

Aunt Welcome's Contribution

AUNT WELCOME NYE watched the whirl of dust behind the stage-coach settle back to its place in the road. Then she took off her "far-off" glasses, and laid them on the mantel. Aunt Welcome's sweet face was clouded a little with perplexity, not distrust. O no, it was all the rest of Smyrna that was distrustful. Aunt Welcome clung to her trust; it was a little habit of hers that must have been set down on the credit side of her page in the recording angel's book.

"She's gone off *again*," Aunt Welcome mused over her resumed knitting-work; "that makes the fifth time according to my count. 'Rindy Philpot says it's six, but 'Rindy always exaggerates a little mite. Five times, and I declare I don't see where she goes to; no, I don't! If she hadn't told me she hadn't any relations in the world——"

Aunt Welcome stopped to sigh gently. The mystery of little Mrs. McPhee's frequent goings-off troubled her a good deal. It made so much talk in gossip little Smyrna.

"Nobody'll go there to see her," resumed the plaintive reverie. "And now they're getting so they don't even bow to her. I saw 'Rindy Philpot looking straight ahead when they met yesterday—I never knew 'Rindy to be near-sighted before. I'm afraid it must've hurt little Mis' McPhee—heart alive, I guess it would have hurt *me*!"

Four times before, the stage had lurched up to the little brown house opposite Aunt Welcome's little white one. The little woman who rode away in it did not look as if she were going holidaying. Her lean, wistful little face was always solemn. It had looked more solemn than ever the fifth time.

"She'll stay three days,—or four, mebbe,—and, when she gets back and lights her lamp, I'll see her crying. She won't even wait to take her bonnet off. She'll look so pitiful, but I sha'n't dare to go in and comfort her up a little. That poor little mite of a woman's in trouble, and the dear Lord pity her!"

Aunt Welcome's face was tender with sympathy. The fog over her "near-to" glasses made her drop a stitch.

The mysterious little woman and she had neighbored only a summer and autumn. Before that, the little brown house across the street had stood empty. Aunt Welcome had been so glad when it found a tenant.

Nobody knew where little Mrs. McPhee came from when she moved into the brown house, and—what was worse—nobody knew where she went when the stage lumbered up to the gate every month. That rankled in the minds of the good people of pleasant little Smyrna. In Aunt Welcome's mind it lay like a tiny discord in the calm melody of her life. There were so few discords in that tune!

As it happened, Lettie's letter came next day, and there was discord in that, too. Lettie was Aunt Welcome's city niece—"she that was a Nye," Aunt Welcome explained, and had married good-natured Miles Crotty and gone away to the city to live. There were five little Crottys now, and the middle one was sick; that was the discord.

"If I could only see you one minute, auntie," the letter read wistfully, "*you'd* know whether to soak his feet or pack his head in cold water. I never wanted you so much in my life."

"The blessed dear!" breathed Aunt Welcome. It was not plain whether she meant the middle little Crotty or "she that was a Nye."

She read the letter a number of times absently. Then she went upstairs and packed her canvas bag.

"The blessed dear, I guess if I'm needed, I'll go," she said. And the next day the stage lumbered up to the little white house.

She got to Lettie's city in mid-afternoon. It was cool and pleasant, and Aunt Welcome thought the walk would do her good; so she waved off the ten-cent men pleasantly, and started down the busy street.

The way to Lettie's went by the jail, and Aunt Welcome looked up in awe at the looming bulk, pricked with its barred windows. It always awed her. The pity of it in the great, clean, bright city!

"The dear Lord pity 'em!" Aunt Welcome murmured.

As she passed the great door in the wall, it swung out heavily and little Mrs. McPhee stepped out. She did not seem to see Aunt Welcome. Her eyes were red with crying, and it may have been she did not see anything.

"Heart alive!" gasped Aunt Welcome under her breath. The small figure melted away in the crowd, and there was no chance to overtake it. "But I wouldn't dare to say, 'How do you do?' to her *here*, if I could catch up," thought Aunt Welcome, still mindful of the little woman's feelings. "She'd feel so embarrassed—dear heart alive, and so should I!"

The middle little Crotty, after the fashion of childhood the world over, had sprung back into a certain degree of health when Aunt Welcome arrived. There was really no need of her advice about the hot or the cold water packing.

"But you're *welcome*!" cried Nettie delightedly, taking the whole quaint figure into her arms.

"Of course, my dear, I'm always Welcome," Aunt Welcome said, taking the whole little Crotty tribe into her arms in her turn. She only stayed one day, and then, the middle Crotty being quite recovered, went home.

On the next day after that she made a long round of calls in Smyrna, ending at 'Rindy Philpot's house.