

An excerpt from
Away Goes Sally
by Elizabeth Coatsworth

Chapter One: The Salt Hay

Aunt Deborah, the "middle" aunt, thought it was dangerous. Gay young Aunt Esther thought Sally was quite old enough.

"The child's very sensible, Sister Deborah, and strong in the wrists," she said.
"What do you think, Sister Nannie?"

It was Aunt Nannie who decided almost everything in the household. She was the eldest of the three aunts, short and solid, with red cheeks and black eyes under straight brows, and such energy that she could scarcely speak without making her gold ear-drops jingle.

"Of course the child is old enough to drive alone to the salt meadows," she answered briskly.

"Esther, you help her harness Dorcas, while Deborah and I finish packing the meadow victuals. Salt haying, I always say, is the hungriest work of the whole year."
Soon Sally was in the two-wheeled gig with the great hamper of provisions under the seat, driving slowly down the road.

"Mind you don't let Dorcas more than just trot, child!" Aunt Deborah called after her.

But Sally was in no hurry. She was filled with a sense of adventure-partly the adventure of her first drive alone, but more than that, a sense of something that was going to happen. She couldn't help feeling glad that it was baking day, with a big wash bleaching on the hedge, and the cheeses to be rubbed, and the vegetables to be picked, and the extra haying work, to keep the aunts at home just for this one day.

Dorcas trotted on, clup-clup-clupper-clup, each step raising a puff of dust. At Jordan Farm, Sally caught a glimpse of Mr. Jordan in the cheese room and waved. The hedges of chokecherry and elderberry between the road and the stone walls were whitened with the dust of late summer. The goldenrod plumes nodded above gray leaves, and the sun was hot and dry. Under the willows by the brook she pulled Dorcas to a walk. She loved the big trees with their small dark leaves in which a few wisps of hay had caught from the passing wagons. It was cool there.

Once out of the shadow of the willows, Dorcas trotted again up the hill into the village, past the Bell-and-Sixpence Tavern, and then by a winding road to the edge of the salt meadows where the hay grew wild in the marshes. The noon-day sun hung overhead, and the hay was almost burningly bright between the channels of blue salt water. Though the sea itself was out of sight, the smell of it hung strong and fresh in the air, and the trim gulls were drifting overhead. Their shadows went sliding across the hay, sometimes darkening for a moment the hands of the men working there.

Sally knew just where to look for Uncle Joseph and Uncle Eben and the three hired men, and quickly recognized their group from among the others at work. Uncle Joseph was leading the mowing with long steady sweeps of his arms, each ending in a sort of jerk, walking forward through a continual slow falling wave of grass and a hiss of steel on dry stalks. The other men had hard work to keep up with him. Uncle Eben had dropped behind and was honing the curved blade of his scythe.

"To cut well, you must sharpen well," he used to say with a sly wink at Sally. He was fat and lazy. He spent more time sharpening than cutting, but people liked to work with him because he was always jolly.

It was Uncle Eben who first saw the gig and waved his hat.

"Dinner, lads!" he called and scrambled nimbly up the steep bank to the road. In a moment he had Dorcas tied, and Sally swung out, and the big hamper in its place on the grass. By the time Uncle Joseph and the hired men had hung their scythes in a maple crotch and joined them under the trees, Sally had spread a clean cloth and put out the baked beans, corned beef, mince pie, doughnuts, and plumcake which the aunts had packed with last year's perry, a sort of cider made from their own pears, and a jug of Jamaica.

"There's no one can vie with Miss Nannie's fixin's," said one of the men, a neighbor who was through with his own haying and was ready to hire out now to help Uncle Joseph.

"Have some more beef," said Uncle Eben. "You're all 'way behind me. Joseph may lead at the mowing, but I lead at the eating."

"You had a head start, Eben," said Uncle Joseph.

"Head and heels," chuckled Uncle Eben. "Little Sally will never have to wait for me. I hope she will be able to say the same of all her beaux."

Sally sat laughing with the others, cutting cake and big slices of pie for them, and nibbling away like a little black-eyed mouse. She was happy, but she was still waiting for something-something far-off now, like a bird whose color and shape she could not yet make out. But it would come nearer in good time. Meanwhile she loved sitting with the men under the trees. Here and there other haying parties were eating in groups. There was much laughter and calling back and forth, one set taunting another for being behind in the work. Each large farm had a share of the meadow, marked off by stakes, not at all like the usual fields, for these grew of their own accord and were harvested in a sort of hard-working picnic, within smell of the sea. Bringing in the salt hay marked the end of summer. The English hay was already in, and the grain was reaped and the flax pulled. It was the jolly time of the year, a contented time when Uncle Joseph no longer watched for rain, and Aunt Nannie went about smiling. She knew that the cellar was full of potatoes and turnips, and the hanging shelves stocked with berry preserves and pickles, and the great chest in the spinning chamber stored with wheat, rye, oats, and barley for the winter months.

As Sally drove home she saw old Captain Dagget in one of the fields, his hair powdered in a queue, his gun lying beside him under the fence. He waved at her and she waved back. He had fought in the Revolution, and the years of hardship and bloodshed had turned him a little queer so that he still thought the Redcoats might be coming down the road.

"Seen anything of them Britishers, Miss Sally?" he called to her.

"Didn't pass any, Captain Dagget," she called back, and drove on.

The three aunts were sitting in the back room by the open door overlooking the new-mown field dotted by apple trees. They had on their calico dresses and their brooches, in case company came, and Sally saw that they had out their company sewing. As soon as she had unharnessed Dorcas, she ran up to her room and put on a fresh blue and white gingham. The cloth was home-made, but Aunt Deborah had taught her how to starch and she thought it looked very well. For a moment after bringing her chair beside her aunts she sat doing nothing but enjoying the smells-a smell of hay, a smell of late roses by the door, a smell of starch, a smell of birchwood smoke, a faint smell of lavender from Aunt Deborah's dress. The cloud shadows moved peacefully across the field. She could hear a horse's hoof-beats ringing hollow on the bridge down the road.

"I'm so happy!" she exclaimed.

"I should think so, child!" said Aunt Nannie, her ear-drops jingling, her needle flying in and out of the cambric she was hemming.

Sally picked up her work, a half-finished straw bonnet. She had braided the straw very smoothly and evenly and now was stitching it into shape. It would be too late to wear this year, but she would have it in the spring with a white ribbon. As she worked she listened idly to the horse. Instead of passing by as she expected, the animal turned at their lane, and she heard their Dorcas whinny.

"Go see who it is, child," said Aunt Nannie, never pausing in her work.

It might be anyone on any errand, yet as Sally jumped to her feet she had a feeling that the thing was now about to happen, falling like a stone into the quiet pool of the afternoon. In a moment she ran back, her cheeks pink with the hurry, and a folded and sealed letter in her hands.

"It was the post," she cried excitedly, for the post seldom stopped at their door. "I asked him to alight and take something to eat and drink, but he was in a hurry and could not stop."

Aunt Nannie took the letter.

"For Brother Joseph," she remarked, "from Cousin Ephraim Hallet who went to Maine. Well, well, child, letters have been written before this, and will be again. Put it there on the table until your uncle comes and let us go on with our sewing. It will soon be time to milk."

But though Sally picked up her bonnet once more and listened to the conversation of her aunts, her thoughts remained on the letter that lay behind her, full of mystery. And it seemed to her that the aunts were waiting, too, waiting for Uncle Joseph to come home and the letter to be opened.

This is the hay that no man planted,
This is the ground that was never plowed,
Watered by tides, cold and brackish,
Shadowed by fog and the sea-born cloud.

Here comes no sound of bobolink's singing,
Only the wail of the gull's long cry,
Where men now reap as they reap their meadows
Heaping the great gold stacks to dry.

All winter long when deep pile the snowdrifts,
And cattle stand in the dark all day,
Many a cow shall taste pale sea-weed
Twined in the stalks of the wild salt hay.