

The Man on the Train

L. M. Montgomery

When the telegram came from William George, Grandma Sheldon was all alone with Cyrus and Louise. And Cyrus and Louise, aged respectively twelve and eleven, were not very much good, Grandma thought, when it came to advising what was to be done. Grandma was “all in a flutter, dear, oh dear,” as she said.

The telegram said that Delia, William George’s wife, was seriously ill down at Green Village, and William George wanted Samuel to bring Grandma down immediately. Delia had always thought there was nobody like Grandma when it came to nursing sick folks.

But Samuel and his wife were both away—had been away for two days and intended to be away for five more. They had driven to Sinclair, twenty miles away, to visit with Mrs. Samuel’s folks for a week.

“Dear, oh dear, what shall I do?” said Grandma.

“Go right to Green Village on the evening train,” said Cyrus briskly.

“Dear, oh dear, and leave you two alone!” cried Grandma.

“Louise and I will do very well until tomorrow,” said Cyrus sturdily. “We will send word to Sinclair by today’s mail, and Father and Mother will be home by tomorrow night.”

“But I never was on the cars in my life,” protested Grandma nervously. “I’m—I’m so frightened to start alone. And you never know what kind of people you may meet on the train.”

“You’ll be all right, Grandma. I’ll drive you to the station, get you your ticket, and put you on the train. Then you’ll have nothing to do until the train gets to Green Village. I’ll send a telegram to Uncle William George to meet you.”

“I shall fall and break my neck getting off the train,” said Grandma pessimistically. But she was wondering at the same time whether she had better take the black valise or the yellow, and whether William George would be likely to have plenty of flaxseed in the house.

It was six miles to the station, and Cyrus drove Grandma over in time to catch a train that reached Green Village at nine o’clock.

“Dear, oh dear,” said Grandma, “what if William George’s folks ain’t there to meet me? It’s all

very well, Cyrus, to say that they will be there, but you don't know. And it's all very well to say not to be nervous because everything will be all right. If you were seventy-five years old and had never set foot on the cars in your life you'd be nervous too, and you can't be sure that everything will be all right. You never know what sort of people you'll meet on the train. I may get on the wrong train or lose my ticket or get carried past Green Village or get my pocket picked. Well, no, I won't do that, for not one cent will I carry with me. You shall take back home all the money you don't need to get my ticket. Then I shall be easier in my mind. Dear, oh dear, if it wasn't that Delia is so seriously ill I wouldn't go one step."

"Oh, you'll be all right, Grandma," assured Cyrus.

He got Grandma's ticket for her and Grandma tied it up in the corner of her handkerchief. Then the train came in and Grandma, clinging closely to Cyrus, was put on it. Cyrus found a comfortable seat for her and shook hands cheerily.

"Good-bye, Grandma. Don't be frightened. Here's the *Weekly Argus*. I got it at the store. You may like to look over it."

Then Cyrus was gone, and in a minute the station house and platform began to glide away.

Dear, oh dear, what has happened to it? thought Grandma in dismay. The next moment she exclaimed aloud, "Why, it's us that's moving, not it!"

Some of the passengers smiled pleasantly at Grandma. She was the variety of old lady at which people do smile pleasantly; a grandma with round, pink cheeks, soft, brown eyes, and lovely snow-white curls is a nice person to look at wherever she is found.

After a while Grandma, to her amazement, discovered that she liked riding on the cars. It was not at all the disagreeable experience she had expected it to be. Why, she was just as comfortable as if she were in her own rocking chair at home! And there was such a lot of people to look at, and many of the ladies had such beautiful dresses and hats. After all, the people you met on a train, thought Grandma, are surprisingly like the people you meet off it. If it had not been for wondering how she would get off at Green Village, Grandma would have enjoyed herself thoroughly.

Four or five stations farther on the train halted at a lonely-looking place consisting of the station house and a barn, surrounded by scrub woods and blueberry barrens. One passenger got on and, finding only one vacant seat in the crowded car, sat right down beside Grandma Sheldon.

Grandma Sheldon held her breath while she looked him over. Was he a pickpocket? He didn't appear like one, but you can never be sure of the people you meet on the train.

Grandma remembered with a sigh of thankfulness that she had no money.

Besides, he seemed really very respectable and harmless. He was quietly dressed in a suit of dark-blue serge with a black overcoat. He wore his hat well down on his forehead and was clean shaven. His hair was very black, but his eyes were blue—nice eyes, Grandma thought. She always felt great confidence in a man who had bright, open, blue eyes. Grandpa Sheldon, who had died so long ago, four years after their marriage, had had bright blue eyes.

To be sure, he had fair hair, reflected Grandma. It's real odd to see such black hair with such light blue eyes. Well, he's real nice looking, and I don't believe there's a mite of harm in him.

The early autumn night had now fallen and Grandma could not amuse herself by watching the scenery. She bethought herself of the paper Cyrus had given her and took it out of her basket. It was an old weekly a fortnight back. On the first page was a long account of a murder case with scare heads, and into this Grandma plunged eagerly. Sweet old Grandma Sheldon, who would not have harmed a fly and hated to see even a mousetrap set, simply revelled in the newspaper accounts of murders. And the more shocking and cold-blooded they were, the more eagerly did Grandma read of them.

This murder story was particularly good from Grandma's point of view; it was full of "thrills." A man had been shot down, apparently in cold blood, and his supposed murderer was still at large and had eluded all the efforts of justice to capture him. His name was Mark Hartwell, and he was described as a tall, fair man, with full auburn beard and curly, light hair.

"What a shocking thing!" said Grandma aloud.

Her companion looked at her with a kindly, amused smile.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Why, this murder at Charlotteville," answered Grandma, forgetting, in her excitement, that it was not safe to talk to people you meet on the train. "It just makes my blood run cold to read about it. And to think that the man who did it is still around the country somewhere—plotting other murders, I haven't a doubt. What is the good of the police?"

"They're dull fellows," agreed the dark man.

"But I don't envy that man his conscience," said Grandma solemnly—and somewhat inconsistently, in view of her statement about the other murders that were being plotted.

“What must a man feel like who has the blood of a fellow creature on his hands? Depend upon it, his punishment has begun already, caught or not.”

“That is true,” said the dark man quietly.

“Such a good-looking man too,” said Grandma, looking wistfully at the murderer’s picture. “It doesn’t seem possible that he can have killed anybody. But the paper says there isn’t a doubt.”

“He is probably guilty,” said the dark man, “but nothing is known of his provocation. The affair may not have been so cold-blooded as the accounts state. Those newspaper fellows never err on the side of undercolouring.”

“I really think,” said Grandma slowly, “that I would like to see a murderer—just one. Whenever I say anything like that, Adelaide—Adelaide is Samuel’s wife—looks at me as if she thought there was something wrong about me. And perhaps there is, but I do, all the same. When I was a little girl, there was a man in our settlement who was suspected of poisoning his wife. She died very suddenly. I used to look at him with such interest. But it wasn’t satisfactory, because you could never be sure whether he was really guilty or not. I never could believe that he was, because he was such a nice man in some ways and so good and kind to children. I don’t believe a man who was bad enough to poison his wife could have any good in him.”

“Perhaps not,” agreed the dark man. He had absent-mindedly folded up Grandma’s old copy of the *Argus* and put it in his pocket. Grandma did not like to ask him for it, although she would have liked to see if there were any more murder stories in it. Besides, just at that moment the conductor came around for tickets.

Grandma looked in the basket for her handkerchief. It was not there. She looked on the floor and on the seat and under the seat. It was not there. She stood up and shook herself—still no handkerchief.

“Dear, oh dear,” exclaimed Grandma wildly, “I’ve lost my ticket—I always knew I would—I told Cyrus I would! Oh, where can it be?”

The conductor scowled unsympathetically. The dark man got up and helped Grandma search, but no ticket was to be found.

“You’ll have to pay the money then, and something extra,” said the conductor gruffly.

“I can’t—I haven’t a cent of money,” wailed Grandma. “I gave it all to Cyrus because I was afraid my pocket would be picked. Oh, what shall I do?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make it all right,” said the dark man. He took out his pocketbook and handed the conductor a bill. That functionary grumblingly made the change and marched onward, while Grandma, pale with excitement and relief, sank back into her seat.

“I can’t tell you how much I am obliged to you, sir,” she said tremulously. “I don’t know what I should have done. Would he have put me off right here in the snow?”

“I hardly think he would have gone to such lengths,” said the dark man with a smile. “But he’s a cranky, disobliging fellow enough—I know him of old. And you must not feel overly grateful to me. I am glad of the opportunity to help you. I had an old grandmother myself once,” he added with a sigh.

“You must give me your name and address, of course,” said Grandma, “and my son—Samuel Sheldon of Midverne—will see that the money is returned to you. Well, this is a lesson to me! I’ll never trust myself on a train again, and all I wish is that I was safely off this one. This fuss has worked my nerves all up again.”

“Don’t worry, Grandma. I’ll see you safely off the train when we get to Green Village.”

“Will you, though? Will you, now?” said Grandma eagerly. “I’ll be real easy in my mind, then,” she added with a returning smile. “I feel as if I could trust you for anything—and I’m a real suspicious person too.”

They had a long talk after that—or, rather, Grandma talked and the dark man listened and smiled. She told him all about William George and Delia and their baby and about Samuel and Adelaide and Cyrus and Louise and the three cats and the parrot. He seemed to enjoy her accounts of them too.

When they reached Green Village station he gathered up Grandma’s parcels and helped her tenderly off the train.

“Anybody here to meet Mrs. Sheldon?” he asked of the station master.

The latter shook his head. “Don’t think so. Haven’t seen anybody here to meet anybody tonight.”

“Dear, oh dear,” said poor Grandma. “This is just what I expected. They’ve never got Cyrus’s telegram. Well, I might have known it. What shall I do?”

“How far is it to your son’s?” asked the dark man.

“Only half a mile—just over the hill there. But I’ll never get there alone this dark night.”

“Of course not. But I’ll go with you. The road is good—we’ll do finely.”

“But that train won’t wait for you,” gasped Grandma, half in protest.

“It doesn’t matter. The Starmont freight passes here in half an hour and I’ll go on her. Come along, Grandma.”

“Oh, but you’re good,” said Grandma. “Some woman is proud to have you for a son.”

The man did not answer. He had not answered any of the personal remarks Grandma had made to him in her conversation.

They were not long in reaching William George Sheldon’s house, for the village road was good and Grandma was smart on her feet. She was welcomed with eagerness and surprise.

“To think that there was no one to meet you!” exclaimed William George. “But I never dreamed of your coming by train, knowing how you were set against it. Telegram? No, I got no telegram. S’pose Cyrus forgot to send it. I’m most heartily obliged to you, sir, for looking after my mother so kindly.”

“It was a pleasure,” said the dark man courteously. He had taken off his hat, and they saw a curious scar, shaped like a large, red butterfly, high up on his forehead under his hair. “I am delighted to have been of any assistance to her.”

He would not wait for supper—the next train would be in and he must not miss it.

“There are people looking for me,” he said with his curious smile. “They will be much disappointed if they do not find me.”

He had gone, and the whistle of the Starmont freight had blown before Grandma remembered that he had not given her his name and address.

“Dear, oh dear, how are we ever going to send that money to him?” she exclaimed. “And he so nice and goodhearted!”

Grandma worried over this for a week in the intervals of looking after Delia. One day William George came in with a large city daily in his hands. He looked curiously at Grandma and then showed her the front-page picture of a man, clean-shaven, with an oddly shaped scar high up on his forehead.

“Did you ever see that man, Mother?” he asked.

“Of course I did,” said Grandma excitedly. “Why, it’s the man I met on the train. Who is he? What is his name? Now, we’ll know where to send—”

“That is Mark Hartwell, who shot Amos Gray at Charlotteville three weeks ago,” said William George quietly.

Grandma looked at him blankly for a moment.

“It couldn’t be,” she gasped at last. “That man a murderer! I’ll never believe it!”

“It’s true enough, Mother. The whole story is here. He had shaved his beard and dyed his hair and came near getting clear out of the country. They were on his trail the day he came down in the train with you and lost it because of his getting off to bring you here. His disguise was so perfect that there was little fear of his being recognized so long as he hid that scar. But it was seen in Montreal and he was run to earth there. He has made a full confession.”

“I don’t care,” cried Grandma valiantly. “I’ll never believe he was all bad—a man who would do what he did for a poor old woman like me, when he was flying for his life too. No, no, there was good in him even if he did kill that man. And I’m sure he must feel terrible over it.”

In this view Grandma persisted. She never would say or listen to a word against Mark Hartwell, and she had only pity for him whom everyone else condemned. With her own trembling hands she wrote him a letter to accompany the money Samuel sent before Hartwell was taken to the penitentiary for life. She thanked him again for his kindness to her and assured him that she knew he was sorry for what he had done and that she would pray for him every night of her life. Mark Hartwell had been hard and defiant enough, but the prison officials told that he cried like a child over Grandma Sheldon’s little letter.

“There’s nobody all bad,” says Grandma when she relates the story. “I used to believe a murderer must be, but I know better now. I think of that poor man often and often. He was so kind and gentle to me—he must have been a good boy once. I write him a letter every Christmas and I send him tracts and papers. He’s my own little charity. But I’ve never been on the cars since and I never will be again. You never can tell what will happen to you or what sort of people you’ll meet if you trust yourself on a train.”

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