

**Astray In Her Mind**

A. P. Campbell, '37

The old house looked cosy and picture-like, with the snow rounded up high on the sprawling roof and the old-fashioned window sills. But inside it was cold and the woman carried in more wood from the porch.

She lighted the oil lamp and stood at the window watching the few snowflakes come hop-scotching down from the sky and disappear from sight in the snowdrifts. Drawing the rocking chair nearer the fire, she sat down. Her shadow moved regularly to and fro as she rocked on the uneven floor.

She was a big woman, old and worn. Her face was yellow and wrinkled, like a discarded paper bag. The rather large mouth was moulded into an expression of stern patience. But there was a certain nobility in the shape of her head that told of days when those eyes were bright and that mouth was soft and gentle. Even now there was something pleasant in her appearance when the light was not shining full on her face. One wrinkly hand was smoothing the knee of her withered homespun dress; her chin bobbed up and down in meditation.

Presently she drew a worn rosary from her pocket and began to say her prayers, dosing off and arousing herself with a start. Tonight she was busy with her thoughts; she looked round the room as if expecting to see someone, but there was no one there—just the gray, cracked stove, the smoke-blackened walls and the high cupboard. Her eyes rested on that, the wooden cupboard in the corner that reached right up to the ceiling—so awkward and so useless. The wind blew through the house, making it shake and rattle like age-dried bones.

Going to the cupboard, she rummaged in a basket, bringing out a small dark object. Holding it near the lamp, she turned it back and forth to catch the light. It was a faded tin-type of two little girls in pink sun bonnets.

For a long time she sat by the stove, holding the picture in her hand. One meagre flat tear slid down her cheek and lost its way in the wrinkles. One shoe began to tap the floor; she started to sing softly. At first old and weak the voice gradually took on strength and volume until there arose a sweet, full tone. It was a love song of youth and its uncounted hopes and joys.



The voice became still, the head nodded lower, her breathing became slow and steady—she slept. The fire burned low, the windows whitened with frost, and still she did not awake, but slept on, one arm thrown over the back of the chair, her mouth hanging loosely open. A mouse peeped from a hole in the corner and scampered across the floor.

Suddenly she awakened and started forward smiling with her arms held out in greeting. But as her eyes took in the empty room, the smile gave way to a look of disappointment; her arms dropped and she pressed one hand to her head in a confused manner.

Becoming suddenly aware of the cold, she went to bed, the lamp waving up and down in her hand as she made her way into the little bedroom. . . . .

A week later she was picked up by a neighbouring farmer, half frozen in the snow. She had started for the farmer's house in search of food, and had fallen in the snow.

For a week she lay ill and the farmer and the farmer's wife shook their heads, saying that it was just like their luck for her to die on their hands. But she did not die. Food and warmth soon renewed her strength. She received the Sacraments but refused to make any other arrangements. She was not, she said, going to die.

In two week's time she was asking to go home. Nothing the farmer's wife could do would please her. She refused to eat her meals, but lay gazing at the ceiling or mumbling to herself. The farmer's wife set her lips firm over her work and called her stubborn and proud. But "Poor thing," she said later and told the children to make easy with their shouting.

One day she found her standing barefooted by the window of her room. Supporting herself by the curtains, she was looking sadly across the field toward her own little house. Hurried back to bed, she stormily demanded that she be sent home.

"Something has to be done with her," said the farmer's wife that night to her husband "I can't look after her. She'll have to be taken some place—You'll have to see about it tomorrow."

"Yes, I suppose so" he replied, watching the smoke from his pipe rise up and flatten against the ceiling.

"She's been acting queer lately."

"Yes, she has." He spat in the wood box. "Now



that I come to think of it, she has been like that for two or three weeks. The last time I was over there—the time I brought the wood to her—she seemed queer, unsociable—as if she did not want to be bothered talking; she has funny ideas too. She told me that one night her sister, who has been dead for years, appeared to her and told her that when she was singing on that evening, she had been sitting by her side. No wonder she is queer. She went through enough to make anyone queer.”

“Yes, the poor old creature, I feel sorry for her. She is gone astray in her mind.———But tomorrow you will have to see about her.”

The next morning when the farmer called his wife to prepare the breakfast, she rapped at the door of the spare room, pushed it in and entered hastily.

“Dan, she’s gone!” she shouted running into the kitchen.

“Gone! Are you—”

“Yes, I’m sure. Don’t stand there like a gawk—go and look for her. She is out there—” He hurried out into the frosty air, filling his pipe as he went.

The foot prints in the snow led across the field to the lone house. The farmer hesitated, then entered.

“God!” He advanced slowly into the room.

She was sitting in the arm chair by the stove, one arm thrown over the back of the chair, her head drooping to one side.

Stepping nearer, he touched her forehead; it was cold as ice.

“Good Jesus, she’s froze!” he rubbed his hands together and drew back looking at her with a strange fear in his heart.

Picking up her rosary, his eye was attracted by something else by the chair. He looked at it, laid it on the table and went out hastily.

Bent over with arms swinging, he hurried across the fields to tell his wife.

And inside the old house everything was cold and still. The windows shone with frost, and the old cupboard rattled with the wind. By the gray cracked stove she drooped in the chair one bare foot thrust forward, cold and blue.

And on the table lay a faded tin-type of two little girls in pink sun bonnets.