

A Little Coward



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IT'S a great pity that you're a boy," remarked the squire, with a contemptuous glance at the small figure huddled dejectedly in front of the fire. "I can readily excuse cowardice in a girl, but not in a fourteen-year-old lad, and that had a nephew of mine. Why, at your age, sir, I didn't know the meaning of the word fear!"

"What's Billy been doing now?" asked Mrs. Hudspeth, coming suddenly into the room, with a lighted candle in one hand and her sewing in the other.

"Making a fool of himself, as usual," growled the squire. "I gave him permission to go with Jack Withrop to the school exhibition over in the village tonight, and he seemed eager enough to go until he found that he would have to come back part of the way alone. Then he suddenly decided that he didn't care to go; so Jack had to go off without him. The idea of a boy of his age being afraid to walk a mile alone after dark!"

"Was that your only reason for not going, Billy?" asked Mrs. Hudspeth, turning sharply to the boy.

"I—I don't want—I mean I don't like to walk through that thick wood at night, Aunt Margaret," he stammered, his face flushing hotly. "It's so lonesome."

"There! that's enough!" interrupted his uncle, gruffly. "You take yourself off to bed. You're nothing but a baby, after all."

Without a word, Billy got up from his stool and hurried out of the room.

"Don't you think you were a little too hasty and harsh, Stephen?" said Mrs. Hudspeth, when the door closed behind the boy. "Remember he hasn't been with us long—and he's such a little fellow! It may be that what we think is foolish cowardice will prove to be nothing but timidity."

"Timidity? Fiddlesticks! He's been here long enough for me to find out that, physically at least, he's a foolish little coward. He has a morbid fear of every creeping thing, and cares nothing in the world for hunting, fishing or any of those innocent pastimes that boys of his age usually delight in. I confess I don't understand him. He seems brave enough in the daytime, and never objects to going on an errand, no matter how far it may take him, but the moment night comes, he is actually afraid of his own shadow. If I send him over to the village or down to the pasture after the cows, he shows such abject fear that I don't know whether to pity him or give him a good shaking."

"It does seem strange that he's so foolish," remarked Mrs. Hudspeth, thoughtfully. "His mother was the bravest woman I ever knew, and his father the bravest man. Well, maybe the child's health isn't good."

"Nonsense! Don't try to excuse him on

that ground, for his health is as good as yours or mine, if he is rather diminutive in size. I've tried to reason him out of his absurd fear, but nothing I can say has the least weight with him. Tonight is the first time I've ever laughed at his fears, or called him a coward; but, since reasoning does no good, maybe ridicule will have some effect. I talked to him for nearly an hour before you came in, and tried to convince him that ours is a quiet, peaceable neighborhood, and that there are neither wild beasts in the woods nor robbers on the highways, but he couldn't summon up enough courage to go with Jack."

"Didn't he say a word while you were lecturing him?"

"Not a word. He looked pretty red and uncomfortable, though—especially while Jack was here."

"I'll talk to him myself tomorrow," said Mrs. Hudspeth, a frown of displeasure showing itself on her usually placid face.

Jack Withrop was considered the bravest, manliest lad in the whole neighborhood, and she was vexed that Billy should have made a display of his silly cowardice in the boy's presence.

"Not that Jack will laugh at him, or set the other boys to poking fun at him—he's too kind-hearted and considerate to do that," she thought—"but I hate to have anybody know what a ridiculously timid boy we've got in the house."

She kept her word, and the following day talked long and rather severely to Billy about his weakness. But, though he listened respectfully to her remarks, he returned such evasive and unsatisfactory answers to her questions, that at last she lost patience with him, and got up and left him in disgust.

"You were right, Stephen; he can't be reasoned with," she remarked to her husband that night. "My lecture didn't seem to affect him in the least, and he either wouldn't or couldn't explain why he was afraid to leave the house after dark. I'm positively ashamed of him!"

Yet it was evident from that day on that there was a struggle of some sort going on in the boy's mind. He was either trying to hide his weakness or to overcome it, for he no longer objected to going on errands after dark, even when they took him as far as the village, though it was a noticeable fact that Jack Withrop invariably accompanied him home under some pretext or other.

"He comes because he knows Billy is afraid and he feels sorry for him," remarked the squire, confidentially, to his wife. "If I should be detained from home some night, you'll have two brave protectors in the persons of Billy and old Jake," he added, in a mildly sarcastic tone.

Jake was the man-of-all-work, a rheumatic old colored man, whom the squire had taken in more out of sympathy for his destitute condition than for any assistance he was about the farm.

"Well, a woman hardly needs a protector in this quiet neighborhood," answered Mrs. Hudspeth, with a laugh.

One morning, a few weeks thereafter, the squire was unexpectedly summoned to Murray, the county seat, to confer with his lawyer about the sale of some valuable land.

A heavy rain had fallen the previous night, and, although it had ceased at daylight, a bank of heavy black clouds over in the south-west betokened another downpour.

"Hadn't you better wait until tomorrow?" said Mrs. Hudspeth, with an uneasy look at the threatening sky. "The creek has risen greatly since last night, and I'm afraid we'll have more rain today."

"I can't help it; I must go today," declared the squire, as he put on his waterproof overcoat. "There's nothing to be uneasy about," he added, somewhat impatiently, as he mounted his horse. "We've got a new bridge over the slough down yonder, and that's the only dangerous place I've got to cross."

"But the roads are so bad, and if it rains—" "I've traveled them in worse weather than this, and I must see Sawyer today. I shall get through with my business as quickly as possible, however, so as to get home a little before dark. See that Billy does his chores wood under shelter."

And he rode off without giving Mrs. Hudspeth a chance to utter another protest against his going.

Shortly before noon a heavy rain again set in, accompanied by a furious wind that uprooted trees and shrubbery, tore down fences, and sent the little creek roaring and plunging on its way in a manner that was quite alarming to Billy, who had seldom in his life witnessed a spring freshet.

He wandered about the house all day, restless and uneasy in spite of his aunt's repeated assurance that the worst was over, and that the evening would probably be clear and pleasant.

But the rain continued to fall, and when, late in the evening, during a lull in the storm, he went down to the long pasture that skirted the creek, to look up the cows, he was terribly alarmed to find that the new bridge over the slough was on the point of being swept away.

"It will be gone in a little while," he thought, as he watched it swaying and trembling in the angry, swollen waters. "And it is almost time for Uncle Stephen to come home. It will be dark presently, and he won't see his danger until it is too late. I must hurry back and tell Aunt Margaret. Maybe she'll know what to do."

But, somehow, when he went into the bright, cozy sitting-room, and found her quietly sewing before the cheery fire that had been kindled on the hearth, he could not bring himself to tell her of his discovery, but stood, silent and uneasy, in front of the fire.

"This has been a gloomy day, hasn't it,

Billy?" she said, presently, glancing up from her work with a smile.

Then, noticing his grave, preoccupied look, she added: "If you are sleepy, you needn't sit up any longer. Your uncle will be coming in pretty soon now, and I won't be lonely."

"Do you suppose he started home in all that rain, Aunt Margaret? Are you sure he'll come back tonight?"

"Why, of course he'll come—unless some serious accident has befallen him. He said he'd be home about dark; and when he says he'll be home at a certain time, you may depend upon it that he will. The storm may delay him a little, but he'll be sure to come tonight. Now run away to bed, or those damp clothes will be giving you a chill."

But, instead of going to his room, Billy ran noiselessly through the kitchen entry and across the back yard to Jake's cabin.

The old man was sitting before his fire, sound asleep, and it was only after several vigorous shakings that he was aroused and made to understand the nature of Billy's errand.

"Sho!" he said, at last, "de squish ain't no fool. Ef dat bridge is onsafe, he ain't gwinter tackle hit. He'll go further down, whar de stream is shaller, en swim his hoss across."

"But he spoke this morning of the bridge being so safe, and it's so dark tonight that he won't see his danger until it's too late. Oh, Jake! there have been several persons drowned in that slough, for you told me so yourself. How can you sit quietly here, when you know what may happen to uncle?"

"Well, how's I gwinter holo hit?" demanded Jake, angrily. "How's I gwinter gib him wa'nin'? Does you spee' me ter go down dar en stan' on de bank in de da'k en rain till he cums erlong? Why, boy, all de hollerin' dese ole weak lungs could do wouldn't be heard in all dat roarin' and splashin' dat's gwine on. Nudder could I hear him comin' on de udder side."

"But we can get on the other side by crossing on that old log, further down," said Billy, eagerly and excitedly. "I know the water isn't over that, for the creek is shallower right there than anywhere else. Then we'd be near the road Uncle Stephen is to come, and could wait there—"

"We?" interrupted the old man, with a sniff. "Does yo' reck'n I see gwinter trust my weak, shaky legs on dat slippy log, en hit ez dark ez pitch down dar in dem woods? No, sah, I see willin' ter do what's right en res'ble, but I hain't gwinter frow away my life fur nobody!"

"Then I'll have to go alone," said Billy, with a resolute look, though he was white to the lips with fear. "Don't tell Aunt Margaret," he added, as he turned away.

"Well, you'se young en spry, en I see weak

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