

THE LITTLE COWARD

That was what Miss Merivale had called her that morning when she tumbled and turned pale because the black mare reared with her. She begged Sir Robert to take her off, and stood in ignominious safety while Agatha Merivale mounted Stella and rode off triumphant down the avenue.

She was a coward. She did not deny it, and was sometimes very much ashamed of it. But no one seemed to mind it, until Agatha Merivale came with her bold, dark eyes and her dashing ways, her riding, her hunting, and every body admired Agatha so much, even Sir Robert!

She almost hated Agatha! You see, until Agatha came they had been so happy at DeRosset's. Little orphan Madeline Leigh had never been so happy in her life as here at the hall with sweet Lady DeRosset, who was her guardian, and her son, Sir Robert. They were so kind and good to her. They petted her and loved her so—and now Agatha had come, and for two weeks had monopolized Sir Robert and kept the house in a turmoil of gossip and laughter at Lina, and made her life wretched.

Lina's maid told that everybody said Sir Robert was to marry Miss Merivale. Lina made a stern resolve that she would run away from the hall when the next took place. Run away! She would run away now! Not far though—she was too much of a coward to venture far into the world alone; but she could go away across the fields to "Aunt Margaret's," as she called Lady DeRosset's widowed sister-in-law, who lived in a quiet, comfortable house a mile away from the hall.

Mrs. Harrington was an invalid, paralyzed and confined to her bed. She was rather a grim old lady, and most were inclined to shun her; but sweet, bright little Lina had won her way into the old lady's heart, and was always welcome at the lodge.

Yes, she would run away to Aunt Margaret's, and perhaps when she was missed, Sir Robert might feel a moment's uneasiness about her. Seizing her hat and a light shawl, she flew across the park, calling Leo, Sir Robert's pretty collier, to go with her. Lina did not like to cross the fields alone, being possessed of a great terror of bulls; but with Leo, she would not mind it much.

Leo was calmly taking a nap in the front porch, but he started up and raced after her with a "jorous barf." But at the little gate that led from the park into the fields, Lina was greatly disconcerted by an unexpected encounter with Sir Robert and Miss Merivale, who came laughing and talking along the path, both looking bright and handsome in the golden rays of the setting sun.

She brushed past them with a hasty "Good evening," but Sir Robert turned back to speak to her.

"Where are you going, Lina?" he asked.

"To Aunt Margaret's," she answered, not looking at him.

"Alone, Lina? Are you not afraid?"

"If you will wait a little while I will go with you," Sir Robert said, looking down at the girl's flushed cheeks and averted eyes.

"No, thank you," Lina answered, hastily. "I will not trouble you. Leo will take care of me. And you would be late for dinner if you went with me."

"May I come for you, then, after dinner?" Sir Robert asked.

"Thanks, I am not going back, I shall stay all night," was the hurried answer, and Lina turned to go.

But Sir Robert detained her for a moment.

"Lina," he said, in a low tone, "what makes you avoid me so lately? What have I done to offend you?"

Lina raised her blue eyes hastily to his for one moment and then dropped them again.

"I have not avoided you," she said, coldly. "You have been very much occupied with—other people. There, I will not detain you."

She waved her little hand haughtily, and walked away from him. He watched the pretty, white-robed figure for a moment, and then Leo came and fawned on him.

"Leo, Leo!" called Lina's voice.

"Go, Lina," said his master, and the obedient dog trotted off down the path after the girl.

It was rather dreary—the lodge that evening. Mrs. Harrington was out of humor because her agent had failed to call that day to receive a thousand pounds that she wished him to deposit for her. And Parkins, her nurse and housemaid, let the maid servants all go off to a fair in the village, "where they will certainly get into mischief," Mrs. Harrington said.

"But when Lina had talked to her and made her laugh a little, she forgot her grievances, and chatted away very pleasantly. At ten o'clock she declared she had laughed till she was tired, and Lina must give her her drops and let her go to sleep.

"There the key is gone! Where can Parkins have put it?" Child, would you

mind running down into the pantry and bringing me a spoon? I would ring for Parkins, but she told me she wanted to get up some tea this evening, and would come up as soon as she had finished.

Lina did not altogether like to pass down the long stairs and silent entries leading to the pantry, but she went and Leo trotted after her. As she stood in the pantry, looking around for spoons with no light but a faint gleam from the hall lamp a sound of low voices caught her ear.

The pantry was on the ground floor, its iron-barred shuttered window looking into the garden. The sound was outside the window, and Lina paused to listen. The first word that caught her ear startled her.

"A thousands pounds and all the old woman's jewelry and plate!" said a man's voice in a husky undertone.

"Yes," was the reply in a woman's voice—the voice, Lina knew, of Parkins, Mrs. Harrington's maid, soft-voiced, lady-like nurse—"and there won't be any trouble about it, because I have let the women go away to stay all night, and sent the gardener on a fool's errand to Misses Brother's, twenty miles off."

"But this girl that came to-night—what about her?" asked the man.

"Oh, she will go to the room presently, and stay there if she is wise. She'd be no hindrance anyway—a silly little thing."

"But it's as well to let her go out of the way," said Parkins, coolly.

"I tell you it's not safe before 11 o'clock," Parkins said, positively. "People may come in. Sir Robert don't like her out of his sight for long, and that idiotic young Marsden may come mooning in. Wait till half past eleven, and the west door here will be open. And, Jim, look here, when you get this away, you are to take me with you—your wife, mind."

The voices grew fainter. Evidently the speakers were moving away from the house. But Lina had heard enough.

Sick with terror, she leaned against the pantry door a moment, and tried to think. What did it all mean? Robbery, murder? And no help near. Her first instinct was to fly out of the house and across the fields to the Hall. But her second would be instantly discovered, she knew, and then poor Aunt Margaret would be alone with those wretches! No, she must not go; but to stand here idly would be no good. She flew like a bird along the hall and up stairs, Leo pacing by her side. At Aunt Margaret's door she paused, and a sudden thought came to her. She would send Leo home for help.

"Where is the spoon, child? How long you stayed. Good heavens! what is the matter?" cried the old lady as she saw the girl's white terrified face. Lina began some evasive answer, but instantly remembered that Aunt Margaret must be told the whole story or nothing could be done to save her. She did tell it, and Aunt Margaret listened in silent consternation, and then burst out with:—

"Good heavens, child! Why don't you run right home?"

"Because I knew Parkins would be up here in a few minutes and find I was gone, and then—"

"Ah, well. So you stayed to save the old woman if you could. What are you doing, child? Why don't you lock the door and pile things against it? God bless it! if I was to rise out of this bed!"

But Lina did not speak for a moment. She had found a pencil and paper and was writing a few brief words. When she had finished—

"No," she said, "When Parkins comes tell her I am to sleep on her couch here in your room, and she must go somewhere else. I'll be back in a moment. Leo!"

Out of the room she darted, and down to the hall door, which she unbarred and passed through. Then kneeling in the shadow of a pillar on the portico, she tied the note tightly in her handkerchief around Leo's neck.

She put her arms around his neck after that, kissed his forehead, and half a sob escaped her.

"Is that you, Miss?" said a smooth voice from the hall. "Why, whatever are you doing in the dark there?"

Lina sprang up as if she had been shot.

"I am sending the dog home?" she said, speaking quietly, though the throbs of her heart shook her whole frame.

"He is restless here without his master. Go home, Leo—straight home, sir."

The dog, with one farewell lick of her hand, bounded down the steps and vanished in the dewy darkness of the summer night.

"Oh, God! let him go safely and swiftly!" prayed the young girl in her heart.

Then she went in and helped Parkins bar the door, and they went together upstairs.

Aunt Margaret lay very quietly on her pillow, but with her black eyes gleaming.

"Parkins," she said steadily, as they entered, "Miss Leigh is kind enough to offer to stay with me here to-night. She will sleep on your couch, and you, my

poor soul, can go and get a good night's rest in another room."

Parkins was silent for one instant, and then began a series of smooth, polite expostulations, which no one would heed, and finally the civil nurse prepared the couch for Lina and took herself off observing sweetly:

"If Miss Leigh will leave the door ajar, I can hear a call from this room, and will come instantly."

"Thanks, Parkins, but I hope I shall not have to call you," said Lina, speaking as sweet as Parkins herself.

Then she glided to the door, and as it closed she turned with a face of dismay and whispered:

"The key is gone! She took it when she was fidgeting in and out with the sheets and pillows."

"There is a bolt besides," Aunt Margaret answered.

Lina gave a sigh of relief as she slipped the bolt into the groove, and felt that she had some little protection against the enemy.

"Now, child," Aunt Margaret said, "can you use a pistol?"

"I never touched one in my life," said the little coward; "but if I had one now I would try."

"Very well. Take my safe-key—it is under my pillow—and unlock the safe. They are just as my husband left them a year ago; but Robert looked at them a few days ago, and said they were all right. That is right. Put one of them on the foot of the bed, and if those wretches come, try, my dear, to use it. Now, put the other here by my left hand. Thank God! I can use that a little. Now, what are you doing? Oh, pile up all you can against the door. There, you can't move anything else. Now, come here, little girl, kneel down by me, and let's say our prayers together."

With the old lady's thin, pallid hand clasped tightly in her two cold, trembling little ones, Lina knelt down there, and burying her face in the pillow, tried to pray.

Her petition was not a very coherent one; it was only a wild, passionate cry for help, and meantime she was listening with every nerve strained, for sounds from the outside. A lamp burned in the room. On the mantelpiece a softly ticking clock marked the slow minutes. No other sound broke the stillness.

Presently a sob shook the girl's figure. She was thinking of Sir Robert and his tender care over her. Oh, if she had only not been so wayward and proud this evening, all would have been safe.

But surely, surely, he would come yet.

He could not fail to find the note, and she knew he would come to save her. But yet horrible doubts came to her as to whether the note would reach him. It might be lost or Leo might wander about and not get home until it was too late.

Too late! Lina shuddered and sobbed again as she thought what that might mean. Oh, it was hard to think of dying so helplessly, so horribly, with help so near.

The long minutes crept on, and no sound came until 11 o'clock had passed. The little clock softly chimed the half hour. Then, in a few moments, came a sound of stealing footsteps in the passage, and the knob of the door was softly turned.

Breathless silence in the room. Then a gentle tap at the door. Lina clasped Aunt Margaret's hand convulsively, and the old lady spoke:

"What is that?" she asked steadily.

"It is me, Parkins, ma'am. Would you ask Miss Leigh if she will be kind enough to open the door? I have the toothache and want some laudanum."

"What a devil she is!" whispered Aunt Margaret. Then aloud: "Go down stairs and get something, Parkins. I cannot trouble Miss Leigh."

Lina hoped that Parkins would urge the point a little. Anything to prolong the parley and gain time.

But a whisper in the passage followed, and then a man's voice:

"Ladies, there's no use making a row. Just open the door peacefully, and you won't be hurt. We'll break it down if you don't."

"What do you want?" Lina asked, hoping to gain a little time. And now a gruff voice answered insolently:

"You know well enough what we want, miss. We want the thousand pounds and the diamonds, and we mean to have them. So don't be a fool, but just open the door peacefully or you'll be sorry."

Lina sprang to her feet and seized the pistol. A flood of color rushed to her cheek and brow. She had been insulted and threatened, and indignation overpowered terror. She went towards the door and called out quickly and clearly:

"You're not coming in. I have sent for help, and Sir Robert and his men will be here directly. I am armed, and if you do break the door down I will shoot you like a dog."

A moment's silence followed, then a hoarse laugh, and—

"All gammon. She hadn't got one to send. Break down the door," in Parkins' voice; and heavy blows began to fall upon the door. It trembled and

cracked beneath the batter. A panel broke, and a man's hand was thrust in; the whole door seemed about to fall when—bang! bang! came two reports from Lina's pistol, and a couple of bullets crashed through the panels, and the besiegers paused abruptly.

"Go away instantly," called the girl's voice, "or I shall fire again."

"One more rush, mate, and we are in," yelled the gruff voice outside.

What followed was wild tumult and confusion; the crash of breaking panels and bolts, the fall of the door and the furniture Lina had piled against it, shot after shot from Lina's pistol, a yell of pain and rage from both of them. The door was down. One of the men was in the room. Lina had fired her last shot, and, running to the bed, snatched Aunt Margaret's pistol and turned to face the enemy. Suddenly came a wild shriek from Parkins; then a voice calling, "Lina! Lina! I am coming," and Sir Robert de Rosset hurled himself boldly upon the ruffian outside the door, prostrated him and sprang into the room over the body. And this is what he saw:

Madeline Leigh, the "little coward," with blazing eyes and scarlet cheeks, and a pistol in her hand, standing unflinchingly between Aunt Margaret and a burly ruffian, and Aunt Margaret herself, who had not turned for a year in bed, standing on her feet on the floor. Two seconds changed the aspect of affairs. After that the burglar sprawled senseless on the floor. Aunt Margaret sank back on her bed with a wild "Thank God!" and the little heroine of the scene lay in Sir Robert's arms in a dead faint.

"Oh, Robert, why didn't you come sooner?" she murmured, half an hour afterward, when she opened her eyes and met his.

"Don't you know I came as soon as I found your note?" he said. Leo went to my room, and I found him there when I left the drawing room, after 11 o'clock."

"Where are those dreadful men?" Lina asked, raising her head dizzily and looking around with a shudder.

"Never mind them, dear. They were taken by the men who followed me. My brave little darling! What a heroine you are!"

Two months later, when Parkins and the men were brought to trial, Aunt Margaret walked into the witness box and gave her testimony with grim directness and self-possession. Lina gave her with much trembling and some tears; but she looked intensely lovely, and no one wondered that Sir Robert was going to marry her.

The crowd around the door gave her three cheers as she left the court-room, walking between Sir Robert and his mother, and three more for Sir Robert, and then three more for Leo, who followed them.

And Aunt Margaret's wedding present to Lina was the thousand pounds and the diamonds that had been saved by the courage of "the little coward."

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Fun

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