

A Bonnet For Betsy

BY MATHIAS P. HARPIN

Betsy Metcalf Was Determined to Have a New Bonnet for Easter, Even if She had to Make it Of Oat Straw. For This She Left Her Name in the History of Our State.

It was early April, 1798. Easter was coming. Betsy Metcalf of Providence knew she wouldn't have a new bonnet. Her father had told her so. He had complained about the times. The Embargo was on. Except by permission of the President of the United States, ships could not clear for foreign ports. Business had died. Unemployment was widespread. Some stores had closed in Providence. Ships rode at anchor like ghosts in the harbor at Warren, Bristol, Newport and Providence. Merchants were hollering blue murder. Betsy was lucky she had a decent dress, never mind a new bonnet, her father said.

Joel Metcalf wasn't rich. He kept a little store on North Main where he sold a few notions such as were imported from Manchester in England. Outside of that he kept a cow. In the spring he planted a garden. Once he had been a carpenter. But due to an injury to his right hand he couldn't follow that trade any more. His wife had died. He was alone with this one daughter.

"I haven't got a cent to spare," Metcalf said. "You'll have to go without a new bonnet this year." Metcalf's attitude toward an Easter purchase this year was justified. For nearly six months he had hardly made enough in his store to keep alive. Already he had dipped into his savings. By this time he was worried. Never before had he refused his daughter. It wasn't easy to say no. How easier it was to say yes!

Betsy was only 12 years old. Always she had had her own way. "Don't feel hurt. Put yourself in my place, if you can," her father said. Betsy's eyes were deep brown. Her lips formed a perfect bow. In ringlets her silky brown hair fell, accentuating her heart-shaped, sunlit face. But now her heart was broken. Quickly she went to her room, weeping. There she stayed pouting.

She wished she had never been born. Wished she was dead. Wished there was no such time as Easter. Wished . . . O, she wished everything and anything. Misfortune had always been with her, she felt. Else why had she lost her mother? The world was full of injustices. Her share had always been large, she was convinced. If only she could be transported far away where her friends wouldn't see her this Easter?

It was time for supper. Her father came to the head of the stairs and called to her. She ignored him. She didn't feel hungry. Finally her father called again. "Betsy, you come down here this minute, do you hear?" Silently, she took her place at the table. But she hardly knew what she ate. All the time she was thinking.

"You'll have lots worse things than this in your life time," her father said. But she didn't listen. Her mind was aflame with thoughts. Finally it came to her. Last year she had seen a bonnet that she liked very much. It came from Paris and was made of straw. The straw was like pure gold. It had ribbons on it too. And tiny bows. Rebecca Brownell wore it. Why, of course. That's the kind of bonnet she wanted. She could make it too with her own hands.

A light shone in her eyes. A smile brought a glow to her face. Her father noticed it. Some day, her father said, she would have a rich husband, and he would buy her all the pretty bonnets she wanted. Betsy, said yes, she thought so. But her mind

was on the new bonnet she was going to make. Yesterday, on his return from the fields her father had brought home some oat straw. It lay in a basket in the back kitchen. She asked her father if she could have the straw. Her father seemed astonished. How could one hope ever to understand little girls! Of course she could have the straw. She hurried from the table and into the back kitchen. Upstairs she went, her tiny feet tapping each tread as she flew.

For an hour she worked on the straw. Each second brought good results.

"I cut the straw and smoothed it with my scissors and split it with my thumb nail," she wrote later. "I had seen an imported bonnet but never a piece of braid and could not tell the number of straws."

Her father came into the room to see if she was all right. "What in the world are you doing?" her father asked, watching her work. "I am making a new Easter Bonnet," Betsy replied. Her father gave her a little hug and a peck on the cheek and left her alone.

"I commenced the common braid with six straws and smoothed it with a bottle and looked it over carefully. But somehow it didn't seem right. So I added another straw and then it was right."

Nert morning she had created the bonnet and hastened to put it on. She held a mirror in front of her face, turning her head this way and that. How nice! This was certainly something that would open all eyes in Providence this Easter. She must show it to her aunt Jane. With the speed of lightning she rushed down the stairs. Her aunt was making biscuits when Betsy burst through the door.

"Goodness, Betsy, you frighten me!"

"Auntie, do you see what I'm wearing?"

"What a beautiful bonnet! Where did you get it?"

"I made it."

"Why, I can't believe it."

"Why, it's simply adorable, Betsy," Aunt Jane said, handing the bonnet back.

That Easter Betsy Metcalf was the talk of the town. All her friends wanted to know where she had gotten her bonnet.

In Providence it was hoped that the weaving of straw would become an important industry in the infancy country. After all, the only industry that America had at that moment was the cotton industry and this was only just starting. She was asked to teach women in Providence and in all the country towns in Rhode Island.

In 1859 the Providence Society for the Encouragement of Domestic Industry wanted to get the report straight. Did she or didn't she make America's first straw bonnet in Providence? By now Betsy Metcalf had married a man named Baker and lived in Dedham. She wrote the society a letter and made a capacious bonnet which the society accepted with thanks. They put it in a glass case and pinned to it an inscription which read — "Braided and sewed by Mrs. Betsy Baker July, 1859, age 73 in imitation of the one made by her in 1798 being the first straw bonnet braided in this country."