

LISA LENA:

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN OUTCAST.

CHAPTER VIII.

A NEW HOME.

On I plodded slowly, my heart getting stronger as I felt myself getting farther and farther from Farmer Mason's. There was little to vary the journey. Now and then I met waggons and light buggies, and sometimes got a lift for a few miles and a meal at the end of it. Everyone was kind, but in those days there was in that district a thin population; the land was not first-rate, and the people were poor and depressed. It was astonishing how little interest they took in a child wandering along as I was doing. No one attempted to stop me.

It would be very difficult for me to convey to the reader an idea of the sensations with which I, a little girl of less than nine years of age, pursued this strange pilgrimage. I was hardy and ready, and experienced no fear during the whole two weeks of my wanderings except once from a drunken Irishman who allowed me to put up one night in his cabin, but who, I am convinced, never meant me any harm. I struggled along, sometimes singing, sometimes crying, often hungry and weary, but always resolutely determined to get as far as possible from Farmer Mason's. I really had no fixed plan. When I should pull up I did not know. There was a sort of desperate submission to fate and waiting on Providence which sustained me from day to day. If I went to sleep at night out in the open I felt no fear, and though I suffered sometimes the pangs of hunger I had no idea of going back again to my so-called guardians.

I had gone on thus, I say, for about a fortnight, when one day I struck the railway. It at once occurred to me that here was a means of getting further away, and reflecting on the matter, I resolved to walk along till I reached a depot, and try and get on a train going towards Alabama. Of course, I had a very vague idea of geography and direction. Along the route of the railway on either side I found more people had settled than in the country through which I had been wandering. But exposure, fatigue and hunger had told on me, and I was scarcely able to drag myself along. I struggled on. I had had nothing to eat for twenty-four hours except some green corn, and I had been unlucky in finding water. Two trains thundered past me as I panted on, but though I waved my sun-bonnet to the conductor and engine-drivers they either never saw me or disregarded my signals.

Night began to fall. It was summer time, and nearly nine o'clock. I saw on the right a low, long house, with out-buildings. With great difficulty I managed to struggle to it. It was quite dark when I got there, and, overcome with weariness and famine, I fell upon the door-step and went to sleep. I had not been there long when I was rudely disturbed by a kick in the side and some heavy body falling over me, and by the outcry of a female voice. There was an immediate commotion, people were around me, and after lifting off the weight which was upon me they stood me up. I then saw what had happened. A big, strapping girl, coming out with a tub of dirty water, had tumbled over me. Her bare elbows were bleeding, and she was crying very energetically. The people asked me "What I was doing there?"

"Going to Alabama," I said. They laughed heartily. "Look here, miss," said a man who had come out, "don't play tricks with us. Who are you and where do you come from?" "I am Miss Bellamy, and I'm going to Alabama to find my mother."

"I think she's a little touched," said the man, pointing to his head. "Well, where did you come from last?" "I don't know. I came along the railway."

"Did you walk?" "Yes." "She looks as if she had walked fifty miles," said the girl, who had dried her eyes, pointing to the remains of my boots. I was certainly a pitiable object. My dress was torn and dirty, my stockings had long since grown black and gone to fragments, and there was little left of the boots but the uppers.

"Where have you walked from?" asked the man again. "A long way—more than two weeks." The man shook his head. "Well," he said, "I don't believe you. Are you hungry?" "I ain't had anything since night before last."

The little girl whose elbows I had scratched here cried out "Poor little thing," and ran into the kitchen. "You may come in," said the man, a little surlily, "but you must keep quiet. My mother's dying." And he went through the kitchen into an inner room.

The girl brought me into the kitchen, which was large and comfortable, and set me down opposite some milk and hoe-cake. As I eat I could hear the man's deep voice speaking very gently and the querulous tones of an old woman in the other room. The door was partly open. "She is a tramp, I guess," he said. "Mebbe a thief. Never mind, about her, mother."

"I was hungry, and he gave me meat," John, remember that. She may be telling the truth." Never mind, mother. She is getting something to eat. Keep quiet, mother. I went on eating. There was silence for a while. The big girl had washed her elbows with cold water, and now came and looked at me very good-naturedly. "Hungry?" she said.

"Yes." "Well, eat as much as you like. Did you fall asleep on the step?" "Yes, I was so tired and hungry." My mouth was full as I spoke. "Well, you nearly settled me, Miss," she said laughing. She had a round, good-natured face.

"I am very sorry," I said. "Let me kiss you." "No, thank you," she replied. "You're as black as a nigger and covered with dust. You must wash yourself first." "You're a furriner, I reckon." "No, I ain't; I'm from Alabama." "Oh! Nigger, perhaps?" "No!" I shouted in a rage. "Well, you look so. Your arms and neck are as brown as brown." I jumped from the chair and began to tear off my clothes.

"I'll show you," I said. Off went my dress. There was nothing under it but a little calico garment. I opened it at the breast, and showed her a milk-white skin. "O la!" she said, "how pretty your skin is. No, you ain't a nigger." At this moment the man put his head through the door, and looked much surprised, while I snatched up my dress and threw over my head. "Sissy!" he said to me gravely. "Mother says she must see you. Remember she is very ill, and say as little as may be, like a good girl. It ain't good for her to talk, but it's best to let her have her way."

He opened the door and I went into the room. It was not large, and on a low, small bed in the corner, propped up by pillows of a beautiful white and in a white cap was an old woman, looking very pale, but dignified and gentle. Her grey hair was parted smoothly under her cap (SEE FOURTH PAGE.)

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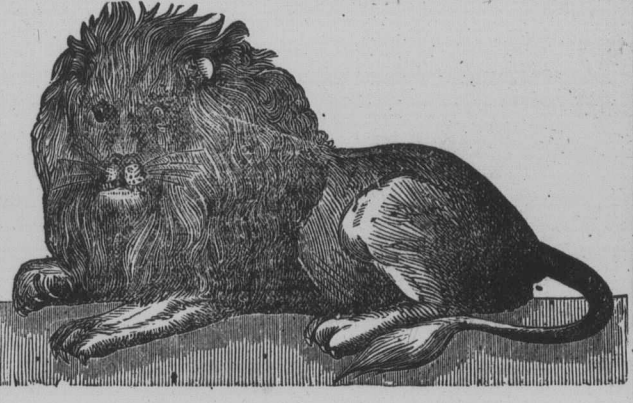
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