

# HAPPY HOUSE

By Jane D. Abbott

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"I am a 'honey' member of a club—and now I'm approaching the exciting part of my letter. It is called Cove's Club and has rules that forbid my swearing, talking back, smoking, lying, stealing bird's eggs, hurting dumb animals, and that make me fight (and lick) every enemy to the club (which a's, seem to be mostly mothers) kill pirates and defend my country. Isn't that heavenly? It meets whenever Liz Hopworth has to clean the 'meetin' house' which is always on Mondays and after there's a social. And to attend the meetings you have to slide down 30 feet of bank to what is known around here as Falling Water Cove, though I don't believe water ever fell there. Anyway, it is a historic spot for reasons besides the club—one is that it was from there Robert Leavitt and the women of the household, with little Justine, escaped when Freedom was attacked by the Indians and it was there, one dark night, Ethan Allen himself landed in a boat for a secret conference with Jacob Leavitt before an attack upon the Yorkers. (90 plus in American History).

"And the members of the club are (please read slowly) me, Davy Hopworth, Dick Snead, Jim Davis, Kirk Brown and Peter Hyde—the hired man.

"Peter Hyde and I are the 'honey' members."

"I can hear you, Claire. 'That is just like you, Nancy Leavitt—swear you're going to do one thing and doing another. Yes, darling, it is like me, I'll admit! But this time it's different. I really did intend to be very haughty and distant each time I saw the man but—I couldn't! Could you, if you had just been running a race which included vaulting a stone wall? I had to run the race to win Davy's respect and I had to jump the wall—well, to show I could! And of course I never dreamed the creature was anywhere around. But he sprang up from the earth, I believe, and was there at the finish. And could you look haughty with every hair pin dropping out of your head?"

"And, anyway, afterwards, he explained something that has made everything different, but that comes later in my story.

"Today it rained for the first time since I've been in North Hero. A sort of steady pitter-patter, not the kind of a down-pour that makes you hug shelter, but a splashy sort you long to run out in with your face turned up. All morning long I sat with the aunts (Aunt Milly was so disappointed when she saw the rain that I brought her down to the hollyhock porch and made her all comfy there) and I simply couldn't stand it all afternoon so, after lunch, I stole away. Now Happy House is divided (thank goodness) into two parts, so if the aunts are on one side it is easy to slip out of the other. I put on my slicker and cap and slipped away. I frisked around in the rain, drops for awhile, then I started toward the orchard to see if my water-proof box was water-proof. And as I walked down the path I heard the sound of hammering from the direction of my nest. 'A-ha,' said I, 'I will surprise nice Mr. Webb at his work!' So I crept up on tiptoe. And, oh, Claire, it wasn't Mr. Webb at all—it was Peter Hyde! There he was with a hammer and a saw and some nails in a funny apron he had tied around him working away with the rain spattering through the leaves right into his face.

"I was so surprised I thought I'd run back, but just at that moment he saw me. And of course, the way I always do when I shouldn't, I began to laugh. And he laughed, too, though he was embarrassed.

"I am sure he didn't want me to find out that he had made the seat. But for a hired man he met the situation with ease. He simply asked me to stand there while he drove one more nail; then he said his work would be complete. When he'd finished he held out his hand and invited me to climb into the nest. All this with the rain spattering on his! Of course I had to tell him that it was perfectly lovely and had been such a jolly surprise and that I had thought Webb had made it. And now comes the runt part. He explained in a sort of sheepish way that he

thought I was a little girl! Jonathan had told him that Miss Sabrina's little niece was coming to Happy House. When he caught a glimpse of me in the stage (he dared to say this) he thought I looked like a 'jolly sort of a kid.' Then that very afternoon he saw me turn a handspring in the orchard—and climb the tree! He said he got to thinking what a sort of dull place Happy House would be for any youngster, and that it would be fun for him to do some little thing to make it jollier for her. He admitted, to use his own words, that he was flabbergasted to find that I wasn't a kid after all! I'm glad, in a 'close-up' I do look my years!

"But can't you see that that explains everything and that he wasn't impertinent, after all?"

"Of course, living in cities all my life, I've always had an impression that hired men were just big, clumsy, dirty looking creatures who ate with knives and always smelled horsey. This Peter Hyde isn't that way at all. He's tanned copper color but his face and hands look clean and except for his clothes, he doesn't look much different from any one else. And now that he knows I am quite grown up (at least in years) he treats me very nicely.

"We're going to do all sorts of nice things for Davy Hopworth, who is a very nice, bright youngster, but, just because he's a Hopworth, the other boys get punished for playing with him and that makes both Peter Hyde and me indignant.

"Isn't the world funny, Claire, how the sins of the fathers and the grandfathers are visited upon the children—at least in places like this? Of course my beloved Finnegan are too busy just keeping the present generation going, to think much about the past, and the world they live in rushes too fast to stop to think that Timmy Finnegan, maybe's, going to rob a bank because his great-grandfather, over in County Cork, ran off with a pig.

"It is too late in the evening to philosophize, and I mustn't let my wick burn too low or Aunt Sabrina will know I'm using the midnight oil. Don't be cross, dear Claire, if you don't hear from me every day; although you might suppose that up here I'd have a great deal of leisure time, somehow each day seems to bring something unexpected. And as I said on page 2 of this voluminous letter, I am growing fond of Happy House and there is a sort of fascination about everything here. Dear Anne, with her noble dreams, never longed to bring about the reforms that I do! One is to throw out the dreadful waxed flowers and peacock feathers and old grasses from Happy House and fill the vases with fresh flowers. Another is to sweep through the whole blessed village and open every blind and let in today!

"And then when I'm bursting with my longing to make the whole world better, I'm suddenly reminded that I'm just a little next-to-nothing that can't even remember to act grown up, masquerading in our Anne's shoes and daring to find flaws in Miss Sabrina Leavitt with all the noble heritage of Leavitt tradition flowing in her veins.

"Good night, littlest pal, I wish I could be with you long enough for a good, long gossip. But, by and by—"

## CHAPTER XI.

### Moonshine and Fairies.

"Good evening, yellow Buttercups

Good evening, daisies white.

Tell me, have you met the Moon Queen

On this pretty night?"

The little singer made a sweeping courtesy.

"How d'you do, Miss Buttercup? Do come here now and meet Mrs. Moon!" With a gesture of exaggerated elegance she led an imaginary Buttercup out to a pool of silver where the bright moonlight slanted through the branches of an apple tree.

"Now, everybody, bow to Mrs. Moon," and the fairy hostess bent to the ground. Then she snapped her fingers. "On with the music," she cried. Like a spirit she danced off over the grass, now scarcely more than a shadow among the shadows, now

full in the moonlight, bending, swaying, leaping, arms out stretched, face lifted.

But the frolic of the fairies in the moonlight came to a sad end, for a human hand reached out from behind a tree-trunk and caught the make believe hostess of Mrs. Moon by one thin arm.

"Lemme go!" cried the child, shrilly.

Nancy, awakened by the moonlight streaming across the rose cabbages of her carpeting, had been lured out into the night. Halting at the raspberry patch she had heard the little singer. Cautiously, lest indeed she disturb fairies at their revels she had crept into the orchard. From a hiding place she had watched the child's mad dance.

"Sh-h! I am the Moon Queen! Let me dance with you!" Releasing the little wriggling body Nancy threw off her slippers. "Come!" Waving her hand she danced down through the apple trees, singing:

In their dress of yellow gold,  
In their petals white,  
I can see the fairy folk  
Gathered here tonight!

From the shadow the child watched her, sullenly, suspiciously. But with her loosened hair falling down over her pink dressing gown. Nancy herself looked an eerie little sprite; in a moment the child's alarm vanished. Of course she knew that this must be Miss Sabrina Leavitt's niece, but it was fun, anyway, to pretend that she was the Moon Queen! And she must be very, very nice not to have "chased" her at once! And she might stop dancing, too, any moment! So out she ran to join Nancy, with hands outstretched, and together they capered and danced around among the old trees until, quite out of breath, Nancy fell upon the soft grass.

"Oh, goodness me, what fun! Now come here, Miss Fairy, and tell me who you are? Are you a fairy come from the Village of Tall Grass in yonder field?"

The child, completely won, dropped at Nancy's feet.

"I'm Nonie Hopworth."

"Oh-h!" Nancy was genuinely surprised. "Are you Davy's sister?"

The child nodded. "Yep." She regarded Nancy closely.

"You're different, aren't you?"

Nancy caught her meaning.

"Yes, I'm different—at least, I'm not exactly like—"

"Miss Sabrina or—or B'lindy. She'd have chased me! That's why I come here to play at night. Anyway, it's easier to pretend at night. Do you ever pretend, Miss?"

"Call me Nancy, do! Of course, I pretend, often! I love to."

"Ain't it fun—I mean isn't! I forgot. I play it 'most all the time."

Nancy looked curiously at the strange little figure, almost wraithlike in the dim light. It was hard to believe that the winsome creature could belong in Freedom—and to the "no good" Hopworths.

There was grace in every movement of the thin little body not in the least concealed by the worn, soiled, out grown dress. Two dark, burning, eager, questioning eyes told of a spirit that lived above and beyond the sordid, colorless monotony of a life with old Dan'l Hopworth and Liz, who "didn't believe a feller oughta have any fun!"

"What do you pretend, Miss Nancy?"

Nancy laughed and rubbed the soles of her bare feet.

"Well, once I pretended I was the Moon Queen and I scratched my poor feet dreadfully. What do you pretend?"

Nonie rocked back on her heels.

"Oh lots and lots of different things. My everyday game is Rosemary. She's my make believe chum. She lives down in the haunted house on the North Hero road, only when I pretend, of course, the house isn't haunted. And it's got lovely glass things from the ceiling for candles and they sparkle like rainbows and diamonds. Rosemary and I play games and we—read and tell each other stories and sometimes she helps me with the work, when Liz ain't around. Only Rosemary don't believe in fairies. She says that's baby, so when she's away I pretend fairy."

"When the moon shines—"

"Oh, yes, it's nicer then. And you can't play fairy round our house because there ain't—there are not—any flowers. So I come here—there are such lots of pretty shadows—and nice smells. I pretend all the flowers come out from the garden and have a party. It's fun having the flowers,

'cause you can just tell how they'll act. You know a tulip's going to be awful tall and proud and bow—like this! And a rose'll act shy, and a buttercup's pert. And a daisy's shamed 'cause her dress ain't better—I mean isn't. And a dandelion's awful bold. And a daffy-down-dilly—oh, they're jolly!"

"How perfectly delightful! Tell me more, Nonie. I believe you have a witch for a fairy grandmother!"

Nonie giggled. "That's 'nother of my games. I've had that for a long time. She's coming some day and touch me with a wand and make me into a beautiful lady. And I'll go out and step into my carriage and a footman all shiny and white will say: 'To her Majesty's!' And I'll sit in the best parlor and drink chocolate and real whipped cream from cups with pink roses on 'em, and a page will say: 'Do have another piece of cake, your ladyship,' and—and I'll say, 'I couldn't hold another mouthful, thanks, I've had five!'"

Nancy and Nonie laughed together. Then Nonie sighed. "Do any dreams ever come true? I mean the kind of things you sit and think about and want?"

"Maybe, if you dream hard enough, Nonie," Nancy answered, soberly.

"Course I know some of the things I pretend can't come true but maybe some will. Miss Denny told me they might. Only she said I'd have to make 'em. She's my teacher. I love her. I guess you're most as nice as she is. She gives me books and tells me when I say bad grammar. She says we must just think beautiful things and then put them into the right words—but it's hard! I forget awful easy. She don't—I mean, she does not—think I'm queer. Liz calls me 'loony!'"

"Oh, no—Nonie," protested Nancy, "Liz just can't understand."

"But you do, don't you? Miss Denny did, too." Nonie was silent for a moment. "After I've learned a lot more I want to go out in the world with Davy and make a fortune. I don't know just how—but I want to do grand things. There's some places, ain't there—aren't there—that's so big folks wouldn't know we were Hopworths? Davy says he wants to go to sea and Liz says he'll come to no good end like Pa, but mebbe I can take him with me." She sighed. "It's awful long off 'til I grow up, though, I'm only 12."

Then Nonie added slowly, as though she was sharing a secret: "There's one more thing I pretend. After I go to bed I shut my eyes tight and pretend that a beautiful lady with hair all gold and eyes that twinkle like stars and smile at you, comes and sits by my bed and takes hold of my hand and pats it and then kisses me, sort of on my forehead, and says: 'Good night, sweetness,' like that, in a voice that's soft like music and not a bit of the holler kind!" Nonie gave a little sigh of rapture. "It's nice, you see, to have a make believe mother like that! I s'pose a real one wouldn't have time. Anyways, Liz says she'd like to see a real mother do more for young 'uns than she does!"

Nancy blinked a sudden rush of tears from her eyes. She felt that she had seen bared the very soul of a child—a soul hungry for kindness and for love. She reached out and took one of the small hands in her own.

"Nonie—let's you and I play lots together. I can give you books, too. We'll read them together. You can come to Happy House often in the daytime."

Nonie shook her head doubtfully.

"Liz won't let me. She says there ain't—there isn't—no use my going off and leaving my work. She says school's bad enough!"

"Does Liz—punish—you much?"

"She chases Davy and me with the broom sometimes. And she scolds, too, but we don't mind, 'cause she's scolding all the time. I wish she would whip us—or lock us up—or—or—or send us to bed! It'd be like other kids, then."

The strangeness of a child longing for punishments that would make her life seem like other children's shocked Nancy! She looked at the thin body—was poverty starving the physical being while neglect starved the spirit!

(Continued next week.)

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