

HAPPY HOUSE

By Jane D. Abbott

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"B'indy, you foolish, superstitious thing—it's your rheumatism!"

"I guess it ain't my rheumatism, Miss Anne, and my bones generally feels right. I ain't forgotten when Miss Milly had that accident nor when Judson's barn burned. I thought mebbe it was poor Mis' Hopkins dyin'. Didn't you know the poor soul dropped right off in her sleep last night and left Timothy Hopkins with those 10 children to care for? I sez this mornin' when Jonathan told me that there was no use tryin' to understand the ways of the Lord—10 children and that poor Timothy Hopkins as helpless a body as ever was, anyway, and not much more'n 'nough to feed his own stomach and no one to manage now!"

"How dreadful! Poor man," Nancy tried to make her tone sympathetic. "Of course that was what your bones were feeling, B'indy!"

"B'indy turned to truly distressed face to Nancy. "But it wa'n't! No, sir, right this minit my bones is feelin' worse than ever that somethin' is goin' to happen!" She sighed as she patted a sandwich together. "Lord knows mebbe it's the heat. There's somethin' brewin', Miss Anne, and you'd better keep an eye open for a storm—they come up fast in this valley!"

But Nancy refused to let B'indy's fears or warnings dampen her gay spirits. Indeed, she promptly forgot them in the joy of dashing off over the dusty road. B'indy's lunch was tucked away in the back; ahead stretched miles of smooth inviting highway, winding through pleasant green meadows.

And this man who grasped the wheel of the car with such complete confidence, who seemed bent upon nothing more important than making the little hand of the speedometer climb higher and higher—this was a new Peter Hyde, unfamiliar and yet strangely familiar in that now he resembled the dozens of other young men Nancy had known.

Nancy felt suddenly shy. Always before, when with Peter, she had enjoyed the least bit of a feeling of superiority, that she was graciously bringing, with her friendship, much into a life that must, because it was limited to Judson's farm, often seem dull and empty. But it was not easy to feel that way toward this very good looking young man in immaculate blue serge who tended to her comfort with the assurance of a person quite accustomed to taking young ladies on automobile picnics!

Because they were both young, because the breeze blowing deliciously against their faces was fragrant with summer smells, their hearts were light; they chattered merrily, as young people will, about everything under the sun, then lapsed into pleasant silences, broken only by the regular humming of the engine.

However, after a little, these silences irritated Nancy. Peeping from a corner of her eye at Peter Hyde's blonde head, she was annoyed by an overwhelming curiosity as to what was going on within it! What was the mystery concealed behind that pleasant mask? And why, when they seemed such good friends, could he not tell her?

Then she suddenly realized, with a quick sense of shame, that she, too, was concealing much from Peter Hyde!

As they rode along he pointed out old landmarks with familiarity of a life-long Islander. He admitted that history fascinated him. "Not in books as much as when you can hook it up with the very ground you're walking on! Look at that lake over there—can't you picture it covered with the canoes of the Indians? They used to come around here in flotillas—the Iroquois, the Algonquins and the Hurons, always fighting. Great lot they were—scrapping all the time!"

He seemed to have at his tongue's end some interesting bit of information about every spot they passed. As they wandered around Isle La Motte, he told how on this little island Champ-lain had first landed on his voyage down into the valley. He explained that a Jesuit mission had been established there as far back as 1660, long before any other white men had ventured

into the wilderness.

They visited the ruins of Fort Ste. Anne on Sandy Point and the little chapel with its cross, to which, on the Feast of Ste. Anne, came pilgrims from great distances, to pray at the shrine.

"We think this America of ours is so young," he laughed. "And here we are living on soil that has been consecrated by brave sacrifices of centuries ago! Not so bad."

Driving homeward their backs were turned to the little ominous pile of clouds darkening a corner of the blue sky. At a spot where the road ran close to the edge of the lake, under a wide spreading maple tree, they laid out B'indy's lunch.

"Now I'll tell him I'm going," Nancy vowed to herself, with a little unaccountable fluttering.

He was on his knees before the picnic box. She could not see his face.

"Peter!" She had not realized how hard it was going to be to say it. "I'm—going—away! Really."

She had expected that he would be startled—show real consternation. Her going must make a difference in his life at Freedom—there were no other young people to take her place.

He was surprised; he held a jelly sandwich suspended for a moment, as though waiting for her to say something more. Then he laid it down on a paper plate.

"White meat or dark meat," he asked.

Nancy could not know that he was not really concerned as to whether she preferred white meat, that his indifference was, indeed, covering a moment's inability to express his real feeling. She was suddenly angry—angry at herself more than at Peter Hyde!

"Of course I shall hate to go, I have grown very fond of Aunt Sabrina and Aunt Milly and B'indy—and dear little Nonie. It's hardest to leave her!"

"They'll miss you. You've changed Happy House. And Nonie's a different child."

"He's very careful not to say he'll miss me," thought Nancy with childish pique. Then, aloud: "But I can't stay at Happy House forever. I only planned to spend three weeks there at the most and it's been six. And it seems as though I'd been there ages! I suppose one day on the Islands is like a week in the cities, where you live right next to people and never really touch their lives. However, it's in the rush of the cities I belong; I should die if I had to stay here!"

She wanted him to understand that the attractions of Happy House could not hold her; she wanted to punish him for that abstraction that she had thought indifference.

"Judson's will be a dull hole without you at Happy House, Nancy," Peter put in, gravely. She laughed lightly. "By Christmas you will have forgotten all about me! Anyway, you will have Miss Denny."

With wicked delight over his embarrassment Nancy told him of Nonie's plan that Miss Denny should be Mr. Peter's "dearest."

"Your fate is as plain as the nose on my face," she laughed, tantalizingly. "You won't have to cross my palm with silver to know your future, Mr. Hyde! A cottage on the 10-acre piece where you will live happily—ever afterward. As a wedding gift, with my best wishes, I'll give you the birdsnest."

She dodged the drum stick that Peter threw at her. "You are not at all grateful for the nice fortune I'm giving you," she declared.

"I am, indeed! Though it doesn't seem quite fair for me to make too many plans without consulting Miss Denny, and I've never seen the lady. She may be old and ugly, black—or yellow."

"I'll tell you—if you'll promise not to tell that I've told! She is old and ugly; she's blind in one eye and stutters and limps and has straggly gray hair and—"

"For Heaven's sake, stop! When all my life I've been looking for a girl with brown hair that looks sort of red and freckles—about 3,000 of them!"

"Peter!" Nancy sprang precipitously to her feet. "Look—there is a storm coming!"

B'indy's threatened storm was approaching swiftly. The black

cloud that had been piling up behind them now overspread the whole western sky.

"What a shame—to have it spoil our day! This has been such fun. I'll never forget it, after I've gone." Then, hastily, "Gather up the napkins and the baskets; I promised B'indy I'd bring them home! Isn't there a short cut home? I'm really dreadfully afraid of lightning." But she had caught something in the expression of Peter Hyde's face that frightened her more than the threatened storm.

"Let's hurry," she cried, running unceremoniously to the automobile.

CHAPTER XXI.

Davy's Gift.

Real need recognizing no distinction of class, it had been Liz Hopworth who had been summoned to the Hopkins home when Mrs. Hopkins "dropped off" in the middle of the night, leaving 10 children motherless.

Over Dan's late breakfast Liz, wan-eyed from loss of sleep, but dignified by a new importance, related all the sad circumstances of poor Sarah Hopkins' passing. "Who'd a' thought," she exclaimed as she vigorously beat her pan-cake batter, "yesterday when I see the poor woman and out a hangin' her clothes that this blessed night I'd a' been called in to straighten her limbs and do for those poor young 'uns!"

To Nonie and Davy death was a strangely mysterious thing which they took for granted; dogs and cats and calves died; frequently there was a burial in the village cemetery. These had always had an element of excitement which even stirred the Hopworth home, detached though it was from the village life. They looked at Liz, now, with wide eager eyes. To have "straightened poor Sarah Hopkins' limbs" seemed to have transformed her—her tone was kinder, something almost tender gleamed in her tired eyes, and she was making pan-cakes for their breakfast!

"Just fetch that grease, Nonie. Step sry, too—there's a lot to be done before this day's over. Lordy, I thought to myself last night, that the Lord strikes hard—leavin' those 10 children that haven't done no wrong without any mother to manage and Timothy Hopkins sittin' there as helpless like he'd been hit over the head, he's that stunned. And scarcely a bite in the house."

Old Dan'l had long since gotten past the day of worrying over the ways of the Lord. Nor to him was there anything particularly startling in a lack of food. His had always been a philosophy that believed that from somewhere or other Providence would provide, and if it didn't—

"Scarcely a bite, and all steppin' on one another, there's so many of 'em, and then when I think o' Happy House and the plenty there's there, well, 's I say, the Lord's ways are beyond me! Eat up your breakfast, Nonie. You gotta do up the work here, for I told that poor man I'd come back quick as ever I could. There's no end of work to be done fore that place will look fit for folks to come and see her."

"Can I go, too, Liz?" asked Davy. "Mebbe I can help."

Normally Liz would have made a sharp retort. Now she considered a moment.

"Mebbe you can. You can play with the baby so's Jennie can help me sweep and dust. Sarah Hopkins would turn over if she thought folks was goin' to see the muss and litter. Hurry along."

All that Liz had said of the house of mourning had been true. Davy found the muss and litter; the poor smithy wandering helplessly around and the "young 'uns" stepping on one another. He shut his eyes tight so that he would not have to catch the tiniest glimpse of poor Sarah Hopkins lying very still in the bedroom off the kitchen. He was glad when Liz, in a strangely brisk tone, bade Jennie, the oldest Hopkins girl, give the baby over to Davy.

"He's com' long to mind the baby, so's you can help. Take him outside, Davy, and keep him out from under foot. Take up these dishes! Sure's I'm livin' I see Mrs. Sniggs comin' up the road this blessed minit."

Davy, gathering up his charge, retreated hastily. In fact, his pace did not slacken until he was well away from the Hopkins home. Then he put his burden down under a tree and stared at it.

The baby, blissfully unconscious of its loss, cooed ecstatically

to express his joy at the unusual attention. He reached out tiny hands to Davy. "Go—go!" he gurgled, coaxingly.

"You sit right there! I gotta think," was Davy's scowling answer.

And Davy was thinking—hard. Liz' story, over the breakfast, had sunk deep into his soul. He knew what it was to live in a household where there was no mother and not much food!

It did not take Davy very long to make up his mind. Then, with determination written in every wrinkle of his frowning face, he lifted the baby and hurried to his home. An hour later, still carrying the baby, he trudged doggedly up the road to Happy House, through the gate, along the path to the door. Only for a moment did he pause on the threshold; then, softly opening the door, he entered, and came out again, empty armed.

The oppressiveness of the day had decidedly ruffled the atmosphere of Happy House. Miss Sabrina had taken the news of Nancy's flight with a disapproving grunt; B'indy had sharply come to Nancy's defense. She "guessed girls had to be girls anyways, though she'd a feelin' in her bones that somethin' might happen and one never could tell 'bout them pesky machines."

Then Miss Sabrina, taller and straighter than ever, had walked haughtily away as far as the sitting room, when a shriek brought B'indy running.

Miss Sabrina had dropped breathless into a chair and at her feet sat the Hopkins baby sucking its thumb.

"B'indy—what—what is it? I liked to fall over it!"

"Land a' goshen a baby! A real live baby!" B'indy leaned over cautiously. "Crawled in here like a caterpillar! As I live, here's a note, Miss Sabrina!" She unpinned a piece of paper from the baby's dress.

"Ples kep this child there ante enuf food fer so meny Hopkins Liz sez and she sez the Lord never ment any body to go hungry she sez your hous is big enuf fer a dusen and lots of food I guess you don't no thet ther ar so meny Hopkins and you will like to kepe this one I no how it hurts to be hungry so ples don't send this baby bak. Yours truly, Davy."

B'indy, after reading the note aloud, stared at the baby.

"Sarah Hopkins' young 'un—I Swan!" With her apron she wiped a tear from her eye. "No one to do for it now."

Miss Sabrina snorted. "Of all the nerve—bringing it here—for me to break my neck on!"

From above came Miss Milly's voice plaintively calling.

"Take it away. Milly's calling—she's got to know what the excitement's about. I'll never get over my fright," and Miss Sabrina, still trembling, rose to go to her sister. The baby puckered his face preparatory to a long wail. "Take it out," commanded Miss Sabrina, "it's going to cry—give it something quick."

B'indy snatched the baby and flew to the kitchen. She could not bear to think that any living thing in Happy House was hungry. However, the threatened squall passed when B'indy, after carefully shutting her doors, produced a bowl and a shiny spoon.

It had not been alone Miss Sabrina's shriek that had frightened Miss Milly. She had heard a rumble of thunder. She was lying back among her pillows deadly pale. She clutched Miss Sabrina's hand and begged her to stay with her.

"I know I'm foolish," she whispered plaintively, "but it's so oppressive. It's hard—for me—to breathe."

Sabrina sat down grimly beside her—no thunder storm came to North Hero that it did not bring unpleasant memories to them both.

"Is it—going to be—very bad?" Miss Milly asked plaintively. "I wish Nancy—was home."

(To be continued next week.)

Some folks are naturally unlucky. Just when Philadelphians are spending large sums of money to put a stop to the whiskered joke about the city of brotherly and sisterly love being sleepy, along comes a Philadelphian and calls at the White House, asking to see President Wilson.

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