

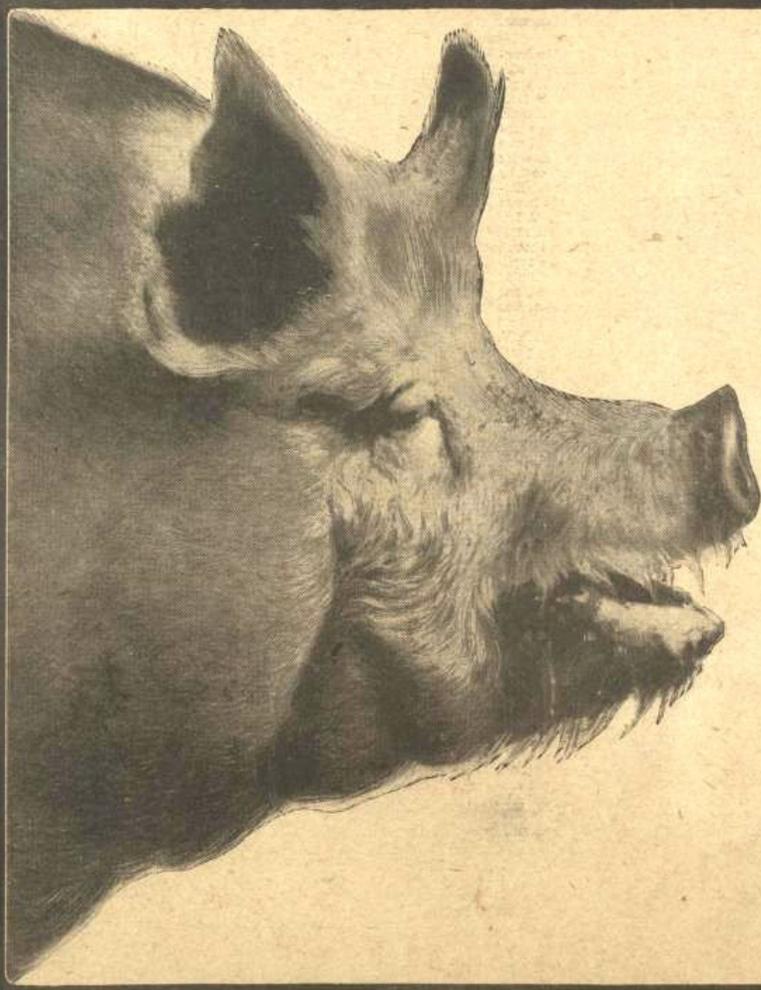
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How Grandma Ran Away

L. M. Montgomery

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The mellow sunshine was sifting in through the vines about the little kitchen window, and making a mosaic of dusty gold on the spotless floor and whitewashed walls. A white monthly rose was abloom on the sill, and an old-fashioned blue bowl on the dresser was filled with yellow hollyhocks. William Massey was sitting on the sofa talking to his mother and brother. He was a handsome, prosperous-looking man of about forty-five. There was a marked contrast between him and Benjamin Massey; the latter, though in reality five years younger, looked as much older. He was a tall, stooped man with kindly brown eyes and a care-worn expression.

Grandma Massey was sitting by the window. She was a tiny scrap of a woman, with a thin, sweet face and snow-white hair. Her brown eyes went from one son to the other with wistful, wordless questioning. Her thin, knotted hands, folded on the table beside her, trembled fitfully. William had been speaking, kindly and affectionately, but with the quiet decision of the experienced man of business.

“You can’t stay here by yourself alone any longer, Mother—that is impossible. Benjamin has a large family and his house is small; I don’t think you would be contented there after being used to a quiet life so long. So we have decided that you will make your home with me after this. Benjamin and I have talked it over, and he agrees with me that it will be the best thing to do. You’ve worked hard all your life, and it is time you had a rest now. You can always come home every summer for a long visit. Edith and the girls will be delighted to have you, and we will do everything in our power to make you happy and comfortable.”

He paused, as if expecting an answer, but no one spoke. Benjamin looked steadily at the floor. Grandma Massey put a trembling hand under the rose and drew the blossom up to her face caressingly. All her life she had given in unresistingly to the will of her husband and her sons. It never occurred to her to dispute their decisions. Since Benjamin and William had arranged it all, it must be so.

But after they had gone out together she laid her head in her hands and wept bitterly. The cat gravely walked over to her and jumped into her lap, rubbing its head against her arm. She stroked it with her trembling fingers.

“Oh, kitten, I’ve got to go away and leave you and everything—my hens and flowers and all, and it breaks my old heart to think of it. I’ve been so happy here all my life. I dassent say anything, ’cause William is so good to me; I must do as he wishes. And Benjamin has hard enough to get along with the family he has now. But I wouldn’t cost him much. I don’t eat much nor wear out many clothes. But he thinks it is better for me to go. I suppose it is; the boys know best. They’re both good sons to me, and William’s wife is a nice woman. I must try to be grateful to them all. But I

can't help feeling dreadful bad, kitten.”

William Massey was not in the habit of wasting time when he had once decided on a course of action. He was a wealthy merchant in a neighboring city and his business rendered a speedy return imperative. The slower country folk were almost bewildered by his swiftness. In a few days all was ready—the little old farmhouse stripped and nailed up, the old-fashioned household goods sold or scattered, the old mother's little trunk packed with her few worldly possessions.

When the day came on which they were to go she rose early and slipped away from Benjamin's house across the field to her own garden. Benjamin found her there half an hour later, wandering wistfully around among its unworldly sweetnesses.

“I wanted to take a posy away with me, Benjamin, just to remember my garden by. Everything's so sweet here, ain't it? They don't have old-fashioned flowers like this in town. There's the southernwood your father planted right by the steps when we were married, and them white rosebushes is the ones your little sister set out the very spring she died, Benjamin. I always thought of her when they bloomed. And here's the day lilies you and William planted the last summer you were both home together, do you mind? You were just little boys.”

Her voice died away in a furtive sob. She hastily turned her face. She must not let Benjamin see her cry. It might worry him if he knew she felt so bad about going away. Benjamin looked embarrassed. He was a silent, reserved man, and speech came hard to him.

“Mother,” he said awkwardly, “if you shouldn't like living in the city you know you can always come back to us. We'd always be glad to have you.”

She looked up with a sudden timid resolution in her face. But before she could speak William joined them and her opportunity was gone. An hour later they were on the train.

William Massey's house was a handsome one on a fashionable street, and his wife and his two daughters welcomed “grandmamma” with unaffected kindness and cordiality, but the simple country soul, unaccustomed to the splendor that surrounded her, felt pitifully insignificant and out of place. It was impossible to adapt herself to her new environment, although she struggled to do so and to prevent her small individuality from being entirely sapped out of her amid the bewildering sensations of her new life.

William's wife, a brilliant society leader, was a thoroughly kind-hearted woman. She welcomed her husband's mother sincerely and spared no pains to make her happy and contented. The most beautiful and luxurious room in the house was given her, the most delicate courtesy and attentions accorded her, all her little wishes and

preferences consulted in every particular. Nevertheless, Mrs William, naturally enough, could find and give little real companionship in her intercourse with her mother-in-law. There was absolutely nothing in common between them, and the older woman longed for her other daughter-in-law, Benjamin's wife, who could talk to her of the things in which they both had an interest, and whom she could have assisted in a hundred little ways consoling to her innocent vanity. She could not help feeling in awe of William's stylish wife, even while she reproached herself for it.

William's daughters, two pretty, precocious misses of fourteen and sixteen, respectively, seemed like strangers to her. She felt in a way afraid of them. Helen and Christine were merry, good-hearted schoolgirls, ever ready to wait on "grandmamma" and contribute to her pleasure. Nevertheless, Grandma Massey pined for her other grandchildren, Benjamin's sunburned, barefooted boys and girls, who had been wont to swarm at will through the old farmhouse, preferring it to their own home, and play hide-and-seek in the orchard, and be fed at all hours with plum buns and cookies and all sorts of grandmotherly goodies. They had filled her heart with their own warm young life, and it grew cold for the want of them.

She missed her garden and her flowers. William, remembering her old love for them, had a florist send her fresh ones every day, gorgeous hothouse exotics that were revelations of beauty and fragrance. They pleased her in a way, but, although she never said so, nothing could replace the homely blossoms she had known and loved all her life, the crimson hollyhocks and poppies, the cabbage roses and daisies and ribbon grass that she had planted and tended with her own hands.

She missed her old occupations and duties. There was nothing for her to do in this big house with its numerous servants. She was not even allowed, in mistaken kindness, to wait on herself; maids were at her beck and call; Helen and Christine anticipated every want. William and Edith insisted that she must "take things easy" now, forgetting that when a woman has been accustomed to constant occupation for seventy years the lesson of taking it easy is a hard one to learn—sometimes an impossible one. She had nothing to do. Books did not interest her; she wanted to be mending and patching, knitting children's mittens and stockings, things that were never heard of there.

She wanted her cows and hens and cats, all the living creatures of the farm that had been part of her life so long. She wanted her own old room, with its bare floor and stained walls, and the low, uncurtained window where the splendor of the sunrise came in.

William Massey, to do him justice, never for a moment suspected that his mother was not happy. He was a very busy man, and having done, as he thought, all in his

power to make life pleasant for her, he was satisfied. Now and then he noticed that she looked thinner and more worn than of yore. But that was only to be expected. Mother was getting old; in the nature of things they could not expect to have her with them very much longer. He guessed nothing of her homesickness and loneliness. It was another of her trials that she had no one to talk to. William seemed wrapped away from her in the multiplicity of his business affairs; he was not half so near to her as when there had been a hundred miles between them. Mrs William and her daughters and her numerous fashion-plate callers could talk of new books and music and pictures and plays and fads and “functions,” and a hundred other things that were Greek to Grandma Massey, but they could not talk to her of what she understood.

“I couldn’t have been lonelier if I was stranded on a desert island,” she said pathetically to herself.

Her only comforts were her home letters. Benjamin’s eldest daughter, Tessie, a girl of fifteen, wrote every week, and the letters were full of home news and bits of gossip and messages from old friends; sometimes clippings from the village paper or pressed flowers from her old garden, or a blotted and ill-spelt note from one of the younger children were inclosed. How Grandma Massey treasured those letters and read and reread them until they fairly dropped to pieces in the folds!

The long winter went slowly by. When spring came and the grass in the city squares grew green and the buds burst on the chestnuts her homesick longing grew so overpowering that she ventured to ask William tremulously if he wouldn’t take her home for a visit. William, still unobservant, did not consider it wise.

“Why, mother, it wouldn’t do for you to go down to the country as early as this. You wouldn’t enjoy it yet. It’s all wet and muddy out there now, and Benjamin and Mary will be busy planting and housecleaning. Besides, I’m rather too busy to take you down just now, and you couldn’t go alone. Wait until July or August.”

Grandma Massey said no more. Her life seemed to be drying up within her. Her heart was starved for a glimpse of the places she had known and loved all her life. At the close of May came a tear-spotted letter from Tessie. Her mother was ill; there was a new baby at the farmhouse and Bobbie and Nellie were laid up with the chicken-pox. “I do wish you were here, Grandma, not to work, of course, but just to tell me what to do. I feel kind of lost and helpless, and mother mustn’t be worried about things, and we can’t get any help. Can’t you get Uncle William to bring you down? Mother is kind of pining to see you, and maybe she’d get better faster if you were here.”

Grandma Massey was alone in the big uptown house when Tessie’s letter came.

The girls were out and Mrs William was visiting friends in another city. William was away and would not be back till late. Grandma laid down Tessie's hurried note and meditated. Her heart thrilled at the thought of being of some use yet. There were people in the world who needed her, after all. If she were home she could do so much—nurse Mary and the children and cheer up Benjamin and help poor, bewildered Tessie. She must go! It would be of no use to appeal to William; he would only be indignant at the idea of her going to wait on sick folks. A cunning light came into the gentle, faded eyes. With an almost stealthy step she went to her own room. From the closet she took her old carpet bag and swiftly packed it with a few necessities. She had a little money in her purse, enough to take her home: Grandma Massey meant to run away.

It would not do to go without leaving some word; they would be alarmed at her disappearance. She got a bit of paper and wrote shakily:

“My deare son, I have had a letter from tessie and the children and mary is sick and they want me, so I'm going. Please don't be cross at me, you and Edith have been so good to me and Im grateful to you, you have been a good son William but I'm awful homesick. I guess when I get home it won't be worth my while to come back. I'm getting old to be moving round much. Ben will look after me.

Mother.”

This she put on the pincushion on her table. Then she crept noiselessly downstairs and out of doors. She might have ordered the carriage, but she was terribly in awe of the dashing coachman. Besides, she was afraid that she might be prevented. The dusk was falling outside, but her desperate courage did not fail her. She asked the policeman at the corner to call a cab for her; but when she got out in the quivering, blue, electric glare of the station, amid hurrying swarms of comers and goers, she felt bewildered, and caught blindly at the cabman's arm.

“Oh!” she gasped tremulously, “I'm so skeered! Where shall I get my ticket? And which is my train?”

Fortunately for Grandma Massey, this particular cabby had a tender heart. And he also had an old mother away back among the country hills who looked a little like his passenger. So although it was not in his line of business at all, he got Grandma Massey her ticket and put her on the right train.

“Thank you,” she said joyfully, “I'd never have managed it alone. You're a real kind young man.”

When the train started she began to realize that she was really homeward bound. Her spirits rose; she felt a secret exultation over her own boldness in starting off so. She was not so old and helpless after all. Then her thoughts went out ahead of her and pictured getting home.

It was a long, wearisome night, but when morning came Grandma Massey, with her eager face pressed close to the car window, recognized a place she knew.

“There’s Henry Newbold’s place, I do declare!” she exclaimed aloud, much to the amusement of the other passengers, “and if he hasn’t been and built a new end onto the house. I’m just sure and certain he didn’t need it. It’s the second wife’s doings, I suppose. She was always a high-stepping creature. She’ll make Henry’s money fly. And there’s the Corner stores away down in the hollow and all the trees out in bloom. Look at them cherry trees in Jesse Wright’s garden! My, how green the fields are! I just feel as if I’d never get my fill of looking at them.”

When the train stopped at the little well-known station there were plenty to help her off. The station master shook her hand heartily.

“Blessed if it ain’t Grandma Massey! How do you do? How do you do? Come down to visit your folks, I s’pose? You never come all alone! Well, well, I always said you were the smartest woman in the state, age or no age. I guess Ben’s folks will be powerful glad to see you. They’ve been having a tough time of it lately. There’s Will Finley with his express, he’ll take you right to the door.”

“Oh, no, I want to walk,” said Grandma eagerly. “It ain’t far across the fields, you know. He can take my satchel along, but I’ll walk. I haven’t had a walk since I left here—nothing but driving. I’m tired of it.”

Her heart was almost bursting with joy as she struck across the green fields. The sun was rising, and all the basins among the hills were brimming with golden and emerald light. The pond in old Abe Henneberry’s field was aglow with a shimmer of fairy tints. The skies over her were blue; the birds were singing.

She could not see Benjamin’s place, or her old home, but she knew that when she came to the brow of the hill they would flash out below. She could have knelt in rapture as she climbed the fence into the old brook meadow, where the spring bubbled up under its sentinel pines. Two calves came frisking across the ferny slope with liquid mischief in their soft eyes. The wild cherry trees in the corners were creamy with feathery bloom. At her feet she saw some delicate blue violets hiding in the lush grasses. Everything seemed to be welcoming her back. Yes, she belonged here. Slowly, and with frequent pauses for rest, the little bent figure toiled up the slope. At its top she paused to gaze eagerly down. Below she saw her old home and Benjamin’s newer house, nestled in the green hollow, half hidden behind bloom-

white apple trees. A fragrant wind stirred in the valley and drifted up to her. A divine light came into the tired old face.

Benjamin Massey, going out to milk the cows with a wearier look than usual on his face, met his mother coming in through the little sagging gate under the sibilant poplars.

“Why, Mother! Mother!”

He said it twice, the first time in a tone of startled amaze, the second with heartfelt joy.

“Oh, Benjamin,” she said, catching at his arm with tears of delight in her eyes, “Oh, Benjamin, I’ve come home!”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *How Grandma Ran Away* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]