

* * The Story Page * *

The House That Could Not Burn.

"What is the matter with your house to-day, Mandy?" cried little Betty McFarland over the front gate.

She might well ask, for it looked as if a whirlwind had struck it; carpets and rugs and chairs and tables and bureaus and cups and saucers were all turned out to public gaze on the porches.

"Oh, we're house-cleanin'," answered Mandy joyously; "it's lots of fun." Mandy took everything as if life were a picnic. "We'll be all done when you get back," she called after Betty; "just you stop and see."

Betty was on her way to the village where with a hundred other girls and boys, she was taught in the graded school. She carried her dinner with her in a little basket, for on Tuesdays and Fridays she went to Miss Venable's for a music lesson, and did not get home till late afternoon.

The sun was hanging low against the rim of mountains in the west when Betty piled books and basket on the Withrows' front gate, and ran in to see whether they had finished cleaning house.

"Don't we look nice?" asked Mandy, enjoying results, as she had enjoyed prospects. "See, the sitting-room is blue-washed, and our new muslin curtains have a blue dot on them. Mother covered the old sofa herself with that blue chintz. Now come and look at my little room; it will take your breath away."

"I can't stop another minute, not to see a palace," said Betty, starting off on a run; "mother won't know what to think if I stay out any later. I'll take a long breath, and stop to-morrow."

Ah, to-morrow! Who knows what she holds in her fast-shut hand! Little Betty had been asleep for hours that night, and was dreaming of going up in a balloon, to reach Mandy's room, when she waked suddenly, with the sound of voices in her ear, and the night wind blowing over her. It must have been the breeze that put the balloon afloat in her dreams.

She sat up in bed, with her little heart in a flutter; what were mamma and Aunt Lizzy doing at the open window? And, oh, what was that red light in the sky?

"Put the quilt around you, Betty," said the mother, seeing the little girl was awake, "and come here."

Shivering with excitement and with the cool night air, Betty ran over to the open window, trailing the patchwork quilt behind her like a court robe. Away down the road, in the direction of the village, something was burning fiercely; she could see the flames mounting and falling through the feathery spring foliage; the smell of burning pine and palat, and a dull roar of flames, of hoarse shouting, or both, came to her ears.

"I'm afraid it is the Withrows' house," said her mother. "Your father and Uncle John have gone to help."

Betty stood spellbound at the window; there was a dreadful fascination about the sight. But the work of the flames was over presently, and the glare of the sky cooled down into a dull glow.

"Go right to bed, Betty, and cover up warm," cried her mother, presently; "I don't know what I have been thinking about, to let you stand in that breeze so long."

Betty went obediently back to her pillow, but the thought of Mandy's pleasure in her little room, and the blue-dotted curtains, was too much for the child; she burst into tears, and cried and cried until she slept from weariness.

The next day everybody went to see the smoking ruins, and offer help—except our Betty; she was laid up in bed with a soar throat.

It was a week before Betty was on the way to school again; the Withrows she knew, had moved into an old carpenter's shop on the roadside, and Betty hoped to get by without seeing Mandy. Her tender little heart sank from seeing her in the sad change.

But there was Mandy, looking as cheerful as ever.

"Why, Betty, I'm so glad to see you!" she cried in her old joyous tone. "I know you can stop a while, 'cause our clock has not struck 8. Oh, yes, we saved the clock, and a whole heap of things, and living in the shop is more fun than anything you ever saw!"

She took Betty in, to show how they had hung curtains and bedquilts for divisions. "This is my bedroom in the corner, see? I play that this bedquilt is flowered paper. Next is mother's chamber; she has tapestry on her walls, you must know. Now, this is our dining-room one part of the day, and then a fairy godmother named Hard Work makes it into a sitting room. It's just like playing all the time. Don't you wish you could live in a shop for a little while?"

That night, after Betty had gone to bed, she said to her mother:

"Mother, no fire can burn up Mandy's home; wherever she is, she makes it seem nice and cozy and homey."

After little Betty had pulled the cover up over her

shoulders, the mother came and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Daughter," she said softly, "we all have a home which can not burn; did you remember that? It is in heaven, 'the home of the soul.' Our best Friend says that in his Father's house are many 'abiding places,' and he is getting them ready for us. Isn't that nice to think about? Now, good-night, dear, and shut your eyes."—Magnet.

* * The Two Compositions. * *

BY ANNETTE L. NOBLE.

Several school girls were talking fast on the piazza of the Holmes house, and Nannie Holmes was talking faster than all the others.

"She says that we may ask any friend to suggest a subject, and that any one may criticize our compositions, but that she trusts to our honor not to beg or borrow our ideas."

"O, I was so sorry!" moaned Kitty Wells, "when she advised us not to write about Spring, nor Temperance, nor George Washington, nor The Flight of Time."

"Yes, it was too bad," said several girls, and Nellie Gray said: "I have one composition on 'The Seasons' that by changing a few sentences did for all four of them separately."

"Nonsense, girls; I like to write compositions. I mean to write my next one in poetry."

This surprising speech came from Minerva Powers, who was thought by admiring friends to be quite a genius.

"Poetry!" groaned Polly Hamilton; "plain prose is too much for us."

"I intend to be an authoress," returned Minerva, complacently.

"There's Aunt Laura," said Nannie. "Oh, girls, perhaps she could help us! Auntie, dear!"

A pleasant faced lady appeared at once, and laughingly exclaimed:

"I have been eavesdropping. Shall I tell you about one of my compositions and that of my best friend, when we were girls?"

"Do, and it may give us an idea," all the girls responded.

"Well, I was fourteen and Maria twelve. I wrote easily, like Minerva, but Maria said she would rather have her teeth pulled than to try to write. Now, one time a five-dollar gold piece was offered for the best composition written by a girl under sixteen, and every girl tried for it, Maria and I among the number. Well, I was not going to try any common subject. I wanted to be sure that my essay was fine, affecting and sublime in places. Maria worked even harder, and when the two were finished, we read them to my mother. Mine was about a most marvelously beautiful and perfect young maiden whose heart broke from loneliness. No one loved or appreciated her. One lovely day, exactly at sunset—it was a surprisingly fine sunset, all gold, scarlet and purple—this young person draped herself in snow white muslin, took a lily in her hand, stretched herself out in the sunset light, and died by degrees. She had, however, time to make a long speech, telling her friends to live as unselfishly, to be as good as she had been, and they would die happy. When the sun set she expired. The next day the entire village attended her funeral."

"I thought this was as fine a composition as Mrs. Stowe or Mrs. Browning could have written. I even thought mother might be in tears when I read it, but she was not. She almost smiled when she said kindly some things that I never forgot. First, that I did not know anything about my subject, and what I had written never could be true. A girl so good that a village full of people came to her funeral would not die of a broken heart because she was not appreciated—nor would she die of any other complaint for that cause. So good a girl would not be vain enough to dress in her best and wear flowers, even if she felt able to make a toilet a few moments before expiring. Dying people seldom have breath to make long speeches, and when death really comes the best are the meekest; all human goodness seems nothing, and we can only trust our souls to God's mercy in Christ."

"I was secretly much displeased. I felt that mother did not appreciate my talents nor my fine writing. I resolved to offer my composition for the prize, just the same."

"Then Maria read hers on 'Perseverance.' 'Perseverance is a virtue. A virtue is being good in some one way. There are several ways of being good, so there must be several virtues. I do not know how many. Perhaps nobody knows. Perseverance is keeping on when some folks stop. Some stop sooner than others, and such folks are said not to persevere. A virtue is like a duty. To persevere is a duty. Let us all persevere, and we will then do our duty and have a virtue besides. Duty and virtue are both good, and it is, therefore, good to persevere.' After that sentence Maria got so tangled up in her duties and virtues that she said she had to stop persevering because her head grew dizzy and she was really sick at her stomach."

"Poor, dear girl!" laughed mother. "Such composing must be very hard. It makes me almost dizzy to listen. Let us forget about the prize; and, Maria, I want you to do something for me. Do you remember little Dick, my pet nephew?"

"Indeed I do, the cunning little fellow?"

"He has broken his leg and can't come to the country this summer. I promised to send him an account of the dogs and horses, our picnics and fun generally. If I get a bit of paper, Maria, and take notes, will you tell me about that robin? Dick would be interested in that. I heard you tell Laura."

"Why, of course I will," said Maria, beginning at once. She said that the week before she was reading, with her cat, Thomas a' Becket, in her lap. Suddenly Thomas grew excited. His eyes looked like two big green beads with one black slit for the string to go through. He leaped down and rushed away like a mad thing. Maria ran after him to the orchard. Oh, the orchard was a beautiful place in May, when all the trees were in bloom! Some blossoms, well shaded, were as pink as peach buds; others, in the sun, were snow white, and one great tree sent down showers of sweet petals whenever the wind swept through its branches. Maria told about a crab-apple tree whose flowers are very large and beautiful, yet the fruit later was worthless. It was near a tree that looked like a great brown skeleton, for worms had nearly killed it. She had so much to tell of the sweet odors and the beauty of the orchard that she forgot to tell of Thomas a' Becket, who lost no time in getting to a tree up which a wild grapevine had climbed. Thomas was old and very fat. He rushed up that vine about three feet, then down he slid. Up he went again, down his claws ripped. Far above two or three robins, were rapidly circling around that tree, screaming as robins really can scream and 'squeal.' Maria insisted there was no nest in sight, no wee birds in danger, no bad boys near. Suddenly Maria saw a queer, pitiable thing. A fine, plump robin was hanging in mid air by a string around one slim leg. If he fluttered frantically right side up, over he would flop again, to hang head down, and all the time he was calling on his excited friends to help. They, like some people in trouble who wring their hands and cry—they flopped their wings and shrieked.

"Maria had stopped scrambling up trees when she put away her last doll. But her kind little heart could not resist these appeals. Up she went among the white blossoms into the very middle of what seemed a big bouquet. Then Robin Redbreast was scared, if possible, worse than before, and the sympathizing friends called out that now he would get his neck wrung. Instead of that a soft hand went gently around his plump body, deft fingers picked the tough grapevine tangle off his little stick of a leg, and lo, he was free! With one glad cry he darted above the tree top toward the deep blue sky, and the other robins gave happy chirps, following gleefully. Maria believed that big, fat bird went right home to tell his wife and children how it felt to dangle head downward and heels up."

"When she had finished her story my mother suddenly asked her if she were required to write three compositions in half an hour what she would do."

"Why, nothing, or perhaps a sentence or two of one. I was an hour over that Perseverance."

"All the same, Maria, in less than a half hour you have composed material for three very good compositions, one humorous one about 'My Cat, Thomas a' Becket,' let me read you this clear, interesting description of a real cat, his looks, tricks, and how he differs from other cats. Next you composed one about an apple orchard in May. You noticed the various tints of the blossoms, told how white butterflies looked like the flowers falling, and how blue the sky was. You remembered the field all yellow with dandelions across the fence and another of red clover. You love nature, and made a true picture in words, or a description essay."

"Then, laughing at Maria's astonishment, mother went on: 'You think the account of robin's narrow escape quite thrilling. Now, you can compose something worth hearing if you will remember a few things. First, be interested yourself, write what you yourself have thought or seen or felt or learned in words that mean the most to you. It is far better and easier to write about a cat or an orchard that is a reality than to make poor rhymes or tell about broken hearts and unnatural girls dying at sunset.'

"Maria was such a sensible girl she was quick to take advice, but I was not. I wrote my composition out on gilt-edged paper, and put in several words of four syllables. Maria's was the robin story made briefer. I cannot tell which of us was the most surprised when the committee awarded the prize to Maria. Since then I have come to understand the wisdom of mother's advice."—Christian Work.

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