

Lucy's Christmas Ride

Written specially for The Western Home Monthly.

Caleb was looking at some papers when Lucy came into the room. He thrust them into the pocket of his overcoat.

"Caleb," said Lucy, "you've dropped a letter."

Caleb started, muttered, and flushed. Lucy was already stooping for the letter. "Why," she exclaimed, "it's addressed to me!"

Caleb's wife came to his rescue. "Caleb forgot to give it to you. He got it last night, after you were in bed. The post office was open late, on account of Christmas Eve."

"I see," said Lucy. But the others look'd anxious; they watched a frown gather while she read. "I don't understand," she murmured. There was no heading to the letter; she looked at the postmark for a name and date. The mark was blurred. She finished reading, then folded the letter, and thrust it into its envelope.

"Come, Caleb," she said. "We'll be late to church." A glance of relief passed between the other two.

As they went out into the street, leaving the wife to cook the dinner, Caleb took off his overcoat and hung it over his arm.

"Won't you find it cold?" asked Lucy. "It's a rather raw day."

"A little raw," said Caleb, moving

Lucy winced. Caleb had touched a sore spot. "At any rate," she said hastily. "I can't travel two hundred and fifty miles to John this morning. He says that since I won't come to spend several days, he will have dinner at noon, so that I can go and come before night. Why, that's impossible."

"Strange," said Caleb. "I don't see what he's thinking of," said Lucy.

They walked a while in silence, and Caleb shivered so that Lucy should see. It inspired her with a desire to get to church quicker. "Caleb," she said, "let's take a short cut."

The town was not large; its main street lay on a curve, and by a path through the fields they could save distance. But at the railroad crossing a freight train blocked the way. "Oh, dear!" said Lucy. "These trains sometimes stand here for hours."

"We might climb through," suggested Caleb.

"If the train should start!"

Caleb peered up and down the train.

"I see no engine."

"Well, then," said Lucy. "You go first."

Caleb crossed in safety. "I'll leave my coat on the couplers so you shan't dirty your dress," he said. "Now, Lucy."

of his fat, fair face. Then he was left behind.

A brakeman appeared at the top of the car. "Sure, mum," said he, "you're in for it."

"Stop the train!"

"I can't."

"How far are we going?"

"Miles."

Lucy was wise. She knew the laws of tides and railroads, and accepted the situation calmly.

"Can you keep your place?" asked the brakeman. "You'd best not try to climb up here."

"Indeed not!" she answered. "I will sit here." The beam was narrow, but Lucy was thin. She was secure.

"Make yourself comfortable, then," he said. "You'll lose that coat from the couplers if you don't look out. Put it behind you to ease your back. No, wait, I'll do it."

He ran down his ladder—Lucy envied him his ease of movement—and, reaching over with one hand, picked up Caleb's coat. A pipe tumbled from the pocket and disappeared beneath the train. "Oh, dear!" cried Lucy.

"No use, mum," he said. "Here, we won't lose anything else." Standing braced, he searched the pockets, and drew out a pair of old woolen gloves, a handkerchief, and Caleb's package of papers.

These, as Lucy sat crouched upon her shelf, he put into her lap, and stuffed the coat behind her. Then Lucy was left to her thoughts.

It was dreary, it was cold. She was sheltered from the wind; the train moved with the even motion of a heavy body. She looked at the letters in her lap. Most of them were old, worn, and dirty. Bills, no doubt, and unpaid. Caleb, though her own cousin, was so shiftless. She thought of the letter in her pocket, but she could not get at it. She tried to remember what it had said; its ending especially. It was almost pathetic; something like this:

"You said once I wanted your money. I don't. Now that I am well off, you must believe me. Spend it on Caleb's family, but let me have the satisfaction of being on friendly terms with my only sister. We are old enough to lay by our former differences."

There were tears in her eyes, and Lucy felt ashamed. If the brakeman should come, he would see them. She looked



"HERE, WE WON'T LOSE ANYTHING ELSE."

again at the letters in her lap, and pretended to be looking them over. To her surprise, her own name, in her brother's writing, looked up at her from an unopened letter.



"WON'T YOU FIND IT COLD, IT'S A RATHER RAW DAY."

his shoulders as if he felt the cold. "But there, I'll soon warm up. You see, the coat's the only one I've got, and it's so old I don't like to be seen wearing it on Christmas Day."

"Perhaps I—" began Lucy impulsively. She checked herself; she would get him a new coat and surprise him. Caleb turned his head away, and hid a smile.

"John has written me such an unreasonable letter," she said. "One would think that he was living in the next town. And he writes as if he had written before: I must have missed one of his letters. He asks me to come today to his Christmas dinner."

"He does," exclaimed Caleb. "But I thought you and John had quarrelled."

She climbed until she was seated on the beam jutting above the coupler. With care she swung her feet across, and faced the farther side. "Now," she said, "are you sure you can lift me down?"

"Sure," said Caleb. Standing between the cars, he reached up to take her.

She grasped the brake rod with a scream. "Oh, Caleb, listen!"

Jarring and groaning along the line of cars. There was an engine! Her car started with a jerk; the other followed. Caleb was forced to move in the train's direction. "Jump down!" he cried.

"Never!" she answered firmly.

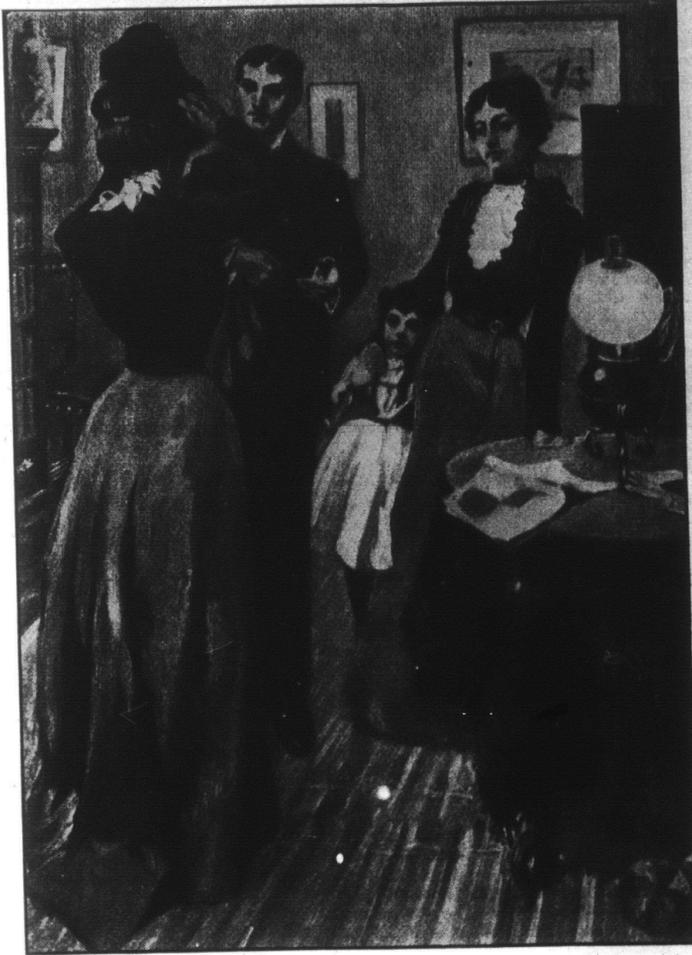
"Caleb, you'll get hurt."

He drew out from between the cars, and as the train went faster ran alongside.

"Lucy!" he gasped in consternation.

"Lucy!"

"Caleb!" she responded, helpless. The speed increased; she had a last glimpse



"I WENT TO TWO TRAINS, AND THEN I GAVE YOU UP."