

THE FIRE-DRILL MARCH

By Elliott Flower

MISS HEDGES of Room 5 was much disturbed about the fire drill. It seemed to her that the system, while excellent in theory, was faulty in execution. Room 5 was on the second floor of a two-room school building, there being four rooms to a floor, so Miss Hedges had an excellent opportunity for observation. The piano, used to play the marches when the children left the building, either in the drill or at the conclusion of sessions, was on that floor, too. It stood in a recess of the big hall, where it could be heard plainly on the floor above and the floor below. And Miss Hedges had made herself the special guardian of this piano.

"The music is of the utmost importance," she said. It was rumored that Miss Hedges had once been through a school fire, and that it had upset her nerves. For this reason the principal and the other teachers were disposed to be tolerant when she criticized various details of the drill.

"It is very pretty," said Miss Hedges on one occasion; "but the details that would make it really effective are overlooked."

"What are they?" asked Miss Raymond of Room 3.

"The conditions that would exist in case of a fire," replied Miss Hedges. "There would be no advance notice then, and the children would not be ready and waiting."

It was the custom to inform all the teachers when there was to be a fire drill, and the teachers informed the pupils. Indeed, there was almost as much preparation for it as there would be for a stage spectacle. Tommy Closs or Nellie Booth was stationed at the piano before the alarm was struck, so that, even if the children had not been warned, the strains of the march would come to them with the sound of the gong.

"That isn't the way it would be in case of fire," Miss Hedges argued. "No one would be ready then."

Tommy and Nellie alternated at the piano, each having a week when he or she played for the regular dismissal of school or for the fire drill, if there happened to be one, and this was another thing that worried Miss Hedges. In the excitement of a real alarm she was sure they would forget whose turn it was to go to the piano.

If Tommy had that duty alone, and if the fire drill was properly conducted, it would become almost instinctive with him to go to the piano at the stroke of the alarm. Furthermore, he would have a pride in the responsibility placed upon him that was lacking when he shared it with a girl. There was no honor in being selected as the alternate of a girl—that is, there was none from a boy's point of view. He ought to be made to feel that there was some glory, some real distinction, in the task assigned to him. Then he would be equal to any emergency.

But no one else seemed to take this view of the matter, and Miss Hedges noted that when one of them was unexpectedly absent there was usually a delay in getting the march started for the ordinary dismissal of school. She spoke of this to the principal.

"A small matter," said the principal. "There's no reason why the children shouldn't go out without music occasionally. Anyhow, the delay is trifling, and the circumstances you mention are of infrequent occurrence."

Miss Hedges subsided temporarily, as she knew she was beginning to be regarded as "the fire nuisance."

But a little later she heard Miss Kelly of Room 6 talking to the children in her room of the fire drill.

"Of course," said Miss Kelly, "this is only practice. In case of a real fire you would not march down the stairs so deliberately, but hurry as fast as you could."

This was too much for Miss Hedges. She knew that some people were sadly lacking in common sense; but she had not expected a teacher to calmly advise the very thing that the drill was intended to prevent. After mature reflection she decided that she would be derelict in her duty if she did not make one more earnest attempt to improve conditions. So she went to the principal again.

"Mr. Black," she said, "the fire drill in this school

"The fire drill is excellent. Even the Superintendent commended it the day he visited us."

"But everyone knew it was coming."

"Of course. If I tried your experiment and any harm came of it, I would be the one censured. You can advise this, because you have no responsibility; but it's a serious thing for me. There is bound to be a little confusion in a fire; but we reduce it to a minimum when we teach the children what to do and how to do it. However, I am glad you spoke to me about Miss Kelly. I shall warn her."

"Let us at least have a distinct fire-drill march," urged Miss Hedges, seeing that there was no chance of gaining the more important point.

"Suit yourself as to that," said the principal. "The piano is on your floor."

Miss Hedges could not play herself; but she believed firmly in the power of music.

Previously, there had been no distinctive fire-drill march. Now she decided to have one that should be as much a part of the alarm or any other feature of it. The marches by which the children were dismissed were changed from time to time, considerable latitude being allowed the pupils who played the piano; but this one should be always the same, and never played except for a drill. And it should be a strong, firm march—one of the kind that commands deliberation and regularity. There are marches and marches. You find one pleasing; but you just naturally get in step when you hear another; it holds you mentally and physically to its even time, or if you lag it forces you to it.

Such a march was the one Miss Hedges selected,

and she gave a copy each to Tommy Closs and Nellie Booth.

"Practise it at home," she said; "but never play it here except for the fire drill."

The march made a hit. Tommy was the first one to play it for a drill, and as the notes rose loud and strong there came the stamp, stamp, stamp of children marking time while awaiting their turn to move; but the very popularity of it proved a menace. The children wanted it played on other occasions, and some of them got copies of it and learned it at home. That did no harm; but Miss Hedges guarded it jealously at school. It was a part of the drill, she held, and the children must learn to recognize it exclusively as such. Once, when school was about to be dismissed, she heard Miss Kelly say: "Play the fire-drill march, Tommy."

"No," interposed Miss Hedges, firmly.

"Why not?" asked Miss Kelly.

"Mr. Black left that matter to me, and I don't want it confused with anything else," said Miss Hedges. "It has given the children a greater interest in the drill than they ever had before. When the alarm sounds their minds are instantly centered on the march."

"Their minds ought to be on the fire, if there should be one," asserted Miss Kelly.

"Quite the contrary," retorted Miss Hedges. "The nearer they come to identifying the drill with something aside from a fire the better it is. Let them listen for the march."

On another occasion Miss Hedges heard the familiar strains coming up from the playground, and from a window she saw Axel Stromm marching at the head



The Notes of the March Came to the Frantic Pupils From the Lips of Axel Stromm

is absolutely no test at all; it is no more than the ordinary dismissal for recess. Teachers and pupils know so well when it is coming that in some rooms they put their books away a few minutes beforehand and wait for the alarm. In addition to this, so much has been left to the individual judgment of the teachers that different ideas prevail in different rooms, and the result would be confusion." Then she told what she had heard Miss Kelly say; for it seemed to her that there was real danger in this.

"A wrong idea, of course," said the principal. "I'll speak to her about it this afternoon."

"Why not turn in an alarm unexpectedly, and find out just what the drill is worth?" asked Miss Hedges.

"I wouldn't care to risk it," returned the cautious principal. "It would frighten some of the teachers out of their wits."

"If they're going to lose their wits," retorted Miss Hedges, "it's better they should do so when there is no fire than when there is one."

"Really, Miss Hedges, you impress me as being fire crazy," said the principal.

"I've been through one fire," asserted Miss Hedges, "and I know what it means. A drill, to be effective, should be as nearly as possible under real fire conditions. Then, when the real alarm sounds, the chances are the school will be emptied or nearly emptied before they know that it is a real alarm. To avoid a panic the first time, tell them there will be no advance notice of fire drills hereafter, and then give none. Let the engineer turn in an alarm once without even giving notice to you. Then you'll see how your system works."

"You're a monomaniac," returned the principal.