
A COLONIAL COQUETTE

THIS little tale of the trials and tribulations of love in 18th century Rhode Island would really fit easily into any age, but here it is, gleaned from the private correspondence of William Palfrey of Boston and Moses Brown, that astute and diplomatic Quaker, the youngest of the "Four Brown Brothers" of Providence. The lady in the case was Mistress Polly Olney, the charming and strangely facetious daughter of Joseph Olney, a favorite innkeeper of Providence. It was at his tavern that the youth of the town used to gather in the ominous days preceding the War for Independence, and in the yard of this hostelry grew the elm which was christened "The Liberty Tree," a name by which the tavern itself was later known.

Of Moses Brown, one of the noted characters in Rhode Island history, little needs to be said, but perhaps William Palfrey requires further qualification. He was born in Boston, in 1741, being three years older than Mistress Polly. His grandson, an eminent New England historian, has described him as "an agreeable person with a frank and generous expression of countenance,

great gayety and heartiness of disposition, a fund of anecdote, a seasoning of original wit, and a somewhat sedulous attention to dress as well as to manners, advantages which, added to his perfectly correct habits, his known industry and trustworthiness, and his forwardness and influence in the political circles of his equals in age, introduced him favorably to the good society of the town." In 1761, the year in which this romance began, Palfrey was employed as a clerk in the establishment of Nathaniel Wheelright who was second only to the elder Hancock as a merchant of Boston.

Palfrey came to Providence on business in 1761, being entertained, while in the town, by Moses Brown who introduced him to a number of pretty girls. Among them was Polly Olney who seems to have made a swift conquest of his heart. In his first letter from Boston to Moses Brown, in which he thanked the latter for his past hospitality, he only wished to be remembered to "Miss Sally & the other ladies," but, in a later letter of March 26, 1761, he took the Quaker into his full confidence regarding his passion for Miss Polly, requesting him to convey his "complements"

to "the dear Polly" toward whom he had feelings which he was quite unable "to express."

Letters were constantly exchanged between the two friends as the courtship of Mistress Polly gained headway, and Moses Brown became the trusted spokesman and aide of the Boston lover who was forced to do most of his wooing by post and by proxy. In April, Palfrey wrote again to his friend, saying "Inclos'd you have a Letter for P——y which I doubt not you will be kind Enough to deliver her and in as private a manner as the Nature of the thing will admit of. I must Confess a Correspondence with the fair Sex is vastly agreeable to me. Especially with the one who I have so great a Regard for as I have for P——y & am sorry that I was oblig'd to leave Providence before I had an opportunity to settle the affair with her, as I was depriv'd of that pleasure by her being gone to one of the Neighbours a Visiting, however hope I shall have another opportunity soon." It is amusing to note that in this letter he also requests that its bearer, a Dr. Jackson, ("who is a friend & Mason") be introduced "Especially to the Females." This was the first letter to Polly.

However, by August of 1761, trouble had begun to arise. Palfrey had paid a visit to Providence, in which he had missed seeing either Polly or Moses Brown, but had heard a rumor that the former was soon to be married to a Mr. Bowers of Swansea. Subject to the usual credulity and jealousy of a lover, he had inquired further concerning this disturbing report, only becoming more upset when informed that it was not Mr. Bowers but Moses Brown himself who was courting Polly. Upon his return to Boston Palfrey wrote at once to Moses Brown, demanding an immediate explanation of the rumor and saying, somewhat spiritedly, that he was glad that he had "not as yet advanced so far but that he could Retreat with Honour."

Moses Brown answered quickly, expressing great surprise at Palfrey's implied accusation. He said that there was nothing in the rumor concerning Polly and Mr. Bowers. Polly had merely gone to Swansea for a visit and returned in the company of Dr. Bowers, who had then stayed in Providence for several days both at the Olney's Tavern

and at the Brown Homestead. But, after admitting it to be true that his friends had accused him, (Moses Brown) of courting Polly (although she was just an intimate friend), the Quaker cleverly turned the tables by asking Palfrey to explain a rumor that had it that he, Palfrey, was paying addresses to "a young Lady in Boston," a rumor which (if true) would make him think both himself and Polly "Very Ungenteely Us'd." With this he neatly turned the tables on his hot-headed accuser.

Upon receipt of the letter from Moses Brown, Palfrey just briefly acknowledged it, for he had to go to New York on business, but a week later he wrote more fully, apologizing for accusing his friend of duplicity and railing heartily against the evils of all rumors. He said that inasmuch as he was a close friend of a certain Cazneau and had been often invited to the latter's home, he had formed a perfectly natural acquaintanceship with Cazneau's sisters and had occasionally taken one of them out walking or carried "her and her sisters with some other Ladies to a play." He called Boston a "Tattling Town" (quite appropriately) and hoped his explanation would clear up the matter, preserving both his friendship with Moses Brown and his own personal honor. And, in closing, he spoke of journeying to Providence very shortly in order to see Polly.

After this letter Moses Brown heard nothing further from Palfrey until February of 1762. He then received a long letter giving a full report of all that had happened between the Bostonian and his sweetheart, Polly. The latter had been at Newport, and Palfrey had sent her a letter in care of Moses Brown, in which he proposed to her fully, explaining that he could not come to Providence again before the end of the year (1761) and asking her to answer by post. No answer came, however, and Palfrey, greatly worried, came to Rhode Island to seek her out. He found Polly at Newport but could not get an opportunity to talk to her privately. "Something or other" was always happening. When Polly returned to Providence, Palfrey came back with her still hoping for a chance to see her alone. Finally, when becoming desperate and thinking he might have to go back to Boston leaving the matter unsettled, he conceived a

clever plan. With the help of Polly's brother, Jo., he succeeded in getting a Miss Paget to invite Polly and himself to her house and then leave them alone. This scheme, he says, "took." However, when he asked Polly if she had received his letter and what she thought of it, her answer was very vague. Pressing the case, he received a very definite rejection, coolly given, with the additional admonition "to think no more of her."

Thinking her answer final, Palfrey returned to Boston, deeply humiliated, and never wrote to her after that. But, Polly had since come to Boston, and Palfrey had met her at a ball. However, to him she still seemed "Exceeding Shy & behav'd with an Air of Distant Reserve." He treated her well and still regarded her highly, expressing every wish for her future happiness. In closing this long letter, he said that, although rumors were about that he had deceived Polly during the whole affair, he had always dealt with her honorably, and, if in doubt, Moses Brown might show this letter to her.

Moses Brown, to his credit, believed his friend's explanation implicitly without having any further assurance from Polly, and wrote that he was well satisfied with the explanation. Although Palfrey had since entered into partnership with his friend Cazneau and had begun to pay serious court to one of his sisters, he was still not quite immune to the charms of Polly, for in April he wrote excitedly to Moses Brown that "Polly is this minute gone out of the Store . . . I think I could perceive a visible alteration in her countenance & behavior for the better. She did not seem to be quite so much upon the Reserve as usual." Later,

one of Moses Brown's letters to Palfrey concerning Polly fell into Miss Cazneau's hands and was opened and read by her with true feminine curiosity. Palfrey nearly lost his second sweetheart as a result, but the matter blew over. The final letter to Moses Brown, written late in April, was a real explanation and showed Polly to be a rather foolish coquette. Palfrey wrote "Polly told my friend Flagg Last Evening that she thought it would have looked odd for a young Lady to say Yes so soon and that if there was any misunderstanding between us, she was very sorry for it." Foolish Polly! She revealed herself too late, for Palfrey was truly a man of honor and held to his engagement to Miss Cazneau. He did, however, remark further on in his letter to Moses Brown, "I am sorry I was not acquainted with her temper and disposition before, as it would have prevented all that has happened."

Yet Polly did not go to Boston in vain, for, in 1764, the *Providence Gazette and Country Journal* announced her marriage to a Mr. Thomas Greene of Boston, describing her as a "young lady" of "real merit" and one fitted "to grace the conjugal state and perpetuate its felicity." Moses Brown, too was married that year to his cousin, Nancy Brown, but it was a year afterwards that Palfrey married Miss Cazneau. During the Revolution he was a member of Washington's personal staff, the Paymaster-General of all the Continental Troops, resigning finally to become Consul-General to France. In 1780 he sailed out of Delaware Bay, on the "Shillala" to fill his last appointment, but neither he nor the ship were ever heard of again.