



Classics in Short No 131: Companions for Alice in The Runaway

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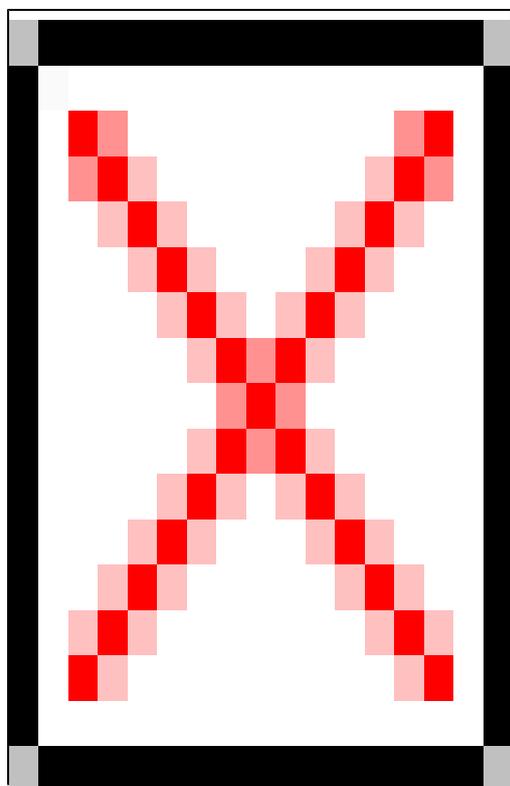
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Article Category:

Classics in Short

Byline:

The Runaway, a neglected classic



Clarice Clavering,

fifteen years old, is walking ruminatively in the garden of her substantial country home on the edge of London. Her mother is dead, her father is 'something in the City', whence he travels each day by train, and her chief companion is her governess, a pleasant enough lady but 'of few original ideas, no fancies, a reserved manner, and a well regulated mind'.

As an ardent youth,

taking delight in Walter Scott's **Woodstock** when we meet her, Clarice is dissatisfied with her genteel life. 'If only *anything* would happen' she thinks and, instantly on cue, there is a rustling in the shrubbery and something *does* happen as Olga emerges on the path:-

'?My goodness? cried Clarice. ?What is it??

?It's me? said the girl, naturally ungrammatical at such a moment.

'Oh do hide me; you will won't you? Oh, please do?'

Thus begins

Clarice's longed-for adventure, as she smuggles Olga into her bedroom and becomes complicit in her plan to go to Scotland. It seems that her parents live in India, where her father is a colonel in a Highland regiment and, rather than stay with her grandmother, who lives in a castle in Scotland, she had been sent to a boarding school in Yorkshire. It was not quite Dotheboys Hall for girls, but she hated it and had run away, although, being a scatterbrain, she had got on the wrong train and had ended up hiding in the garden of Clarice's suburban home down south.

Scatterbrain

does not fully summarize thirteen-year old Olga's intrepid but thoughtless determination to do things her way and this story of her secret stay in the Clavering household amounts to a succession of crazy escapades that put at risk Clarice's comradely efforts to hide her. At the same time, Clarice's trust in Olga's tale is compromised when she learns that an agony column in *The Times* is advertising a servant-girl's theft from a school in Yorkshire of money and jewels which may correspond to similar possessions in a bag that Olga is carrying. How can Clarice remain loyal to the girl for whom she has conceived a great affection while avoiding telling lies or denouncing her as a thief?

Irrepressible

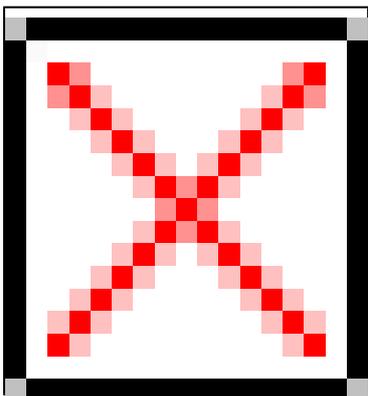
and violently rejecting her reputed dishonesty, Olga persists in madcap exploits ('Of course I ought not to have done it?' she remarks after one episode. 'One never ought to do fun ? but it was delicious?'). The reader comes to wonder at the ingenuity of her various contrivances and how Clarice's dilemma may be resolved until in a tremendous climax which involves the almost simultaneous arrival of police ('This here go ? though an uncommon rum go ? is of no manner of use...?'), a magistrate, and, in timely mode, Olga's Papa. Wrapping it all up a telegraph boy brings news of the apprehension of the other runaway, the Yorkshire servant girl, for whom Olga has been mistaken

There are perhaps few readers of BfK

who have read **The Runaway** or know anything of its author, Mrs Elizabeth Anna Hart. It was first published by Messrs Macmillan in the year that they also published **Through the Looking-Glass and what Alice Found There** (1872) and, as I hope may be seen by the above brief synopsis, it shares with that book a light heartedness and (with Olga too) an inventive delight in 'doing fun?' which is wholly at odds with the reputation of Victorian writers for children as dealers in religiosity and doom. (An unworthy thought strikes that Mrs Hart may have been couching a lance against Charlotte Yonge.)

The craftsmanship of the story,

its pacing, its convincing household scenes, the credibility and differentiation of its characters are such that one may also



wonder why it fell from grace. Indeed, it may well still be entirely forgotten had it not been for the intervention of that great artist, Gwen Raverat, who had loved the book as a child and who was responsible for persuading Macmillan to bring out a new (very slightly altered) edition in 1936. This she illustrated herself with a plethora of superb wood engravings which place the book in the top rank of illustrated stories for children. Macmillan

relinquished rights to it in 1953 when Duckworth were able to issue a new edition and Persephone brought it into the twenty-first century in 2002. It still remains too little known.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His book **The Ladybird Story: Children's Books for Everyone**, The British Library, 978-0-7123-5728-9, £25.00 hbk, is out now.

The Runaway, by Elizabeth Anna Hart, with illustrations by Gwen Raverat is published by Persephone Books Ltd. 978-1903155264 £14.99

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