

The Fireside.

THE RUNAWAY.

"Would they put her in the asylum," she wondered, "if they caught her?"

Folks would surely think she was crazy.

She stopped at the stone wall to rest, and looked back timorously at the old familiar scene.

Far behind her stretched the meadows, a symphony of olive and green in the late fall. Here and there sunken boulders stood, soldierly golden-rod or berry bushes clothed now in scarlet and gold. At intervals in the long slope stood solitary trees, where fluttering, brittle leaves fell in gentle chilly air. In summer time she remembered well the hay-makers rested in the shade, and the jug with ginger water she made for them was kept there to be cool.

She seemed, as she sat there, to remember everything. The house was all right, she was sure of that; the key was under the kitchen door mat, the fire was out in the stove, and the cat locked in the barn.

She held her work-hardened hand to her side, panting a little, for it was a good bit of a walk across the meadow, and she was eighty years old on her last birthday. The cows feeding looked home-like and pleasant.

"Good-bye, critters," she said aloud; "men's the time I've druv ye home an' milked ye, an' I allus let ye eat by the way, nor never hurried ye as the boys done."

With a farewell glance she went on again, smoothing as she walked the scattered locks of gray hair falling under the hood, and keeping her scant black gown out of the reach of briars. Across another field, then through a leafy lane where the woods were hauled in winter, then out through a gap in the fence with its great branching arms like a petrified octopus, to the dusky high road.

Not a soul in sight in the coming twilight. John, the children and the scolding wife, who made her so unhappy, would not be home for an hour yet, for East Mills was a long drive.

Down the steep hill went the brave little figure, followed by an odd shadow of itself in the waning light, and by the tiny stones that rolled so swiftly they passed her often and made her look behind with a start to see if a pursuer were coming.

"They'd put me in the asylum sure," she muttered, wildly, as she trudged along. At the foot of the hill she sat down upon an old log and waited for the train.

Across the road, guarded by a big sign, "Look out for the engine," ran two parallel iron rails, what were to be her road when the big monster should come panting around the curve.

At last the dull rumble sounded, a shrill whistle, and she hurried to the track, waving her shawl to signal.

This, in the conductor's vernacular, was a cross-road station, where he was used to watch for people waving articles frantically. The train stopped, and the passenger was taken aboard. He noticed she was a bright-eyed old lady, very neat and precise.

"How fur?" he asked.

"Bostin."

"Git there in the morning," he said, kindly waiting for the money, as she

opened a queer little reticule, where, under her knitting, wrapped in a clean cotton handkerchief, was her purse with her savings of long years—the little sums Sam had sent her when he first began to prosper in the west, and some money she had earned herself by knitting and berry-picking.

At a cross-road, as they went swiftly on, she saw the old sorrel horse, the rattling wagon, and John with his family, driving homeward. She drew back with a little cry, fearing he might see her and stop the train, but they went on so fast that could not be, and the old horse joggled into the woods, and John never thought his old Aunt Hannah, his charge for twenty long years, was running away.

At Boston a kindly conductor bought her a through ticket for Denver.

"It's a long journey for an old lady like you," he said.

"But I'm peart for my age," she said, anxiously; "I never had a day's sickness since I was a gal."

"Going all the way alone?"

"With Providence," she answered, brightly, alert and eager to help herself, but silent and thoughtful as the train took her into strange landscapes where the miles went so swiftly it seemed like the past years of her life as she looked back on them.

"Thy works are marvelous," she murmured often sitting with her hands folded, and few idle days had there been in her world where she had sat and rested so long.

In the day coach the people were kind and generous, sharing their baskets with her and seeing she changed cars right and her carpet-bag was safe. She was like any of the dear old grandmas in eastern homes, or to the grizzled men and women, like the memory of our dead mother as faint and as far away as the scent of wild roses in a hillside country burying-ground. She tended babies for tired women and talked to the men of farming crops, or told the children Bible stories; but never a word she said of herself, not one.

On again, guided by kindly hands through the great bewildering city by the lake, and now through yet a stranger land. Tired and worn by night in the uncomfortable seats, her brave spirit began to fail a little. As the wide, level plains, lonely and drear, dawned on her sight she sighed often.

"It's a dre'ful big world," she said to a gray-bearded old farmer near her; "so big I feel e'enmost lost in it, but," hopefully, "across them deserts like this long ago Providence sent a star to guide them wise men of the East, an' I hain't lost my faith."

But as the day wore on, and still the long, monotonous land showed no human habitation, no oasis of green, her eyes dimmed, something like a sob rose under the black herchief on the bowed shoulders, and the spectacles were taken off with trembling hand and put away carefully in the worn tin case.

"Be ye goin' fur, mother?" said the old farmer.

He had bought her a cup of coffee at the last station and had pointed out on the way things he thought might interest her.

"To Denver."

"Wal, wal; you're from New England, I'll be bound."

"From Maine," she answered; and

then she grew communicative, for she was always a chatty old lady, and she had possessed her soul in silence so long, and it was a relief to tell the story of her weary years of waiting to a kindly listener.

She told him all the relations she had were two grand-nephews and their families. That twenty years ago Sam (for she had brought them up when their parents died of consumption; that takes so many of our folks) went out west. He was always adventurous, and for ten years she did not hear from him; but John was different and steady, and when he came of age she had given him her farm, with the provision that she should always have a home, otherwise he would have gone, too. Well, for five years they were happy, then John married, and his wife had grown to think her a burden as the years went on, and the children, when they grew big, did not care for her; and she felt that she had lived too long.

"I growed so lonesome," she said, pathetically; "it seems I couldn't take up heart to live day by day, and I knowed our folks was long lived. Ten years back when Sam wrote he was doin' fair an' sent me money, I began to think of him, for he was allus generous an' kind, an' the greatfulest boy, an' so I began to save to go to him, fur I knowed I could work my board fur a good many years to come. Fur three years he as'n't hardly wrote, but I laid that to the wild kentry he lived in. I said bears an' Injuns don't skeer me none, fur when I was a gal up in Aroostook kentry, there was plenty of them both, an' as fur bufferlers, them horned cattle don't skeer me none, fur I've been used to a farm allus. But the lonesumness of these medders has sorted upshot me and made me think every day Sam was further off than I even cal'lated on."

But what will you do if Sam ain't in Denver?" asked the farmer.

"I have put my faith in Providence," she answered simply, and the stranger could not mar that trust by any word of warning.

He gave her his address as he got off at the Nebraska line, and told her to send word if she needed help. With a warm hand-clasp he parted from her to join the phantoms in her memory of "folks that has been kind to her, God bless 'em," and then the train was rumbling on.

But many of the passengers had listened to her story and were interested, and they came and sat with her.

One pale little lad in the seat in front turned to look at her now and then and to answer her smile. He was going to the new country for health and wealth, poor lad, only to find eternal rest in the Sunny land, but his last days brightened by the reward of his thoughtful act and kindness.

"She probably brought those boys up," he thought, and denied her life for them. Is she to die unrewarded, I wonder? There cannot be any good in the world if that be so." He thought of her and took out his purse; there was so little money in it, too; every cent made a big hole in his store, but the consciousness of a good deed was worth something. "I mayn't have the chance to do many more," thought the lad, buttoning his worn overcoat.

He slipped off without a word at a station and sent a telegram to Denver.

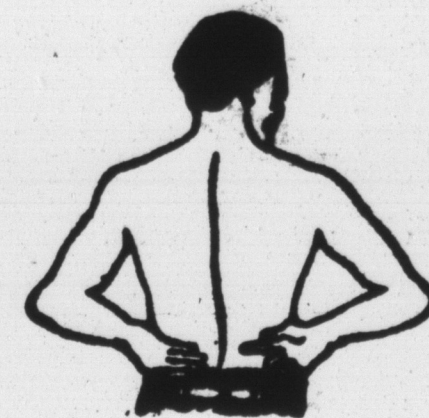
"To Samuel Blair" — for he caught the name from her talk — "Your Aunt Hannah Blair is on the W. and W. train coming to you."

It was only a straw, but a kindly wind might blow it to the right one after all. When he was sitting there

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after his message had gone on its way she leaned over and handed him a peppermint drop from a package in her pocket.

"You don't look strong, dearie," she said, "ain't ye got no folks with ye?"

"None on earth."

"We're both lone ones," she smiled, "an' how sad it be there ain't no one to fuss over ye. An' be keeful of the drafts, and keep flannels allus on your chest; that is good fur the lungs."

"You are very kind to take an interest in me," he smiled; "but I am afraid it is too late."

Another night of weary slumber in the cramped seats and then the plain began to be dotted with villages, and soon appeared the straggling outskirts of a city, the smoke of mills, the gleam of the Platte river, and a network of iron rails, bright and shining, as the train ran shrieking into the labyrinth of its destination.

"This is Denver," said the lad to her,

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