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MILDRED CLINGERMAN

Mr. Sakrison's Halt



IN those days the old Katy local was the magic carpet that transported me from one world to another. Summertime only truly began the moment the conductor lifted me aboard and urged me to “set still and be a big girl.” He was never impressed with the fact that I’d been traveling two days all alone and on much bigger trains than the Katy. When he had asked after my mother and told me how anxiously my grandparents were awaiting my arrival, he’d pass on down the aisle to mysterious regions forward, and I’d be left to spy all about the coach for Miss Mattie Compton.

As often as not, there was no sign of Miss Mattie, and the only other occupants would be somnolent old men in alpaca coats who roused now and then to use the spittoons. Usually her absence meant simply that the conductor had not yet found time to eject her bodily from the Jim Crow car, but sometimes I was forced to conclude that she was resting at home that day. At such times my disappointment would be intense. And while the Katy huffed and rattled past the cotton fields and muttered gloomily over the shady creeks, I had nothing to do but hold myself steady on the slick straw seat and stretch my eyes wide to keep awake.

But mostly I was fortunate enough to catch the Katy on one of Miss Mattie’s days. I’d see just the tip of a pink ribbon bobbing over the top of the high seat, and I’d hurry down the car to slide in beside her. Or perhaps the door to the coach would open and Mr. McCall, the conductor, would appear with Miss Mattie in his arms.

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She would be hanging as limply as a bit of old mosquito netting, staring sweetly into Mr. McCall's annoyed red face. He'd plump her down beside me and then, accommodating himself to the Katy's swaggering roll, slam out of our car again without a word.

Miss Mattie and I never bothered with formal greetings. The bond between us was so well-established that we always took up again just where we'd left off the year before. She might sometimes call me by my mother's name instead of my own, but I didn't mind. (It was such a pretty name.) Almost immediately, out of the confused, jackdaw clutter of her conversation, her recognition of our shared dedication would emerge, and once again we'd plunge deeply into talk of Mr. Sakrison. Interruptions were frequent, as frequent as the Katy's stops along the line. When the Katy squealed jerkily to a halt and sat there panting, we'd press our noses against the dirty window (with its heaped up piles of coal dust along the sill) and stare silently at the scene outside. Then, for a little while after each of the stops, I'd have to pat Miss Mattie's hands till she stopped whimpering.

Miss Mattie was pretty when she wasn't whimpering. Her face was soft and pink with fine little crumpled lines, and her blue eyes were younger than the rest of her. Sometimes when she was telling over and over again about Mr. Sakrison's strange disappearance in that young chirruping voice, I would forget that Miss Mattie was close to sixty years old.

She always wore little crocheted white gloves that somehow lent an air of dignity to the rest of her ill-assorted costume. "Outlandish," people termed Miss Mattie's get-ups. She mixed the styles of thirty years back with anything modish that took her fancy. In order to take Miss Mattie's fancy a piece of wearing apparel had only to be pink and fluffy. Chapel Grove's inhabitants never forgot the

day Miss Mattie appeared with a pair of pink “teddies” pinned to her gray curls. The wispy bit of lingerie hung gracefully and shamelessly behind her poor addled head for all the louts in town to see, and they followed her to her door taunting her with ugly words.

In the main, Chapel Grove treated Miss Mattie kindly enough. She was even pointed out to visitors. But nobody ever bothered to hide the grinning and nudging that broke out wherever she appeared. There were humorists, too, who liked to josh her about Mr. Sakrison, saying rude, insulting things of him, till Miss Mattie collapsed into a damp, sobbing little heap at their feet. At such times I suffered a queer, ill-defined conviction that Chapel Grove would like to make me cry, also. Beneath the surface kindness I sensed their suspicion that I was, in some way, as different as Miss Mattie. Even my grandparents thought it was too bad that I must grow up elsewhere, and everybody smiled at my alien “accent.” No matter how joyfully each summer I threw myself into the very heart of all the youthful activities there, I was aware of a subtle reserve that kept me circling just outside the true center. (Didn’t they realize I belonged? Why, I’d been born there! . . . But so had Miss Mattie.)

Miss Mattie and I were both made to feel Chapel Grove’s disapproval of those who do too much traveling around. Several times each year she went all the way to the State Capitol to ask the railroad officials there to help her locate Mr. Sakrison. But most of her journeys were made up to the city where one transferred to the Katy for the last four hours of the trip to Chapel Grove. The Katy rattled up there mornings and returned in the late afternoon. At least twice each week Miss Mattie boarded her for the round trip. Once arrived, Miss Mattie usually just stayed on board, if the trainmen would let her. She had no interest in the city at all. It was the journey back and forth that was important.

On the last journey we shared, the conductor did not lift me aboard the Katy or tell me to be a big girl. I was a big girl. At least I thought I was. I certainly towered over tiny Miss Mattie, and I was very conscious of the hard little buds that were my breasts—half-ashamed and half-proud of the way they strained under the tight voile dress.

Miss Mattie was having one of her rare “clear” spells. She called me by my own name and traced for me, through mazy genealogical thickets, her fourth cousinship to my mother. This didn’t startle me; one way or another I was related to everybody in the county. But I was startled and disappointed to hear her talking like all the other adults I knew. She seemed tired, too, and I was suddenly shaken by a dreadful fear that one day soon she’d give up her search and admit defeat.

“Oh, Miss Mattie, please,” I said, “tell me about Mr. Sakrison.”

She turned to look at me, and I almost cried out when I saw she was cringing as if I were one of the town bullies eager to strike the poisonous blow. I stared back at her till the tears spilled down my cheeks.

“You’ve grown so tall,” she whispered. “I was afraid . . .”

Both of us wept openly then with a great flutter of white handkerchiefs, and afterwards I was glad to see that the weary, grown-up look had faded from her eyes. With our heads very close together and Miss Mattie’s hand in mine, she told me the story again for the last time.

“You remember, my dear—I’ve told you so often—he had the loveliest instincts. I never knew a Yankee could be anything but a *beast*, but he was so kind, so gentle . . . I didn’t mean to fall in love with him. They say such horrid things about traveling men, ’specially Yankee traveling men. He walked me home from church

that night. Wouldn't come in, since I was—to Chapel Grove's way of thinking—living alone in that big house. But he kissed me. . . . We stood under that old catalpa tree, you know the one. He hugged me so hard he crushed the roses I was wearing, and the smell of the bruised petals hung over us like a fog. We made our plans and I packed all night. Had every nigra in the house pressing and mending . . . The night went so quickly, and all of us were happy, calling back and forth and singing snatches of songs.

“Early in the morning I put on my pink organdy and Mr. Sakrison called for me and we caught the Katy to go up to the city for the wedding. It was a delirious kind of morning. I've never known the Katy to slide so smoothly along. There was something different, too, about the way the sunlight slanted across the fields. I remember thinking that if I could shift those long shadows just a fraction, the way you do a vase full of roses, I'd see a lovely new view. And there was a new, wonderful taste to the air and even to the coffee I'd put up for us!

“After a while we both felt quieter inside and Mr. Sakrison held my hand and talked of all his hopes for the future. Not just our future, either. He spoke his piece for the whole world. I was so proud of him. I'd never heard anybody speak so sadly about the nigras—their want and their fear. They were picking in the fields that day, I recall. . . . He put words to the little sick feelings I'd had at times, and I began to catch his vision . . . some of it, but not all. Not then.”

The Katy whistled long and mournfully. Miss Mattie interrupted herself with “Hush!” and pressed her nose against the window to see if this, at last, was the station she'd been hunting for all those years. But it wasn't.

“You see,” she said, “I was too happy to know or care which halt it was. The Katy would stop, as it always does, at every cow pasture

almost. Sometimes Mr. Sakrison would swing off to light his cigar, though I never minded the odor of cigars. . . . Delicious, isn't it? But he said the scent caught in my hair, and he couldn't have that. He said my hair smelled of breezes in the springtime. . . . And then the Katy stopped at the dearest little halt! We had been aboard about two hours, I think, so it would have been almost halfway to the city. I had never noticed the place before, but then I hadn't been to the city often.

"The first thing that caught my eye was a huge camellia bush in full bloom, a red one. The fallen petals had heaped up in a ring around it, you know the way they do. I asked Mr. Sakrison to step off and cut one of the blossoms for me with his pocket knife. I didn't think the station master would mind, and there wouldn't be time enough to ask politely. But the queerest thing! The Katy just sat and huffed and puffed for the longest spell, it seemed. And things outside moved slow as molasses. There was a park with a little blue lake, and swans dipping their heads . . . and children playing. Ever so many children, and all so nicely dressed, even the little darbies. There were adults strolling there, too, all mixed in together, all colors. I wasn't a bit surprised, somehow, but I wondered at the slow, graceful movement of the scene. It was like grasses waving under water.

"Then I noticed the station itself. It was a funny little brick, octagonal building. Over the door to the waiting room it didn't say WHITE, you know. It said: WAITING ROOM. ONE AND ALL. And then, while Mr. Sakrison was still cutting the blossom, out of the station house came a colored gentleman. He walked up to Mr. Sakrison and pounded him on the back and they shook hands, and I thought to my soul they were going to embrace. . . ." Miss Mattie paused and bit her lips and twisted her hand from mine.

“Do you know, that made me angry? I looked hard at Mr. Sakrison, and for a moment he looked like any other Yankee . . . a total stranger. It was the anger that kept me sitting there staring instead of joining him. I wouldn’t feel angry now. Even then—I like to remember—I fought it down and called and waved to him. But he only looked around in a puzzled kind of way . . . and walked off into the park with the man. The Katy started up again with a terrible crashing sound and fairly flew away from there.

“I was looking back, you know, and trying to reach the emergency cord . . . and weeping. I saw just the first few letters on the station sign. It said ‘B R O’ something. In the city I waited and waited, but Mr. Sakrison didn’t come. They told me the only halt between Chapel Grove and the city that had the letters B R O was Brokaw. I hired a buggy and drove back there, but it was only a tumble-down old halt without a station house—just one of those sheltered seats. . . .”

Miss Mattie always stopped her story at this point, as she did now. Again we murmured over all the pleasant names we could think of that the halt might have possessed. As usual Miss Mattie argued strongly for her favorite. But I didn’t think the word *Brotherhood* was pretty enough. While we talked I was recalling the rest of the story—the part of it I knew from a different viewpoint. Chapel Grove’s version was that the Yankee traveling man had meant to fool her from the start. She had probably given him money, they said. Her folks had left her a great pile of it. And (here they pulled down their mouths) he never had any intention of marrying her and had escaped at the first opportunity. Miss Mattie had come home then and shut herself up for months. When she did show her face again it was the silly, addled face she wore now. Look at the crazy things she did—like riding the Katy up and down the

line for thirty years almost every day, looking for the halt that swallowed Mr. Sakrison!

In the long gloaming that day the Katy made many halts, and I stared fiercely with Miss Mattie in utmost concentration at each one, hoping we'd recognize *something* to tell us this one was B R O.

Sure enough, we found it. It was I who spied the swans, so white in the dusk, but it was Miss Mattie who saw the camellia bush and the man who waited beside it. When the Katy stopped Miss Mattie was off as quick as a wink, but she needn't have hurried, because the Katy just stood breathing there for a long time. I saw a petal on the camellia bush fall and fall—forever it seemed—before it touched the ground. I saw Miss Mattie leaning on the man's arm, and they turned and he waved his straw hat at me, slow as slow. And, oh, Mr. Sakrison was lovely . . . but so was Miss Mattie. She was young and plumped out, especially in the bosom, and I was suddenly ashamed and crossed my arms over my chest. I was watching the swans arching their necks when the Katy started up again very quickly as if she were getting away under full steam. Only then did I remember to look for the station sign, but I was too late.

In Chapel Grove that summer it was a nine days' wonder the way poor old Mattie Compton had stepped off the Katy and disappeared without a trace. Since I was the last person who saw her, I was forced to tell again and again the dull facts of how the Katy stopped at a station whose name I neglected to notice, and of how Miss Mattie got off there and didn't get back on board. That was all I reported. Grandmother finally put a stop to the questions with her appeal to the ladies that I was "at that delicate age," and Miss Mattie's disappearance had upset me.

It hadn't, of course.

But there were things in Chapel Grove that year that did upset me. Most nights I saw the fiery cross burning on schoolhouse hill. Grandfather went about tight-lipped and angry, cursing "flap-mouthed fools." I lay awake sometimes and listened to the hounds baying down in the bottom-lands, and I wished with all my heart for money enough to ride the Katy every day, up and back, till I found the halt called B R O. There, I'd run, run and be gathered to Mr. Sakrison's heart . . . and Miss Mattie's.

The Katy local was retired years ago. There's a fine highway now to the city, and they say everybody in Chapel Grove drives there often since it's so near. I hear everything has changed. But I read in my newspaper last week how they've locked the doors to the schoolhouse and barred with guns and flaring anger the way to the hill, and I realize how terribly far Chapel Grove still is from Mr. Sakrison's halt.