

CHAPTER III

THE TERRIBLE FIRE

ONE night, about eight o'clock, Harry and Laura were playing in the nursery, building houses with bricks, and trying who could raise the highest tower without letting it fall, when suddenly they were startled to hear every bell in the house ringing violently, while the servants seemed running up and down stairs as if they were distracted.

"What can be the matter?" cried Laura, turning round and listening, while Harry quietly took this opportunity to shake the walls of her castle till it fell.

"The very house is coming down about your ears, Laura!" said Harry, enjoying his little bit of mischief. "I should like to be Andrew, now, for five minutes, that I might answer those fifty bells, and see what has happened. Uncle David must be wanting coals, candles, tea, toast, and soda-water, all at once! What a bustle everybody is in! There! the bells are ringing again, worse than ever! Something wonderful is going on! What can it be?"

Presently Betty ran breathlessly into the room,

saying that Mrs. Crabtree ought to come downstairs immediately, as Lady Harriet had been suddenly taken very ill, and, till the Doctor arrived, nobody knew what to do ; so she must give her advice and assistance.

Harry and Laura felt excessively shocked to hear this alarming news, and listened with grave attention while Mrs. Crabtree told them how amazingly well they ought to behave in her absence, when they were trusted alone in the nursery, with nobody to keep them in order, or to see what they were doing, especially now, as their grandmamma had been taken ill, and would require to be kept quiet.

Harry sat in his chair, and might have been painted as the very picture of a good boy during nearly twenty minutes after Mrs. Crabtree departed ; and Laura placed herself opposite to him, trying to follow so excellent an example, while they scarcely spoke above a whisper, wondering what could be the matter with their grandmamma, and wishing for once to see Mrs. Crabtree again, that they might hear how she was. Anyone who had observed Harry and Laura at that time would have wondered to see two such quiet, excellent, respectable children, and wished that all little boys and girls were made upon the same pattern ; but presently they began to think that probably Lady Harriet was not so very ill, as no more bells had rung during several minutes, and Harry ventured to look about for some better amusement than sitting still.

At this moment Laura unluckily perceived, on the

table near where they sat, a pair of Mrs. Crabtree's best scissors, which she had been positively forbidden to touch. The long troublesome ringlets were as usual hanging over her eyes in a most teasing manner, so she thought what a good opportunity this might be to shorten them a very little, not above an inch or two ; and without considering a moment longer, she slipped upon tiptoe, with a frightened look, round the table, and picked up the scissors in her hand ; then hastening towards a looking-glass, she began snipping off the ends of her hair. Laura was much diverted to see it showering down upon the floor, so she cut and cut on, while the curls fell thicker and faster, till at last the whole floor was covered with them, and scarcely a hair left upon her head. Harry went into fits of laughing when he perceived what a ridiculous figure Laura had made of herself, and he turned her round and round to see the havoc she had made.

Harry had been told five hundred times never to play with matches, and threatened with twenty different punishments if he ever ventured to do so ; but now he amused himself with lighting them and tossing them into the air. At first they all went out before reaching the ground, and soon, gaining confidence, he was making a triumphal progress round the nursery, and finally into the inner nursery, though afraid to make the slightest noise in case Mrs. Crabtree should hear it.

After he had been absent some time, the door was hastily opened again, and Laura felt surprised to see