

Through Grandmother's Eyes

Above the low hills of Putnam County, New York the faint light of dawn touched the trees and scattered farmhouses of Southeast's mostly poor farms. After the hard cold winter of 1820, April's first flowers were beginning to show. In one small farmhouse surrounded by fields and a low stone wall, lights shone from the windows. They had been on all night.

Behind a half-curtained window, a mother sat in a rocking chair holding her small infant in her arms. At last the baby's cries had stopped and she slept. The mother's head bent low over her child, her eyes closed and the rocking chair was still.

At the door, Grandmother Eunice stood for a moment, giving thanks in her heart that at last the terrible night was over. Taking care not to wake either her daughter, Mercy, or the baby, she gently lifted her tiny grandchild, Frances, from Mercy's arms and placed her in the cradle next to the rocker. Satisfied both mother and child were fast asleep, she tiptoed from the room.

In the kitchen her younger daughter, Theda, was already filling plates for three-year-old Polly and young Joseph who was nearly as tall as his father, Sylvanus.

The Blind Girl's Song

Eunice took her seat as Joseph looked up. "Pa and John went down to the barn," he pointed out. "Pa said not to wait for them. I can take breakfast down to them as soon as I'm done."

Eunice nodded. "It's been a long night for all of us, and I'm guessing John couldn't stand to hear his first born child suffering another minute. You be sure and tell him his wife and baby are both asleep now."

Theda slapped her wooden serving spoon down hard on the table and sat down. "Doctor or no doctor, whoever that man was who came last night, I can't believe putting those hot poultices on a six-week-old infant's eyes won't do more harm than good. I never heard such pitiful cries coming out of that poor little thing." Theda wiped away the tears that filled her own eyes.

"Now, daughter," Eunice said, "your father went all the way to Doansburg for the doctor, and if he'd been there he would have come. Be glad that man, stranger or not, was a doctor and offered his help. I'll admit using hot poultices didn't set well with me either, but it was clear the infection was bad and something had to be done. Let's give thanks and trust in God's good will."

By the end of a week the infection did seem to be better, but thick white scars had covered the eyes, and soon Eunice knew that her six-week-old grandchild could no longer see. Sadness settled like a cloud over the household. But Grandmother Eunice was a woman of strong faith. "Now daughter," she reminded Mercy,

“what can’t be cured, can be endured.” It was an old Puritan saying, and the Crosby family knew it well. Their family line went straight back to the Puritans who had first come to America on the Mayflower. Eunice and her family were poor, but they were hard workers with the same faith and courage as their Puritan ancestors. Before the year was out Mercy’s husband, John, died suddenly, and baby Fanny as he had fondly called her, was fatherless. Her mother was soon working as a maid to help support the family.

“God will provide,” Grandmother Eunice sang as she rocked and cared for her grandchild. She had already decided that little Fanny would learn to do the same things as sighted children. “And why not?” she said. “All babies come into this world ready to learn, don’t they?” she said, tickling Fanny’s small chin. “Didn’t I come from a family of eleven, and your grandpa, one of nineteen children?” Her tickling was making Fanny laugh. “That’s right, little one, you’re laughing just like any baby does when its Grandma tickles it. You will do well, Fanny Crosby!”

Fanny grew up to know every path and field near the farmhouse and every room with its furniture inside the house. Her grandmother had taught her well, and Fanny picked up sounds and smells and the touch of things quickly. From a toddler she’d learned directions and remembered them as she did everything she learned. At three years of age she had thought it was grandmother who needed to hold her hand. Today the October sun

The Blind Girl's Song

felt warm on her face and the ground under her bare feet drier and harder than summer earth.

“Fanny, I should have made you put on your shoes, child. We will have to watch out for the prickly burrs that love to ride whatever comes by.” Fanny knew by the flap-flap of grandmother’s steps that she was wearing her old gardening shoes.

“You know, Grandma, that my feet love to feel as much as the rest of me,” Fanny said. Grandma answered with a little squeeze of her hand and a soft chuckle. “Oh listen, Grandma,” Fanny said as she stood still. She turned her head slightly. “Hear it?” she asked. “It’s a bird calling in the tree near us for I can hear it moving on one of the branches. But it’s not one of the ones we know.”

“That, child, is a whippoorwill, and you can hear him calling his name. And I see him, Fanny, just where you are pointing, over in a maple tree on one of the low branches.” For a moment they stood and listened until the bird called again. “Now, let me tell you what he looks like, Fanny. If you add its nice white bristled tail, he’s not much bigger than the small oat loaves we sometimes make together. Its wings are mottled, brown and gray and black, and its breast is reddish brown.”

Once Fanny had seen the faintest glimmer of shining colors in a sunset when she and Grandmother stood at the top of a high hill. Grandmother had taught her the names of the colors. She could tell when it was day from the faint brightness that Grandma said was like looking through a window frosted over with winter ice so thick

that nothing else could be seen. She knew too when night came and the faint light was gone. Happily she could see all she needed with her ears and hands and feet and nose, and imagine all that anyone described for her.

Fanny heard her grandmother step to the side of the path and then the rustling of dry weeds and the sounds grandmother always made when she pulled weeds in the garden. In a moment she was back. "Here child, I believe I've mixed these well enough to give you the feel of bristled." Fanny reached to touch the small bundle her grandmother held, and let her fingers run over the mix.

"I see it," she cried, and she did see it with her hands, at once knowing what the word bristled meant. "What a fine new bird to add to our list." Fanny heard her grandmother throw away the bundled weeds, brush her hands on her skirts, but she didn't take Fanny's hand yet.

"Now, child, tell me just who is on our list and how many we know so far."

Quickly, Fanny named them one by one: the red-headed woodpecker, the mockingbird with its white chin, and the bird with a garment of blue, and the red-winged blackbird.

"Good, child," her grandmother said, "and soon we will learn about the meadowlark, the cuckoo, the yellow warbler, the wren, the songsparrow, the goldfinch, and the robin, but today how would you like to play a special game?"

"Yes, yes, Grandma, please let's, but I can hardly wait to learn all the birds. God has made so many."

The Blind Girl's Song

“He has, Fanny, and you and I whenever we take our walks together are walking inside God’s great book just full of the things he has made for us to learn from and enjoy. Do you remember what the Bible says about us and the little common birds?”

Fanny squeezed her grandmother’s fingers. In the mornings Grandma taught her the Bible, line after line, chapter after chapter. Everything she heard and repeated she stored in her memory. It was like there were shelves in her mind neatly stored with each thing she learned, all ready and waiting to be called whenever she needed them. “Yes,” she said, “Jesus told us that even with so many birds to care for, the heavenly Father has no trouble feeding them, and he said we are more valuable than those birds, and he easily cares for us,” she recited in her own words. “I can hear you smiling, Grandma.”

“I was smiling at your way of putting God’s promise to us, but how did you know?”

“When you smile, Grandma, sometimes I can hear the little move you make with your mouth, the tiny click of teeth. I know your face so well I know the direction your mouth is going, up not down.”

“Well,” her grandmother said, “you also know whether I have reason to be stern or happy.”

“Yes, but I can tell lots of things, like you are wearing your everyday long black dress because you’ve rolled back those stiff cuffs. And I can feel the buttons down the front are worn and not the nice new ones on your good Sunday dress.”

“And don’t I know that your mother has told you that all Southeast women wear long black dresses with stiff white cuffs and buttons down to the waist, and save the best for Sunday,” Grandma said and chuckled.

“Ah, this is the spot I’ve been looking for, Fanny, for our game. Come sit here on this old log right next to me.” In a moment Fanny was seated on the log. “Now, child,” her grandmother began, “all around us are trees, maple, oak, a wild apple tree, birch, even an ancient cherry tree. Do you remember yesterday’s wind how it whistled around the house? Well, it has made a lovely mix of leaves off the trees here, and blown some of them up against our log. You know the trees by touching their bark and feeling the shape of their leaves, even smelling them and tracing the veins on their leaves, so here is our game for today. Shall we see if you can tell which of these leaves belonged to which tree? Remember the leaves are drier now and some are curled, even a bit broken, but you may feel until you find the best of the lot.”

Eagerly Fanny knelt by the log feeling for the piles of leaves and carefully sorting among them. Sometimes she held them to her nose, some she quickly put aside and others she piled into her skirt. When she was satisfied with her pile she held them up one by one and gave the name of their tree, then set them aside. Only once did she hesitate over a shriveled cherry leaf, smelled it again, felt it, and firmly said, “cherry tree.” She had identified perfectly all of the leaves in

The Blind Girl's Song

her pile, and again heard her grandma smile. The day ended all too soon.

Fanny liked evening meal time when Grandpa and uncle Joseph came in from the fields, Mother came home from work, and Aunt Theda and Grandmother called them all to supper. The little house filled up quickly. She and Polly who was almost three years older than herself, though Polly was her aunt too, were always the last to sit down at the table. Fanny giggled, thinking as she slid onto the bench next to Polly, that they were also the first to leave to join the village children playing outdoors. When it grew dark and mothers called their children home, Fanny, who could not see with her eyes and played just as well in the dark was the last to leave. She easily climbed trees, played the games the others played, even rode bareback when she had a mind to. Of Grandpa's two horses, old Dobbin knew her, and let her hold on tight to his mane while she urged him to run. It drove Luke, who worked in the barn, wild though she tried to tell him that Dobbin would never run into anything. Her mother would have protected her from many things, but Grandmother knew Fanny could and would do most anything sighted children did, including getting into mischief.

Evenings before bedtime were never dull in Fanny's family. Grandpa and her mother took turns reading aloud exciting stories and poems. Fanny's favorites were tales of robbers, stories of the Wild West, of Greek heroes, and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Later upstairs in her bed if she listened carefully she could hear Grandpa reading aloud tales of the strange knight Don Quixote, or the robber chieftain Rinaldo Rhinaldine. "I shall be a soldier when I am grown," Fanny would tell herself, "or maybe a sailor and have adventures." Sundays when they walked barefoot to church, carrying their shoes until they came to the church, she thought she might become a minister. She was sure she could preach a better sermon than the pastor.

When she sat on the hard bench in the little church it seemed to Fanny that the preacher's sermons would never end. Week after week, Fanny could hear the heavy breathing and light snore now and then of the men who were dozing into their long beards. Others smoked clay pipes and filled the air with the smell of tobacco. She was happy when the congregation got to sing. Since the church was too poor for books, one of the deacons would always do what was called lining out the Psalm. The deacon would sing one line of a Psalm, and the congregation would repeat it until they had finished the Psalm. Fanny loved to sing and could have gone on much longer.

Fanny knew one place where Bible stories came alive, and where prayer was really talking to God. It was at her grandmother's rocking chair. Grandma made the Bible stories real and explained them so that she and Polly could understand. It was a kind Heavenly Father who sent his only son, Jesus Christ into the world to

The Blind Girl's Song

save it and be a Friend to all mankind. We could ask him for everything. “But,” she would add, “remember that if God does not give you what you ask, then he has something better in store for you.” Fanny would not forget. Her mother wanted more than anything for Fanny’s eyes to be healed.

“Soon, Fanny will go and visit a doctor who knows all about eyes and see how he can help us.” Fanny listened but thought little more about it, until the day her mother packed their things and said, “We leave tomorrow morning.”

Fanny wanted her grandmother to come with them on the trip to New York City, but mother said no. “It will take all the money I’ve saved since you were born,” her mother said, “for the two of us to go and see Dr Mott at his eye clinic in New York. But just think how wonderful it will be if he can fix your eyes, child.”

First she and her mother had ridden in the wagon all the way to the town of Sing Sing. By the time they went on board the boat waiting to take them on the Hudson River for the rest of the trip to New York, Fanny wanted to know about everything around her. Already she felt the wind on her face and the smells of the river it carried. The sounds of gulls and the busy port were new and Fanny laughed imagining it all. It was fifty-five miles to the City and would take them most of two days, and she soon made friends with the friendly captain and his crew. Her mother was too seasick to come up on deck, but Fanny had no trouble

at all. When the captain asked her to sing for them, she sang the ballad of the bachelors, a song the village children sang, and soon had them all laughing and clapping. Song followed song, and when it was over a cow that a farmer was taking down river began mooing loudly as if it were trying to sing. It turned out that the cow needed milking. That evening Mercy used the milk to make custard for everyone on board.

Afterwards Fanny sat on deck listening to the musical sound of the waves. Suddenly the setting sun shone so brilliantly on the waters that Fanny gasped. Though it was only the faintest gleams of colors Fanny saw, she knew she had seen them! As quickly as it had come that few seconds of color was gone, but Fanny had already stored it in her memory and she knew she would never ever forget that glimpse of colors.

Fanny could see nothing at all but she could hear it all, all of the city life around her. New York City was a noisy place, peddlers crying their wares, horses and wagons clomping on cobbled streets, and people everywhere. She was glad to step out of the busy street into the quiet of the eye doctor's office. The eye exam was long as two doctors examined Fanny's eyes.

"There is nothing we can do," doctor Mott had told her mother. "Poor child, she will always be blind." Fanny heard his words and felt the pat of his hand on her head, but she felt inside the way she always did. Whatever sight was she didn't need it at all.

The Blind Girl's Song

The night they reached home Fanny heard her mother weeping, and then her Grandmother's words. "Now daughter, if the Lord does not give what you prayed for, then he knows that it is better for you not to have it."

That very week Fanny's mother got a new job as a housekeeper in the nearby town of North Salem. "Fanny," her mother said, "I have good news for you. We are to live together in my new employer's house. Your grandmother will come several times a week to visit, and you will have lots of other children in the village to play with. Most of the people in North Salem are Quakers and I think you will like it there."

Fanny didn't just like it there, she loved it! Soon she was speaking the plain language of the Quakers. One of the villagers kindly gave her rides on his wagon to the local mill, even on days when she invited herself. "No, thee ain't going with me," he would say some days, and Fanny was always sure he would give in when she said, "David, I tell thee I am going to mill with thee." Fanny would barely wait for his next words.

"Well, get thy bonnet and come along."

The Quaker church, The Society of Friends, was much more interesting than the church back home Fanny thought. The speaker barely stopped for breath in his sermons, and there were hymns! All the hymns told stories of sinners who died suddenly without hope. Anyone who had not repented and become a Christian could die anytime, children or grown-ups, without

hope. Being ready to die was very important if one was to know for sure they were going to heaven. The hymns did make one think, and Fanny did love a good story even those about poor sinners.

Grandmother came often to teach her while her mother worked. Soon Fanny had memorized many parts of the Bible. She was nearly eight years old now, and life in North Salem should have been good the way it had been when they first came, but Fanny could feel inside that something had changed. Often people now told her, "Oh, Fanny, because you're blind you couldn't see anything if you did come with us." Or, "Fanny, you can't help with this because you're blind," or "that's not something you need to bother about since you can't go to school." Fanny began to wonder, and a little voice inside seemed to be telling her, "You are not like the children you play with. They can see and you can't." Whatever it was that sighted children had, she must not have it. And how could she learn the things she wanted without it? She began to feel sad.

Fanny knew what she had to do. She found her mother's rocking chair in the small room and knelt down next to it. It wasn't Grandmother's chair, but it would do. "Dear God," she prayed, "am I still your child even though I am blind? Your world is so big, God. Is there a little place you may have for me in your world?" It seemed to her that in the stillness of the room she suddenly knew that God was telling her in her heart, "Don't be sad, child. You are going to be

The Blind Girl's Song

happy and useful in your blindness.” Fanny smiled. As Grandma said, “Troubles can be borne when God has good things ahead for you.” She began a poem about a happy blind child.