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A Brave Girl

L. M. Montgomery

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Aunt Em was the heroine of this story and it was she who told it to us on her last visit here.

We were all sitting around the fire one evening, when Clive, my older brother, came in and said it was the darkest night he had ever been out in.

I said I was glad I hadn't gone over to see Kitty Martin that evening, as I had intended, since I would have had to come home alone.

"You wouldn't have been frightened to do that, would you?" said Aunt Em.

"Yes, I would have been scared to death," I admitted frankly. "I'm the biggest coward that ever breathed.

"Aunt Em.—Clive here would tell you that."

Mother smiled across the table at Aunty.

"Madge would never be able to do what you did for me one time, Emmy," she said.

"Oh, yes, she would. I was frightened enough, Alice—and you know what a dreadful coward I had always been before that night."

Clive and I had scented a story by this time and we gave Aunt Em no peace until she consented to tell us. I shall try to give it as nearly as possible in her own words.

"It was thirty years ago," said Aunt Em, settling comfortably back to her knitting, "but I'm sure I shall never forget a single incident of that night if I live to be a hundred. I was fourteen years old and your mother here was eight. We were living on a farm in one of the loneliest, dreariest, back-country places you could imagine.

"Our nearest neighbour lived three miles away and we were almost surrounded by woods. About six miles away was a little village called Cross Roads—quite a stirring place we thought—with a church and store. Father and mother made frequent trips thereto, but Alice and I rarely went out of sight from our own farm. We did not even get to school and not often to church. We had no playmates and were often lonely. Our family consisted of father and mother, we two girls and 'old Aunt Maragret' as we called her. She was really no relation at all, but a trusted nurse and servant combined and was as much a part of our household as any of us.

"We girls were blindly petted and spoiled by her. Looking back now, I cannot say I think she was a judicious friend by any means, for she told us so many tales of fairies and witches and 'spooks' that our heads were full of such nonsense. I, in particular, grew to be dreadfully afraid of the dark. You could not have persuaded me to go into a room without a light, and the mere idea of venturing out of doors alone after nightfall would fill us with terror. I knew I was very foolish for I did not really believe in Aunt Margaret's stories at all, and I honestly tried to conquer my fears; but I could not succeed although I was very much ashamed of myself.

“One day father and mother started on an expedition to the nearest town about thirty miles away. They intended to remain over night and return the next day, leaving Alice and me in Aunt Margaret’s care.

“I was very busy all day, for there was an extra amount of work for me to do, and left Alice to the care of Aunt Margaret, who was complaining greatly about her rheumatism. Alice had always been a rather delicate child and subject to attacks of croup. It was a cold day for the time of year, with a raw east wind blowing. Alice went out too much in the forenoon and would not wrap herself up. At dinner time I noticed she had a cold and Aunt Margaret insisted on her staying indoors the rest of the day.

“She did not seem any worse by night, but Aunt Margaret took her to bed with her, insisting that she could keep her covered up warm better than I could.

“I went to my own little room over the kitchen and soon fell asleep. I slept soundly for I did not know how long, when I was suddenly awakened by a glare of light in my eyes. Aunt Margaret was standing by my bed with a lamp.

“Oh, Aunt Margaret, what is the matter?” I exclaimed in fright.

“Aunt Margaret set the lamp down on the table and wrung her hands in a manner that convinced me something serious had happened.

“Oh Alice has the croup?” she moaned, ‘and she’s dreadful bad—all fevered up and clean out of her head. I’ve done all I could, but ’tain’t no use. She’ll die on our hands and not a soul to go for a doctor or anything—and me all crippled up with rheumatiz. Oh, what’s to be done?’

“During Aunt Margaret’s distracted speech I had been dressing as quickly as my trembling fingers permitted. A great dread was tugging at my heart. Was Alice really in danger—my little sister whom I loved so dearly?

“Something must be done—but what? And who was to do it?

“I took the lamp and hurried into the other room, followed by Aunt Margaret, who hobbled after me, crying and lamenting dismally. She seemed to have lost her usual clear-sighted calmness altogether. Alice was her pet and the sense of her danger quite unnerved our old nurse. I realized that the whole responsibility rested on me; and I felt very helpless. Inexperienced though I was, I saw at once that Alice was dangerously ill. She tossed to and fro and coughed incessantly with a hoarse choking sound. Her eyes were glaringly bright and she did not seem to know me at all.

“Oh, Margaret, I said piteously, ‘is she going to die? What can we do?’

“Oh, child, I don’t know. I’ve tried every remedy I know of. I didn’t want to wake you till I had to. If we had only someone to send for Dr. Long.’

“I tried to think calmly. Our nearest neighbour was three miles away. Father and mother had taken the team to town, and I could not drive the only horse left, a wild young three-year-old.

“The doctor lived at Cross Roads—six miles away by the roundabout main road. But there was a shorter cut, not more than two and a half miles, or three at the most, through the woods directly back of our farm. I knew the road well; it was used for wood hauling, and we went through it when we went berrying in the wild lands back of Cross Roads.

“I must go for the doctor—and I must go by that dark, lonely wood-road. There was no help for it; there was no other way; but you cannot realize how terribly frightened I was.

“Margaret stared at me in amazement as I hastily slipped on my jacket and hat.

“Where are you going, child?”

“For the doctor. I’m going through the woods, and I’ll be as quick as I can. Do everything you can for Alice and keep up the hot applications.”

“I went over to the bed, kissed my little sister, then ran down stairs and slipped back the bolt of the door.

“The night was very dark and our lantern was broken. A frantic terror took possession of me and my trembling limbs refused to move. I could not go. I could not face that dark, lonely walk, bristling with unknown horrors. I can smile at myself now, as you do; but I could not subdue my fears then.

“Then came the thought: ‘If you do not go for the doctor Alice will die,’ and it nerved me with a sort of desperate courage.

“I stepped out, shut the door and started resolutely in the direction of the woods.

“It was, as I have said, very dark, but after I had been out a few minutes my eyes got accustomed to the gloom and I could see my way.

“I had to cross two large fields before I reached the wood road. I climbed the fence and fairly flew over the dew-wet grass. The trees along the fences were terrifying in their dim shadowy outlines; when a cow got up suddenly from a corner my heart gave a painful bound. The far-off bark of some prowling fox sent the cold shivers up and down my spine.

“I arrived at the wood-road out of breath and paused in fresh fright. The gloom under the trees was intense. There were so many eerie and mysterious sounds coming and going in the darkness, too—the groaning of the wind, the swaying of the branches and the leaves, all thrilled me with terror.

“Now, Em. Carter,’ I said aloud—and the faint sound of my voice in that great empty darkness was as terrible as anything else—‘you know perfectly well

there is nothing to hurt you, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You've been through this wood dozens of times in daylight and you never saw anything worse looking than yourself. You know there is no such thing as a ghost. Your sister is dying and you are skulking here afraid to take a step to save her life.'

'By the time I got through with this monologue I felt braver and I plunged in desperately and hurried down the dark wood road.

'I really yet cannot think of that experience without a little shudder. To me the forest seemed fairly alive with a stealthy, uncanny life.

'I was fast, but my thoughts were faster, and every ghost or bogie story Aunt Margaret had ever told me flashed across my memory. I dared not turn my head lest some dreadful thing should be dogging my steps—although it would have had a lively race of it, for I was going at a headlong pace.

'Several times I tripped on roots and fell. Once I struck my face against a stump and cut my cheek. I could feel the warm blood trickling down as I scrambled up and ran on, but it seemed a very trifling thing compared with my mental agony.

'But at last I did get through the wood-belt and came out back of the Cross Roads village. I had still quite a distance to go, over blueberry commons dripping with dew and so overgrown with young maple that I came near losing my way; but somehow or other I pushed through, following a cow track, and reached the fence along the main road.

'I climbed over it, but somehow in my hurry my foot slipped on the top longer and I fell heavily to the ground. I sprang up at once but staggered back with a cry of pain, for it seemed as if a knife had been thrust through my ankle. I had sprained it somehow when I fell. I could not bear my weight on it for a minute, and at first I felt as if I were going to faint. But my physical pain drove my ghostly fears out of my mind, and I set my teeth firmly. There was only one thing to do and I did it; I got down and crawled, slowly and sobbingly, on my hands and knees along the roadside to the doctor's house, feeling as if I must give up with every wrench of my ankle.

'I crawled up to the door and rang the bell. It seemed hours to me before I heard steps inside; then the door opened and Doctor Long's kindly face appeared.

'He carried a lamp, and as the light fell over me he fairly jumped—as well he might, for my face was all blood-stained, my hat gone, my dress torn to tatters, and I was sobbing and gasping wildly.

'“Bless my heart!” exclaimed the doctor. ‘Emmy Carter here at this hour of night and in such a plight! Child, where did you come from, and what is wrong?’

'“Oh, please, sir,” I gasped brokenly; ‘Alice is dying with croup—won't you come at once! There was nobody home but Aunt Margaret and me—and I've run

through the woods—oh, won't you come right away? I'm afraid I sprained my ankle—jumping over a fence—down there.'

"I do declare," said Doctor Long, and he picked me up as if I had been a baby and carried me into his office. He insisted on bandaging up my ankle before he would attend to anything else, and he wanted me to stay there while he went up to our place. But I declared I must go back with him, so he harnessed his pony as quickly as possible, lifted me into the phaeton, and we started back. It seemed to me that drive would never end, but it did, of course, and we got home before Aunt Margaret thought I had time to get to the cross-roads. The doctor looked very grave over Alice. He was barely in time, he said; a very little later would have been too late.

"It was morning before Alice was out of danger; then Doctor Long found time to ask me how my ankle was. I had not thought much about it, as I lay helplessly on the sofa and watched Aunt Margaret and him working over my sister; but when I knew Alice was safe I began to recollect my own mishaps.

"It feels as if somebody were sticking needles through it," I said, 'and that isn't exactly pleasant. How long am I going to be laid up?'

"Oh, not very long," said the doctor cheerily. 'It's not a bad sprain—and Alice is all right, thanks to you, my brave girl.'

"I felt myself getting very red. 'Oh, I'm not brave at all,' I cried. 'I'm an awful coward, Doctor Long. If you knew how terribly frightened I was. At first I was sure I couldn't go at all—and every step I took I was sure some dreadful thing was just on the point of catching me. I don't believe I could do it again.'

"The doctor laughed and said something about Shakespeare's definition of bravery. Do you know it Clive?"

"The brave man is not he who feels no fear,
For that were stupid and irrational,
But he whose noble soul his fear subdues
And bravely dares the danger nature shrinks from,"

quoted Clive, glibly.

"Yes, that was it," said Aunt Em, "but I told him that couldn't apply to me, for I didn't subdue my fear—I only just went somehow in spite of it. But that night cured me. I never was frightened in the dark after that. My ankle was all right in a few days and father and mother said some very nice things to me. But my sweetest reward was the knowledge that I had really saved Alice's life."

We all drew a long breath as Aunt Em finished her story, and her stocking

together.

“Aunt Em, you were a brick,” exclaimed Clive with boyish enthusiasm.

“I could never have done that, Aunty,” I said.

“I think you could if need arose,” said Aunt Em. “I would have been sure I could not do it either. But you never know what you can do until you try.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *A Brave Girl* by L. M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery]