

# HAPPY HOUSE

By Jane D. Abbott

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Then into Nancy's happy meditations flashed the disturbing thought that nothing about the garden or the house belonged in any way to her!

"It's just like me to forget," she declared aloud, shouldering her hoe and turning toward the carriage barn. "And like me to get fond of it all!"

"Anyway, Nonie'll have her party, and even if there isn't a harp and a velvet train there'll be lots to eat or B'lindy's name isn't B'lindy. I wonder," and Nancy addressed the distant outline of the Judson's barn, "how Peter Hyde'll ever act at a tea party!"

## CHAPTER XVIII

### The Party.

Very early, on the morning of the day of the party, Nancy and Aunt Milly and B'lindy and Jonathan and Nonie and Davy and Peter Hyde, each, scanned a sunny, cloudless sky with relief and joy.

"Well, it isn't going to rain, anyway," each thought.

Even Miss Sabrina, lifting her shade slowly, felt her pulse beat more quickly as a sunbeam danced into her face. This day was a new day for Happy House; she could not count the years since a "party" had been given in her home; her old hands trembled now as she dressed hurriedly. "What if something goes wrong!" she thought. Had they forgotten anything?

A little later Nancy, standing with her arms full of girlish finery of 30 years ago, voiced the same fear to Aunt Milly.

"What is something should go wrong!" But there had been a giggle in her voice as she had said it. This was the most delightfully funny party she had ever known, and it was going to be the very jolliest, too.

Directly after breakfast Nonie had run home with the made-over white dress. She thought it much lovelier than velvet and in her joy over a pair of Nancy's slippers the child forgot her cherished dream of a train.

What Miss Milly should wear to the party was a matter that demanded much thought. "You see, I want you to look happy," Nancy explained to Aunt Milly. She had dragged down from the attic a little trunk in which, after the accident, many of Aunt Milly's girlish possessions had been packed. It was great fun taking them out and selecting from them what Aunt Milly should wear. There were not many things—compared to Nancy's own wardrobe it was pitifully small and spoke eloquently of the limited pleasures of Aunt Milly's girlhood.

"This will be lovely," Nancy held out a flowered silk. "And you can wear these darling beads. And this," picking out a shell comb, "in your hair. And I will send Jonathan over to Judson's for a bunch of their lovely roses. I know they have some!"

"But isn't this—queer—and out of date? I'm old now, Nancy!"

"You dear, funny Aunt Milly! Don't you know that you're not a bit old? All this time you've been shut away the years have been rolling right past you and have left you untouched. You're going to be the sweetest picture and you're going to be a—surprise, too!"

She was a picture when Nancy's eager fingers had finished with her. The pink of the quaintly fashioned dress was not more pink than the color that flushed her delicate cheeks; into her soft hair Nancy had thrust the shell comb and around her neck hung a chain of tiny corals. Jonathan had returned from Judson's with four bunches of roses and one of them now adorned Miss Milly.

"You're just lovely," Nancy had cried, imprinting a warm kiss upon the blushing cheek.

She awarded the same stamp of approval upon Aunt Sabrina, too, who was very stately in a black silk with one of the Judson roses pinned in the net fichu about her throat.

"And I shall kiss you, too," Nancy called out to B'lindy, catching, through the open door a glimpse of marvellously starched calico.

"You go 'long and keep out from under my feet," had been B'lindy's retort as she retreated

from Nancy's threatened attack. "I guess there's work has to be done before this party's over!" But the grumbling in her voice could not conceal her pride and satisfaction.

"Oh, everything is just lovely," Nancy exclaimed, tiptoeing about to add a finishing touch here and there. And indeed, some magic wand seemed to have scattered gladness everywhere about the old place; the great rooms, open now to the sunshine, radiated it in the fragrance of the flowers that Nancy had heaped everywhere.

"I wish it would stay like this," was her unspoken thought.

But in her plans for the party which was to show all Freedom that Happy House was a happy house, Nancy had reckoned without Mrs. Cyrus Eaton.

Since trouble had shadowed Happy House and shut its hospitable doors, time had brought changes to Freedom just as it had to every place on the globe; commerce, trade, politics, a certain democratizing of the standards of living had made their inroads even upon the little village; new families came and old ones died out. And new influences challenged and threatened the old Island aristocracy.

Not the least of these was the influence of trade. When Cyrus Eaton bought and rebuilt the general store next to the post-office he made for himself—or for his wife—a social prestige that was beyond dispute. As the years had gone by he had strengthened this materially by certain credits which he extended to different families in the village.

Webb had gone to Mrs. Eaton's first with his invitation and his story. That lady had flipped the little card upon the table with a snort. Did Miss Leavitt or anyone else think she'd go anywhere where those Hopworths were? Was it not her duty, too, to warn her friends as to what this party would be like—to tell them of this hoydenish, impertinent girl, "of the bad branch of the family," who seemed to have hypnotized Miss Sabrina?

By the time Mrs. Eaton had finished her baking, put on her best purple poplin and started out in Webb's trail, her rage had carried her to such heights of eloquence that it was not difficult for her to convince her neighbors that some "hoax" was about to be played upon the good folks of Freedom and that each one must show her pride by remaining away from the party. She talked so fast, and repeated her stories so often, that she digressed, quite unconsciously, from the truth and, at the last few calls, made Nancy out a most shocking young person!

"I can't tell you—I wouldn't tell you—all the goings on at that Cove," was her favorite introduction. "And in the orchard, too! Anyone could have told Sabrina Leavitt she was a fool bringing the creature here—that branch of the family, everyone knows, wouldn't be above doing anything!"

So while happy Nancy arranged flowers for the party the expected guests entrenched themselves behind their closed blinds, their righteous satisfaction tinged the very least bit of regret born of immense curiosity. However, there were two exceptions. Samuel Todd, the post-master, was an aspirant for a seat in the state legislature. His ancestors had never lived anywhere else but on the island and he had inherited a wholesome respect for the Leavitt name. He was enough of a politician, too, to know that, even though she was an old woman he might sometime need Miss Sabrina's good will.

"You go 'long and keep your eyes open and your mouth shut," he advised his wife when, after Mrs. Eaton's hurried call, she had sought his counsel. "You women talk too much, anyway."

Mrs. Todd, for once, was delighted to do his bidding; Carrie Baker, over at North Hero, had made over her yellow muslin so that it was "better'n new—and just lyin' up there in the closet catchin' dust," she explained to Mrs. Sniggs. Mrs. Sniggs promptly offered to accompany her.

"I'm that curious to see that mantel—and the girl, too!"

So that, when the hour of the

party struck and found Nancy, like a flower, with Miss Sabrina and Miss Milly, on the lawn, ready to receive their guests, the only guests (excepting Peter Hyde and the Hopworths and Miss Sabrina and B'lindy, peeping from the door, did not count them) were Mrs. Sniggs and Mrs. Todd!

Liz Hopworth with Nonie and Davy had come early. Davy shone as to face and feet; the grandeur of the new shoes Peter Hyde had given him quite made up for the small things lacking in the rest of his appearance. Liz was trying not to pant in a plum-colored cashmere that was many sizes too small for her gaunt frame. Nancy had managed to place her near Aunt Milly—Aunt Milly was sure to be cordial and gentle with her and put her at her ease.

Webb and Peter Hyde had come early, too. Nancy had caught herself watching for Peter Hyde. She had given a little involuntary gasp when she saw him—he was resplendent in immaculate white flannels!

"Of course he bought them—just for this!" she thought regretfully. However, she had a moment of delicious satisfaction when she took him to Miss Sabrina; they should all see that a hired man could be very much of a gentleman.

"Peter," she managed to whisper to him, "I have a feeling that something awful is going to happen!" Then Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Sniggs had come through the gate and she had gone forward to meet them.

It was Webb who gave Nancy a hint of the real truth. He was, as he expressed it, "so god darn flubbin' mad at the hul parcel of womenfolks he'd liked to burst!" Gossip had crept to the postoffice stoop and Webb had sensed what was going on. "Skunks—beggin' your pardon, Miss Anne, but that's what!"

Nancy had a moment of panic; her eyes sought wildly for Peter Hyde. Then her fighting blood stirred. "Thank you, Webb," she said with well assumed calmness. "Don't worry a bit! We'll show them—we'll act just as though we hadn't invited anyone else!"

But her nonchalant manner cloaked real distress. There was Miss Sabrina, proud Miss Sabrina who had opened the doors of her trouble for all Freedom to come and gape at—Nancy knew it had not been easy! There was pretty, fluttering, expectant Aunt Milly in the dress she had had made when she was 18; Nonie who had dreamed of throngs of guests paying homage before her; and B'lindy, who had made a cake that was "like as a twin to the one my mother made for the gov'nor!" What would they say?

Was she not, indirectly, the cause of the humiliation that threatened them?

Nancy hurried to Peter Hyde where, in a corner of the garden, he stood paying court to Nonie. In answer to his pleasant nonsense Nonie's delighted laughter was rising shrilly. Nancy sent Nonie back to Aunt Milly. Then she caught Peter's arm.

"Peter! Peter! Quick—come behind this bush! I'm—I'm—I've got to cry—"

And to Peter Hyde's consternation Nancy did burst into tears.

"For Heaven's sake, Nancy, what—"

"I'm just—mad," Nancy blurted from behind a handkerchief. "The—the cats!" She lifted her head, relieved by her sudden outburst. "It's that Mrs. Eaton again! She's—just—getting even!" She told what Webb had said. "And here's the party—and no one will come! Aunt Sabrina will never, never get over it. And B'lindy—I wish I could run away."

Peter Hyde wanted very much to laugh, but the real distress in Nancy's face touched him. He patted her consolingly.

"Can't I do something? Can't Webb and I round 'em up at the point of a gun?"

"N-no, it's too late! We've just got to act as though the garden was full and make the best of it! I wanted it to be such a success. I wanted it to be a party that Nonie'd never forget. And I wanted everyone to see Aunt Milly! Oh, why, oh, why doesn't something happen!" For Nancy had suddenly remembered the huge pails of ice cream and the cake that was "like as a twin to the one my mother made for the gov'nor."

At that moment the loud whirring of an automobile caught their attention. Nancy, red eyed, peeped from behind their bush. "It's at our gate!" she cried.

"Peter—" she clutched his arm. From the tonneau a tall man was alighting. To Nancy there was something vaguely familiar in the sharp featured, clean shaven face and in the mass of wavy white hair that fringed his coat collar.

"Peter,—it's—Theodore Hoffman!"

## CHAPTER XIX.

### The Master.

A bolt from the cloudless blue could not have startled the little gathering on the lawn more than did the arrival of the distinguished stranger at the gate of Happy House. Moreover, French Mercedes cars did not often pass through North Hero; this was purple and cream color and the chauffeur wore purple livery. And the man who walked up the path had a bearing that distinctly set him apart from ordinary mortals.

Nancy, in a panic, wanted the earth to swallow her, but as the earth was very solid, she had no choice but to drag herself forward. She had, only a moment before, prayed that something would happen—and something had!

Peter Hyde had rushed forward to greet the newcomer and this had given Nancy a moment to rally her scattered wits. She was too busy whispering an explanation to Miss Sabrina to notice how friendly had been the master's greeting to Peter.

"Miss Leavitt, may I present Mr. Theodore Hoffman—and Miss Anne Leavitt."

Peter's voice was as steady as though he was introducing any John Smith; there was even a twinkle in his eye, as it caught Nancy's glance, that seemed to say: "I have brought the master to you—now!"

There was a gentleness in the keen, deep-set eyes, a friendliness in the musical voice of the master that suddenly quieted Nancy's fluttering nerves. Time and again, at the very thought of this meeting, she had been so frightened and now—she was not a bit afraid. She was even glad he had come when the garden looked so pretty, when Aunt Sabrina was so proudly garbed in her best silk, when Aunt Milly, all pink and white, with Nonie perched on the arm of her chair, was leaning over explaining some intricate stitch in a bit of embroidery to Liz, to whom embroidery was not less remote than Sanskrit literature.

Mrs. Sniggs and Mrs. Todd were staring, open mouthed, first at the stranger, then at the cream and purple car at the gate.

Nancy's spirits that had dropped to such depths behind the syringa bushes soared again. At last her moment had come! The master was declaring his delight in having chosen such a happy afternoon to come to Happy House; he admired the garden, and the old house; he admitted to a great curiosity concerning the Islands—he had never visited them before.

Nancy left him with Aunt Sabrina. Aunt Sabrina would manage to tell him a great deal—Nancy, watching, knew just when she left the Indians and the burning of Freedom and began on Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys and the coming of Benedict Arnold and his flagship to the Island.

"He'll love her," she whispered to Peter Hyde, nodding toward where the master leaned with deep attention over Miss Sabrina's chair. "Look me square in the eye, Peter! Did you know he was coming today?" "On my honor, I didn't. Is the play ready?"

"Oll ready, in a nice fat envelope. For goodness sake, look at Webb!"

Webb, returning from the house where he had hurried to tell B'lindy of the coming of the distinguished guest ("Don't know who he is nor whar he come from, but he's got one of them thur autyobiles that's bigger'n a steam engine and a fellar drivin' it that's dressed up like a circus lady") was standing in the path wildly gesticulating with one hand to attract Nancy's attention and with the other clapped over his mouth to suppress the laughter that was plainly shaking his entire body.

Nancy and Peter turned to see what had so convulsed him. Up the road toward the gate were approaching three separate groups of women, all coming hurriedly, breathlessly, with a great deal of chatter and fussing with hats and gloves.

(To be continued next week.)

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