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Over the River and through the woods

Clifford D. Simak

The two children came trudging down the lane in applecanning time, when the first goldenrods were blooming and the wild asters large in bud. They looked, when she first saw them, out the kitchen window, like children who were coming home from school, for each of them was carrying a bag in which might have been their books. Like Charles and James, she thought, like Alice and Maggie - but the time when those four had trudged the lane on their daily trips to school was in the distant past. Now they had children of their own who made their way to school.

She turned back to the stove to stir the cooking apples, for which the wide-mouthed jars stood waiting on the table, then once more looked out the kitchen window. The two of them were closer now and she could see that the boy was the older of the two - ten, perhaps, and the girl no more than eight.

They might be going past, she thought, although that did not seem too likely, for the lane led to this farm and to nowhere else.

They turned off the lane before they reached the barn and came sturdily trudging up the path that led to the house. There was no hesitation in them; they knew where they were going.

She stepped to the screen door of the kitchen as they came onto the porch and they stopped before the door and stood looking up at her.

The boy said: 'You are our grandma. Papa said we were to say at once that you were our grandma.'

'But that's not...,' she said, and stopped. She had been about to say that it was impossible that she was not their grandma. And, looking down into the sober, childish faces, she was glad that she had not said the words.

'I am Ellen,' said the girl, in a piping voice.

'Why, that is strange,' the woman said. 'That is my name, too.'

The boy said, 'My name is Paul.'

She pushed open the door for them and they came in, standing silently in the kitchen, looking all about them as if they'd never seen a kitchen.

'It's just like Papa said,' said Ellen. 'There's the stove and the churn and...'

The boy interrupted her. 'Our name is Forbes,' he said.

This time the woman couldn't stop herself. 'Why, that's impossible,' she

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said. 'That is our name, too.'

The boy nodded solemnly. 'Yes, we knew it was.'

'Perhaps,' the woman said, 'you'd like some milk and cookies.'

'Cookies!' Ellen squealed, delighted.

'We don't want to be any trouble,' said the boy. 'Papa said we were to be no trouble.'

'He said we should be good,' piped Ellen.

'I am sure you will be,' said the woman, 'and you are no trouble.'

In a little while, she thought, she'd get it straightened out.

She went to the stove and set the kettle with the cooking apples to one side, where they would simmer slowly.

'Sit down at the table,' she said. 'I'll get the milk and cookies.'

She glanced at the clock, ticking on the shelf. Four o'clock, almost. In just a little while the men would come in from the fields. Jackson Forbes would know what to do about this; he had always known.

They climbed up on two chairs and sat there solemnly, staring all about them, at the ticking clock, at the wood stove with the fire glow showing through its draft, at the wood piled in the wood box, at the butter churn standing in the corner.

They set their bags on the floor beside them, and they were strange bags, she noticed. They were made of heavy cloth or canvas, but there were no drawstrings or no straps to fasten them. But they were closed, she saw, despite no straps or strings.

'Do you have some stamps?' asked Ellen.

'Stamps?' asked Mrs Forbes.

'You must pay no attention to her,' said Paul. 'She should not have asked you. She asks everyone and Mama told her not to.'

'But stamps?'

'She collects them. She goes around snitching letters that other people have. For the stamps on them, you know.'

'Well now,' said Mrs Forbes, 'there may be some old letters. We'll look for them later on.'

She went into the pantry and got the earthen jug of milk and filled a plate with cookies from the jar. When she came back they were sitting there sedately, waiting for the cookies.

'We are here just for a little while,' said Paul. 'Just a short vacation. Then our folks will come and get us and take us back again.'

Ellen nodded her head vigorously. 'That's what they told us when we went. When I was afraid to go.'

'You were afraid to go?'

'Yes. It was all so strange.'

'There was so little time,' said Paul. 'Almost none at all. We had to leave so fast.'

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'And where are you from?' asked Mrs Forbes. 'Why,' said the boy, 'just a little ways from here. We walked just a little ways and of course we had the map. Papa gave it to us and he went over it carefully with us...'

'You're sure your name is Forbes?'

Ellen bobbed her head. 'Of course it is,' she said. 'Strange,' said Mrs Forbes. And it was more than strange, for there were no other Forbes in the neighborhood except her children and her grandchildren and these two, no matter what they said, were strangers.

They were busy with the milk and cookies and she went back to the stove and set the kettle with the apples back on the front again, stirring the cooking fruit with a wooden spoon.

'Where is Grandpa?' Ellen asked.

'Grandpa's in the field. He'll be coming in soon. Are you finished with your cookies?'

'All finished,' said the girl.

'Then we'll have to set the table and get the supper cooking. Perhaps you'd like to help me.'

Ellen hopped down off the chair. 'I'll help,' she said. 'And I,' said Paul, 'will carry in some wood. Papa said I should be helpful. He said I could carry in the wood and feed the chickens and hunt the eggs and...'

'Paul,' said Mrs Forbes, 'it might help if you'd tell me what your father does.'

'Papa,' said the boy, 'is a temporal engineer.'

The two hired men sat at the kitchen table with the checkerboard between them. The two older people were in the living room.

'You never saw the likes of it,' said Mrs Forbes. 'There was this piece of metal and you pulled it and it ran along another metal strip and the bag came open. And you pulled it the other way and the bag was closed.'

'Something new,' said Jackson Forbes. 'There may be many new things we haven't heard about, back here in the sticks. There are inventors turning out all sorts of things.'

'And the boy,' she said, 'has the same thing on his trousers. I picked them up from where he threw them on the floor when he went to bed and I folded them and put them on the chair. And I saw this strip of metal, the edges jagged-like. And the clothes they wear. That boy's trousers are cut off above the knees and the dress that the girl was wearing was so short...'

'They talked of plains,' mused Jackson Forbes, 'but not the plains we know. Something that is used, apparently, for folks to travel in. And rockets - as if there were rockets every day and not just on the Earth.'

'We couldn't question them, of course,' said Mrs Forbes. 'There was something about them, something that I sensed.'

Her husband nodded. 'They were frightened, too.'

'You are frightened, Jackson?'

'I don't know,' he said, 'but there are no other Forbes. Not close, that is. Charlie is the closest and he's five miles away. And they said they walked just

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a little piece.'

'What are you going to do?' she asked. 'What can we do?'

'I don't rightly know,' he said. 'Drive in to the county seat and talk with the sheriff, maybe. These children must be lost. There must be someone looking for them.'

'But they don't act as if they're lost,' she told him. 'They knew they were coming here. They knew we would be here. They told me I was their grandma and they asked after you and they called you Grandpa. And they are so sure. They don't act as if we're strangers. They've been told about us. They said they'd stay just a little while and that's the way they act. As if they'd just come for a visit.'

'I think,' said Jackson Forbes, 'that I'll hitch up Nellie after breakfast and drive around the neighborhood and ask some questions. Maybe there'll be someone who can tell me something.'

'The boy said his father was a temporal engineer. That just don't make sense. 'Temporal means the worldly power and authority and...'

'It might be some joke,' her husband said. 'Something that the father said in jest and the son picked up as truth.'

'I think,' said Mrs Forbes, 'I'll go upstairs and see if they're asleep. I left their lamps turned low. They are so little and the house is strange to them. If they are asleep, I'll blow out the lamps.'

Jackson Forbes grunted his approval. 'Dangerous,' he said, 'to keep lights burning of the night. Too much chance of fire.'

The boy was asleep, flat upon his back - the deep and healthy sleep of youngsters. He had thrown his clothes upon the floor when he had undressed to go to bed, but now they were folded neatly on the chair, where she had placed them when she had gone into the room to say goodnight.

The bag stood beside the chair and it was open, the two rows of jagged metal gleaming dully in the dim glow of the lamp. Within its shadowed interior lay the dark forms of jumbled possessions, disorderly, and helter-skelter, no way for a bag to be.

She stooped and picked up the bag and set it on the chair and reached for the little metal tab to close it. At least, she told herself, it should be closed and not left standing open. She grasped the tab and it slid smoothly along the metal tracks and then stopped, its course obstructed by an object that stuck out.

She saw it was a book and reached down to rearrange it so she could close the bag. And as she did so, she saw the title in its faint gold lettering across the leather backstrap - Holy Bible.

With her fingers grasping the book, she hesitated for a moment, then slowly drew it out. It was bound in an expensive black leather that was dulled with age. The edges were cracked and split and the leather worn from long usage. The gold edging of the leaves were faded.

Hesitantly, she opened it and there, upon the fly leaf, in old and faded ink, was the inscription:

To Sister Ellen from Amelia Oct. 30, 1896

Many Happy Returns of the Day

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She felt her knees grow weak and she let herself carefully to the floor and there, crouched beside the chair, read the fly leaf once again.

30 October 1896 - that was her birthday, certainly, but it had not come as yet, for this was only the beginning of September, 1896.

And the Bible - how old was this Bible she held within her hands? A hundred years, perhaps, more than a hundred years.

A Bible, she thought - exactly the kind of gift Amelia would give her. But a gift that had not been given yet, one that could not be given, for that day upon the fly leaf was a month into the future.

It couldn't be, of course. It was some kind of stupid joke. Or some mistake. Or a coincidence, perhaps. Somewhere else someone else was named Ellen and also had a sister who was named Amelia and the date was a mistake - someone had written the wrong year. It would be an easy thing to do.

But she was not convinced. They had said the name was Forbes and they had come straight here and Paul had spoken of a map so they could find the way.

Perhaps there were other things inside the bag. She looked at it and shook her head. She shouldn't pry. It had been wrong to take the Bible out.

On 30 October she would be fifty-nine - an old farm-wife with married sons and daughters and grandchildren who came to visit her on week-end and on holidays. And a sister Amelia who, in this year of 1896, would give her a Bible as a birthday gift.

Her hands shook as she lifted the Bible and put it back into the bag. She'd talk to Jackson when she went down stairs. He might have some thought upon the matter and he'd know what to do.

She tucked the book back into the bag and pulled the tab and the bag was closed. She set it on the floor again and looked at the boy upon the bed. He still was fast asleep, so she blew out the light.

In the adjoining room little Ellen slept, baby-like, upon her stomach. The low flame of the turned-down lamp flickered gustily in the breeze that came through an open window.

Ellen's bag was closed and stood squared against the chair with a sense of neatness. The woman looked at it and hesitated for a moment, then moved on around the bed to where the lamp stood on a bedside table.

The children were asleep and everything was well and she'd blow out the light and go downstairs and talk with Jackson, and perhaps there'd be no need for him to hitch up Nellie in the morning and drive around to ask questions of the neighbors.

As she leaned to blow out the lamp, she saw the envelope upon the table, with the two large stamps of many colors affixed to the upper right-hand corner.

Such pretty stamps, she thought - I never saw so pretty. She leaned closer to take a look at them and saw the country name upon them. Israel. But there was no such actual place as Israel. It was a Bible name, but there was no country. And if there were no country, how could there be stamps?

She picked up the envelope and studied the stamp, making sure that she had seen right. Such a pretty stamp!

She collects them, Paul had said. She's always snitching letters that belong to other people.

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The envelope bore a postmark, and presumably a date, but it was blurred and distorted by a hasty, sloppy cancellation and she could not make it out.

The edge of a letter sheet stuck a quarter inch out of the ragged edges where the envelope had been torn open and she pulled it out, gasping in her haste to see it while an icy fist of fear was clutching at her heart.

It was, she saw, only the end of a letter, the last page of a letter, and it was in type rather than in longhand - type like one saw in a newspaper or a book.

Maybe one of those new-fangled things they had in big city offices, she thought, the ones she'd read about. Typewriters - was that what they were called?

do not believe, the one page read, _your plan is feasible. There is no time. The aliens are closing in and they will not give us time.

And there is the further consideration of the ethics of it, even if it could be done. We can not, in all conscience, scurry back into the past and visit our problems upon the people of a century ago. Think of the problems it would create for them, the economic confusion and the psychological effect.

If you feel that you must, at least, send the children back, think a moment of the wrench it will give those two good souls when they realize the truth. Theirs is a smug and solid world - sure and safe and sound. The concepts of this mad century would destroy all they have, all that they believe in.

But I suppose I cannot presume to counsel you. I have done what you asked. I have written you all I know of our old ancestors back on that Wisconsin farm. As historian of the family, I am sure my facts are right. Use them as you see fit and God have mercy on us all.

Your loving brother,

Jackson

P.S. A suggestion. If you do send the children back, you might send along with them a generous supply of the new cancer-inhibitor drug. Great-great-grandmother Forbes died in 1904 of a condition that I suspect was cancer. Given those pills, she might survive another ten or twenty years. And what, I ask you, brother, would that mean to this tangled future? I don't pretend to know. It might save us. It might kill us quicker. It might have no effect at all. I leave the puzzle to you.

If I can finish up work here and get away, I'll be with you at the end._

Mechanically she slid the letter back into the envelope and laid it upon the table beside the flaring lamp.

Slowly she moved to the window that looked out on the empty lane.

They will come and get us, Paul had said. But would they ever come. Could they ever come?

She found herself wishing they would come. Those poor people, those poor frightened children caught so far in time.

Blood of my blood, she thought, flesh of my flesh, so many years away. But still her flesh and blood, no matter how removed. Not only these two beneath this roof tonight, but all those others who had not come to her.

The letter had said 1904 and cancer and that was eight years away - she'd be an old, old woman then. And the signature had been Jackson - an old family name,

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she wondered, carried on and on, a long chain of people who bore the name of Jackson Forbes?

She was stiff and numb, she knew. Later she'd be frightened. Later she would wish she had not read the letter. Perhaps, she did not know.

But now she must go back downstairs and tell Jackson the best way that she could.

She moved across the room and blew out the light and went out into the hallway.

A voice came from the open door beyond.

'Grandma, is that you?'

'Yes, Paul,' she answered. 'what can I do for you?'

In the doorway she saw him crouched beside the chair, in the shaft of moonlight pouring through the window, fumbling at the bag.

'I forgot,' he said. 'There was something papa said I was to give you right away.'