

## \* \* The Story Page. \* \*

### Miss Laetitia's Memorial Day.

BY MARIE NELSON THURSTON.

Across the sweet green old-fashioned tangle of her garden, Miss Laetitia looked down the pleasant village street. It was three o'clock and people would be coming along pretty soon.

People said—even village people who were reasonably expert themselves—that it was perfectly wonderful the way Laetitia Peabody did find out all about everybody. To Laetitia Peabody herself there was nothing in the least wonderful about it; she didn't do anything—people just dropped in as they passed. She guessed maybe they knew how she liked to see folks since she had none of her own. In the beautiful world were Miss Laetitia lived, people were always doing kind things: perhaps the fact that, in her queer way, she counted any alights or unkindnesses things to pity people for and help them out of—like sickness or misfortune—may have had something to do with the sunshine that filled her life.

Down the street raced a dozen boys; a knot of little girls followed, linked together child-fashion, then more boys and more girls; people without question were coming along. Miss Laetitia settled her glasses more firmly and looked past the great syringa bush at the gate.

"Cynthia'd order to be comin' soon," she said, "she'll be all tucked out with the heat to-day. If school lasted much longer she wouldn't, poor child, that's certain! There she is this minute, white's a sheet! I've got to stop her."

She dropped her sewing and hurried out of doors. A girl was coming down the street, a slender little thing with delicate blue veins threading her temples and dark shadows under her eyes. She was walking slowly and evidently not even trying to answer the children who clung and chattered about her. Miss Laetitia stepped to the gate and put an authoritative hand on the girl's arm, nodding kindly as she did so, to the staring children.

"You run along to-day," she said to them. "Teacher's tired, and I'm going to make her come in and rest a little while."

The children went on hesitatingly with furtive backward glances at "Teacher." The girl smiled faintly into her friend's face; she clung to the fence almost as if she needed visible support for her faltering resolution.

"I can't today, truly I can't, Miss Laetitia," she said. "I've got all the spelling papers to correct, and part of the arithmetic, and compositions to read, and a lesson on daisies to prepare, and—"

Miss Laetitia's gentle voice was touched with unwonted sharpness. "There, stop that, Cynthia Allen! I can stand most anything but when it comes to tearing flowers to pieces so that the children can't go out into the daisy field without having a million lessons dancing in their faces instead of just flowers that they'd order love and play with and be as free with as the sunshine and shadows—it riles me all up. 'Tain't petals and sepals a child loves, it's flowers the way God made them. They'll hate them if they have to tear them to pieces and name the parts and draw them, and dear knows what! As if there wasn't time enough for that when they get older! I can't think of it without getting cross."

"I wish," the girl said with a little laugh that died away into weariness, "I wish you would talk to the school board, Miss Laetitia."

"I'd like to," Miss Laetitia responded vigorously. "Now come right into the house, Cynthia Allen. 'Tain't any use to fuss—you know you're just ready to drink a glass of milk and then lie down for half an hour anyway. Here, you give me that load of learning! 'Tain't natural to me but I guess I can carry it as far as the sitting-room."

The girl obeyed her silently because she was too tired to protest. Five minutes later she lay on the lounge in the darkened sitting-room where a great pitcher of purple lilacs breathed fragrantly through the shadows. She would not go to sleep, she said to herself, she must not. But nature was better to her than her will; in a little while the dark lashes rested quietly on the pale cheeks.

Miss Laetitia picked up the school-bag and tiptoed softly out on the piazza. She wasn't any hand at books, she humbly confessed, but she did know a little plain spellin'! She hunted up a stump of a pencil and laboriously began correcting the papers; so absorbed was she that she did not hear a light step on the path and started when a merry girlish voice spoke almost at her ear.

"Well, Miss Laetitia! What is it now?"

Miss Laetitia looked up; the little frown of concentration lingered on her forehead for one bewildered moment, then it was chased away by a delighted smile.

"Well, Dorothy Marlow, if you ain't a special providence! It's some of Cynthia Allen's school work—she's just about worn out with her teaching anyway, and the heat to-day was too much for her. She's asleep in the sitting-room and I thought maybe I could save her an hour's work on some of the papers, but land sakes, what

with my old eyes and some of the writing, I ain't getting on very fast! I was afraid I'd give up entirely when it got to the arithmetic, but now that you've come along it's all right."

"You don't seem to think of sparing me," the girl laughed. "Don't you think I need to be considered too?"

Miss Laetitia smiled admiringly back into the pretty dimpled face.

"Dear heart," she said simply, ain't I considering you? I guess I know you, Dorothy Marlow!"

The pink cheeks flushed to deeper flower-color and the girl leaned over to kiss the soft old face. "I didn't suppose you ever flattered, Miss Laetitia," she said. "Think what a blow it is to find you out! There give me those papers—the arithmetic first and then I'll help on the spelling. Never mind a pencil—I have one here."

For half an hour the two pencils—Miss Laetitia's old stub and Dorothy's dainty silver one, marched down paper after paper. When at last all were corrected Dorothy put them back into the bag and looked smilingly across at her friend. She was so used to finding some bit of work waiting at Miss Laetitia's that that part of the call was forgotten as soon as it was finished.

"You haven't asked me what I came for," she began. "I wish you would. It's very embarrassing not to be asked."

"What do you want of me?" Miss Laetitia answered promptly with a little sparkle of fun behind her glasses.

"Now Miss Laetitia, what an unkind way to put it—as if I never came except to beg! But, well—I might as well fess. I want the promise of all your white roses and lilacs for Decoration Day. How is that for a modest request?"

"Bless me, child, I didn't know but you were going to ask me for my grandmother's china, the way you began. Of course you can have the flowers and welcome—what's the use of having them if they can't be picked? You come and help yourself to whatever you please."

Dorothy smiled down into the garden—barely in bloom yet—only flecked with color here and there, but softly astir in the summer wind and full of the low droning of bees.

"It's so lovely," she began; then she stopped—she had surprised such an unwonted look in Miss Laetitia's face!

"Would you rather not?" she cried anxiously. "O Miss Laetitia, have I asked too much? I never thought— But Miss Laetitia turned to her with gentle puzzled eyes. "What do you mean, child? You know I'd love to send the flowers."

"I thought you would," Dorothy answered, choosing her words slowly, "only—you looked hurt somehow, and I couldn't bear to think that I had—been careless or anything."

"Bless your heart, dear, it wasn't you, I guess 'twas me. I was just wondering if any poor fellow had been hungry in his life for the love and the flowers that we give him after he's dead. I was wondering if we always knew our heroes when they are with us. That was all, dear. And I guess we needn't worry about those that are dead anyway. The Lord will know how to make it right. He won't make mistakes if we do."

In the girl's eyes laughter and tears battled together. "If none of the rest of us made anymore mistakes than you do Miss Laetitia," she cried as she rose to go.

For a few minutes Miss Laetitia sat on the porch empty-handed; she would not go into the sitting-room for her work for fear of waking Cynthia. The little Callie Mather came by and she called her in to inquire about her mother, and send some flowers to her and the brave older sister who had to take up the duties laid down by the mother's weak hands. As she turned from Callie, Cynthia stood in the doorway her little thin face full of worry.

"O Miss Laetitia, I didn't mean to sleep. It's been more than an hour, and I've got all that work to do, and—"

"No you haven't, Cynthia Allen," Miss Laetitia interrupted. "Now don't you go to spoiling good things that way. Dorothy Marlow has been here and the papers are all marked—except the compositions—and I guess they're marked just as good as you could do too! Now you just pick a handful of those Johnny-jump-ups to laugh at you on the way home, and don't you dare to pull them to pieces for a lesson either. I won't have my flowers made lessons of!"

The girl really laughed a little. She went down the street with a lighter step; the rest and the love and the bit of help had lightened mightily the drizzling weight of the "load of learning."

Miss Laetitia was free to take up her sewing after that, but she didn't; she sat thinking a few minutes and then put on her hat and started resolutely down the street herself. She must see Emma Rice—she was just the one to help her carry out her plan.

Emma Rice, sitting propped up in the bed she never left, welcomed her eagerly. "I saw you coming up the path," she cried, "and I was so glad. You always bring something real, Miss Laetitia, something to do or think of. It's been so hot to-day—I guess I want the something real!"

Miss Laetitia sat down by the bed-side and laid a handful of blossoms on the white coverlet. The girl's thin fingers crept among them, loving each flower separately, but she only smiled her thanks. She had said one day, that flower's were too beautiful to touch with words, and Miss Laetitia had understood.

In a moment Emma looked up. "What have you brought me, Miss Laetitia?" she asked.

"Some work," Miss Laetitia answered concisely.

The girl's thin hand forgot the flowers then in an eager little gesture of delight. How she almost envied people who could work!

"What is it?" she cried. "Tell me quick!"

"It's Memorial Day," Miss Laetitia replied, taking off her glasses to rub them. Somehow her glasses were so apt to get dim in Emma's room!

"It's a Memorial Day just for you and me, Emma Rice."

Dorothy Marlow started me on it when she came and asked me for some flowers. It came over me all of a sudden that maybe some poor fellow we remember now went starving for love and sympathy for many a year before he died. There child don't you go to grieving over that, I started to, and then I thought to myself that I guessed the good Lord had that all fixed by this time better than we could imagine. But it's the people alive now I'm thinking of, the ones that are struggling and fighting and suffering right along side of us and nobody thinks of calling them heroes. There's Cynthia Allen working herself most to death to earn money to help at home while Harry is working his way through college. And there's Helen Wells giving up all a girl's place at home; and Rob Ashford—I guess nobody knows what that boy's gone through trying to live down his mistake, after Mr. Low gave him another chance in the store. It just makes my heart ache to see his face sometimes. I've tried to speak to him Sundays, I dunno how many times, but he always slips out the first thing as if he thought nobody wanted to see him."

"And the minister," Emma breathed eagerly. "O Miss Laetitia, the minister's one—he's so good to people—like me."

"Sure enough," Miss Laetitia assented cordially, "the minister, and Mrs. Minister too. Mercy on us, how she keeps all those children mended up, and attends all the missionary and sewing-circle meetings, and keeps as bright when she's at everybody's beck and call, just beats me. I guess I'd put her right side of the minister on the list Emma—that's where she belongs."

Name by name the beautiful list grew. It held eight finally, counting the minister and Mrs. Minister as one. Six dozen roses Miss Laetitia planned, would just about "go round"—she couldn't quite give a dozen to each.

Emma's eyes widened at the total. "Why Miss Laetitia, you won't have half enough," she cried, "not even if your garden is at its loveliest."

"My garden!" Miss Laetitia repeated. Then she laughed softly. "Why child, these aren't coming from my garden—you don't suppose folks are going to be allowed to guess, do you? I'm going to send for some city roses and then you are going to put the notes with them—you'll have a week to write these notes in—and your little brother, who won't know anything about where they come from, is going to carry them round in his wagon and get paid with a bag of cookies. Dear me, didn't I tell you all that? How forgetful I am, I must have supposed you knew without any telling! Now your eyes needn't begin asking questions. I s'pose flowers will be high that day, but I shall order them to-morrow, and I guess I can afford to give a little something once a year to our heroes! I've thought it all out, child, and you needn't worry over a thing—except those notes! But if I don't go before I tire you all out somebody else will be worried, I'm thinking, and that's your mother!"

But Emma's weak voice called her back. "I want to say something, Miss Laetitia," she pleaded.

Miss Laetitia looked down at her doubtfully. "Twon't take long, will it?"

"No it's short," Emma answered, twisting her thin fingers nervously about her friend's hand, "it's real short only—I don't know just how to say it. It's Miss Laetitia—it isn't that I deserve anything, it's only that it's like you to give, and please, don't send any roses to me. I'm so cross and discontented often and—I wouldn't be sick if I could help it. I'd rather be well than be brave—yes, I would! Just bring me a handful of flowers the way you do—just from you—will you please Miss Laetitia?"

Miss Laetitia leaned down quickly and kissed the white face. "It shall be just as you wish, little soldier of pain," she answered.

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