THE BLACK HAND

The teacher sat on Mrs. Garvin's front porch near the end where the Gothic-pointed willow hedge kept off the western sun in the summer and the blizzard winds in the winter. Away off eastward, on the level gray line of road, between the pale, yellowish-green wheat fields she saw a moving speck growing into the shape just below Peter's place three-quarters of a mile away. Presently Mrs. Gavin came out and sat on the porch, fanning herself vigorously with her apron. "My, but it is hot! You are the lucky one. All you have to do is to sit here on the porch when school is out, and pretty soon your term will be over, and then you can go away and won't have anything at all to do until fall."

"Oh," said the teacher, "nothing to do and no salary, and what about the summer school and the institute? There is no rest in these days."

The heat-flushed woman looked at the teacher in her cool shirt-waist and linen skirt, her glossy hair stirring with the movements of her big palm-leaf fan, with a sort of yearning expression that told plainly that Mrs. Garvin had her own ideas of that rest.

The teacher's eyes had wandered back to the road and centured on the little speck coming nearer and nearer, so curious in its outline as it grew larger, like unto neither man nor beast.

Presently Mrs. Gavin, following her gaze, said: "What can that be coming down the road from Peterses? It's just creeping along. It looks too big for a man and it isn't the shape of a horse, nor of any other creature belonging to these parts."

The teacher had formed the happy habit of allowing Mrs. Gavin the pleasure of her own discoveries. So she merely said: "That is so. It is a queer-looking object. What do you think it can be?"

"Well, I don't know," said Mrs. Garvin; "seeing you're the teacher, it seems to me you ought to know, if it's a queer beast of some kind. You have a whole book full of them in there."

The teacher shook her head and laughed a little by way of the easiest reply possible, and sat there, fanning and watching. Mrs. Garvin became so absorbed that she stood up to get a better view. "Sure," she said, "it's queer; I don't believe my eyes are deceiving me, but I never saw anything like it."

Nearer and nearer it came, down the highway, now covered with foot-deep dust—for there was a midsummer dry spell on—right in the face of the sun that had been blistering all day, and along a bare, unshaded road, none the cooler in the summer because in midwinter the snow lay man high and whirled over it in white clouds for months.

"I declare to goodness," said Mrs. Garvin, "I believe it is a woman." The teacher, too, sat up and looked almost excitedly at the figure that certainly moved with a looseness of outline that could come only from skirts swaying as she walked.

"She is carrying something on her head, that's what makes her look so queer," said Mrs. Garvin. "And a bag in each hand," she gasped.

"That's so," said the teacher with sized this time for Mrs. Garvin's benefit. Nearer and nearer the woman came, until the bright yellow of the 'kerchief on her head shone out under the pack like a gleam of light against the dark, coppery tan of her face.

In front of the drive turning in at Garvin's she hesitated, looking at their place and then along the road, where a little to the westward was the Gafiney farm.

"She has decided for us," said the teacher, as the woman came in slowly.

"I wonder what she wants?" said Mrs. Garvin. "She looks like one of them Eyetalian pedlars I have seen in the city, but I never saw one before on this road. I wonder where she is coming from. The nearest railroad stop east of us is Redbank, and that is twelve miles from here," and she looked over at the figure. "She surely couldn't have walked all that way with those things on her head and in her hands could she now?"

The teacher vouchsafed no explanation. She had heard some tales of robust womanhood in the Minnesota country—stories of women who worked in the fields with their husbands; of Bohemian women who grubbed out trees better than the men; of a woman who had carried her month-old baby five miles on foot to the hospital in town to visit her husband with a leg broken by a falling tree. Such stories had come to her to be traditions respected as possible, though quite out of the line of understanding of her own slim girlhood and intellectual associations; but now the sight of a woman who had walked twelve miles from Redbank on a day like this, loaded down like a pack-mule, was like something on the other side of a fence too high to look across. All sorts of things might be there, but the imagination had no basis on which to give them form.

A moment later the figure had reached the end of the lilac hedge and was standing over in the driveway, looking questioningly at the two women in the cool shade of the porch.

"Would you want to be buying anything of her, teacher?" Mrs. Garvin asked apologetically, as if seeking an excuse for herself. "I'd like to look at what she has, though I don't know whether I have any change to throw away."

"I may need needles and pins, and I do believe I ought to have some fresh ribbon; I feel that I ought to take something of her to give her a chance to sit down and take that pack off her head."

When Mrs. Garvin motioned the woman to come in, her face broke into a beatific smile and her step grew as springy as a young girl's hastening to meet her sweetheart. The teacher gazed at her in wondering admiration as she came over and deposited her two bags, and bending her head with a deft movement, slid her pack onto the porch.

"Sit down," said Mrs. Garvin, "woman alive; it makes my own feet ache to think how tired you must be;" and she shook her head a little deprecatingly and went on: "and where did you come from to-day?" The woman looked around uncomprehendingly. The teacher, used to putting her thoughts into simple language and few words, leaned forward and said with great distinctness, "Where—from—to-day?" Again the woman did not understand. "From what railroad station did you come to-day?" Again she looked blank. "What town to-day?" Then again that expansive smile broke over her face. "Redbank! Redbank!"

"So it was Redbank," exclaimed the teacher. "Think of it!"

"Think of it!" echoed Mrs. Garvin. "But she talks English well enough when she knows what she wants to say."

The teacher looked at the woman and smiled mistily, saying: "Maybe she is a Syrian, and all Syrians talk English well after they learn to speak it."

Mrs. Garvin turned approvingly to the teacher. "My, how much you know! If I had to remember all them names and places like you do, I'd surely have a headache."

The woman seemed to catch the idea and smiled. "Their own language is so hard," went on the teacher, "that it seems to give them a talent for languages."

The woman still seemed to feel the compliment and said: "Syrian ver' ver' hard," and nodded her head. All the while, mindful of business, she was steadily undoing her bundle, bringing out bright-colored silk handkerchiefs, bits of ribbons, celluloid combs, collar-buttons and cheap pins to catch the rural eye, with an assortment of needles and thread and tape and pins and other outfit for a good work-basket, so hard to keep in stock when there are no corner stores nearer than five or ten miles.

The teacher, with an impulse of generosity, began to select pins and needles and bits of ribbon far beyond her immediate use and up to the limits of her slender purse. The woman's smile grew broader and broader when Mrs. Garvin, too, not wishing to be outdone, hauled out a couple of aprons for herself and some aprons for the "good man."

"Why did you come to this country?" asked the teacher, sympathetically curious. The woman held up her hands with the ready gestures of the Orient. "My man dead fi' year, three children in Syria. Bring here, cost money, much money."

The teacher's eyes were fixed in fascination upon the woman. She thrilled as though she had suddenly seen as act in a great tragedy. Twelve miles a day with a pack she herself could not even lift, to keep three little ones in Syria and bring them at last to this country, on the profits of a few cents worth of needles, tape and so forth. Was there anything left in the world that was impossible to devotion? Her eyes moistened, and the woman, with the sense of human fellowship, which is beyond race and beyond language, suddenly put out her brown hand and patted the girl's slim, white one. The teacher rose quickly to hide more tears and hurried to her room to get her purse. By the time she came back with the change, Mrs. Garvin was packing up her wares. The teacher looked at Mrs. Garvin pleadingly. "Oh, where is she going for the night?"

Mrs. Garvin's face took a puzzled, hesitating look. "Sure, I don't know; I never thought of that till this minute."

"I think she would be glad to sleep out in the hay. It's nice and clean. She wouldn't even ask a place in the house," suggested the teacher, eagerly.

"Oh, I wouldn't have her do that; if I had her stay at all she could sleep on the lounge in the sitting-room. I didn't suppose Pat would mind, although he don't like the looks of them furriners, men nor women."

"Well, if he does, play she is my company and put it on me."

"All right," said Mrs. Garvin, cheerfully, and she motioned the woman to put down her pack. At first the pedlar did not seem to understand what was meant, but when she realized that she was to stay the night in this pleasant place, she bent forward and kissed Mrs. Garvin's hand. "Oh, now! what would she be doing that for? Sure I am not used to that sort of thing," and she blushed to the roots of her hair.

The teacher herself led the woman around to the bench beside the pump in the back of the house, where the family performed most of their ablutions in the summer time, thus saving both housework and porcelain. Then she left her to go and straighten her own hair and lend Mrs. Garvin a hand at setting the table to keep her in good humor in return for the extra trouble she was to have.

In the morning when the teacher appeared for her breakfast, her first question was: "Where is our guest?"

"Oh! sure," said Mrs. Garvin, "she's been on the way since five o'clock, and is nearly in Goodhue County by this time. She is not like some people I know about getting up."

The teacher thoughtfully stirred the sugar into her coffee and made no remark at this comment.

"She wouldn't eat any breakfast either, only a cup of coffee and a bit of dry bread; and look at these! She has given everybody in the house something, even you. There is a red and white handkerchief for that boy Wenzel," said Mrs. Garvin. "When she looked at that black-eyed Bohemian she smiled, and I suppose she thought he was one of her own kind. They ought to understand each other, for the talk of one of them is about as bad as that of the other. Then there are some collar-buttons for Pat, which he is always needing, and a ribbon for Esperanza."

The teacher always suppressed a smile when Mrs. Garvin brought out Esperanza in that unctuous way. It was a sign of exceeding good humor. At times less cheerful, she was likely to shorten it into Essie, and put the rest of her breath into some such term as "ye little omadhaun."

"And here is another bit of ribbon for you." The teacher looked at the ribbon with a grateful smile and a thought of the gauge of her taste which gave her a piece of dark blue ribbon instead of the impossible pink that had been left for the little girl.

"I hardly deserve this, for I did not do anything for her," she said. "It was very good of you to keep her."

"There isn't every one around here that would do it, and if I do say it myself," said Mrs. Garvin. "If she had gone on to the next house, to Gaffney's, she would not have been kept all night."

"I suppose her guardian angel is watching over her."

"Sure, she's religious enough. Not a bite would she eat until she had blessed herself and said her prayers, just like the rest of us, and better, I suppose. But," said Mrs. Garvin, "I'd never turn away a woman like that anyway, if I thought she hadn't any other place to stay. The likes of her always make me think of a story my mother used to tell. It may seem queer to you, for I don't suppose you've ever heard the stories the old people tell about fairies and the spells and the likes in Ireland. I don't know much about them myself, for you know I was raised in this country. There was an old woman—I don't believe I could tell the story just the way my mother used to, though I heard her tell it over and over again; those old folks were wonderful for remembering. Why, my mother could tell all the litanies in the prayer-book by heart—"

The teacher gently brought Mrs. Garvin back to the track: "Well, what about the old woman?"

"Well, once upon a time in a town in Ireland there was a well-to-do farmer. His wife was a good housekeeper and all that, but she was a little near and close about things, and there was a good deal of talk that the girls and the men on the place did not have any more to eat than they ought to have. One day there was an old woman came down the road, and she was that weary she could hardly stand. She turned in and asked the farmer's wife herself to give her a drink of milk. But herself said she didn't have any to spare. The old woman walked on down the road a little, and then she came back and asked if she could not have even a drink of buttermilk, she had seen that there was churning on the place that day, and she thought that most of the buttermilk would be going to the pigs anyway. And the wife told her 'No' again. The old woman then asked if she could sit on the porch and rest, but the wife would not let her; but she told her to get out and be gone, or she would set the dogs on her, saying this was no place for harboring beggars and tramps."

"Tramps?" said the teacher, her pedagogic sense of the fitness of words getting ahead of her for the moment. "Did they have tramps in Ireland, too?"

"Well, maybe she didn't say tramps," said Mrs. Garvin, a little tartly, "but something like that. Well, with that the old woman turned and gave the wife a long look and put up her hand in her pocket and pulled out a little black thing and threw it at the wife, but no matter how much the farmer's wife looked, when the woman was gone, she could not find the little black thing, and she had a curiosity to know what it could be. After a bit, when she went out into the dairy to get a drink herself, she saw there was a little black thing in the milk. She tried to get it out, but no matter how she tried it kept slipping away from her. At last she thought as she was thirsty she would drink anyway, and would feel the thing if it came against her lips, and she would stop and get it out. So she took a drink, but no sooner did she take the milk in her mouth than she felt something hard slipping down her throat. Then she looked for the black thing, but it was not in the milk any more. Then she ran into the house and in a little while she began to feel dreadfully sick. Her face and her hands and then her whole body began to swell until her body was twice its natural size. They sent for the doctor as fast as they could, but not a bit of good could he do her. Then she sent for the priest. The priest looked at the woman and said: 'It looks to me like something more than sickness,' and he says, 'What have you been doing that was wrong to man, woman or child?' And then the woman raised herself and told about the old beggar woman she had refused the drink of milk.

"'Well, the hardness of your heart is being punished,' said the priest, and he took some holy water and sprinkled the woman with it and prayed over her. Then he told them to put her in a hot bath. By and by the woman got better and the swelling went down out of her body and her face, and then the blackness went out of her body, too, except of her right hand. Nothing would take it out of that hand. Then she sent for the priest again. He came and he said: 'That is a sign the good Lord has left on you, showing that you should be kind to the poor and to the stranger that comes to your door asking for a sup of that of which you have plenty and to spare.'

"And so it was that the woman's right hand stayed black, though she lived a long life afterward. But never a person came to her door and was turned away; and if she heard of any one out of her way in want of food or fire she went to them herself. So when she came to die, from all the towns around came the poor, that people had never seen before, and all of them fell down and cried and prayed for her soul and kissed her hand. And when the tears of the poor fell on her hand, little by little it grew whiter, and at last it was white as snow."

"The tears of the poor had washed away the stain?" asked the teacher.

"Yes," said Mrs. Garvin, "that's the way my mother said it was; and," she added, "I do be thinking when I see a woman like that old Eyetalianor what do you call her? Syrian? Oh, yes, maybe there's a black spot on me somewhere, and it would be good to have a few prayers and tears of the poor to wash away the blackness of it when I am dead."

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