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THE NORTH WINDOW

By Harry B. Kennon.

Perhaps it was because of our living so near the sky; perhaps because of the Scotch-Irish blend of our blood; perhaps, because we adored young Louis Marceaux; perhaps.....

I have suggested that we lived on a hilltop, as we did; but the north window gave on still ascending ground, reaching, after the generous dip in which lay our father's smiling cornfield, higher and higher, its crown of woods the boundary of our childish world. Beyond the woods—oh, somewhere!—stood the monastery of Maryville, with its silver-sounding and far-carrying bells. We could hear their chiming morning, noon and evening, and sometimes, ineffably sweet, at midnight.

Was it our father's saying that "the bells of Maryville gave him a feeling of safety" that accounted for their place in our affections, or was it the mystery of music coming from we knew not where? I do not know. We children of Protestant training sensed not at all the beautiful significance of their intervallic ringing.

Louis crossed himself when he heard them. He never told us why.

Though our south windows overlooked the sleepy village of Carondolet and, beyond, the swift sweep of the ever varying, then busy, Mississippi; and though there was a telescope on one of the sills ever ready to spy out the identity of steamboats as they rounded the bend down Kimmswick way, the north window, in the upper hall, was our mother's favored prospect.

Had I the art of a Whistler, I would paint her sitting there for all sons to see forever—but her hands would not be painted idle. Nor could De Franci have painted them: he of the lace-guarded and tapering inefficiencies—exquisite, as many prized portraits in St. Louis homes testify—could never have risen to the dimpled dignity and strength of character that our mother's hands revealed. She loved the north window, as did our little sister Florence—"Birdie" to Louis, her big boy friend and knight. Frequently both she and mother would be there together....

It was the tide of the year, when corn up-standing rich steals golden gleams to gild its green; the quiet time of day when long, long shadows fall. The mocking bird sang its heart out to the hush, from the tip of the Lombardy poplar sire by the north gate.

Florence sat by the north window, I on the floor, my back against the balustrade, devouring wonders of the Brothers Grimm; mother was in the nursery, laying out clean frocks and panties to make us presentable against father's coming home. We were not early-to-bed youngsters. The journey between the city and Carondolet meant catching especial and, in those times, very few trains; no being whisked at ten minute intervals—or is it seven?—by electric power from hither to yon, from turmoil to peace. We met him on fine days—such fine days!—at the foot of the hill in the sunset and, sometimes, in the twilight, when lightning-bugs lanterned our way up the stepping-stones. So from four to six-thirty was furnishing time according to age and opportunity

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and, as we numbered two more than Wordsworth's seven, our mother had her hands full.

I looked up from my book, as always, when the bells rang....

"Louis! Louis!" shrieked Florence, from the window.

"What is it, Florence? What is it?" asked mother, instantly with us, there, as ever, in time of trouble.

"Louis is gone," sobbed Florence.

"Louis rowed your brother Ben across the river to go in swimming," said mother, quietly. A shadow crossed her face. "They should be home by now."

"No! No!" expostulated Florence, "Louis was just here—at the gate. He's gone away."

"Which way did he go?"

"Down in the corn. I heard the bells—and there was Louis. He said good-bye—said he wasn't coming back here again, never no more—never no more—"

"Hasn't my little daughter been asleep—dreaming?"

"How can I hear the angel bells asleep? Louis was here!"

The protesting, sobbing child was mothered back to the nursery, soothed by one past mistress of the art; presently I heard her laughter. I went to the window and watched for Louis to come out at the far side of the field, as he must—watched for him climbing the hill. A little wind arose. The corn rustled, and whispered things that a small boy hears. I forgot Louis in the listening..

The big front door banged to shake the house and Ben came hastily stumbling up around the curve of the stairway; his eyes were red with weeping, terror-bearing, dirty where he had tried to dry them with his fists.

"Mother! Mother!" he cried in distress.

"What is it, son?" She met him at the stair-head.

"Louis! Louis!—"

"Yes, my son, yes—?"

"He's not coming back here again never no more," chanted Florence, from the doorway.

"The—the quicksand!" blubbered Ben.

Mother clasped him to her breast.

"The bells were ringing across the river. Louis said he'd take one more dive—he—he—he...."—Reedy's Mirror.

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