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LINCOLN, NEBR.

A WAY-SIDE INN.

[KATHARINE MELICK.]
For The Courier.

"Dean has typhoid fever. Send his mother" ticked from the Golden Gate, where the sands of Camp Merritt tossed over groves below and pallets above. Over alkali flats and snowy slopes, and ever down the broadening river ways came the call for mother, caught from the hot lips of a fever-crazed boy. A knock at a door under brier-rose leaves hanging limp in the afternoon sun; a yellow paper unfolded, and the call had reached the mother.

Before the west sun had dropped that night from the fetid sands into the bay; before the ocean mists, dark and sinuous, crept over the tents, a white-faced woman watched from a car window the fast lengthening shadows of the bluffs stretching over the black Missouri, and longed to overtake the sun, shining far ahead upon the roof that covered her boy. The people beside her ate wafers and bananas, or went to the dining car, or walked unsteadily to the ice water tank between games of cards. Presently the conductor brought her a ticket which had fluttered down the aisle. It

was hers, and after that the official kept a wary eye upon the slight, erect figure, until at the end of his fifty mile run an oblivious blue-coat with a beard replaced him.

As through a limbo of chaotic nonentities these faces went and came, with others, before the wide eyes of the watcher, who saw beyond them flash after flash, swift visions of one face. A little crib, with a pink fist thrust over, and within, the face, like a rose-leaf. A small white bed, all tumbled, with the face quiet on the pillow, and long lashes curved like the stamens from a flower-heart. A high tallyho, the last of the old stage-coaches,—with the same round face, now a noisy coach horn of ringing yo hos stop, as the four cream-colored horses get under way. How the merry jodels ring and ring back after the dust cloud floats away! How they mingle with the ki-yi chorus of the terriers every morning from the barn door! And how, all alone, the strengthening tenor rings in the solos of the High-School glee club!

Then once more alone, on an Easter morning, with the lilies covering the old armory stage, and the notes of America dying, while the old soldiers come, one

by one,—so old and bent, and grey, to honor the lad gone down with the Maine. So old and grey, these boys in blue, and so many young lads watching and thinking their thoughts, while the veteran with choking voice stands in fancy upon the half sunken deck, and looks, looks, into the blue Havana bay for his comrade's boy.

Then the petals of the Easter lilies, stirred by a great wave of sobbing breaths, trembled to the passion of the warrior-priest.

"And if ever—which God in His mercy forbid,—if ever the sword of the avenger be raised by an outraged nation, we who have loved our country better than life, have sons who love their country. We who have faced death, have sons who can face death."

The colder night air blew in across low-reaches of the sandy Platte. A brakeman, noticing the woman's white lips, shut the window.

But the breath was less damp and cold than the wind blowing in from the sea over the tents of the volunteers, and the murmuring hospital tent. Before morning another of the sons of soldiers had faced death,—the death that walks in darkness,—and another message came over the mountain slopes. Somewhere by the smooth river the message passed by, and the mother's eyes looking into the night saw it not. She heard the long keen wind of the prairie, and saw it stretch huger and darker beneath the stars. At daybreak, as the train stopped for a moment before a square red box of a station, in a treeless plain, the brakeman who had shut the window hurried through one car, while the conductor entered another, calling:

"A telegram for Mrs. Hastie."

And as the mother rose, she felt herself almost lifted forward, out of the car to the platform, where, before she could see the words on this second yellow paper, she was left standing, with her satchel at her feet, while the train went on into the gray west.

She must come home. She had been too slow. One with swifter feet had gone on before. Home? Why, what was one house more than another? Was not the grey waste holding him there? She could not go back alone—all alone. She must go on, or go somewhere to rest one instant from the words that rang and rang in her ears, and that she yet looked at over and over because it came to her momentarily that she was in a dream.

There was a station agent by. He seemed to have spoken to her.

"When does the next train go east?" she asked him, and he seemed to hesitate before saying, "Tonight, lady, at seven o'clock."

"Is there no other way to go back?"

The man took off his cap and looked into it, and then out over the sea of dead September grass. He had come to the platform in a blue flannel shirt and no vest, his arms free for action. His office was to swing clear the long leather bags of mail, and to catch the ones sent sliding from the postal car. He had foreseen no such contingency as this, and he wished to look away from the stony faced woman, just as he had often gone all the way round a pasture to avoid passing by a sick cow.

"No way unless you have wings,"— "which was a fool thing to say," he told

his wife afterward, "for she looked back over that track, exactly as I've seen an antelope take a glance over the trail, when I come up with my huntin' knife."

"Is there a hotel?"

"Yes. Let me put this mail away, an' I'll carry your grip. It's a piece up the track."

The traveler waited, wondering whether there were any letters inside those yellow flaps for mothers, mothers of soldier lads. And then her satchel was lifted, not unkindly, and she moved on,

still in a dream, to a yellow two-story structure, square and bare of all ornaments save a name across the whole middle front—"Holliett House."

There would be a woman—some woman—there. She choked down a great sobbing cry, and the first tears dropped on her white cheeks. Not to be alone—all alone in the world. To feel some warm human touch of one who could know.

There was a rank odor of parboiling salt pork in the office, over the red tablecloth in the dining room, and out of the kitchen beyond. A sputtering as of frying potatoes snapped louder when the kitchen door opened, and a neat woman in a large red apron came through to the door. The station agent had disappeared.

"You want a room for a day? Well, there is an upstairs chamber. This is the stairway. Go right up. I'll bring your luggage. I do my own work and must go back to the kitchen. If you want anything ring for it."

To her last hour that mother will see the little room, with serpentine lines running from impossible purple baskets, over the walls, and the serpentine lines of the dark rung bedstead—every round swelled into joints like endless smooth caterpillars. When the lines all began to writhe around her head, she touched the bell, at last, and rolled herself, as the broad red apron appeared.

"I am a little faint—no, it isn't breakfast I want. It is—oh—my boy!"

The woman in the red apron stood at attention. Up the stairway came the sound of sizzling pork. "I will bring you a pitcher of water," she said, and brought it.

"I am in great distress. I am alone. In bitter, bitter sorrow."

"If you want anything more, ring for it," said the landlady with dignity, and went to her skillet.

When the mother came to herself, the sun was hot against the one south window. The water in the pitcher was like the "tea begrudged or water bewitched" of her mother's phrase in a girlhood, ages past. But the face that looked out of that past was full of love. Surely the grave held all the love that ever looked upon her. The single touch of a hand—a warm human hand,—had the grave emptied earth, then.

One moment more seemed stark madness, and the half crazed woman drew herself from the bed and looked over the scorched prairies. The sun was not yet at noon. She watched the dry glare quiver over the red box of the station and glisten in beads of resin from the narrow porch roof of a general merchandise store across the street. Oh, the cool refuge of the grave, and the arms of a buried mother.

And then the old, old cry of the hurt soul—the cry of a mother-hand long laid to rest mingled with the agony that only mothers know.

The day increased and brought with its rising, pitiless winds some sense of the hardening ordeal of this life of dust and toil to the sensitive, suffering heart of the woman in that room of torture. When the other woman, who could only fry and brew, came with her tea and the thinnest slice of bacon, she said a thank-you with a steadier mouth, and tasted the tea. And when the level light streamed past the window, the mother looked in her satchel for the paper on which she had hoped to write of the lad's recovered strength. There was a half written page to "My Own Dean"—started before the telegram came. She tore it out, and wrote:

"For the sake of other mothers who may come this way and stop by the way-side, I must say to you,—there are some things one cannot ring for. God give you to see, and spare you the knowing." So it was that Dean's mother came back to us who love her, leaving her message of sorrow in the desert, where—God knows,—it may have lightened some other stricken soul.