

The Fireside.

BY THE PROVIDENCE ROAD.

BY MARY E. Q. BRUSH.

The cold, gray afternoon was ending with a snowstorm. Billy plied his broom vigorously, but no sooner was the walk leading from the gate up to the weather-worn house swept clear, than down came the flakes again—little, round ones, like rice grains, and big, star-shaped ones—making a soft, downy covering for the boards. One broad, ruddy streak lay across the snow; it came from the lighted window of the sitting-room, where a shadowy head moved to and fro, while even through the drifts muffling the ledge, came the sound of the sewing-machine. Mother Martin was speeding it fast, for she wanted to finish her stent of sewing before the time for supper getting.

The big, red tippet wound round Billy's head did not cover up the sudden scowl disfiguring his bayish face.

"Whew!" Poor mother must be tired! Up at five this morning, washing, getting the meals and then sewing all the afternoon in order to earn something! Wish she's let me stay out of school and get a place in a shop or store! Wish poor father wasn't sick! Wish old Aunt Topsy—Billy paused suddenly, while the scowl deepened. Then, with an unpleasant smile curling around his lips, he leaned the broom against the crotch of the pear tree close to the walk, pulled off one of his mittens, and thrusting his hand into his reefer pocket, drew out a sheet of paper.

The fast falling flakes and the gathering gloom prevented a very distinct view of its contents; nevertheless, the boy seemed satisfied with the brief survey. He restored the paper to his pocket, chuckling as he did so. "Looks just like old Aunt Topsy! Sharp nose, grim jaws and spike eyes. And that prim sort of collar she always wears around her neck! Ho, if I'd searched in all the stores from New York to Chicago I don't believe I'd have found a valentine better suited to the old lady. And I'll send it to her—indeed I shall! It'll serve her just right for the unfeeling way she's acted toward father and mother."

Stamping the snow from toes and heels, Billy went noisily up the steps.

As he hung his coat and hat in the entryway, he chanced to overhear a bit of conversation going on in the sitting room.

Mrs. Martin had stopped her busy wheel; there was the soft rustle of garments being neatly folded, and above this came the sound of her gentle voice, saying:

"Yes, Abel, I think it'd be no harm to try. If John Armstrong is doing as well as that item in the Western paper stated, why, he surely ought to pay those two hundred dollars. What a help the money would be just now," with a sigh.

Her husband, lying back amid his pillows, echoed the sigh. "You never said truer words, Eleanor. We do need the money! It wouldn't seem so hard to be sick and out of work in summer, but here in midwinter, it's awful! Well, I guess I'll write to Armstrong, in fact I have scribbled off a few lines; used a pencil, but I guess he can read it well enough," with a grim smile.

"You or Billy can address an envelope in ink when you've the time."

"Here's Billy now, he can do it," said Mrs. Martin, as she stopped to pick bits of cloth and stray threads from her apron, tucking them into the little rag bag that dangled at the side of the sewing machine. "As for me, I want to hurry out to the kitchen and stir up some flapjacks; they'll taste good this cold, blustering night."

A minute or two later Billy found himself seated by the little writing desk, pen and ink and two envelopes before him.

"Write, John Armstrong, Esq., Fara-weigh, North Dakota," dictated Mr. Martin.

Billy wrote the address, giving a prolonged whistle as he did so, and exclaiming:

"Whew! that's a long journey to take." Then taking up the second envelope, he wrote with great care and many flourishes:

"Miss Temperance Martin, 25 West Walnut St., Centreville, —"

In one of the enclosures, he placed his father's letter; the valentine was slipped into the other; both acts were done hastily and somewhat furtively.

Then he popped his curly head in at the kitchen door and said to his mother who was vigorously beating the flap-jack batter, "Guess I'll have time enough to mail father's letter so it'll get on the six o'clock train; he seems anxious to get it off. It won't take longer than three jerks of a sheep's tail for me to run down to the post office and back!"

A minute later, Billy was speeding down the street, his swift feet following the irregular gash made by the recent snow-plow. His road led him past "25 West Walnut Street."

Here he slackened his pace—then came to a full stop.

For a wonder Aunt Topsy had forgotten to draw down her shades. Usually the house looked gloomy and forbidding. Now, however, the cheery gleams of lamplight and firelight shone out across the strip of snow lawn and the two tall fir trees standing like sentinels on each side of the window. The latter was the long, low kind, enabling any chance passer-by to behold a full view of the interior of the room. It was not uninviting. The deep red velvet paper with its gilt border made a handsome background for the heavily framed family portraits hanging thereon; a wide sofa and comfortable-looking chairs, solid and old-fashioned, stood here and there; a fat, gray tabby cat, with a bow on its neck, was curled up cozily among the cushions; a stand of late blooming, white and yellow chrysanthemums gave a touch of beauty and freshness to the apartment. There was a glitter of silverware, with the gleam of china on the handsome mahogany sideboard. Brightest of all was the cheery fire in the grate, sending its dancing reflections on brass andirons and fender. In front of the latter sat Aunt Topsy herself, erect, handsome and prosperous-looking.

But suddenly, as the glances of the small watcher outside were fixed upon her, the old lady bowed her stately head and a flood of tears streamed from her keen, dark eyes; her strong figure swayed back and forth in a spasm of grief, at the sight of which Billy's heart

softened, and he said to himself, pityingly:

"My stars! what can be the matter! She's feeling badly about something, that's certain. Don't know she could cry so, poor thing! After all, I suppose she has her troubles, too, and anyhow, she must be awful sad and lonesome."

In a singularly subdued frame of mind Billy resumed his way quietly down the street. As he turned the post office corner, he paused, his lips puckered up in a low perplexed whistle. Then he exclaimed with much energy:

"Pshaw! Guess I won't do it after all! Somehow it seems sort of mean after what I've just seen! No, I won't send Aunt Topsy that valentine—so there!"

Stepping out of the silvery circle of the electric light, he turned into the shadow of an adjacent alleyway. The next instant, bits of white paper, mingled with the falling snowflakes, and Billy walked away with a half-rueful, half-triumphant laugh, adding:

"There, I've done it! A five-cent valentine and two-cent stamp gone! But—well—I say, I don't want to hurt the feelings of an old woman who seems gloomy enough already!"

Then, with a happy glow on his face, Billy dashed breezily into the post office, mailed his remaining envelope, and hurried home to his supper of hot flap-jacks, which he ate with a clear conscience and the best of appetites.

Miss Temperance Martin had to sweep her own doorway and front walk that Valentine morning. For some reason or other, the boy who did her chores failed to appear at the usual hour. The aged spinster waited for him until she grew impatient, and finally, donning shawl and old-fashioned quilted hood, she took her broom and shovel and sallied forth.

On the doorstep she came face to face with the postman.

"Mornin', ma'am," said the latter, touching his cap respectfully, and then, he added, as he handed her an envelope, "I guess here's a valentine for you, Miss Martin! The good old saint hasn't forgotten you after all!"

Miss Topsy stood half-dazed, forgetting the snowdrifts and the cold wind nipping her nose until it was as red as her apple-tinted cheeks. Letting the broom and shovel fall with a great clatter against the verandah railing, she presently turned back into the house, and, dropping down in the nearest easy-chair, rubbed her misty glasses until they were quite clear; then she opened the envelope—the latter certainly having a valentine look about it, its edges all embossed with cupids, bows and arrows, hearts and garlands of flowers. Misses Topsy's cheeks grew redder.

"Some of them sassy school children have been making game of me," she exclaimed, her voice trembling with mingled pain and indignation.

However, the contents of the envelope did not seem to match its outside. There was nothing comic—nothing love-lorn. Indeed, a plain sheet of paper written with the lead pencil, and having these words:

JOHN ARMSTRONG, ESQ.
Dear Sir.—Learning of your whereabouts, I write to ask you whether it is not possible for you to pay me the money you borrowed of me so long ago. As you doubtless remember, I made the loan as an act of friendship for you and relying on your solemn promise to return the same to me within a certain time. Your conduct in regard to this

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matter is something with which you have to settle with your conscience. Nevertheless, I feel that you ought to know in what straits my would-be action has helped to place me. When your note came due, I found that you had left town for parts unknown. As I had gotten the money for you from the bank, I was, of course, obliged to pay the sum, and in order to do this was forced to borrow money from my sister, Temperance Martin. Sickness and the loss of a situation has caused me, I am sorry to say, to be very tardy in reimbursing my sister—and this, to my deep regret, has made an estrangement between us. I do not wonder that she is offended, for I owe her part of the loan even now. It would be a great relief both to my wife and myself if I were able to pay sister Temperance every cent—interest and all—for it grieves us and adds much to our already heavy burdens to have her feel

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