

How Fidelia Went to the Store by Mary Eleanor

Wilkins Freeman

"I don't know what we're goin' to do," said Aunt Maria Crooker. She sat in a large arm-chair, and held in her lap a bowl of sugar and butter that she was creaming. Aunt Maria filled up the chair from arm to arm, for she was very portly; she had a large, rosy, handsome face, and she creamed with such energy that she panted for breath.

"Well, I don't know, either," rejoined her sister, Mrs. Lennox. "I can't go to the store with my lame foot, that's certain."

"Well, I know I can't," said Aunt Maria, with additional emphasis. "I haven't walked two mile for ten year, an' I don't believe I could get to that store and back to save my life."

"I don't believe you could, either. I don't know what is goin' to be done. We can't make the cake without raisins, anyhow. It's the queerest thing how father happened to forget them. Now here he is gone over to East Dighton after the new cow, and Cynthia gone to Keene to buy her bonnet, an' me with a scalt foot, an' you not able to walk, an' not one raisin in the house to put into that weddin'-cake."

Mrs. Lennox stated the case in full, with a despairing eloquence, and Aunt Maria sighed and wrinkled her forehead.

"If there were only any neighbors you could borrow from," she observed.

"Well, there ain't any neighbors 'twixt here and the store except the Allens and the Simmonses, and the Allens are so tight they never put raisins into their Thanksgivin' pies. Mis' Allen told me they didn't. She said she thought most folks made their pies too rich, an' her folks liked them just as well without raisins. An' as for the Simmonses, I don't believe they see a raisin from one year's end to the other. They're lucky if they can get enough common things to eat for all those children. I don't know what's goin' to be done. Here's the dress-maker comin' to-morrow, an' Cynthia goin' to be married in two weeks, and the cake ought to be made to-day if it's ever goin' to be."

"Yes, it had," assented Aunt Maria. "We've put it off full long enough, anyway. Weddin'-cake ain't near so good unless it stands a little while."

"I know it."

Just then there was a shrill, prolonged squeak. It came from the yard. The doors and windows were open; it was a very warm day.

"What's that?" cried Aunt Maria.

"Oh, it's nothin' but Fidelia's little wagon. She's draggin' it round the yard."

The two women looked at each other; it was as if a simultaneous idea had come suddenly to them.

Aunt Maria gave expression to it first. "Fidelia couldn't go, could she?"

"Maria Crooker, that little thing! She ain't six years old, an' she's never been anywhere alone. Do you s'pose I'm goin' to send her a mile to that store?" Mrs. Lennox's tone was full of vehement indignation, but her eyes still met Aunt Maria's with that doubtful and reflective expression.

"I don't see a mite of harm in it," Aunt Maria maintained, sturdily. She set her bowl of sugar and butter on the table, and leaned forward with a hand on each aproned knee. "I know Fidelia ain't but five year old, but she's brighter than some children of seven. It's just a straight road to the store, an'

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~~she can't get lost, to save her life. And she knows where 'tis. You took her down to Mis' Rose's three or four weeks ago, didn't you?"~~

"Yes; that day father went down for grain. I s'pose she would remember."

"Of course she'd remember. I don't see one thing, as far as I'm concerned, to hinder that child's goin' down to the store an' bringin' home some raisins. I used to go on errands before I was as old as she is. Folks didn't fuss over their children so much in my day."

"Well," said Mrs. Lennox, finally, with a great sigh, "I don't know but I may as well send her."

Mrs. Lennox was much smaller than her sister, and she had a rather sickly but pleasant face. She had to push a chair before her as she walked, for she had scalded her foot quite badly the week before, and it was now all swathed in bandages. It had been a very unfortunate accident in more ways than one, for Cynthia, her elder daughter, was going to be married soon, and the family were busily engaged in the wedding preparations. It was very hard for poor Mrs. Lennox to have to limp about with one knee in a chair, while she made wedding-cake and arranged for the bridal festivities, but she made the best of it.

Now she pushed over to the door, and called, "Fidelia! Fidelia!"

Directly the squeak increased to an agonizing degree, the rattle of small wheels accompanied it, and Fidelia came trudging around the corner of the house. She was a chubby little girl, and her blue tier seemed rather tight for her. She had a round, rosy face, and innocent and honest black eyes. She wore a small Shaker bonnet with a green cape, and she stubbed her toes into the grass every step she took.

"Don't stub your toes so," said her mother, admonishingly. "You'll wear your shoes all out."

Fidelia immediately advanced with soft pats like a kitten. When she got into the kitchen her mother took off her Shaker bonnet and looked at her critically. "You'll have to have your hair brushed," said she. "Fidelia, do you remember how you went with mother down to Mis' Rose's three or four weeks ago?"

Fidelia nodded and winked.

"There was a big pussy cat there, do you remember? and Mis' Rose gave you a cooky."

Fidelia's affirmative wink seemed to give out sparkles.

"Well, you remember how we went to the *side* door and knocked—the door with some roses over the top of it—and Mis' Rose came—the *side* door?"

Fidelia, intensely attentive, standing before her mother and Aunt Maria, remembered about the side door.

"Well, you remember how there was a piazza across the front of the house, don't you? Father hitched the horse to a post there. Well, there's another door there opening on the piazza, don't you remember—a door with panes of glass in it like a window?"

Fidelia remembered.

"Well, now, Fidelia, do you suppose you can go down to the store and buy some raisins for mother to

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put in sister Cynthia's weddin'-cake, all yourself?"

"An' be a real smart little girl," put in Aunt Maria.

Fidelia gave one ecstatic roll of her black eyes at them, then she broke into a shout, "Lemme go! lemme go!" She oscillated on her small stubbed toes like a bird preparing to fly, and she tugged energetically at her mother's apron.

"I'll give you a penny, an' you can buy you a nice stick of red-and-white twisted candy," added her mother.

Fidelia actually made a little dash for the door then, but her mother caught her. "Stop!" she said, in an admonitory voice which was quieting to Fidelia, and made her realize that the red-and-white candy was still in the future. "Now you just wait a minute, an' not be in such a pucker. You ain't goin' this way, with your apron just as dirty as poison, and your hair all in a snarl. You've got to have on your clean apron, and have your hair brushed and your face washed."

So Fidelia climbed obediently into her high chair, and sat with her eyes screwed up and her fists clinched, while her mother polished her face faithfully with a wet, soapy end of a towel, and combed the snarls out of her hair. When it was all done, her cheeks being very red and shiny, and her hair very damp and smooth, when she was arrayed in her clean starched white tier, and had her Shaker tied on with an emphatic square bow, she stood in the door and drank in the parting instructions. Her eyes were wide and intent, and her mouth drooped soberly at the corners. The importance of the occasion had begun to impress her. She held a penny tight in her hand; the raisins were to be charged, it not being judged advisable to trust Fidelia with so much money.

"I don't believe that little thing can carry three pounds of raisins," Mrs. Lennox said to Aunt Maria. She was becoming more and more uneasy about Fidelia's going.

"Let her take her little wagon an' drag 'em; that'll be just the thing," said Aunt Maria, complacently.

So Fidelia started down the road, trundling behind her the little squeaking cart. It was a warm July day, and it was very dusty. Directly Fidelia started she forgot her mother's injunctions about stubbing her toes; she disappeared in a small cloud of dust, for she walked in the middle of the road, and flirted it up with great delight.

In the course of the mile Fidelia met one team. It was an old rocking chaise and a white horse, and an old farmer was driving. He drove slower when he came alongside of Fidelia. When he had fairly passed her he stopped entirely, twisted about in his seat, and raised his voice.

"Whose little gal air you?" he asked.

Fidelia was a little frightened. Instead of giving her father's name, she gave her own with shy precision—"Fidelia Ames Lennox," she said, retiring into her Shaker bonnet.

"You ain't runnin' away, be you?"

Fidelia's pride was touched. "I'm going to the store for my mother," she announced, in quite a shrill tone. Then she took to her heels, and the little wagon trundled after, with a wilder squeak than ever.

Fidelia kept saying over to herself, "Three pounds of your best raisins, and Mr. Lennox will come in and pay you." Her mother and Aunt Maria wished after she had gone that they had written it out on a piece of paper; they had not thought of that. But Aunt Maria said she knew that such a bright child

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as Fidelia would remember three pounds of raisins when she had been told over and over, and charged not to come home without them.

Fidelia had started about ten o'clock in the morning, and her mother and Aunt Maria had agreed that they would not worry if she should not return until one o'clock in the afternoon. That would allow more than an hour for the mile walk each way, and give plenty of time for a rest between; for Fidelia had been instructed to go into the store and sit down on a stool and rest a while before starting upon her return trip. "Likely as not Mis' Rose will give her a cooky or something," Aunt Maria had whispered to Mrs. Lennox.

So when noon came the two women pictured Fidelia sitting perched upon a stool in the store, being fed with candy and cookies, and made much of, or even eating dinner with the Rose family. "Mis' Rose made so much of her when you took her there before that I shouldn't wonder a mite if she'd kept her to dinner," said Aunt Maria. She promulgated this theory the more strenuously when one o'clock came and Fidelia had not appeared. "Of course that's what 'tis," she kept repeating. "It would take 'em a good hour to eat dinner. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if she didn't get here before two o'clock. I think you're dreadful silly to worry, Jane."

For poor Mrs. Lennox was pushing her chair every few minutes over to the door, where she would stand, her face all one anxious frown, straining her eyes for a glimpse of the small figure trudging up the road. She had made the blueberry dumpling that Fidelia loved for dinner, and it was keeping warm on the back of the stove. Neither she nor Aunt Maria had eaten a mouthful.

When two o'clock came Mrs. Lennox broke down entirely. "Oh dear!" she wailed; "oh dear! I ought to have known better than to let her go."

Aunt Maria was now pacing heavily between her chair and the door, but she still maintained a brave front. "For goodness' sake, Jane, don't give up so," said she. "I don't see anything to worry about, for my part; they're keepin' her."

At half-past two Mrs. Lennox stood up with a determined air. "I ain't goin' to wait here another minute," said she. "I'm goin' to find her. I don't know but she's fell into the brook, or got run over." Mrs. Lennox's face was all drawn with anxiety.

"I'd like to know how you're goin'," said Aunt Maria.

"I guess I can push this chair along the road just as well as in a room."

"Pretty-lookin' sight you'd be goin' a mile with one knee in a wooden chair."

"I guess I don't care much how I look if I only find—her." Mrs. Lennox's voice broke into a wail.

"You just sit down and keep calm," said Aunt Maria. "If anybody's goin', I am."

"Oh, you can't."

"Yes, I can, too. I ain't quite so far gone that I can't walk a mile. You ain't goin' a step on that scalt foot an' get laid up, with that weddin' comin' off, not if I know it. I'm just goin' to slip on my gaiter-shoes an' my sun-bonnet, an' take the big green umbrella to keep the sun off."

When Aunt Maria was equipped and started, Mrs. Lennox watched her progress down the road with frantic impatience. It seemed to her that she could have gone faster with her chair. Truth was, that poor Aunt Maria, plodding heavily along in her gaiter-shoes, holding the green umbrella over her

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flaming face, made but slow and painful progress, and it was well that Mr. Lennox and Cynthia
Lennox came home two hours before they were expected. It was three o'clock when Mr. Lennox came driving into the yard in the open buggy. Cynthia, erect and blooming, with her big bandbox in her lap, sat beside him, and the new Jersey cow, fastened by a rope to the tail of the buggy, came on behind with melancholy moos. Cynthia had bought her wedding-bonnet sooner than she had expected, so she had come home on the three o'clock train instead of the five; and her father had bought the cow sooner than he had expected, and had come to the railroad crossing just about the time that Cynthia's train arrived. So he had stopped and taken in her and her bandbox, and they had all ridden home together.

Mrs. Lennox stood in the kitchen door when they drove in.

"Oh, mother," Cynthia cried out, "I've had splendid luck! I've got the handsomest bonnet!"

"I guess you won't care much about bonnets," answered her mother; "*Fidelia's lost.*" She spoke quite slowly and calmly, then she began to weep wildly and lament. It was quite a time before she could make the case plain to them, and Cynthia and her bandbox, and Mr. Lennox and the horse and buggy and cow, all remained before her in a petrified halt.

As soon as Mr. Lennox fairly understood, he sprang out of the buggy, untied the cow, led her into the barn, turned the team around, with a sharp grate of the wheels, jumped in again, and gathered up the reins. Cynthia, her rosy cheeks quite pale, still sat in her place, and the tears splashed on her new bandbox cover. Mrs. Lennox had set her chair outside the door, and followed it, with a painful effort. "Stop, father!" she cried; "I'm goin' too!"

"Oh, mother, you can't!" said Mr. Lennox and Cynthia, together.

"I'm goin'. You needn't say a word. Father, you get out an' help me in."

Mr. Lennox got out and lifted, while Cynthia pulled. Mrs. Lennox's injured foot suffered, but she set her mouth hard, and said nothing. They started at a good pace, three on a seat, with Mr. Lennox in the middle, driving.

They had got about half-way to the store when they overtook Aunt Maria. Aunt Maria, with the green umbrella overhead, was proceeding steadily, with a sideways motion that seemed more effective than the forward one.

"I'll get out, and let her get in," said Cynthia.

"No," said her father; "it won't do; it 'ill break the springs. We can't ride three on a seat with Aunt Maria, anyhow, and I've got to drive."

So they passed Aunt Maria.

"Don't go any farther, Aunt Maria," Cynthia called, sobbingly, back to her. "You sit down on the wall and rest."

But Aunt Maria shook her head, she could not speak, and kept on.

It was quarter-past three when they reached the Rose house and the store. The store was in the front of the house, and the Rose family occupied the rear portion. The house stood on a street corner, so a good deal of it was visible, and the whole establishment had a shut-up air; not a single farmer's wagon stood before the store. However, as Mr. Lennox drove up, a woman's head appeared

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at a window; then a side door opened, and she stood there. She had on a big apron, and her face was flushed as if she had been over the stove; she held a great wooden spoon, too. She began talking to the Lennoxes, but they paid no attention to her—their eyes were riveted upon the store door. There was a speck of white against its dark front, and suddenly it moved. It was Fidelia's white tier.

"Why, there's Fidelia!" gasped Cynthia. She jumped out, not waiting for her father to turn the wheel, and ran to the store door. The handbox rolled out and the lid came off, and there was her wedding-bonnet in the dust, but she did not mind that. She caught Fidelia. "Oh, you naughty little girl, where have you been all this time?" cried she.

Fidelia's eyes took on a bewildered stare, her mouth puckered more and more. She clung to her sister, and sobbed something that was quite inaudible. It was quite a time before her father and mother and Cynthia and Mrs. Rose, surrounding her with attention, could gather that the import of it all was that she had knocked and knocked and nobody had come to the door.

"Knocked!" gasped Mrs. Rose; "why, the poor little lamb! Here Mr. Rose and Sam have been away all day, an' I've been makin' currant-jell' out in the kitchen. An' there's the bell on the counter, that customers always ring when there ain't anybody round. I've been listenin' for *that* all day. It's been so hot, an' everybody hayin', that I don't suppose a soul but her has been near the store since nine o'clock this mornin', and there she's stood an' knocked. I never heard anything like it in my life. See here, Pussy, haven't you been asleep?"

Fidelia shook her head in a sulky and down-cast manner, but there was a suspiciously flushed and creasy look about her, and they agreed that it was more than probable that a nap on the store steps had softened and shortened her vigil.

Mrs. Lennox had her up in the wagon on her lap. She took her Shaker bonnet off, and smoothed her hair and kissed her. "She thought she'd got to knock, I s'pose," said she. "I ought to have told her she didn't have to when she went to a store. Poor little soul! mother won't send her to the store again till she's bigger."

"I knocked an' knocked," wailed Fidelia, piteously.

She looked cross and worn out. Mrs. Rose ran into the house, and brought out a plate of cookies and a mug of milk, and then Fidelia sat in her mother's lap and ate and drank and felt comforted. But after the raisins had been finally purchased, Cynthia's bonnet picked up out of the dust and shaken, the little squeaking wagon stowed under the seat of the buggy, and the team turned around, Fidelia set up a grievous and injured cry: "My candy! my candy! I 'ain't—got my candy!" And she held up to view the copper cent still clutched in her moist little fist.

"Poor little lamb, she shall have her candy!" cried Mrs. Rose. Fidelia had never seen such a handful of candy as Mrs. Rose brought out from the store. There was a twisted red-and-white stick of peppermint, pink checkerberry, clear barley—a stick of every kind in the glass jars in Mr. Rose's store window. And Mrs. Rose would not take Fidelia's one penny at all; she bade her keep it until she came to the store again.

Aunt Maria was almost up to the store when they left it, and it was decided that she should remain and make a call upon Mrs. Rose while Mr. Lennox carried the others home, then he would return for her. Aunt Maria folded her green umbrella and sank down on the door-step, and Mrs. Rose brought her a palm-leaf fan and a glass of ginger water. "I 'ain't walked a mile before for ten year," gasped Aunt Maria; "but I'm so thankful that child's safe that I can't think of anything else." There were tears in her eyes as she watched the wagon-load disappearing under the green branches of the elm-

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trees. And Fidelia, in her mother's lap, rode along and sucked a stick of barley candy in silent bliss. —
Griefs in childhood soon turn to memories; straightway, as she sucked her barley candy, Fidelia's
long and painful vigil at the store door became a thing of the past.