

Then, as if this monstrous desire bred others as new and strange, Sarah Ann was guilty of the first impulsive, unconsidered act of all her uneventful years. The Philadelphia train puffed more loudly, the conductor called "All aboard!" The steps of the first car were near at hand. Without a glance at the place where Aaron was patiently waiting for her return, without a thought of her base cruelty, Sarah Ann mounted the steps. Before she had found a seat, before she had time to catch her spent breath, the train had started. She was free!

For the first twenty-five miles she sat in a daze of excited joy. She felt as light as air, her heart beat so that she could feel it—she regretted that her life had been spent in such uninterrupted quietude. She paid for her ticket without a pang, she bought peppermints from the train-boy, she invested in a newspaper and threw it away without opening it. She had plenty of money. It would not be like Sarah Ann to go anywhere, even upon a wedding journey, without money. She spread her skirts comfortably over the seat, rejoicing in the wide space. Aaron was small, but even Aaron crowded her.

As she made her plans to stay in Philadelphia overnight, the thought of Millerstown's opinion troubled her. All her life she had had great respect for Millerstown's opinion. But Aaron would go home alone, and Millerstown would suspect nothing. Fortunately, Aaron was close-mouthed, and even a loquacious person hardly acknowledges that his bride has fled from him. It seemed incredible, even to Sarah Ann herself, that she could be thus coolly considering the distressing plight of one who had been her friend for so long.

She determined to go to a hotel in the city. It was true that Manda Kemmerer lived in Philadelphia, and that it would be sensible and economical to stay with her. But Sarah Ann said to herself that she was not out for economy; she was taking—and the thought brought an excited and unbecoming giggle—she was taking a wedding trip, and economy on a wedding trip is a crime.

For the first half of the journey, her mood held. Then, as suddenly as Ollie Kuhn's question had shot out of the dark, and with the steady, constant fire of a machine gun, came the reproaches of a guilty conscience. It may have been that the motion of the train, of which she was suddenly uncomfortably conscious, had something to do with her repentance.

She said to herself that she claimed to be a Christian, but she had behaved like a heathen. She claimed to love her neighbor; she had treated Aaron worse than an enemy. She prided herself upon her truth; she had acted a wretched lie. As the train passed Jenkintown, she drew her skirts close about her, as if their spread had symbolized her proud heart; when the train entered the suburbs of the city, she wept. But she could not marry Aaron Konig, she could not!

Climbing ponderously down from the train, she started up the long platform, her heart aching. Aaron was her dearest friend, and she could never look at him again. His visits, quiet as they were, had given variety to her dull life.

He was a man of importance in the village; his attentions had gratified her vanity. He had never been anything but kind to her, and she had treated him vilely. Had it been possible for Sarah Ann to blot out the last two hours, and stand once more by Aaron's side on the Allentown platform, there is no telling to what depth of humble atonement she might have plunged.

As it was, she moved along helplessly with the crowd toward the waiting-room.

Then, suddenly, Sarah Ann gave a little cry. Just beside her and about to pass, totally oblivious to her presence, moving rapidly as if he were pursued, was the object of her tender penitence.

"Aaron Konig!" she cried. "Why, Aaron Konig!"

Seized in a firm grasp, dazed by her sudden appearance, which he failed utterly to comprehend, overwhelmed apparently by some wild grief of his own, Aaron stood still. For an instant the hurrying crowd protested against this

blocking of the path; then it divided round them.

"I am sorry, I am sorry!" cried Sarah Ann. "But I couldn't think of this marrying!"

"I—I will get married if you say so," faltered Aaron. "I—"

Then, suddenly, Sarah Ann and Aaron cried out together.

"What are you doing in Philadelphia?" demanded Sarah Ann.

"Did you run away from me?" cried Aaron.

"I—I—I—" stammered Sarah Ann.

"It—it was this way," stuttered Aaron. "I—I—"

Then Sarah Ann took the bull by the horns. Trembling, yet hoping, she asked:

"Don't you want to get married, Aaron?"

Whereupon Aaron, gasping, hating himself, but realizing that the happiness of his life hung on his reply, answered briefly, "No."

"Nor I," said Sarah Ann.

Together they went into the station and sat down. For a long time neither spoke. Then Aaron lifted a tremulous voice:

"It was all Ollie Kuhn's."

"Yes," agreed Sarah Ann.

For a moment neither spoke. Then Aaron murmured, "And now, Sarah Ann, let us have a little something to eat."

The trains seemed especially arranged for runaway and repentant lovers. At one o'clock there was a train for Allentown, at five they could be in Millerstown. They ate their dinners, each paying for a share, and then each bought a ticket. They did not utilize the remaining time in sightseeing, they did not even walk to the windows and look down upon the busy street; they sat side by side, enjoying as of old their quiet, friendly communion.

Their state of calm continued until their journey was almost over, and in the Millerstown train they sat once more behind the fat man. He explained, with many digressions, unheard by them, why he had decided to return to Reading.

Suddenly an almost purple flush came into Sarah Ann's cheek. Her lips trembled; she seized Aaron Konig by the arm.

"We are almost there!" she cried, anxiously. "And what will Millerstown say that we two go away like this and come back together? What will we tell them, Aaron, ah, what will we tell them?"

The fat man was still talking; had he been dumb for a year, he could not have talked more constantly.

Aaron, as greatly terrified as Sarah Ann, appreciating more thoroughly than she the infinite and eternal pleasure that Millerstown would wring from such a joke as this, sank back weakly in the seat. His mind put forth vague, inquiring tentacles, as if the roar of the train or the flying fields or the steady stream of the fat man's talk could answer Sarah Ann's question.

"There was a man in the Teslehem train," the fat man was saying. "He went out on the platform and his hat blew off, and he came back and he yelled it over the car like a fool. 'My hat blew off!' he said. 'What do you think, my hat blew off?'"

The fat man paused for a breath, then went on: "Now he oughtn't to have told nobody. It is dumb to let your hat blow off. If he hadn't told it to nobody nobody would 'a' knowed it. My hat blew off once and—"

The fat man went on passed the village, past the great pipe-mill, through the lovely open country, within sight of the curving hills back of Millerstown, into Millerstown itself. He was still talking when they rose.

"That is it!" said Aaron Konig, almost hysterically, as they went down the side aisle. "That is it! If we don't tell Millerstown, Millerstown will never know. Like the man said, Sarah Ann!"

Overjoyed to be back, excited over the hoodwinking of Millerstown, Sarah Ann and Aaron stepped from the train, lovers no more, but friends forever. And to this day, their secret has been kept.—Elsie Singmaster, in Youth's Companion.

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