



THE RETURN TICKET

A Story of the Last Homeward Journey

By NELLIE E. McCLUNG

IN the station at Emerson, the boundary town, we were waiting for the Soo train, which comes at an early hour in the morning. It was a bitterly cold, dark winter morning; the wires overhead sang dismally in the wind, and even the cheer of the big coal fire that glowed in the rusty stove was dampened by the incessant mourning of the storm.

Along the walls, on the benches, sat the trackmen, in their sheepskin coats and fur caps with earlaps tied tightly down. They were tired and sleepy, and sat in every conceivable attitude expressive of sleepiness and fatigue. A red lantern, like an evil eye, gleamed from one dark corner; in the middle of the floor were several green lamps turned low, and over against the wall hung one barred lantern whose bright little gleam of light reminded one uncomfortably of a small live mouse in a cage, caught and doomed, but undaunted still. The telegraph instruments clicked at intervals. Two men, wrapped in overcoats, stood beside the stove and talked in low tones about the way real estate was increasing in value in Winnipeg.

The door opened and a big fellow, another snow shoveller, came in hurriedly, letting in a burst of flying snow that sizzled on the hot stove. It did not rouse the sleepers on the bench; neither did the new-comer's remark that it was a "hell of a night" bring forth any argument—we were one on that point.

The train was late, the night agent told us, when he came out to shovel in more coal—"she" was delayed by the storm.

I leaned back and tried to be comfortable. After all, I thought, it might easily be worse. I was going home after a pleasant visit. I had many agreeable things to think of and still I kept thinking to myself that it was not a cheerful night. The clock, of course, indicated that it was morning, but the deep black that looked in through the frosted windows, the heavy shadows in the room, which the flickering lanterns only served to emphasize, were all of the night, and bore no relation to the morning.

The train came at last with a roar that drowned the voice of the storm. The sleepers on the bench sprang up like one man, seized their lanterns and we all rushed out together. The long coach that I entered was filled with tired, sleepy-looking people, who had been sitting up all night. They were curled up uncomfortably, making a brave attempt to rest, all except one little old lady, who sat upright looking out into the black night. When the official came in to ask the passengers where they were going, I heard her tell him that she was a Canadian and she had been "down in the States with Annie, and now

she was bringing Annie home," and as she said this she pointed significantly ahead to the baggage car.

There was something about the old lady that appealed to me. I went over to her when the official had gone on. "No," she wasn't tired, she said; she "had been up a good many nights, and been worried some, but the night before last she had had a real good sleep."

She was quite willing to talk; the long, black night had made her glad of companionship.

"I took Annie to Rochester, down in Minnesota, to see the doctors there—the Mayos, did you ever hear of the Mayos? Well, Dr. Smale, at Rose Valley, said they were her only hope. Annie has been ailing for years and Dr. Smale has done all he could for her. Dr. Moore, our old doctor, wouldn't hear of it; he said an operation would kill her, but Annie was set on going. I heard Annie say to him that she'd rather die than live sick, and she would go to Rochester. Dave Johnston—Annie's man that is—he drinks you know—"

The old lady's voice fell and her tired old face seemed to take on deeper lines of trouble

as she sat silent with her own sad thoughts. I expressed my sorrow.

"Yes, Annie had her own troubles, poor girl," she said at last, "and she was a good girl, Annie was, and she deserved something better. She was a tender-hearted girl, and gentle and quiet, and never talked back to anyone, to Dave least of all, for she worshipped the very ground he walked on, and married him against all our wishes. She thought she could reform him!"

She said it sadly, but without bitterness.

"Was he good to her?" I asked. People draw near together in the stormy dark of a winter's morning, and the thought of Annie in her narrow box ahead robbed my question of any rudeness.

"He was good to her in his own way," Annie's mother said, trying to be quite just, "but it was a rough way. She had a fine big brick house to live in—it was a grand house, but it was a lonely house. He often went away and stayed for weeks, and her not knowin' where he was or how he would come home. He worried her always. The doctor said that was part of her trouble—she had been worried so much."

"Did he ever try to stop drinking?" I asked. I wanted to think better of him if I could.

"Yes, he did; he was sober once for nearly a year, and Annie's health was better than it had been for years, but the crowd around the hotel there in Rose Valley got after him every chance and one Christmas Day they got him goin' again. Annie never could bear to mention about him drinkin' to anyone, not even me—it would ha' been easier on her if she could ha' talked about it, but she wasn't one of the talkin' kind."

We sat in silence, listening to the pounding of the rails.

"Everybody was kind to her in Rochester," she said after awhile. "When we were sitting there waitin' our turn—you know how the sick people wait there in two long rows, waitin' to be taken in to the consultin' room, don't you? Well, when we were sittin' there Annie was sufferin' pretty bad, and we were still a long way from the top of the line. Dr. Judd was takin' them off as fast as he could, and the ambulances were drivin' off every few minutes, takin' them away to the hospital after the doctors had decided what was wrong with them. Some of them didn't need to go to the hospital at all—they're the best off, I think. We got talkin' to the people around us—they are there from all over the country, with all kinds of diseases, poor people. Well there was a man from Kansas City who had been waitin' a week but had got up now second to the end, and I noticed him lookin' at Annie. I was fannin' her and tryin' to keep her



"I knew what she was thinkin'."

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