

# A Country Doctor

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# A Country Doctor

SARAH ORNE JEWETT

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# I

## *The Last Mile*

IT HAD BEEN ONE OF THE WARM and almost sultry days which sometimes come in November; a maligned month, which is really an epitome of the other eleven, or a sort of index to the whole year's changes of storm and sunshine. The afternoon was like spring, the air was soft and damp, and the buds of the willows had been beguiled into swelling a little, so that there was a bloom over them, and the grass looked as if it had been growing green of late instead of fading steadily. It seemed like a reprieve from the doom of winter, or from even November itself.

The dense and early darkness which usually follows such unseasonable mildness had already begun to cut short the pleasures of this spring-like day, when a young woman, who carried a child in her arms, turned from a main road of Oldfields into a foot-path which led southward across the fields and pastures. She seemed sure of her way, and kept the path without difficulty, though a stranger might easily have lost it here and there, where it led among the patches of sweet-fern or bayberry bushes, or through shadowy tracts of small white-pines. She stopped sometimes to rest, and walked more and more wearily, with increasing effort; but she kept on her way desperately, as if it would not do to

arrive much later at the place which she was seeking. The child seemed to be asleep; it looked too heavy for so slight a woman to carry.

The path led after a while to a more open country, there was a low hill to be climbed, and at its top the slender figure stopped and seemed to be panting for breath. A follower might have noticed that it bent its head over the child's for a moment as it stood, dark against the darkening sky. There had formerly been a defense against the Indians on this hill, which in the daytime commanded a fine view of the surrounding country, and the low earthworks or foundations of the garrison were still plainly to be seen. The woman seated herself on the sunken wall in spite of the dampness and increasing chill, still holding the child, and rocking to and fro like one in despair. The child waked and began to whine and cry a little in that strange, lonely place, and after a few minutes, perhaps to quiet it, they went on their way. Near the foot of the hill was a brook, swollen by the autumn rains; it made a loud noise in the quiet pasture, as if it were crying out against a wrong or some sad memory. The woman went toward it at first, following a slight ridge which was all that remained of a covered path which had led down from the garrison to the spring below at the brookside. If she had meant to quench her thirst here, she changed her mind, and suddenly turned to the right, following the brook a short distance, and then going straight toward the river itself and the high uplands, which by daylight were smooth pastures with here and there a tangled apple-tree or the grassy cellar of a long vanished farmhouse.

It was night now; it was too late in the year for the



chirp of any insects; the moving air, which could hardly be called wind, swept over in slow waves, and a few dry leaves rustled on an old hawthorn tree which grew beside the hollow where a house had been, and a low sound came from the river. The whole country side seemed asleep in the darkness, but the lonely woman felt no lack of companionship; it was well suited to her own mood that the world slept and said nothing to her,—it seemed as if she were the only creature alive.

A little this side of the river shore there was an old burial place, a primitive spot enough, where the graves were only marked by rough stones, and the short, sheep-cropped grass was spread over departed generations of the farmers and their wives and children. By day it was in sight of the pine woods and the moving water, and nothing hid it from the great sky overhead, but now it was like a prison walled about by the barriers of night. However eagerly the woman had hurried to this place, and with what purpose she may have sought the river bank, when she recognized her surroundings she stopped for a moment, swaying and irresolute. “No, no!” sighed the child plaintively, and she shuddered, and started forward; then, as her feet stumbled among the graves, she turned and fled. It no longer seemed solitary, but as if a legion of ghosts which had been wandering under cover of the dark had discovered this intruder, and were chasing her and flocking around her and oppressing her from every side. And as she caught sight of a light in a far-away farmhouse window, a light which had been shining after her all the way down to the river, she tried to hurry toward it. The unnatural strength of terror urged her on; she retraced her steps like some pursued animal; she remembered, one after

another, the fearful stories she had known of that ancient neighborhood; the child cried, but she could not answer it. She fell again and again, and at last all her strength seemed to fail her, her feet refused to carry her farther and she crept painfully, a few yards at a time, slowly along the ground. The fear of her superhuman enemies had forsaken her, and her only desire was to reach the light that shone from the looming shadow of the house.

At last she was close to it; at last she gave one great sigh, and the child fell from her grasp; at last she clutched the edge of the worn doorstep with both hands, and lay still.

## II

### *The Farm-house Kitchen*

**I**NDOORS THERE WAS A CHEERFUL COMPANY; the mildness of the evening had enticed two neighbors of Mrs. Thacher, the mistress of the house, into taking their walks abroad, and so, with their heads well protected by large gingham handkerchiefs, they had stepped along the road and up the lane to spend a social hour or two. John Thacher, their old neighbor's son, was known to be away serving on a jury in the county town, and they thought it likely that his mother would enjoy company. Their own houses stood side by side. Mrs. Jacob Dyer and Mrs. Martin Dyer were their names, and excellent women they were. Their husbands were twin-brothers, curiously alike and amazingly fond of each other, though either would have