

LADDIE

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Laddie by Evelyn Whitaker

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EVELYN WHITAKER

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By the author of
"Miss Toosey's Mission"



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CHAPTER I.

"THIRD-CLASS forward! Here you are, mum. Plenty of room this way! Now then! that ain't third, that's first. Come, look alive! All right behind there?"

Doors bang; a whistle; and the train moves off.

The guard had thrust into a third-class carriage, already nearly full, a bandbox with a blue spotted handkerchief round it, and a bunch of Michaelmas daisies, southernwood, and rosemary tucked under the knot at the top; a marketing-basket, one flap of which was raised by a rosy-cheeked apple emitting a powerful smell; a bundle done up in a handkerchief of the same pattern as that round the bandbox, only bright yellow; a large cotton umbrella of a pale green color, with a decided waist to it; and a pair of pattens! Anything else? Oh, yes, of course! there was an old woman who belonged to the things; but she was so small and frightened and overwhelmed that she appeared quite a trifle beside her belongings, and might easily have been overlooked altogether. She re-

mained just where the guard had pushed her, standing in the carriage, clutching as many of her things as she could keep hold of, and being jerked by the motion of the train, now against a burly bricklayer, and now against his red-faced wife who sat opposite; while her dazzled, blinking eyes followed the hedges and banks that whirled past, and her breath came with a catch and a gasp every time a bridge crossed the line, as if it were a wave coming over her. Her fellow-travellers watched her, in silence at first, having rather resented her entrance, as the carriage was already sufficiently full; but when a sudden lurch of the train sent her violently forward against a woman, from whom she carromed off against the bricklayer, and flattened her drawn black-satin bonnet out of all shape, the man found his tongue, which was a kind one, though slow in moving.

"Hold hard, missus!" he said; "we don't pay nothing extra for sitting down, so maybe you could stow some of them traps under the seat, and make it kind of more comfortable all round. Here, mother, lend a hand with the old lady's things, can't you? That's my missus, mum, that — my better arf, as the saying is, and no chap needn't wish for a better, though I say it as shouldn't."

This remark produced a playful kick, and a "Get along with you!" from the red-faced wife, which did not show it was taken amiss, but that she was

pleased with the delicate compliment, and she helped to arrange the various baskets and bundles with great energy and good nature.

"Now that's better, ain't it? Now you can just set yourself down. Lor' bless the woman! whatever is she frightened at?"

For the bustling arrangements were seriously alarming to the old woman, who was not sure that a sudden movement might not upset the train, or that, if she let go of anything in an unguarded moment, she might not fall out and be whirled off like those hurrying blackberry bushes or patches of chalk on the embankment; though, indeed, it was only her pattens and umbrella that she was clutching as her one protection. The first thing that roused her from her daze of fear was the bricklayer's little boy beginning to cry, or, as his mother called it, "to beller," in consequence of his mother's elbow coming sharply in contact with his head; and, at the sound, the old woman's hand let go of the umbrella and felt for the marketing-basket, and drew out one of the powerful, yellow apples, and held it towards the sufferer. The "bellerin" stopped instantaneously at such a refreshing sight, even while the mouth was wide open and two tears forcing their way laboriously out of the eyes. Finding that she could accomplish this gymnastic feat without any dangerous results, the old woman seemed to gain more confidence, seated herself more com-

fortably, straightened her bonnet, smiled at the bricklayer, nodded to the little boy, and, by the time the train stopped at the next station, felt herself quite a bold and experienced traveller.

"This ain't London, I take it?" she asked, in a little, thin, chirrupy voice.

"London? bless you! no. If you're bound for London you'll have another five hours to go before you can get there."

"Oh, yes, I know as it's a terrible long way off, but we seemed coming along at such a pace as there wasn't no knowing."

"You ain't used to travelling, seemings?"

"Oh! I've been about as much as most folks. I've been to Martel a smartish few times when Laddie was there, and once I went to Bristol when I was a gal keeping company with my master, but that ain't yesterday, you'll be thinking."

"Martel's a nice place, I've heard tell?"

"So it be; but it's a terrible big place, however."

"You'll find London a pretty sight bigger."

"I know London pretty well, though I haven't never been there; for Laddie, he's been up there nigh about fifteen year, and he's told me a deal about it. I know as it's all rubbish what folks say about the streets being paved with gold and such like, though the young folks do get took in; but Laddie, he says to me, 'Mother,' says he, 'London is paved with hard work like any other town; but,'

he says, 'good honest work is worth its weight in gold any day;' so it's something more than a joke after all."

The old woman grew garrulous as the train rushed along. Laddie was a subject, evidently, upon which her tongue could not help being eloquent.

"An old hen with one chick," the bricklayer whispered to his wife; but they listened good-naturedly enough to the stories of the wonderful baby, who had been larger, fatter, and stronger than any baby before or since, who had taken notice, begun teething, felt his feet, run off, and said "daddy" at an incredibly early period.

Mrs. Bricklayer nodded her head and said, "Really, now!" and "Well, I never!" inwardly, however, reserving her fixed opinion that the infant bricklayers had outdone the wonderful Laddie in every detail of babyhood.

Father Bricklayer could not restrain a mighty yawn in the middle of a prolonged description of how Laddie's gums were lanced; but at this juncture they reached the station which was the destination of the bricklayer and his family, so the old woman was not wounded by the discovery of their want of thorough interest, and she parted from them with great regret, feeling that she had lost some quite old friends in them. But she soon found another listener, and a more satisfactory one, in a young woman, whom she had hardly noticed

before, as she sat in the opposite corner of the carriage with her head bent down, neither speaking nor being spoken to. She had a very young baby wrapped in her shawl; and as one by one the other passengers left the carriage and she was left alone with the old woman, the two solitary creatures drew together in the chill November twilight; and, by and by, the wee baby was in the old woman's arms, and the young mother, almost a child herself, was telling her sad little story and hearing Laddie's story in return. There never had been such a son; he had got on so wonderfully at school, and had been a favorite with every one,—parson and schoolmaster; "such a headpiece the lad had!"

"Was Laddie his real name?"

"Why, no! he was christened John Clement, after his father and mine; but he called himself 'Laddie' before ever he could speak plain, and it stuck to him. His father was for making a schoolmaster of him, but Laddie he didn't take to that, so we sent him into Martel to the chemist there, to be shop-boy; and Mr. Stokes, the gentleman as keeps the shop, took to him wonderful and spoke of him to one and another, saying how sharp he were, and such, till at last one of the doctors took him up and taught him a lot; and when he went up to London he offered to take Laddie, and said as he'd take all the expense, and as he'd made a man of him. He come to see me himself, he did, and talked me over,