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Harriet Lummis Smith

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By Harriet Lummis Smith

THE heavy cart, loaded with corn for the grist-mill, had stood a good half-hour at Jonathan Murray's door. The oxen, chewing their cuds reflectively, were in no hurry to start; but Jonathan's daughter, Mary, glancing at the sun, now high above the reddening maples on Blueberry Mountain, compressed her lips into a severe line suggestive of overtaxed patience.

Through the closed door of the room beyond the kitchen came the murmur of voices, one breaking now and then into sobs, the other, a deeper voice, gently remonstrant. The words of the dialogue were not audible, but Mary could guess what was being said, the unreasonable appeal, the sturdy common-sense rejoinder.

She had been trained to respect her elders, but in her heart there was a contemptuous wonder that any one, even her father's new wife, should not realize the necessity of a man getting his grist to mill. "Perhaps she would be content to eat it unground," Mary murmured, with slightly curling lip. Her girlish stepmother, a child beside Mary in all practical things, had never shown any great readiness to undergo privation.

The door opened at last, and Jonathan Murray came from his wife's room with his strong face overcast. The trip to the mill would occupy only three days; the third night he would be at home again; but as his wife had clung weeping round his neck, and he had kissed the forehead of his two-weeks'-old son, he had felt an unwonted heaviness of heart. It was a relief to stop for a word with Mary. The composed serenity of her face and manner was reassuring.

"She is troubled, Mary, to have me leave her, but I have no choice in the matter. The corn must be ground; already I am late with it. She is unaccustomed to our solitude. A neighbor or two would help keep up her heart."

He looked rather wistfully about the clearing, hemmed in by the forest, with the mountains rising beyond. It had never occurred to him before that it was lonely. He had his home, his wife and children, and strength to work for them. Few pioneers asked for more.

"She will grow used to it in time," Mary said, but she felt again that sense of surprised contempt for one whose peace of mind depended on seeing the smoke-wreaths from other people's chimneys. Mary knew as little of neighbors as she did of fashions. It was impossible for her to put herself in the place of the timid young creature, transplanted from the bustle of a thriving town to a solitude almost like that of a primeval wilderness. The young wife had struggled bravely against the strangeness of it all, but now, her power of resistance lessened by physical weakness, she had given up the effort to conceal her apprehensions. Her husband's departure seemed to her to leave them all at the mercy of innumerable dangers.

As the oxen plodded up the slope, Jonathan Murray turned for another look at his home, the square, substantial house, with its roof sloping in the rear to within a few feet of the ground, the wide chimney, spacious enough to accommodate the generous girth of the Christmas saint, who must find himself sadly incommoded in these modern days.

A girlish figure stood in the open door. She waved her hand to him with a gesture oddly reassuring. Jonathan Murray found his heart suddenly lighter. Mary would take care of the weeping young wife whom he had left and the little, squirming, red-faced son. He could trust Mary.

When he looked back again, just before he turned the bend, the watching figure had disappeared. Mary was indeed in her stepmother's room, summoned by the baby's lusty crying. She took the child in her arms, conscious of a curious tender warmth in her heart. "Little brother, you must not cry so loud," she said in his ear, and the child stopped with almost uncanny abruptness, and stared at her with big round eyes.

Across the top of the baby's bald head Mary looked rather helplessly at the swollen, tear-stained face of the mother. Such manifestations of weakness made her feel awkward and ill at ease. For herself, she would have thrust her hands among the blazing logs in the huge fireplace almost as soon as she would have wept where other eyes could see her. Yet again the tears were rolling down the thin cheeks of her father's wife, and two tremulous hands were extended toward her appealingly.

"Mary, I cannot bear it! I am afraid. Oh, 'tis terrible, this loneliness! Night and day it rests like a weight on my heart, but more so when night falls. I dread to see the dark settling down, even when your father is here to protect us. And now —"

Sobs choked her speech. Mary laid the baby back in his cradle, possessed herself of one fluttering hand, and stroked it gently, although her kindness was not free from the old, contemptuous wonder.

"I am here to protect you," she said.

"And are you not afraid?"

Mary's smile was answer enough. There is a contagion of courage as well as of fear, and for the time the stronger nature dominated the weaker. Mistress Murray laughed a little hysterically, but wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"I am a sad coward," she said. "'Tis to be hoped that my boy will take after his father, and not me. 'Twill not be long, Mary, before he will be protecting us both. We shall not fear with him at home. He will be broad of shoulder, like his father. Already he brandishes his arm as if defying danger."

When Mary went back to her work, she left smiles behind her, and she thought of her father, and sighed. "I wish he knew that she is no longer weeping," thought the girl, for she guessed that the days of absence would seem quite as long to Jonathan Murray as to his wife.

In spite of her apprehensions, Mistress Murray, exhausted perhaps by the varying emotions of the day, slept soundly through the night. Mary's rest was not so peaceful. She was not afraid; but for the first time in her life a sense of responsibility for others weighed upon her. She heard every sound—when the baby stirred in his big, home-made cradle, when the dog in the kitchen growled under his breath, when from the heart of the forest came strange cries not unlike the wailing of an infant, blended at intervals with the muffled howling of wolves.

The pioneer girl was familiar with the voices of wild beasts. They did not frighten her, but they emphasized the fact that she was the sole protector of two helpless human beings. She was glad when the first hint of dawn gave her an excuse for rising.

The day did not open auspiciously. It was lowering, and the smoke, instead of rising, hung low over the high-pitched roof in ominous black wreaths. The mother's nervousness had communicated itself to the baby. He fretted during the day. Mistress Murray was apprehensive of rain, which might delay her husband's return, and Mary had to forget her own weariness and assume the sprightliness necessary to keep up the other girl's uncertain spirits.

When at last she crawled into bed, she fell almost immediately into a dreamless sleep, where no thought of care or responsibility intruded.

The crying of the baby woke her. She started up, reached mechanically for the cradle, and set it rocking. But the child screamed on, and Mary, blinking and but half-awake, slipped from her bed and started to take him in her arms. Then all at once her drowsiness vanished. For the cry of the child indoors was answered by a scream from outside, a sound of incredible ferocity, so close to the walls of the house that it almost seemed in the room itself.

"What is that?"

The terrified, gasping whisper from the bed steadied Mary's nerves as nothing else could have done. She spoke with perfect confidence, although an instant before her own heart had fluttered.

"'Tis nothing. They are often about when the weather is growing colder. The cattle and pigs are shut up safe. There is no danger."

Almost as she spoke there was a rattling over her head, the sound of great claws scraping on the shingles.

"It is on the roof!" the frightened mother cried. "O Mary!"

This time the girl's reassuring answer was less spontaneous. Taking the candle, she went to light it at the hearth. The fire that had roared so lustily during the evening had almost burned out; a few embers remained. The light of the candle showed Mary that the dog was awake, and stood beside her. The hair along his spine bristled, his lip was drawn back and showed the gleaming teeth.

The noises on the roof ceased for a time. Then the baby wailed, and again padded footsteps sounded on the shingles overhead. Mary realized that the panther was giving his attention to the chimney; she knew that he was circling about it, and now and then pausing, no doubt to rear his sinewy length against it. The wide mouth offered ample entrance room for such an intruder. The few smoldering embers on the hearth would not check him.

Again the baby cried, and close upon the sound bits of mortar came rattling down the chimney into the fireplace. It was plain that the panther, attracted by the child's crying, was trying to make an entrance by way of the chimney. The falling mortar suggested that he was already testing the steep sides with his formidable claws.

Mary's eyes flew to the loaded musket, hanging on the wall within reach. Like all girls in pioneer households, she could use a gun with a fair amount of dexterity; but even as she moved to take it down, doubt caused her to hesitate. If she shot up the chimney at the possible intruder, she was more than likely to miss, and before she could reload, the infuriated creature might be upon her. If she waited for his descent, she must shoot to kill. There would be no chance for a second shot.

She ran back into the bedroom, where the baby's fretful crying had begun again. Mistress Murray, seeing by the light of the candle that Mary carried, the white determination of the girl's face, needed to ask no questions. "Mary!" she gasped. She lifted herself on her elbow, cast a terrified glance toward the cradle, and then fell back in a dead faint.

Snatching the pillow from beneath the unconscious head, Mary closed and bolted the door on the fainting woman and the crying child. She had no time to weigh methods. Again the rattling mortar told what the big cat was about.

Mary caught her father's hunting-knife from the nail where it dangled, and slashed the heavy linen cover of the pillow. Then upon the ashes of the dying fire she emptied the contents of the case. The gleaming white goose feathers fell like snow upon the smoldering embers. In an instant a cloud of smoke was ascending the chimney, and with it the indescribable smell of burning feathers.

Overhead a great cough waked the echoes. The big cat, his head hanging over the top of the chimney, as he meditated a downward leap, received the ascending fumes full in the face. The cough was repeated. There was a scurry, a rattle of claws, and then a tawny body launched itself from the roof into the dark, as if that breath of civilization had aroused in it an overwhelming desire for the unsullied atmosphere of the forest. And Mary Murray, with trembling hands and shaking knees, proceeded without delay to build a roaring fire.

When Mistress Murray came to herself, her stepdaughter was bending over her, moistening her forehead and rubbing her hands. The composure of the girl's manner was in itself an answer to the question that sprang to the young mother's lips. Nevertheless, she asked it.

"Has it gone, Mary? Are we safe?"

"It has gone," said Mary, quietly, "and we are quite safe." Then she noticed that her stepmother, now that her mind was partly at ease, was sniffing uncertainly.

"'Tis a most unpleasant odor, dear Mary," she murmured.

"Burnt feathers are the best of all remedies for faintness, or so I have been told," Mary replied, demurely. And it was long before the other woman knew the more weighty reason for the sacrifice of one of the best pillows. As Mary's hands smoothed the damp hair back from her forehead, Jonathan Murray's wife was comparing herself with his daughter, to her own great disadvantage.

"You are brave, like your father, dear Mary," she said, at last. "And I am a coward. Yet your father loves me despite my weakness. I wish you were like him in that, too."

Something stirred in Mary's breast as it had stirred when she had taken the baby in her arms. She could have resisted kindness, affection, even, but the service that she had done chained her irresistibly. With no help but her own keen wits, she had defended her father's wife and her father's son. Their very lives, perhaps, they owed to her, and that debt made a bond between them that never could be broken. Something hard and unyielding melted within her, and swept away in its current the feeling of scornful superiority with which she had sat in judgment on her father's wife. Pioneer life did not encourage demonstrativeness. In many a household any manifestation of tenderness was as sternly repressed as if it was an act of weakness. But Mary Murray, carried out of herself by a sudden rush of emotion, fell on her knees, and kissed the trembling lips that had pleaded for her love.

Jonathan Murray came home the next day at nightfall. Mary stood in the door to greet him. A big fire blazed cheerily on the hearth, and in the room beyond, the voice of the newcomer in the house made itself heard in wailing welcome. Outwardly nothing was changed; but Jonathan Murray had come home to a united household, bound together by the love that can overlook where it cannot understand.

DRAWN BY W. F. STECHER

THEN UPON THE ASHES OF THE DYING FIRE SHE EMPTIED THE CONTENTS OF THE CASE.