

Edith Hawley's Opportunity.

(M. Louise Ford, in the 'Youth's Companion'.)

'I know, dear, it does seem hard that it should come in Thanksgiving week, but money is scarce, and it is too good an opportunity to miss. Mrs. Loring is well able to pay you, and it is quite a compliment, I'm sure, to trust you for three days to manage three children and oversee the housekeeping.'

Mrs. Hawley looked up from her mending and smiled encouragingly at her daughter, who was busily braiding the tablecloth fringe as if that important task must be attended to without delay.

'It's hard to miss Thanksgiving dinner with you all, and then to give up Nola Grey's party into the bargain,' said Edith, 'but I'll do it, for "money is king," especially when it means a new winter cloak,' and she carefully shook out her braided fringe, smiling bravely back at her mother.

'Then I may tell Mrs. Loring you will come on Tuesday?'

'Tell her I'll be there Tuesday night surely, and that I'll stand by the ship till she comes back.'

So Mrs. Loring went off to the wedding, feeling quite content to leave Edith in charge; while that young woman took possession of the reins, and prepared to manage the small household.

The Loring children soon found that nobody could make paper boats and caps and dolls better than Edith, and as for games, there was a new one every hour, if necessary. Even Ray, who was just over the measles, forgot to be fretful, and Della and Grace were as happy as sunbeams all day.

Wednesday passed very pleasantly, and it was not until Thanksgiving day that Edith began to feel a little homesick. But she conquered it bravely, saying to herself: 'Well, I'll do my best to make these little folks have a good time and be thankful, all by myself,' as she set about preparing the children for the feast that Bridget was ready to place on the table.

The short afternoon was a merry one to the children, for they popped corn, and roasted apples by the fire, and Edith told them wonderful stories of fairies and elves who did all sorts of kind and loving deeds on Thanksgiving day. When the lamps were lighted and the curtains drawn, the little folks began to grow sleepy, and it was not very long before Grace, the big seven-year-old sister, was ready to be tucked into bed with the others.

They were no sooner fast asleep, and Edith settled with her book for a long and lonely evening, than the door-bell rang.

'I wonder who it can be,' she said to herself. Then her eyes shone with pleasure as she greeted her friend, Carl Newton, who had come to see if she couldn't possibly get away 'just for a little while, you know,' to Nola's party.

'Oh, Carl! I wish I could, but I can't possibly; it wouldn't be right.' Carl could see, however, that she hesitated. She thought of the children, sure to sleep for hours, and of Bridget, who was to be in the house all the evening. What harm would it do just to join the merry company for an hour? In imagination she saw herself returning and finding everything just as she left it.

But in another instant the alluring picture was gone, and she said slowly but decidedly: 'No, I can't, Carl. I am very sorry.'

'Well, if you'll not, you'll not, I suppose, but I thought you might be accommodating enough to go just for a little while.'

'It's tantalizing to think of all the fun you

will have, and I do long to go, but I have made up my mind and I must make the best of it,' said poor Edith, looking down at the carpet to hide her tears which were ready to fall.

'All right—but it'll spoil half the fun if you are not there,' and with a decided frown Carl turned away, only pausing to call back a 'Good-night' hurriedly from the steps.

It was hard to take up the book again, for Edith was only a girl of eighteen, and the disappointment was a real one; but she succeeded in forgetting herself after all so completely that an hour had passed before she looked up from her reading and became conscious of some one's screaming, and of doors slamming.

She started up and had scarcely reached the door when Bridget, terrified and hysterical, met her, crying 'Fire, fire!'

'Where, where?' cried Edith, running toward the kitchen, whence came an ominous, crackling sound. She opened the door and a volume of smoke rushed out, through which she could see that the whole further end of the kitchen was on fire.

The children! She must save them first of all. They were asleep directly over that roaring furnace of fire.

Bridget utterly failed her at this trying moment. Unused to controlling herself in emergencies, the ignorant girl lost her presence of mind and thought of nothing but her own safety and that of her own possessions. She had flown to her room at the first alarm, thrown everything in wild haste into her trunk, dragged it down the stairs into the yard, and then fainted dead away.

Edith meanwhile had run up-stairs, and was groping her way through the rapidly-increasing smoke to the children's room, calling to Grace and Della to 'come quick.' She seized a blanket, wrapped Ray in it, and cheering the frightened little girls, and telling them to follow her, she turned again to go down-stairs.

Oh, how thick the smoke was! Which way should she go? She scarcely knew where she was in that unfamiliar house.

'Bridget, where are you? Do come and help,' she called frantically.

As if in answer, a firm, strong step came springing up the stairs and Carl's cheery voice rang out reassuringly:

'Here, this way, Edith; I'll help you!'

There was no time to wonder how he came to be there. Hastily passing Ray into his arms, she turned to help the little girls.

They had disappeared!

She heard their voices screaming with fright in another direction, and groping along through the darkness and smoke, calling constantly, found them at last in the bath room, where they had wandered in their bewilderment. A few minutes longer and they would have been suffocated, for Della had fallen exhausted, and it was only by great exertion that Edith at length managed to drag them to the head of the stairs, where Carl met her again, and half led, half carried them down the stairs and into the fresh air, while she followed with trembling limbs, but with enough presence of mind to gasp out anxiously:

'Oh, Carl, a shawl or blanket for the children—in the hall closet!'—and Carl ran to bring them, snatching as he ran a warm afghan and a very heavy cloak from the hall coat-rack.

By this time the alarm had been given. The firemen were quickly on the scene, and soon had the fire under control, confining it to the back of the house, while the neighbors gathered about Edith, praising her bravery, and

assuring her that no one could have done better. But the poor girl was crying hysterically and saying:

'Oh, what will Mrs. Loring think of me? To think this should have happened while she was away!'

'Nonsense,' said Carl. 'The firemen say it was caused by a defective chimney, and that it would have happened anyway,' and by the time the children were all tucked away in warm beds in a neighboring house, and Edith had had a refreshing cup of hot tea, she felt reassured again as to her responsibility for what had occurred.

'Where did you come from, Carl, at just the right moment?' she asked. 'You rushed in like the prince in the fairy tales and covered yourself with glory.'

'I went to the party,' replied Carl, somewhat shamfacedly, 'and I didn't have a good time at all. Kept thinking how hateful I'd been, trying to make you come, when I respected you all the more for not coming, and switching off without saying good-night. So I excused myself and thought I'd come up again and give you a surprise party. But I must say you got ahead of me, and gave me one instead. I found Bridget in a dead faint over her trunk, and then I knew that you were all alone fighting the fire. Wasn't I thankful when I heard your voice! You did work like a Trojan, Edith!'

'Oh, Carl,' and the girl covered her face with her hands; 'just supposing I had gone with you, as I wanted to! Those children would have all been burned to death!'

'Well, all's well that ends well, so don't think about such dreadful possibilities. It's all right now, and you're a heroine. If the Lorings don't appreciate you, I'll be mistaken,' said Carl, warmly.

Surely enough, when the early morning train brought the absent parents, their praise and gratitude were poured out upon Edith. The damage to their home was as nothing compared with the safety of their precious children, who were none the worse for their narrow escape. Not even Bridget was blamed, for she was so ashamed and distressed at her lack of presence of mind that no one had the heart to censure her.

When winter came with its cold winds it found Edith clad in the long-desired new coat, and she found it a most useful possession as she went back and forth from the city where she took the music lessons she had long coveted. She was able to take them now because a generous cheque had come to her one day in the mail, sent by those who signed themselves 'Your grateful friends;' so that, in more ways than one, Edith Hawley had reason to remember for many a long year that notable Thanksgiving day.

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