she must go to pieces the very next moment.

Thad afterward confided to his sister, Prissy, that he believed he should have crawled back again when he was half way through that hole, had it not been for the thought of his mother’s “I told you so,” when she knew that he *had* thrown away the seven dollars.

The cabin was half full of debris of all sorts, but Thad found the locker. There was nothing in it but some old clothes, an empty bottle, and some bits of tobacco. If the valentines had been there, they would have been soaked with water and probably ruined; nevertheless, it was bitter to Thad to be convinced that Simon Silva had cheated him.

He felt a pull on the rope. They were anxious about him, and the timbers were surely giving way under his feet.

“Take Polly Bree down! Take her down! Polly Bree’s drowned!”

What a strange, uncanny shriek it was! Thad's heart fairly stood still for an instant. He hadn't lived all his life on Cape Cod not to know a parrot's voice. There it was, a heap of rumped feathers, in a cage that hung from a hook in the cabin ceiling. Thad snatched the cage down, and with it under his arm made his way through the hole, his progress most unpleasantly accelerated by tugs upon the rope by Uncle Cy, who was nervous.

"This ledge will be under water in less than ten minutes, and the vessel won't hold together as long as that. Got a poll-parrot instead of your voluntines, have you? Well, I declare, she must be drowned, for I never saw a gray parrot before that hadn't anything to say for herself."

Polly had withdrawn her head so deeply into her crumpled neck feathers that only her beak was visible. Her eyes were closed, and, although she still clung to her perch, Thad doubted whether she were alive. He didn't care much about parrots, anyway, but he wrapped his coat around the cage to keep her warm.

"I'll tell you what—he never bought any valentines. I always told you Simon Silva was a scamp!" said Dukey Doane.

Thad didn't feel sufficient spirit to refresh Dukey Doane's memory. He reflected, in silence, upon the hollowness of the world.

It was nearly noon when they got back to Colonyville. A group of men stood near the bank building, in which was also the insurance office, and Thad saw Simon Silva and his mate, Dick Burgess, among them. Deacon Atwood, the president of the insurance company, was there, also, and Dukey Doane's father, who was one of the directors.

Dick Burgess and Simon Silva looked startled at sight of the parrot which Thad carried.

"Well, if that don't look like— You *hain't* been aboard of that wrack? She couldn't have held together till this time!" said Simon Silva, his swarthy countenance growing red.

"I hadn't ought to 'a left her," said Dick Burgess, "but I didn't believe she'd live, and I never thought parrots was lucky, anyhow. Joe Bree gave her to me; he'd just come off a long voyage, and she was seasick. He said she was a prime talker when she was well, but I guess she's about dead. I never heard her open her mouth."

Polly raised her head slowly, while they watched her; she stretched her neck forward, and "fixed" Dick Burgess "with her glittering eye."

"Keep dark, Dick Burgess, keep dark!" she shrieked. "Run her ashore! Run her ashore! It'll pay! It'll pay! It'll pay!"

Dick Burgess turned pale. Simon Silva rushed forward with so evil a face that Thad feared he would wring the parrot's neck, and ran past him homewards as fast as he could go.

He had hung her up in the shop, and given her some breakfast, and she had smoothed her crumpled feathers, and was still shouting “Keep dark, Dick Burgess!” and Thad had listened to all that his mother had to say about the seven dollars—alas! it was very unpleasant—when in came Deacon Atwood, his face beaming with satisfaction.

“We have got the better of that scoundrel, Silva!” he said. “Burgess has confessed, frightened into it by that parrot! She’s a fine bird! The company wants to buy her. We’ll give you sixty dollars for her. That’s as much as you could get for her in Boston.”

And, right before Thad’s mother, he counted out six crisp, new ten-dollar bills into Thad’s hand.

Polly Bree still lives in the insurance office, and is a great pet. Thad carries her choice tid-bits, and is fond of her; but, of late, a slight coolness has arisen between them, owing to the fact that somebody has taught Polly Bree to say, “Mind your mother!” and she cackles it out whenever Thad comes near, in a way that he feels to be unpleasantly personal.

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