



# Harpers *Magazine*

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## JOURNEY TO ENGLAND, 1941

FOOTNOTES FOR A FUTURE GIBBON

BY ELMER DAVIS

THESE disconnected observations of a traveler will no longer be news by the time you read them, and may no longer even be true; things change fast these days, and seldom for the better. But they were true in May, and they are here set down in the hope that some of them may be possible source material for the historian of the future; as anything written nowadays might have some value for those who may some day be fortunate enough to survey these times in retrospect, and to discern relations and significances that are hidden from us now. Sidonius Apollinaris, writing in an earlier time when European civilization was being destroyed by the Germans (but Germans of a different type, who had some respect for a culture created by other races, and were willing to save some of it if they only knew how) — Sidonius Apollinaris, whistling to keep up his courage among evils which he seems to have hoped were transitory, doubtless thought that his correspond-

ence would be preserved for the elegance of his style. It would have pained him to foresee that he would be read by men who thought his style atrocious but found his letters invaluable for their passing mention of things going on around him to which, the reader sometimes feels, he paid no more attention than he could help.

So present-day estimates and forecasts would be sounding brass and tinkling cymbal to the future historian who may find something useful in trivial incidents of travel—supposing, that is, that there are any future historians. If the Nazis win this war its history will be written by men trained in the school of Dr. Goebbels, and nobody will ever know what really happened; past and future history too may be streamlined into something that would not have been recognized as history by any historians of the past, except the teleologists of the Deuteronomic school. But since, at this writing, it seems likely that the Nazis can be licked if the American people

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*Title:* How Edith McGillcuddy Met R. L. Stephenson

*Date of first publication:* 1941

*Author:* John Steinbeck (1902-1968)

*Date first posted:* Apr. 24, 2021

*Date last updated:* Apr. 24, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210461

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# HOW EDITH McGILLCUDDY MET R. L. STEVENSON

A STORY

BY  
JOHN STEINBECK

First published *Harpers Magazine*, August 1941.  
Also published under the title *Edith McGillcuddy*.

Salinas was a dirty little California cow-town in 1879. There was a small and consistent vicious element; there was a large wavering element, likely to join the vicious element on Saturday night and go to church repentant on Sunday. And there was a small embattled good element, temperance people, stern people.

Twenty saloons kept the town in ignorance and vice while five churches fought valiantly for devotion, temperance, and decency.

The McGillcuddys belonged by right, by race, and by inclination to the good element. Mr. McGillcuddy passed the plate in the Methodist church; for the McGillcuddy family had joined the Methodists at a time when anyone who wasn't a Presbyterian was automatically an atheist or an idolator. Mrs. McGillcuddy labored at making the trousers that were sent twice a year to Africa and to the Sandwich Islands to curb the immorality of those backward peoples.

The little twelve-year-old Edith McGillcuddy, however, was a problem. Born to the good element, her instincts were bad in the matter of the company she kept. She could and did play decorously with the children of her own class but, left to her own devices, she invariably drifted to those dirty-faced children who, if they went to Sunday school at all, worshipped sticks and stones in the basement of the Catholic church. This was a matter of alarm and sometimes of anger to Mr. and Mrs. McGillcuddy.

One Sunday morning in summer, when the sunshine lay sweetly on the weedy lots and when the sloughs on the edge of town sent up an arrogant smell of moss and frogs and tules, Edith was given five cents and started on her way to Sunday school. She had no intention of going anywhere else. Of course she rattled a stick against the fence pickets as she went along, but it was a small clean stick. She walked carefully to keep dust from flying on her blacking shoes, and she didn't climb a fence and cut across lots because by so doing she might have torn her long black stockings. She brought her blond braid round in front every now and then to see that the pink hair ribbon was stiff and perfect.

Had she climbed the fence none of this adventure would have happened. She walked around it instead and, at the corner, sitting among the mallow weeds, was Susy Nugger, a little girl of Edith's age but not of her class. Susy's hair strung down over her eyes like the forelock of a pony. Her face was sticky and streaked where candy juice had collected dust; one puffed cheek was tight-stretched over a black all-day sucker. Her gingham dress was gray with dirt and she wore neither shoes nor stockings. Susy reclined among the yellowing mallow weeds and looked at the light summer sky. Occasionally she removed the sucker to see how it was getting along.

Edith didn't see Susy until she came abreast and until Susy spoke. "Where you going?"

Edith knew she shouldn't stop, but she did. "Going to Sunday school. What you doing?"

"Sucking on a sucker, and I bet you wish you had one," said Susy. Her words were mushy because of the sucker. The two girls eyed each other belligerently.

"Well, I guess you better go on," said Susy. "I'm going to a free funeral." She watched with satisfaction the interest rising in Edith's face, and she saw with malice that Edith was unconsciously picking her hair ribbon.

"What's a free funeral?" Edith demanded. "They're all free. They don't even pass the plate at funerals. I been to lots of them."

Susy plucked some little cheeses from the mallow weeds and put them in her mouth on top of the sucker. "I bet you never went to a funeral that had a free train ride to it."

Edith's hair ribbon suffered. "Train ride to where?"

“To Monterey, that’s where, and back too. And it don’t cost a cent to mourners or friends of the deceased.”

“I bet you aren’t a mourner or a friend,” said Edith.

Susy took the paling sucker from her mouth and regarded it maddeningly. “Well, if I cry a little ever’body’ll think I am.” Edith scuffed one toe in the dirt, forgetting the new blacking. “Why’nt you come along?” Susy suggested.

“No. I got to go to Sunday school. Got the nickel for the plate right here.”

“Why’nt you wait till next Sunday and put two nickels in. They don’t care just as long as they get it sometime.”

“God might not like it,” said the weakening Edith.

Susy guilefully pressed on. Nice-people she might not be, but logician she was. “When you pray for something do you get it right off? No, sometimes you wait a long time for it and sometimes you don’t get it at all. I prayed for about a million things and I never even got a smell of them. Why’nt you let God wait a week for his nickel?”

This was wrong, and Edith knew it was terribly wrong, but Susy was powerful and subtle. Out of her gingham pocket she drew a huge all-day sucker, scarlet and shiny. “I was saving this red one for the funeral. It’s a hot one.”

Edith gave up. “The red ones always are hot,” she said kindly.

“Well, this one is the hottest you ever had. I tasted it. It’ll burn the mouth right out of you. I ate the black one first because I like the red ones best, but you can have it.”

Edith accepted the sucker and the bribe. “What train we going on, the big train?”

“Of course not,” said Susy. “We’re going on the narragauge. Not just one car either. The Alvarez family rented the whole train. They’re going to bury ’Tonio Alvarez in Monterey.”

Before she put the big sucker in her mouth Edith rubbed it a little on her sleeve to prove she was still dainty. “I guess we better be going to the depot and get a seat,” she said.

The funeral train was festive in a mournful kind of way. First was the little engine rolling black smoke out of its head and puffing steam out of its belly. After that was the flat car carrying the coffin on two saw-horses. Flowers and pillow pieces were piled all over the coffin car and no one sat on it. After that came four more flat cars with benches for the mourners. Black crepe hung from the funnel of the engine and lined the sides of the cars. By special arrangement with the company the train bell tolled mournfully.

Edith and Susy got there just in time. The coffin was in place and the benches were nearly full of mourners. On the first two cars ladies and gentlemen in black formal clothes sat stiffly, ready handkerchiefs and smelling salts clutched in their hands. They had already got the churching over with. The priest and the family sat on the first car.

The last two cars were crowded with less formal people and the aisles between the benches were cluttered with lunch baskets and paper bags and cans of milk. Edith saw with relief that she and Susy were not the only ones who were combining a funeral and a free train ride. For there were courting couples whose self-imposed gravity was constantly racked with giggles. There were hair-trigger children who needed only a leader or an incident to break into happy riot.

The engine bell tolled mournfully on and the steam from the stomach of the engine hissed. Susy and Edith squeezed in and sat on the floor between two rows of benches. Already Edith’s face was streaked with red from the sucker; her hair ribbon was a ruin, and in crawling up on the flat car she had torn the knee out of one of her long ribbed stockings.

There came a pause to the tolling bell. Then the whistle screamed. The wheels turned and the little train gathered speed. It moved out of town and into the yellow grain fields. The wind rushed by. Some of the smaller bunches of flowers arose into the air and sailed away into the hayfields. Women gathered their dresses about their ankles and pinned their veils tight round their throats. The priest hugged his surplice close. Two boys were fighting already on the last car.

Through the ripening country the train tore at twenty miles an hour. The sparrow hawks flew up from the squirrel holes and the blackbirds soared away in flocks, like wind-blown black curtains. The wind was warm and it was perfumed with the funeral flowers and with the black smoke from the engine. The sun shone brilliantly down; the little train raced on through the hayfields.

Now a few people, made hungry by all the excitement, began to open the lunch baskets. Ladies pushed their veils up to take each bite of sandwich. The children in the last car threw orange peels and apple cores at one another.

The train left the yellow fields and entered the bleak country where the earth is dark sand and where even the sagebrush grows small and black. And then the round, sparkling bosom of Monterey Bay came into sight.

All this time the train bell tolled. Four men had climbed forward to the coffin car to hold down the larger and more expensive bunches of flowers and the symbolic funeral pieces, such as pillows and flower crosses and broadsides of red geraniums with lambs in white verbenas. A group of small boys on the last car began to snatch caps and throw them from the train.

It is remarkable that during the whole trip no one fell off the train. Nervous mothers spoke of it afterward, spoke of it as a provision of Providence, probably set in motion by the sacred nature of the journey. Not only did no one fall off, but no one was hurt in any way. When the train pulled into the depot at Monterey every passenger was safe. Ladies' clothes were a bit blown, but since their dresses were black they didn't show the engine smoke at all.

At the station in Monterey a crowd was waiting, for Monterey was the home seat of the Alvarez family, and the big granite tomb was in the Monterey cemetery. A hearse was waiting and a few surreys for the immediate family. The rest of the people formed in a long line to walk to the graveyard.

Just as they were about to move, the brakeman shouted, "The train will start back at four o'clock, and it won't wait for nothing."

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The granite vault was open, its bronze doors wide. The crowd of people stood in a big half circle facing the entrance, and the coffin was in front of the door. The people had put their lunch baskets behind tombstones, out of the hot sun. Edith was alone now, for the treacherous Susy had allied herself with a little girl who carried a big lunch pail. Edith had seen them walking in the procession, Susy helping to carry the pail.

And now the grave service was going on, and Edith stood between two big men. She could see the inside of the vault with the inscribed squares where other coffins lay. She felt deserted and alone. The priest said the hollow burial service. Edith began to sniffle, her eyes dripped—suddenly she sobbed aloud.

One of the big men looked down at her. "Who is this?" he asked of the big man on the other side. "I don't recognize her."

The other man glanced down at her and shrugged his shoulders. "One of 'Tonio's bastards, I guess. The country's full of them."

Edith stopped crying. She didn't know what a bastard was, but she was glad to be one if it gave her an official position at the funeral. She watched while the coffin was carried into the vault and slid into the little black cave that was ready for it. Then the tomb door clanged shut and the people began to disperse, some to eat their lunches in the cemetery and others to search out the shade of oak trees on the hill behind the graveyard.

The crickets were singing in the tall grass and the bay breeze blew in over the graves. Edith looked for Susy and found her with her new friend. They were sitting on a cement slab eating thick sandwiches.

Susy called out ungraciously, "Go away! There's just enough for Ella and me, huh, Ella? Ella's my friend. Huh, Ella? Ella knows me."

Edith turned disconsolately away. A reasonably well-fed McGillcuddy wouldn't think of eating thick sandwiches with Susys and Ellas, but Edith was growing hungry. Her insides were hollow too from the dry scanty wind. Nearly all the people were gone. Edith noticed that the wind brought with it a delicious odor. There was kelp in it and crabs and salt and clean damp sand; but it was a lonely smell too. As Edith walked down toward the bay she thought of Salinas. Were her people looking for her body down wells or in the quicksand holes of the Salinas River? For her family probably thought Edith was dead. Her eyes dampened. She thought how it would be to be dead, not in a dry, comfortable coffin like 'Tonio Alvarez, but floating in the stale water of an old well, or far down under the oozy quicksand. She felt very sad as she walked through the sunny streets until she came to the beach.

The little waves were lipping on the sand. A few rowboats lay bottom up on the beach. A wavy line of dead seaweeds left by the high tide cut the white beach in half. Edith walked thoughtfully to one of the overturned boats and sat down on it.

There came a scrabbling sound from under the boat. Edith got down on her knees and looked underneath. She leaped back quickly, for a dirty little face was peering out at her. The face and a frousy, frizzled head came worming out from under the boat, and a red dress followed, and long, skinny bare legs. It was a plain ragamuffin. Compared to this little girl, Susy was as elevated as Edith was above Susy; for this little specter of dirt and low-classness not only had a dirty face and uncombed hair; what was infinitely worse, she had on no pants under the dress, and she had not wiped her nose for a long time. She was on her knees now, clear of the boat, and she stared at Edith with animal eyes.

"What you doing under that boat?" Edith demanded.

The ragamuffin spoke in a hoarse, cracked voice. "Nothing. I was just laying there. What's it your business?"

"What's your name?" Edith continued sternly. Her tone cowed the wild girl.

"Name's Lizzie. And I never seen you before neither."

"Of course you didn't. I came to the funeral from Salinas."

"Oh! That old funeral. I could of went to that. But I didn't want to."

"Sure, you could of walked to it," Edith agreed sarcastically, "but you couldn't of come over to it from Salinas on a train."

The shot was deep. Lizzie changed the subject. "There's a lady in this town smokes cigarettes."

"I don't believe it," Edith said coldly.

A look of jeering triumph came on Lizzie's face. "Ho! You don't believe it, Miss Smarty-face. Well, I can show her to you with a cigarette right in her mouth."

"I don't believe it," Edith said again, but there was no conviction in her tone. She knew of course that it was impossible, but Lizzie's manner wavered the impossibility.

"You can come with me and I'll show you," Lizzie continued. "And we can make a nickel too."

"How?"

"Well, this lady that smokes and a man with long hair live up to the Frenchman's. They buy ever'thing. They bought abalone shells even, and they could of picked up all they wanted. Ever'body sells things to 'em. I bet they'd even buy dirt for a nickel. They aren't sharp; that's what my pa says."

"What are we going to sell them?" Edith asked.

"Huckleb'rries," said Lizzie. "You come with me to Huckleb'rry Hill and help pick a bucket of berries, and we'll take them down, and the man with long hair'll give us a nickel for them, and you can see the lady smoking."

"Is the man with long hair an Indian?"

"I don't think so. He's just kind of crazy. That's what my pa says."

"Is he scary?"

"No, he ain't scary. He treats you nice and gives you a nickel for ever'thing."

A warmth of yellow was in the afternoon sun as the two little girls climbed the hill among the tall straight pines. The straight shadows lay on the needle beds, and the little crisp dead pine twigs snapped under the girls' feet. Fallen pine cones littered the ground. Lizzie showed Edith how to bruise the Yerba Buena under the heel so that the sweet smell of it arose into the air. They tore their way through a blackberry thicket and the thorns didn't hurt Lizzie's bare feet. At last they came to the open slope where the neat huckleberry bushes grew, and the tips of the twigs were loaded with black fruit and the leaves of the bushes were as shiny as mirrors.

"There," said Lizzie. "Now we'll pick them. Don't mind if you get leaves in the bucket because those people will buy anything."

Edith watched while her new friend filled half the bucket with pure huckleberry leaves. That helped to make the bucket fill up with berries more quickly. It took very little time to make the top brim with the black, shiny berries. The girls' hands were purple-black with the fruit juice.

The sun was even yellower when they went back down the hill and the wind came swishing up from the bay. The little fishing boats with sails were spanking home in the afternoon.

"Suppose they aren't home?" Edith suggested. "The train's going back to Salinas at four o'clock."

"Don't you worry. They'll be sitting right out in the yard on the ground, and the lady'll be smoking."

They trudged through the dirt streets of Monterey. A few horsemen idled about and a few rigs were tied to the sidewalk hitching posts. A barouche passed, bearing a sad lady in black satin, and the polished spokes of the wheels flittered in the sunshine. At last Edith and Lizzie came to a large white adobe house. There were two storeys to the house and the curtains were red. Beside the house there was a high wall of limestones set in mud. Little eaves perched on top of the wall to keep the rain from washing the mud away. A heavy two-leaved gate was in the wall, and in the middle of the gate was a big iron ring. Over the wall the tops of fresh green trees showed and the tips of ivy.

Lizzie whispered hoarsely, "They'll be sitting right on the ground. They always are."

"On the ground? No chairs?"

"Right hell on the ground," said Lizzie emphatically, "and a tablecloth on the ground too."

"I don't believe it," said Edith.

"Well, you watch then."

Lizzie picked up a stone from the ground and hammered on the gate. A sharp voice called, "Pull on the ring if you want to get in." Lizzie reached and gave the ring a tug.

The gate posts must have leaned inward, but without help, the heavy leaves folded open by themselves. Edith's eyes widened; her mouth dropped open; her hands hid in the folds of her ruined dress. It was just as Lizzie had said it would be. The yard was flagged with smooth limestones. Nice trees lined the walls. Toward the back of the yard a white cloth was on the ground and a teapot and cups. On one side of the cloth sat a lady in a white dress smoking a cigarette, and on the other side squatted a long-haired young man with a lean, sick face and eyes shining with fever. A smile came on the young man's face, but the lady did not change her expression; she just looked blankly at the two little girls standing in the open gateway. Edith and Lizzie stood self-conscious and clumsy. When the young man spoke, some kind of a memory rippled in Edith's head.

"What is it you want, girls?"

Lizzie's hoarse, cracked voice came explosively. "Huckleb'rries," she croaked. "Nice fresh huckleb'rries. Fi' cents a bucket."

The young man put a lean hand in his pocket and brought out a coin. Edith and Lizzie marched stiffly forward. Lizzie held out the bucket of berries and took the coin in her purple paw. Then, without warning, she whirled and ran like a rabbit out the gate. It was so silent in the yard that Edith could hear the retreating footsteps for a time after the disappearance of her friend.

Edith turned slowly to the people. The lady's face had not changed. A little spurt of smoke escaped from her nose and writhed in her dark hair. The young man smiled ruefully. "She did you, didn't she?" he observed.

Then Edith's anger arose. "That's not all," she said sharply. "The bucket's more than half leaves."

The long-haired man smiled on. "It always is," he said gently. "One must take that into consideration."

"You knew it?" Edith demanded.

"Oh! Gracious, yes. But," he said softly, "I didn't care."

The woman on the other side of the cloth spoke for the first time. "They just take you for a fool. They make a fool of you."

The man pinched the tip of his nose. "It's not bad sport to be a fool," he said, "—for five cents." He faced Edith again. "Will you have a cup of tea?"

She looked yearningly at the fat brown teapot on the ground and at the fat brown sugar bowl and cream pitcher. "I'm not allowed to have tea. My mother won't let me."

The man bowed in the face of this law.

Edith continued quickly, "But if it's half milk, that's cambric tea."

"Certainly it is," he said sharply. "Certainly it is."

"And I can have that."

He poured it for her and held out the brown sugar bowl. Edith sat down on the ground. The woman still gazed at her, but Edith's courage came back. Edith was what she was. "You

aren't an Indian, I guess," she observed.

"No. I'm really not."

"Because," she went on, "you talk pretty near like Granma McGillcuddy."

"You have a Granma McGillcuddy?" the young man cried.

"My own name is Edith McGillcuddy and I live in Salinas and I came on a train to the free funeral . . ."

The man turned to the woman. "Take note of this," he said happily. "There is more in a line than I could do. There's condensation for you, and history, and if you were so minded—philosophy."

The woman looked slightly annoyed.

Edith sipped her cambric tea and continued, "I should of gone to Sunday school."

"You should, all right," agreed the man. "Salinas is twenty miles away, isn't it?"

"Yes, and it's a nice town, but there's no ocean beside it and it's got twenty saloons." Edith nodded dismally to show how bad the last fact was.

"The McGillcuddys of Salinas," he murmured, "and you came in a train to the free—look, what's a free funeral?"

At that moment a high scream filled the air. Edith grew tense. The scream was repeated. "I know," she cried. "It's the train going back." She ran wildly out through the big gates and kited down the hill. The train was just beginning to move when she climbed aboard.

And that was how Edith McGillcuddy met Robert Louis Stevenson.

[The end of *How Edith McGillcuddy Met R. L. Stephenson* by John Steinbeck]