

ROSE HARTWICK THORPE

(1850–1939)

Curfew Must Not Ring To-Night

England's sun was slowly setting o'er the hill-tops far away,
Filling all the land with beauty at the close of one sad day;
And its last rays kissed the forehead of a man and maiden
fair,—

He with steps so slow and weary, she with sunny, floating
hair:

He with bowed head, sad and thoughtful; she with lips so
cold and white,

Struggled to keep back the murmur, "Curfew must not ring
to-night!"

"Sexton," Bessie's white lips faltered, pointing to the prison
old,

With its walls so tall and gloomy,—moss-grown walls dark,
damp, and cold,—

"I've a lover in that prison, doomed this very night to die
At the ringing of the curfew, and no earthly help is nigh.
Cromwell will not come till sunset"; and her lips grew
strangely white

As she spoke in husky whispers, "Curfew must not ring
to-night!"

"Bessie," calmly spoke the sexton (every word pierced her
young heart

Like a gleaming death-winged arrow, like a deadly
poisoned dart),

"Long, long years I've rung the curfew from that gloomy,
shadowed tower;

Every evening, just at sunset, it has tolled the twilight hour.

I have done my duty ever, tried to do it just and right;

Now I'm old I will not miss it: Curfew bell must ring
to-night!"

Are you receiving Story of the Week each week?

Sign up now at storyoftheweek.loa.org to receive our weekly alert
so you won't miss a single story!

Wild her eyes and pale her features, stern and white her
thoughtful brow,
And within her heart's deep centre Bessie made a solemn
vow.

She had listened while the judges read, without a tear or
sigh,

“At the ringing of the curfew Basil Underwood *must die.*”
And her breath came fast and faster, and her eyes grew
large and bright;

One low murmur, faintly spoken, “Curfew *must not* ring
to-night!”

She with quick step bounded forward, sprang within the
old church door,
Left the old man coming, slowly, paths he'd trod so oft
before.

Not one moment paused the maiden, but, with cheek and
brow aglow,

Staggered up the gloomy tower where the bell swung to
and fro;

As she climbed the slimy ladder, on which fell no ray of
light,

Upward still, her pale lips saying, “Curfew *shall not* ring
to-night!”

She has reached the topmost ladder; o'er her hangs the
great, dark bell;

Awful is the gloom beneath her, like the pathway down to
hell.

See, the ponderous tongue is swinging! 't is the hour of
curfew now!

And the sight has chilled her bosom, stopped her breath
and paled her brow.

Shall she let it ring? No, never! Her eyes flash with sudden
light,

As she springs and grasps it firmly: “Curfew *shall not* ring
to-night!”

Out she swung, far out; the city seemed a speck of light
below,
There 'twixt heaven and earth suspended, as the bell swung
to and fro.
And the sexton at the bell-rope, old and deaf, heard not the
bell;
Sadly thought that twilight curfew rang young Basil's
funeral knell.
Still the maiden, clinging firmly, quivering lip and fair face
white,
Stilled her frightened heart's wild beating: "*Curfew shall not
ring to-night!*"

It was o'er!—the bell ceased swaying, and the maiden
stepped once more
Firmly on the damp old ladder, where, for hundred years
before,
Human foot had not been planted. The brave deed that she
had done
Should be told long ages after. As the rays of setting sun
Light the sky with golden beauty, aged sires, with heads of
white,
Tell the children why the curfew did not ring that one sad
night.

O'er the distant hills comes Cromwell. Bessie sees him, and
her brow,
Lately white with sickening horror, has no anxious traces
now.
At his feet she tells her story, shows her hands, all bruised
and torn;
And her sweet young face, still haggard with the anguish it
had worn,
Touched his heart with sudden pity, lit his eyes with misty
light.
"Go! your lover lives," cried Cromwell. "*Curfew shall not
ring to-night!*"

Wide they flung the massive portals, led the prisoner forth
to die,
All his bright young life before him, 'neath the darkening
English sky.
Bessie came, with flying footsteps, eyes aglow with
lovelight sweet,
Kneeling on the turf beside him, laid his pardon at his feet.
In his brave, strong arms he clasped her, kissed the face
upturned and white,
Whispered, "Darling, you have saved me! curfew will not
ring to-night."