

Red Rice,
ANDOVER.

Easter Monday. 1892

Dearest "Everybody"

At last I am able to sit down peaceably and write, and this must be a family letter and sent round to Bessie, Emily and all whom it concerns - for more than one account I cannot write, and send this to Mother being the Head of the Family.

You can fancy the way we have been deluged with letters and telegrams and visiting cards. I have been quite unable to cope with anything but business matters requiring immediate attention; this is the first letter I have attempted to write.

Well - a fortnight ago yesterday - (it seems like a year), Louis and I were coming home from Church over the Bridge, having been to see the Collins', when just when we got to the Walter Palmers, I remarked to Louis "How the dust is flying through the Railway Cutting today!" and then "I believe it is smoke" on which Louis looked up and said "By George, I believe our Stables are on fire". I replied "it is too far off for the Stables, if it is then, it is the House". We noticed a knot of people standing at the Palmers' gate and called across to them "Are you looking over there because you think there is a fire?" "Yes ma'am we do, shall we telephone for the Engines?" Louis called out "No, we will do so from the Waterworks if necessary"

and with that we took to our heels and ran. When our gate came in view, behold the road was blocked with people right across. The smoke was going up in volumes, but as yet no flames; when we reached the gate, there, if you please, we beheld our garden strewn with furniture and our friends turning our things out as fast as they could. My head fairly went round for a moment at the unexpectedness of the sight! It was then about ten minutes past 1 o'clock. Emily had sent Eric to telephone from the Waterworks and Gavin to look for us, but he had missed, and the telephone was closed on Sunday, so that was of no avail, but Major Liebenrood, who was driving from Church, turned his horse round and drove like mad for the Engines.

When Louis and I arrived poor Emily rushed out frantically to meet us. She had been almost beside herself when the fire was discovered and we did not come home. Louis and I went up to the little green room (Nellie's room) at once where the mischief was, it was like an oven, but not a trace of smoke to be seen there, or indeed anywhere inside the house at that stage; it was almost difficult to realise that an immediate removal of furniture was necessary.

About a quarter of an hour later however, the first piece of ceiling and roof came down, and then the fire simply tore across the roof, first in my room, then all along the front of the house with lightning rapidity. The Engines arrived about 1.30 p.m. or

thereabouts. You never saw such a scene as our garden was. Everyone was coming from Church and they turned in, in numbers, to help. As long as it was safe inside, we tore down pictures, brackets, cleared ornaments, books etc., etc., in the wildest haste. Then Louis was heard shouting "Clear the House, Clear the House" and it certainly was very alarming to hear and see a great mass of burning roof come thundering down on the top of the stair. I was standing, at the time, just by the drawing room door. All the lower part of the house is standing, but of course fearfully damaged by smoke and water. Louis told you that all our plate and my jewelry and most of my clothes (my Russian Dress too) and his are saved. The children have lost a great deal of theirs, as the fire reached their rooms so much sooner than was expected. After one could do no more in the house, I went out into the road for awhile and watched from there. It was a spectacle !

The fireman in their brass helmets looked so weird among the flames and there was such a babel of sound, they were hacking out the windows and shouting to one another, and the fire was roaring and the water spluttering and hissing, and the confusion of people below, all made a regular pandemonium.

You never saw such a mob as turned up; there were 4 Detectives marching people off in scores. We really were very fortunate in not having anything valuable stolen, for our household

goods were all out in the garden in one horrible mess, even my Rockery was strewn. Carpets, Bedding, clothes of everyones, kitchen pots and pans, books and ornaments, all heaped together ! It would have been very easy to run off with things.

It was all over about 3 o'clock and the firemen left.

A number of ladies carried my Drawing room ornaments, china, valuables, etc., to the Priory. It was fortunate it was Sunday and in the daytime, there were so many hands available. I sat on a chair in the Drive, by the Stables, finally, and looked on. I was quite done up !

Louis, having had a pipe procured for him by a kind friend, was the calmest person there, and never lost his head for a moment. What upset me more than anything, was seeing a fireman tumble through our glass Verandah, of course, I thought he was killed, fortunately he only was cut about the face and no eyes or vital parts touched. I had dreaded any accidents so, from the moment the firemen arrived.

One thing troubles Louis' mind very much. He arrived from Church, Top hat, stick and all complete! He was at work during the fire in his every day pot hat; he cannot remember the moment at which he exchanged his Sunday hat for his weekday one ! I am firmly convinced he walked straight to the cupboard on arriving as usual, by sheer force of habit; it is the first thing he always does coming home from Church, before he will even walk round the garden.

We stayed at the Priory for a week; it took 6 of us, the maids, Miss Kidgell and me, pretty well the whole week, to sort the household goods; we had all the different tradespeople up to pack and take away what was in their particular line, and I was standing about, between Priory and Point, making inventories, from 9.30 a.m. as long as daylight lasted and as people were turning up all day long "to enquire" I was considerably hampered in my proceedings. No one who has not gone through it can conceive of the worry and work it entails ! And as I could not sleep for visions of a burning house and things being pitched out of windows helter skelter all night long, and inventories dancing in my brain, I was fairly worn out by the end of the week. The children were kindly taken off my hands. The big boys to the Collins' and Louise and Baby to Mrs. Drakes!. Dear little Louise took Baby over to the Priory during the fire and sat in the Drawing room and told him stories till Mrs. Drake came and took them to her house and then they watched the flames from the top storey window.

Eric handed books out through the Smoking room window as cool and ~~as~~ unmoved as if it were an ordinary spring cleaning and was afterwards seen in the Kitchen filling his pockets with biscuits - Lunch-time having long passed and no Lunch being forthcoming ! A policeman saw him and nearly ran him in ! till informed with great majesty who he was.

Gavin was generally mouching "around" gazing on the destruction.

When the fire was first discovered, Emily rushed to the boys and said "Master Eric you go for the fire engines and you Master Gavin run and find your Father, quick." "Not much, Emily, you don't think I'm going on such an errand as that donkey". "Master Eric, don't you know the roof is burning over your head, run for your life!" "Don't excite yourself Emily; don't you move Gavin, don't take any notice of her nonsense!" Poor Emily at this waxed so desparate, that Eric saw fit to very deliberately walk outside to investigate, thereupon seeing the smoke, he remarks "There is some smoke, I think I'll go" and then they both took to their heels and ran fast enough. But I think it must have been maddening for poor Emily. Little wretches!

It has really been a most merciful escape. If it had happened at night, we should have had no warning till the roof actually fell in. They say it must have been smouldering in the roof at least 36 hours. I cannot think what we should have done; the first piece that fell, was just outside my bedroom door, and if Louis and I had been away from home the whole house would have been ablaze before it reached the childrens' rooms and it would have reached them before any of the maids got warning of it, for their room, is the only one where the roof is nearly intact. It is all very upsetting as it is, but when one thinks what it might have been, one has no room for anything but thankfulness.

We have taken an unfurnished house down the Bath Road on the lefthand side coming up from the town just a little further on than the entrance to Coley Avenue, and there we must picnic with the remains of our goods till the dear Point is built up again. We hope to get in by the end of next week, meanwhile we have a delightful harbour of refuge and the boys supremely happy.

I took Louise and Baby the next day over the ruined house; it did amaze them, poor Baby could only murmur "Oh! dear, Oh dear dear" and Louise's feelings were all for her Mother, she kept squeezing my hand and saying "poor mummy, poor dear mummy". Louis comes backwards and forwards when he can and in Reading puts up with Fred. He was very sad in the depths of his heart till he found a shelter for his wife and chicks.

Grannie seems pretty well; this sudden cold has tried her much and her nettle-rash is most wearing for her. Fannybis away for 3 weeks and I am in charge.

Louis brought on Saturday night the news of Ally Foley's death. We are much distressed and very anxious for particulars. It seems so very sudden, as Father's letter of the Saturday before never mentions her.

Now Goodbye,

With much love

Your loving M.E. Simonds.