

The Way to Zion

By Jessica Larsen

Based on a true story

Richmond, Missouri, June 2, 1862

“Mary, what do you see?” Mary’s stepmother spoke softly from her sickbed.

“The fighting seems to be getting closer,” said Mary, looking out the window. The American Civil War was being fought just a few miles away. The sound of gunshots had filled the air since morning. Mary turned to her stepmother. “I’m so sorry. I don’t think we can leave the house to get the doctor.”

“Come closer.” Mary sat next to the bed and took her stepmother’s hand. “I know your father is still not well,” Mary’s stepmother said quietly, “but you need to take the family to Zion—your brother, your sister, and the twins. Don’t give your father any peace until he goes to the Rocky Mountains! Promise me!”

Mary knew how much her family wanted to go to Salt Lake City. After they heard the gospel and were baptized, they had left England to join the Saints in Zion. But would it even be possible? She glanced at her father, who sat silently in his chair. Three years ago, Father had suffered a terrible stroke that had paralyzed his left side.

Mary took a deep breath. “I promise,” she whispered.

Soon Mary’s stepmother closed her eyes for the last time.

One morning soon after, Mary decided it was time to tell her father about her promise. “I know I’m just 14,” she said, “but I must take our family to Zion.” She heard the twins waking. “I need to go get breakfast started,” she said. “But just think about it, please.”

A few days later, Father called Mary’s name. “It’s all arranged,” he said. His speech was still slurred from the stroke. “I’ve sold our land and the coal mine so we can buy a wagon, some oxen, cows, and a few supplies. A wagon company is leaving soon for the West. They’re

not Latter-day Saints, but we can travel with them as far as Iowa. When we get there, we can join a party of Saints going to the Salt Lake Valley.”

Mary threw her arms around him. “Thank you, Father.” Soon they would go to Zion!

The days passed quickly as Mary helped get the family ready for their travels. “Everything is going to be all right,” she told herself. “Soon we’ll be in Zion.”

But then Father fell ill. From the way his mouth drooped on one side, Mary feared it was another stroke.

“He’s too sick to travel,” she told the leader of the wagon company. “We just need a few days for him to recover.”

“We can’t wait,” the man said briskly. Seeing Mary’s face, he softened his tone. “You can stay here until he’s ready to travel, and then you can catch up with us.” With no other choice, Mary agreed.

A week later, Mary got her family ready to travel again. “The twins and Sarah can ride on the oxen,” she told Jackson, her nine-year-old brother. “Father can ride

in the wagon, and you can help me drive the oxen.”

“I’m scared,” Sarah said in a small voice. She was only six, and she looked tiny on the ox’s broad back. The four-year-old twins looked at Mary with wide eyes.

“We’ll just make good time and catch up with our group!” Mary said with forced cheerfulness.

On and on the Wanlass family traveled, for miles and then for days. Finally, even Mary had to admit the truth.

The wagon party had not waited for them. Mary and her family would have to travel to Zion alone.



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