

Washed Loyal

“They say Lincoln has been shot. I hope to God it’s true and I hope my brother shot him!”

Uttered to-day in Mason City these words would be serious enough. But on April 18, 1865, such a declaration was little short of a match in a powder barrel. Almost every home in the village of Mason City had been touched by the grim hand of war. Weary but hopeful, in common with the North, the people of the little Iowa community were looking to Abraham Lincoln as the one man in the world who could make their sacrifices of avail.

Four years before, when the President first called for volunteers, Mason City had responded. Muddy streets had been churned to an even deeper mire by the passage of men bound for the training camps. In midsummer some of the most active men in the struggling pioneer community marched away with Captain D. E. Coon to join the Second Iowa Cavalry.

Since that day repeated appeals of “Father Abraham” for men to maintain the Union had met with instant responses. Farewells that were never to be followed by glad welcomes had been said. Yet faith in the great leader had never faltered, and when that faith had been justified at last by victory, love for the tall, sorrowful man in Washington had become intensified.

Spread wide over the prairie yet firmly unified by a common purpose and common hardships, the frontier town was longing for the final adjustment between the North and South that would allow its men to return. Only the boys, the physically unfit, and the old men were left at home. For nearly four years progress had been arrested. There was work to be done in conquering the prairie, a new season was just beginning, and hope of speedy release from the army seemed to depend upon Lincoln.

Then came the terrible news that the President had been shot. The stagecoach had scarcely arrived before the sad tidings had spread all over the town. With bated breath people spoke of the tragedy. Up and down the rutted streets neighbor talked to neighbor of the national calamity. More than once the fear was voiced that four years of bloody war and unmeasured sacrifice might be wasted.

At the Eureka House, a hostelry and stage relay at that time, men and women gathered to discuss the meager details. Could the news be really true? What insane motive had prompted the murder? How had the assassin escaped? Who was involved in the plot? In the midst of such conjecture while the people of Mason City were stunned and saddened, Mary Rogan spoke her bitter words of rejoicing in the assassination of President Lincoln. But her treasonable remark fell upon ears that were not attuned to such a refrain. Colonel I. R. Kirk, a veteran of the Spanish-American War, still living in Mason City,

is one of the few persons who remembers the occasion and the exciting events which followed.

Feeling ran high in the village. As during the World War, utterances inimical to the government were dangerous to their authors. But young Mary Rogan, good looking and buxom, was in the habit of speaking her mind. She didn't like Lincoln and never did believe he was half the man so many thought him. With Southern relations and sympathies, she was somewhat out of place in a community as strong in its Northern leanings as Mason City. Being employed at the Eureka House, she was well known and her disloyal attitude had been suspected for some time.

But her avowed pleasure in Lincoln's death and wish that her brother had perpetrated the awful deed fell as a bomb among those who heard her comment. From one to another the news of the statement sped over the city. Little groups formed on the street — formed, spoke earnestly, and dissolved to form other groups. The story spread like wild-fire among the five or six hundred inhabitants of the town. Women with brothers, sons, sweethearts, and fathers in the Union army thought of their nights of sorrow and their days of endless waiting for word from the front. The long fight under Lincoln for the ideals he held fundamental to the welfare of the country, and their dependence on him, came home to them. And their righteous indignation mounted.

That night Mary Rogan walked up the street from

her work, conscious of her conspicuous situation, but with her head held high. She seemed as one who knew herself to be in the minority, and glad of it.

By evening the women were so wrought up over the vicious words that they felt something had to be done. "Let's duck her!" suggested someone. Instantly the idea met with approval. Gathering recruits as they went, the women moved toward the home of Miss Rogan. There was no levity among them. A grimness of purpose that boded ill for the intended victim was plainly marked on their faces.

At the Kirk home, the crowd stopped. Mrs. Elizabeth Kirk, a leader among the women of the city, was called to the door. As they told her what was contemplated, Ike Kirk, then only fourteen years old, edged boy-like into the doorway behind his mother to see what the excitement was all about.

Mrs. Kirk, with two sons in Southern hospitals and one in a soldier's grave in Louisiana, immediately consented to join the militant women. At the suggestion of one of them, the lad put on one of his mother's dresses and followed, ready to lend a hand in case his sturdy strength should be needed.

Fifteen or twenty women were in the crowd when it reached Mary Rogan's residence, situated where the Stott home now stands, on the corner of Fifth Street and Delaware Avenue north. Without ceremony the leaders entered the house and led Mary out. A slight protest on her part was immediately stilled when she felt the firm grip of many hands

upon her arms and garments. Thus she was hustled along. Down what was then Main Street they went, using the unpaved roadway in preference to the narrow board walk, a crowd of twenty-five or thirty women by that time, with the victim walking defiantly in the center of the group.

Gradually the silent grimness of purpose broke down her resistance and suddenly she screamed in terror, begging to escape the fate that awaited her. According to the story of the happening in the *Cerro Gordo Republican*, a Mason City newspaper, "she was being hurried off in the direction of Willow Creek, when the unsuspecting men in different parts of the town were apprised by her screams and vociferations that something was in the wind, but starting for the 'front' they were informed that their presence was not needed."

At that time there was no bridge over Willow Creek on Main Street, for the creek was easily fordable except in time of high water. Up stream from the ford, however, there was a comparatively deep pool. It was there the women led their prisoner. Ike Kirk followed along, as he had been told to do, but by the time the women reached the creek, nearly everybody in town had joined the jostling crowd of spectators that lined the bank above the water.

A slight struggle ensued. Firm and willing hands were laid on the woman. Suddenly she was picked up bodily and with a splash she went into the water. A second and a third time she was submerged while

the crowd on the bank stood looking on in silence. Ludicrous as the performance may seem now, it was wholly serious then.

“My husband is fighting rebels south and we will attend to them here”, remarked a soldier’s wife. And the newspaper reported another woman as saying “that they would not allow rebels to live in Mason City.” The women of that community were serving notice to the world that they had nothing but condemnation for any disloyalty to the principles for which their men-folk had fought, and that aid and comfort to the enemy were not to emanate from their midst.

Finally the drenched woman gaspingly retracted. She “begged pardon for what she had said and sacredly promised forever to be a good Union woman from that time forward, under all circumstances. They blacked her face and would have sheared her head had she not earnestly entreated them not to do so, promising to be loyal.” Thereupon the women, “after administering to her the oath of allegiance, formed in procession and marched up Main Street, singing”. They were met by the men, “who cheered them lustily, joined in the procession and escorted them to McMillin’s store, where candies were passed to the crowd.”

At this juncture W. E. Thompson, a former sailor and minister, “was called out by the ladies for a speech and responded, briefly referring to the unhappy circumstances which had called them together,

complimenting them for their loyalty, and making some very touching remarks concerning the death of the President and the nation's affliction; after which the crowd marched to the Eureka House, where they sang The Star Spangled Banner and Rally 'Round the Flag, and then dispersed.''

It is only fair to Mary Rogan to add that she kept her word. Sometime later she married a Union veteran named James Jenkinson and lived to be respected in the community that had administered her baptism of loyalty.

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