

Hulda's Story

excerpt from

“Chronicles of Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow”

Edgar Mayhew Bacon, 1897

Hulda was a Bohemian woman, who came without references or kin and Settled in the midst of conservative folks who were familiar with each other's grandparents. To be a stranger was to be open to suspicion; to be alone was not respectable. Acting upon a well-known principle, recognized in most rural communities, the newcomer is held to be guilty till he has proved himself to be innocent.

Hulda gathered herbs, ** simples, ** in the mill woods; she knew where the boneset grew, and vervain, and mandrake, and calamus. Her cabin was full of the sweet odor of plants adrying; specifics for colds and fevers and the unsophisticated pains and aches of simple folk. She wove baskets, too, and was wise, as a woman ought not to be. Rumor, as busy in Sleepy Hollow in 1770 as she is in 1897, said that the witch had commerce with the Indians who came occasionally into this region from far up the State, and exchanged with them secrets of black art and yarbs.**

A tapu, as effectual as ever existed in the South Sea islands, cut this woman off from human intercourse, and when the war came she, alone, had no friend to discuss her hopes or tell her fears to. From first to last the neutral ground got the worst of the Revolution. Friends and foes struggled across it and fought or fled back again. Every crime in the calendar was committed in the names of King and Congress alike, till the harried remnant of the people sat among their denuded fields and depleted bams, and faced starvation and sickness with such stoicism as they could muster. Sometimes an undetected hand left dainties that were hard to procure, on the door-step or the window-sill of some house where want and pain had settled together; but the donor was invisible.

In those days men patrolled the highways to intercept the cattle-thieves that ran off their stock, and as the population became smaller, the women sometimes took their places with flint-lock and powder-horn. Hulda, the witch, presented herself for this service, but no one wanted her companionship. At last one day a force of British landed from one of the transports that had sailed up the Hudson and commenced a march which was to bring them, by means of the King's highway, to the rear of Putnam's position, at Peekskill. As they marched in imposing array a volley greeted them from behind walls and tree-trunks. It was Lexington repeated in Westchester County. Not to be repulsed this time, Hulda fought with her neighbors, using her rifle with great effect, so that she was singled out for vengeance; and before the redcoats retreated to their boats they had, by means of a sortie, overtaken and killed the witch.

Animated by a new respect, those who had seen her fight avowed that, witch or no witch, she had earned a right to Christian burial. Reverently they carried her to her cabin, and while there discovered between the leaves of her Bible (?) a paper informing them of a little store of gold that she desired to have distributed among the widows whose husbands had fallen for their country.

Hulda's grave, it is said, is close by the north wall of the old church, as though her neighbors, having done her what despite they could during her lifetime, were desirous to atone after her death by an exhibition of hearty respect.