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Scandalous Affair of 1836

All Huntsville, except residents on the "inside", was aghast when John C. and his wife, Emeline, bundled into a stage coach at close to midnight on the evening of Dec. 21, 1836, just four days before Christmas, and hurried off to her father's home at Greensboro, Alabama.

Indignant gossip was a common thing across the tall fences around the town's back yard the next day.

"The idea of old John C. sending away such a pretty young thing!"

"I don't see how she ever came to marry him in the first place. Him and his crabby ways! Wonder she hadn't chased him away."

"They say she fell in love with an actor down at the theatre, and John found out about it."

For days, weeks, on into early spring of the next year, they talked, with an occasional item of truth leaking into their conversation. Then John C. filed his suit for divorce, charging his wife with adultery.

This was the beginning of perhaps the outstanding divorce case in Huntsville history. Most of its testimony involved incidents that occurred within a block of the present post-office. Before it was ended, some of the town's most distinguished early settlers had contributed to its testimony.

No thought of such an unhappy climax attended the wedding of John and Emeline at Courtland on Dec. 24, 1829. They and their relatives could see only happiness ahead.

While many years her senior, John was prosperous, had a successful land office in Huntsville, and boasted as a distinguishing feature the fact that he had come to the town with his parents in 1811, the year it was founded. He was the ideal husband, everyone thought, for a much younger

wife.

Emeline also was of a prominent family. Not quite 15 at the time of her marriage, she was girlish, light-hearted, had a trim figure and an extremely romantic and imaginative mind. In this last characteristic, particularly, she and her husband differed.

A few days after the wedding, John brought his wife to the home of his mother, a mile and a half from Huntsville. Emeline apparently became fond of her husband's two sisters, Narcissa and Delia, both unmarried and much older than herself, for they were together much of the time when she was not with her husband.

Early in 1831, the mother died. The following June 1, John bought the brick home still standing at the northeast corner of Greene and Randolph Streets, directly across Randolph Street from the Central Y. M. C. A., and removed there with his young bride.

On January 1, 1835, the two sisters, who remained at their mother's plantation, also purchased a house and lot in Huntsville and came to town to live. The two families were in close association with each other. Scarcely a day elapsed without a visit between them. For nearly two years this continued.

Then, on August 9, 1836, a cloud of trouble moved across this peaceful horizon in the form of a handbill, dropped over the high board fence that surrounded John's home. It announced that Henry Riley, "state manager of many of the principal theaters in the Union," would present an entertainment consisting of recitations, imitations and songs.

When it was brought to her by her favorite Negro girl, Ann, this notice interested Emeline, and she made her plans to attend the performance.

That night, John begged off, with the excuse that he preferred to stay home and read. So Emeline, accompanied by a Negro attendant, set out for the theatre, then diagonally across the block from her home, on the lot directly across Lincoln Street from the Jewish synagogue.

Up to the front row she went, for choice seats in a theater then were reserved for ladies. The curtain was raised, the audience applauded, and then the actors began their series of recitations from Shakespeare, Sheridan, Holmes and Southey.

Emeline fidgeted impatiently. This wasn't particularly to her liking. But when the second act got under way, she sat up quickly, her heart aflutter.

Upon the stage had appeared her ideal of a man. He was Henry Riley, there to give his "celebrated" imitations of several distinguished performers.

The manner in which Emeline met Henry Riley has been lost to posterity. And how their acquaintance developed so rapidly is a mystery. At any rate, she dispatched the following note to him by Ann, her servant, a few days later.

"Come after tea here, and I will come down to the garden."

Within a day or two, she wrote him again: "Henry, if you will come down to the theater this evening, I will go there and tell you where you may see me. Let no one know of this, not for your life. Mr. C. is in the country, I am alone. Your Emeline."

With all the innocence of a rosebud, this adventure suddenly blossomed into a full-grown love affair. Emeline's heart beat rapidly and her temples throbbed at the thought of Henry.

"All seems cheerful and gay around me, yet, Henry, my heart feels desolate," she wrote in another message. "It wanders like a drop from the ocean which cannot meet its kindred drop, like a voice which in all Nature finds no echo. Keep that ring I sent you in remembrance of me. One who loves you. Farewell. Farewell."

Then, a little later, she sent Henry another note, telling him to meet her in the garden after nightfall. That was a bad move.

At the hour set, she slipped out of the house and down to the fence at the back of the garden, on the opposite side of which was the theater lot. For minutes that seemed like hours she waited, until, at last, her lover appeared out of the darkness.

They talked in whispers, for a much longer time than they had intended. As Emeline kissed him lightly and ran toward the house, the back door opened, and through it stepped her husband. She called his name aloud, both in fright and in fear that her lover had not gone.

John wanted to know where she had been so long. Inside the house again, he accused her of meeting someone

in the garden, held her firmly by the arms, used unkind words, and told her that if she did not tell him whom she could go her way and he would go his. Emeline was silent through it all.

After they had gone to bed, she thought seriously of telling him the whole story and then of running to Henry's arms.

But fear that her husband would kill her lover caused her to lie there until her eyes closed in troubled sleep.

When Emeline had recovered from her fright, she sent Henry two poems, both of which she herself had written about their love.

On September 19, the actor prepared to leave. While he worked over his trunks at the theater, the servant girl brought him a note. It read:

"I will direct my letters to Mr. Sam Cowell at Tuscumbia. You must address yours to Edwina Johnson."

Emeline's next message to Henry was a long letter in which she told him of the awful emptiness since he had gone, and of a dream in which he had rescued her from a ship that had struck a rock on the shore of a strange lake.

Then came a note of alarm. Her husband had missed a picture he had of her, and she had told him that she lent it to a friend, not that she had passed it across the garden fence to Henry Riley.

"I am betrayed on every side," she informed him, "but if you will send the picture, all will be straight again... do not write to me any more."

The next was more emphatic:

"For God's sake do not write to me any more, for I wrote to you the other day and gave the letter to one of the Negroes to put in the office. She carried it, instead to Mr. C.'s sister, who gave it to him. In it I spoke of my picture, and he told me he would send me to Greensboro to my father. If he does, then I will write you."

On October 17, Emeline wrote Henry that she was leaving the next morning for Greensboro, accompanied by Judge Crawford, to attend the bedside of her mother who was extremely ill.

"I thought you would have come," she added. "At least, I have looked for you in vain. I never wished to see anyone so much before in my life." From Greensboro on Oct. 22,

she dispatched a long letter. "If dreaming of you be a crime," it began, "my crime is dark indeed."

Then followed a beautifully worded description of how her lover, in disguise, had saved her from death in the "dark waters of a stream."

"At last I am desolate and unhappy," she confessed. "Here it seems as though I were away from all I hold dear on earth. If you were here, all would be sunshine. But a cloud is over me. Brooding shadow fears I shall never see you any more."

In desperation, she wrote on the folded and sealed paper: "Mr. S. Cowell, Tuscumbia. If not there, please direct to wherever he is. Will postmaster please do this."

The following week, she sent a message that she was returning to Huntsville at once.

"You say I must write you what you must do," she concluded. "How can I tell you? Come to H. and see me. And that is all I can say you must do. I was once a bright jewel, but you have robbed me of its luster. If I never see you more, you have my blessing."

After Emeline's return, John hoped that they once more might settle down to that undisturbed married life they had enjoyed during their first years together. He noticed that his wife had lost some of her girlishness, had a wan and tired look on her face, and liked to sit for hours alone in her room. All this he supposed to have been due to the strain brought upon her by her mother's illness.

John's life since early September had been anything but that of a happily married man. When his mind was not too heavily taxed by his business, he more than once had brooded over certain ugly rumors about his wife which had originated among the Negroes.

These tales had been brought directly to his ears by his two sisters, both of whom, living in idle spinsterhood, had made it their business to gather up as much of this gossip as possible and to run with it to his land office. In fact, Delia, the younger, had even spoken about the reports to Emeline and had received a firey tongue-lashing in return. That had marked the end of the frequent and friendly visits between the families.

But with Emeline at home once more, apparently as true and as faithful as a wife should be, the rumors ceased and

gradually were forgotten. Not nearly so often did neighbors turn their prattle to the inmates of the two-story brick home on the corner.

This situation continued to improve until the middle of December. Then it stopped with a surprising suddenness, brought about when a familiar face emerged from a stage coach in front of the Bell Tavern on the north side of the square. It was that of Henry Riley.

From that time on, Emeline's love affair was snatched from her bosom by the neighbors. The fact that Riley had come back to town, unannounced, without his theatrical company, and without any apparent business, excited widespread suspicion, and every rumor about him was dragged from the grave.

Around 2 o'clock on the afternoon of Dec. 19, Preston Yeatman and John H. Lewis were "engaged in their own affairs," as Yeatman later testified, in a brick stable, formerly in the northeast corner of the Central Y. M. C. A. block. From behind the grates of the building, they saw Riley approaching along Randolph Street, from the direction of the square.

As the actor passed the C. home, Yeatman and Lewis saw the blinds of a window in the second story cautiously open and a piece of paper drop down at Riley's feet. He looked hastily about him, picked up the paper, thrust it into his pantaloons pocket and turned back toward the courthouse.

The two who had witnessed the incident bubbled over with their shocking news. It was too big for them to handle so they went with it to James W. McClung, local lawyer.

McClung considered himself John C.'s friend, so he rushed down the street to the land office. After telling his then second-hand story, he sat back to study the effect it would have upon the husband.

John admitted that a circumstance once had arisen which had caused him to believe that his wife had been unfaithful to him, but that she had asserted her innocence so strongly and had offered such sound alibis that he had let the matter pass. In the light of this new rumor, however, he said that he would apply for a divorce if he could get enough evidence to justify the act.

McClung suggested that they seize Mr. Riley and take the

paper away from him. This they did in front of the Bell Tavern a few minutes later, aided by several bystanders.

Back at the land office again, they opened the crumpled note to find the following written in Emeline's legible hand:

"I am so much pleased to see you here once more, but it is impossible for me to speak to you. I am still the same and ever shall be. Return home, Henry, and forget me, if you please, but if it is ever in my power to become the bride of H., with honor I will, and as soon as I can, you shall know it. Keep my secret. Never betray me so long as you live. Write a letter this evening, and tonight, after tea, slip it through the window blinds of the porch. I will be there playing on the piano. Adieu, Henry. Yours."

Even with this latest evidence, however, John was not satisfied. So, after McClung had gone, he summoned to his office his very best friend, Samuel Cruse.

Upon hearing his story, Cruse advised that they go to the tavern and inquire whether Riley, who by that time had disappeared, had left any baggage there.

At the tavern, John M. Caldwell, proprietor, informed them that the actor had left a trunk in his room. Up they hurried, much against the innkeeper's approval, and forced open the trunk. Inside, wrapped in a play bill, they found a bundle of letters and a miniature of Emeline.

That night, after supper, John called his sisters to his home. Then, in the presence of his wife, he gave his decision: Emeline would have to return to her father's home on the next stage, which left the following Wed., Dec. 21.

Between 11 and 12 o'clock Wednesday night, as scheduled, Emeline climbed aboard the stage in front of the Bell Tavern. Inside, she nestled down between two passengers. As the wheels started rolling, she glanced back over her shoulder momentarily, then clasped her hands in her lap to await the next step in her uncontrollable romance.

The following March, John filed suit for divorce. When the case came up for trial at the October term of court, several prominent witnesses were called. Emeline, who did not appear in person, was represented by her solicitor, S. Pete.

After reviewing the evidence for two long days, Judge George W. Lane ruled in favor of the plaintiff.

Included in the voluminous court records which led to

the decision was Emeline's sole message after her embarrassing departure. She had had her counsel write in answer to her husband's charge that she believed the complainant's suspicions were aroused by persons permitted to approach him in the disguise of friendship but who really desired to destroy his happiness and her reputation.

"This respondent is informed and verily believes," she added, "that the evil-disposed persons who have excited the ill-founded suspicions of the complainant have until lately been his bitterest enemies. This respondent further saith she believes these evil-disposed persons are persons whom the respondent did not choose to associate with, and for the purpose of revenge have been busy in exciting the unfounded prejudices of her husband."

With these words she ended her Huntsville chapter - this girlish young wife, married before she was 15, and driven away from the home on the corner which still stands as a monument to her romance.

