

GRACE LIVINGSTON HILL

Beginning
at
Jerusalem



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BEGINNING AT JERUSALEM.

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They had never heard of a missionary society, either of them, until the day before, when Ransom came trudging through the snow drifts from the village post-office four miles away and brought a letter from their Cousin Fannie. They had read it eagerly and wished it three times as long, for Fannie always wrote such interesting letters. She had told all about her home and their new church, and the new minister's wife, who had organized a boys' and girls' mission band; and how they were having such delightful meetings, learning all about the mission schools and sewing things to send to them; and how her brother made little things with his scroll-saw, brackets and clock frames and dolls' furniture, and sold them to get money for his share, and all the others were doing something just as nice.

“My!” said Ruth, wistfully, looking up from the absorbing letter at last. “Wouldn't it be just nice if we could belong to a

mission band somewhere and do things like that? I'd enjoy doing it, wouldn't you? But there's no use trying to do any good for anyone out here."

"I suppose there must be ways," said Ransom, "if we only knew them. Let's think about it." Then he went whistling to pump for a pan of fresh water for his mother, the subject was dismissed for a time.

But this morning it had come back to them again. Ruth was clearing off the breakfast table, and Ransom was helping fix up the kitchen, so she would be the sooner through and ready to go out coasting, for the hill was in prime order, and they were anxious to get to it. Mother and father had been suddenly sent for the night before, to go twelve miles out in the country to see a very sick friend, and they had climbed into the old sleigh in the early gray of the morning and gone, not expecting to return until late in the evening, so the two were alone. Perhaps there was a little feeling of desolateness in having mother and father gone for so long, mingled with the pleasure of very little to do but enjoy themselves. They were fourteen and fifteen years old, and bright and strong, and so full of energy that they could hardly find enough to keep them busy.

"It's no use," Ransom was saying, as he clumsily brushed the chips away from the stove hearth. "There's no missionary work we can do away out here in the snow banks. When the weather gets better, and they can rebuild the burnt-down school house, and we get back to school, we might be able to get up a mission band, but

there isn't much prospect of that for one while," and he paused by the window and looked out on the still deep drifts of snow, and the white sky which was dropping more flakes all the time, slowly and softly, as if it could not bear to stop.

Suddenly his eye caught something away down the hill road.

"Look here, Ruth!" he called to his sister, who had gone to the pantry. "Somebody's coming up the hill road."

Ruth dropped everything and came, for travelers were not frequent at that time of year.

"It's a wagon, as sure as I live!" exclaimed Ransom. "Why doesn't the man get runners? Why, he'll kill that horse!"

The wagon toiled slowly and painfully up, until it was near enough for the children to hear the creaking of the wheels.

"It looks like a load of furniture," said Ruth. "It couldn't be the new folks are going to live in our old house, could it? Father said they would hardly be here until the cold weather was broken, he thought."

"I shouldn't wonder if that's who it is," said Ransom. "You know the man said they were waiting for his wife to get well so they could move her. There are three children on that front seat with the man, and they look almost frozen to death. It's a bad day to move."

"I should think so!" exclaimed Ruth, as she opened the door and shivered a little, "but the hill will be delightful. We must hurry and get out to it."

But in spite of her eagerness for the hill, she stood still

watching the team as it came slowly towards their gate and paused. A weary looking man leaned forward a moment, and scanned the faces of the brother and sister who stood in the door.

“Is your pa and ma there?” he asked, in a wistful voice.

“No, have gone away and won’t be back till late tonight,” responded Ransom.

The man’s face fell and he leaned back with a helpless air, as if his last hope was gone, and looked off into the snowy distance to see if some thought would not come to his tired, vacant mind.

The little girl by his side began to cry, a feeble fretful sort of wail that did not seem to expect to be comforted. That roused the man.

“I’m sure I don’t know what to do,” he said. “I’ll have to leave these children here and these things, and go back for my wife and the other boxes before nightfall. She’s sick, and the house we thought to stay in till spring burned down last evenin’, There wasn’t no way but to come, cold as ’tis, and I must get *her* over here before night. She can’t stand it where she is, just a bed on the floor in the kitchen, right under foot, where there’s a house full. I thought maybe your ma would let the little ’uns stay by her and give ’em a bite to eat till I come back tonight; but if she ain’t here maybe you won’t know what to do with ’em. I’m sure I don’t know what to do.”

“Bring them right in here,” said Ruth in a motherly way. “Of course I’ll take care of them. Mustn’t he, Ransom?”

“Of course,” said her brother, speaking up with decision. “I’ll

come out and help bring them in. Are you going to unload over at the house before you go back?"

"Yes, I'll just dump things out and get back, for it's a good piece and the horse'll have to rest to get back tonight. We started before daybreak this morning."

"I'll go over and help him to unload," he said to Ruth as he landed the third young stranger on the kitchen steps, "and say—if you could get him a cup of coffee I expect he'd like it. He started early, he says, and it'll be after dinner time before he gets any."

"Of course," said Ruth, briskly. This was a case in which her energy could have full play.

In less than two minutes she had the fire roaring away in the old cook stove and was busying herself in making coffee, and frying some Indian mush and a bit of pork left from breakfast. "There's some buckwheat batter mother said might be thrown away; it wouldn't be good for another day, but I'll just bake it up now for him," she said to herself. The three children sat still by the fire thawing out their poor frozen little hands and feet, and watching with wondering eyes these savory preparations.

Meantime Ransom was bringing down thanks upon his head by the help he was giving unloading. With two pairs of hands it did not take long to transfer the small load of furniture from the wagon to the house.

"What are you going to do tonight when you come back? Where will you put your wife?" asked Ransom, as he looked over the desolate heaps of furniture in the cold bare house.

“Oh,” said the man, with a sigh, “I reckon we’ll get along. We’re only too thankful we didn’t lose our things. The neighbors helped us and was awful kind. I reckon I can put up a stove here when I come back and we’ll make out to do till morning,” and he hurried out to his wagon.

“Wait,” said Ransom. “I’ll give your horse a little lunch while you go into the house and get a cup of coffee. Ruth said she’d have it ready for you.” And without waiting for the man’s blessings he led the old horse to the barn.

It was marvelous how much fried mush and buckwheat cakes the father and three children managed to dispose of. Ruth quite enjoyed baking cakes and seeing them disappear. But at last the appetite of each was satisfied and the father started on his way back to Poke Run.

“Now what shall we do next?” asked Ruth, with eager face and bright eyes as she rushed through the washing of the unusually large number of breakfast dishes. “Isn’t this more fun than sledding?”

“There’s more work cut out for us yet,” said Ransom, soberly, “if we’re willing to do it, and I guess we’ll have to be or we’ll be ashamed of ourselves.”

“What? A good scrubbing?” asked Ruth, still gleefully, and with a merry twinkle at the three children who were huddled into a sleepy heap on the old lounge. “I am going at that just as soon as these dishes are done.”

“No. I wasn’t thinking of them. You’d better let them sleep

for a while and let their faces go dirty until we get more important matters off our hands. I thought this was rather fun at first, to happen when father and mother are gone, but I begin to wish they were here now to tell us what to do, or to do it and let us help. What are those folks going to do tonight when that man gets back with his sick wife? Where will they sleep? It's as cold as a barn over at their house, and things scattered high and low and nothing in the right place anywhere. We can't take them all in here, can we, for several days, until they get settled? There isn't any room."

"No," said Ruth, rather perplexed, "because mother said they might bring Aunt Hetty and Cousin Will back with them. Mother would not like to have strangers in her bed, either, unless there was no other way to do, you know. Couldn't we make it look a little comfortable over there for them?" She nodded her head doubtfully in the direction of the little old farmhouse which used to be their own home, before this newer and larger one was built.

"That's what I was thinking," answered Ransom, brightening. "Do you think you could help? I wouldn't know how to go to work. But I could do all the hard work, only we'd have to give up the coasting. Would you mind?"

"Coasting! What's coasting?" said Ruth, with a toss of her head. "Only are you sure, perfectly sure, the man won't think we are meddling with his things? What would mother say to it, I wonder?"

"Yes, I'm sure, for he looked so worried when he told me he could put up the stove after he got back that I know he'd be real

glad. I would have told him I would do it, only I thought I'd ask you first."

"All right. Let's go to work then. We'll have to work hard to get things through. See, those children are fast asleep, bless their hearts. Bring those old picture books of ours and put near them with these cookies, so if they wake up they won't cry. Now, I'm ready!" said Ruth, as she tied on her old red hood and put a big apron over her jacket.

When Ruth and her brother reached the little lonely house they began their self-imposed task with quiet zest.

"What's to be done first? Put up the stove?" said Ransom.

"Yes—or no. I'd spread down the carpet first if there is one to spread. I'm glad the house isn't large, so we can't have much doubt as to where things go. At least, it won't be any harder for them to change the things after we have fixed them than to fix them in the first place, and I'm sure they'd rather have a little comfort the first night, even if things aren't just as they would like them."

Ransom was doubtful about the carpet. "Are you sure that is necessary?" he asked. "There are other things they'll need more."

"Now, Ransom Warder, that's just like a boy. I never can make a room look anything like cozy without something on the floor, and it will keep their feet warm besides. Here's an old rag one, just the thing. It looks as if it would just fit this kitchen, too, and as there isn't any parlor or dining-room in the house, they certainly won't put it anywhere else."

After a few minutes of shaking and planning, the rag carpet was spread down, and then Ransom went about putting up the cook stove. The house was an old-fashioned one with a large room which was used for kitchen, parlor and dining-room in one. The two rooms adjoining were small bedrooms, and at the back was a roomy woodshed. There was only an attic upstairs, so, as Ruth had said, there was little choice as to where to put the furniture.

While Ransom was putting up the stove and building the fire, his sister was looking over the heaps of things scattered about, and deciding what to do with them. She found a smaller carpet which would do for one of the bedrooms and a separate breadth she could spread for a rug in the other. The two beds would be easily set up, and there was a rickety cradle and several other pieces of bedroom furniture. Then she came upon a barrel of dishes.

“These will all have to be washed, Ransom,” she said as she inspected them. “They’re covered with straw and dust and some are blackened with smoke. They must have been through the fire. You’d better get some kettles of water and put them to heating the first thing.”

They worked hard all the morning, which somehow seemed very short. After the dinner Ruth took the children with her to their now warm and comparatively pleasant new home. She found that the oldest one could give a little valuable information about where to find sheets and other bedding, and so they worked again.

It was marvelous how much they accomplished in that one short day. To be sure, they were not over particular in arranging

for there was need of haste, but by four o'clock in the afternoon things really wore an air of comfort. The two bedrooms were entirely habitable, and somewhat warmed from the bright kitchen fire. A lamp had been found and cleaned and filled, and was on the kitchen table ready to light.

“Now for the extras,” said Ransom, as he came in from the home kitchen armed with the stove blacking and brush, and soon the old rusty stove shone until it hardly knew itself. Ruth put potatoes and turnips and cabbages cooking, reasoning that the weary, hungry people would be glad of anything they could get. Then she foraged in their own storehouse that there might be a bountiful meal set forth for the travelers. She brought a clean coarse tablecloth from home, as there seemed to be none among the baggage, and set the table with shining dishes.

As the night began to come on the lamp was lighted and put in the window, where it would shine brightly down the dark hill road. Ruth made some delicate toast and tea for the invalid, and the three children were put in as neat array as was possible.

The potatoes were undeniably done and the coffee was sending a delicious fragrance into the room when Ransom, at the window, at last saw the black speck which presently developed into the horse and wagon of the travelers.

“Why, there must be some mistake!” said Mr. Barker, as he halted before his new home. “I ain't got the wrong house, have I? But the first one's dark and there's a light in here. I don't understand it.”

He walked up to the door doubtfully, and was about to knock when Ransom flung it wide open and let a flood of light out.

“Why! I must have made a mistake,” began the bewildered man again, rubbing his hand across his eyes, and staring about on the familiar objects in their new setting, but Ransom stopped him by saying;

“It’s all right. Where is your wife? Shall I help you bring her in?” And he bounded past him into the snow, across the nicely made path he had just finished a few minutes before.

It no use to try to tell how surprised and dazed and pleased they all were, nor how Mrs. Barker broke down and cried when she was brought in and put in the big rocking chair and looked about her. Ruth and Ransom slipped away in the midst of the happy exclamations and ran swiftly to their own deserted house.

“Let’s get some supper, and go right to bed,” said Ruth “Father and mother told us not to sit up for them, and I’m just as tired as I can be. But aren’t you glad we did it? I was so afraid the last hour or two that perhaps they wouldn’t like it after all. But it just paid for it all to see that man’s dazed face and the tears in the woman’s eyes. Wasn’t it fun? I never enjoyed anything so much in my life.”

Just before they went to bed Ransom took up the old Bible from its shelf.

“Look here, Ruth; see what verse I opened to? Isn’t it strange? A kind of blessing from God on our day, isn’t it?”

And he read: “Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me.”

“So then we were doing some real missionary work for Him, and it pleased Him,” said Ruth softly, after a pause, “and we said this morning that there wasn’t any work for us out here. I shouldn’t wonder but he would send us something to do for Him every day if we would ask him. Perhaps nothing as big as this, but something for Him, you know.”

Said Ransom, “Ruth, let’s ask Him.”



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