

For Girls and Boys.

THE MATCH IN THE CRACK.

BY MARY F. MARTIN.

It was a very little match—just a harmless piece of wood, so small and insignificant that Harry Belmont, from whose pocket it fell as he changed his coat to go to the base-ball match, did not think it worth hunting for.

It was a very little mouse that crept stealthily out of his hole that night to hunt for crumbs. His fur was soft and silky, and his eyes bright, but his teeth were sharp, so sharp that, unsuccessful in his search for crumbs, he tried to make his supper off a little stick with a rough end which he found wedged into a crack in the floor.

The match was a little match, and the mouse a little mouse, but the fire started by that little match and 'nat little mouse swept down a whole block of houses, despite the almost superhuman efforts of the firemen.

In the midst of the confusion a cry is heard, "A boy at the upper window!" and there, far up, with hands outstretched for help, stands Harry. Tired with the excitement of play, he has slept through all the noise and tumult, until when he awakens he finds all effort at escape useless. As he leans from the window the angry flames seem to leap higher to grasp their helpless victim. In the crowd where all the faces are distinct in the glare of the fire stands his mother. She had thought him safe, and oh! what agony to see her boy cut off from her by the cruel flames. Is there no help? In vain he stretches forth his hands for aid; brave hearts pity him, and long to save him, but he is beyond their reach. Already the flames drive him back at intervals, as the wind sweeps them against the window; the casing itself is blistered, and is only kept from bursting into a blaze by the constant stream of water poured on it by the untiring firemen.

Is there no hope, no help? He hears as though in a dream a cry that has seemed only a low murmur amid the confusion, so far removed is he from the crowd. In an instant's lull comes louder the cry, "Reach the fire-escape, and you are safe." He is so weak his knees shake beneath him. Had he not better give up further effort to avoid the inevitable fate awaiting him if he stays where he is?

Once more he leans from the window as the stream of water checks the flame for an instant; once more he would look on his mother's face, but as he looks the cry rises louder: "Reach the fire-escape and you are safe," and though he cannot hear his mother's voice, her pale lips seem to be forming the same words.

One determined effort, groping his way through the blinding smoke, scorched by the flames that have already found their way into the room, almost yielding even at the last, he reaches the fire-escape; there kind hands grasp his, and though weak and wretched, with scars that he will carry to the grave of the cruel fire kindled by the little match, he is saved.

It was only a little harmless white roll of paper that was handed to Edmund Arnold that day in the park by one of his friends. Others were smoking cigarettes, and why shouldn't he? It was anything but agreeable at first, and the headache, for which he accounted to his mother by his long walk in the hot sun, was almost unbearable. At the time he fully determined to leave cigarettes in future to those who were used to them, but the little match had fallen into the crack, and when next a cigarette was offered to him he was ashamed to refuse, and thought he might stealthily throw part away before he suffered any ill effects from it; but this time it was more enjoyable. He smoked it all, and his headache was so slight that it was scarcely worth noticing. Weeks passed, and part of the small salary that had helped his mother to supply necessities for the family was reserved for his own use, and he was seldom seen without a cigarette between his lips.

Months passed, and becoming inattentive to his duties he was discharged by his employer, and spent his time at the corners of the street with the commonest kind of a cigar in his mouth.

At home he was not the same helpful son that he had once been. At times he would sit moodily in the corner, and as he walked his limbs would shake as though with age.

Years have passed, and in a hospital ward lies Edmund Arnold. He is only seventeen. He may have many years of life before him, but they will all be passed there. His disease has been pronounced an incurable brain trouble, brought on even at this early age by the

excessive use of tobacco; and not only are his poor legs paralyzed, but his intellect is weakened, so that, talk to him as you may of the fire-escape, his brain is too inactive to comprehend your meaning.

It was only a glass of cider, and it sparkled and foamed temptingly, but it was a match in the crack as Joe Bunting put it to his lips.

His mother when dying had exacted from him a solemn promise never to touch the first glass of liquor. He knew not why she had insisted so earnestly upon his promising, but it had been a check upon him many a time when his companions had tempted him to drink with them.

Yes, the remembrance of the pale face over which such a look of anguish stole when at first he had hesitated to give the required promise had again and again proved a safeguard to him, but now it was only a glass of cider.

"No harm," one boy said. "No liquor about it," urged another, and he yielded.

Well had his mother known that the dry wood needed but a little match and a scratch from the tooth of a very little mouse to start it into a blaze. As the look of anguish spread over her dying face she had thought of one, the father of her boy, who filled a grave—a drunkard's grave. Yes, he had died from the effects of liquor, but never had she had the sad pleasure of soothing his dying moments. No kiss had she given the man once so dear, so noble, ere his spirit took its flight into eternity; no comfort had she in knowing that her voice had cheered his last hours of death-anguish. Instead, he lay in an unknown grave. In the very height of manhood, inflamed to frenzy by the wine-cup, he had taken the life of a boon companion, and his own life paid the penalty. Is it any wonder that, as her boy hesitated to make the promise she required, the past of one loved one and the possible future of another should blend in one?

It was only a glass of cider, but it roused to activity the appetite that had thus far been sleeping, and when next the ruby glass was offered him he drained it to the dregs and longed for more.

The flame once kindled burned brighter and brighter, and the young life once guarded by the remembrance of a dying mother was fast yielding to the pitiless demon. Is there no help, no hope? Will no one cry, "Reach the fire-escape and you are safe?"

Day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year, the flame kindled by that match in the crack burned on. Instead of the laughing boy, whose kiss had in her darkest hours eased his mother's heart-ache the boy became the swaggering youth whose boisterous laugh and coarse jokes polluted the quiet evening air, as with others, gathered at the street-corner, he passed insulting remarks upon the passers-by.

As the flame increases in volume, the swaggering youth becomes the poor drunkard—not now satisfied with his occasional glass, but thirsting even for the liquid fire that is consuming his very life. Is there no help, no hope? Will no one cry, "Reach the fire-escape and you are safe?"

See, as the fire burns more and more fiercely each avenue of escape seems closed. His poor beclouded brain is less and less active. Hopeless and benumbed, he is ready to sink. But, hark! a murmur reaches his ear, and as he listens the voice of his long-forgotten mother swells the murmur to a cry of earnest, heart-piercing entreaty: "Reach the fire-escape and you are safe!" He gropes in vain; for a moment he clings to the crumbling pillar of "moderation," but the flame touches that frail support and it falls, almost burying him in its ruins. Discouraged, he scarcely cares to struggle longer, but the cry comes more earnestly: "The fire-escape—reach it and you are safe!" Trembling and weak, he totters to his feet. He clutches at one and another frail, charred beam for support, but each gives way at his touch, and unless upheld by a Hand, he sees not, he would sink to rise no more. He reaches the fire-escape. Over it is written "Total Abstinence," and, spurning the hand that is outstretched to help him, he steps upon the firm structure; his foot slips even there, and he falls again. One more effort: the hand he spurned is beneath him still, and raises him when his strength is all but gone. Again he steps upon the ladder, this time with his hand fast clasped in the hand of his all-powerful Friend, and though bearing for life the scars of the fiery ordeal through which he has passed, he is saved.

Trusting for help and for strength to the almighty arm of Him who laid down His life for him, he is saved on the fire-escape of "Total Abstinence."—National Temperance Society Tract.