

"What do you think has come to her, boy?" asked the father anxiously.

"I am afraid she's hurt," Joe said, "she's been climbing round and fell."

"Here's her hair-ribbon," cried her mother bursting into a fresh flood of tears.

Joe took it from the mother's hand, choking down a queer lump in his throat.

"Well," he said, "I'll be off, I won't wait for the rest, they can go where they like."

"There's goin' to be a storm," called the father, "take a coat or somethin' to kiver you." But Joe was down the road followed by Rover, who barked joyfully and ran ahead at every fresh turn of the road, as if to show the way. When he reached the edge of the swamp, he tied his horse to a tree, for the under brush and fallen trees were so thick that he would have stumbled and fallen. Putting his rifle over his shoulder, he struck into the swamp following Rover, who still kept up an anxious barking, lest Joe's zeal should flag. Foolish boy, he had brought no lantern, and the dark clouds covered the sky making it almost impossible to pick his way through the forest. Suddenly a flash of lightning darting through the darkness revealed a sight which froze his blood. Two bears, roused by the crackling of the brush under Joe's feet, were evidently preparing themselves for battle. The friendly darkness however, came between them and Joe hurried on. After a few minutes, Rover stopped, whining and coaxing Joe, who got on his knees and crept along, feeling sure he was near the lost girl. He moved his hand slowly over the grass as he went on. The storm was now raging; now and then he could hear a tree falling, could distinguish during the gleams of lightning that he was in the heart of the swamp. Then as a terrible flash lighted up the ground around him, he saw not three yards away a white arm raised in appeal and heard Bell's voice: "Oh, if only Joe knew, if he were here!"

"I am here, Bell," Joe whispered, thinking of the bears, for he felt sure they were following him, "what is the matter, Bell, have you hurt yourself?"

"I don't know," answered Bell, "I fell across an old tree, my foot is twisted some way, and my back; oh, I can't move."

"Never mind, I'll stay with you till your father comes, I think I hear them now." In the distance he thought he heard a horn. It must be the men coming. The storm had passed and the moon shone fitfully between the trees. But another noise startled him, it was the crackling of the brush, and the heavy, shuffling tramp of feet, not human. He started to his feet and put his rifle to his shoulder. He did not tell Bell of the danger. He was speechless with horror. He was alone with a helpless girl and two hungry bears to fight, but he was no coward, this, not too strong boy. He knew that it would not do to fire in the face of his foe, but to aim at his side: as to reach his heart. He crouched in the grass, trying to keep his brain cool, and his arm steady, and waited. While he was

thinking, the huge form of Mr. Bruin came in sight, followed by his mate. Joe raised himself from the grass, took aim and fired. The ball went where Joe intended it, straight to the heart of the foe. The great brute rolled over. Then Joe sprang to his feet, for Mrs. Bruin, hungry and enraged, clambered over the dead body and lifted herself on her hind legs to grapple with Joe. Quick as a flash without any previous thought, he ran the muzzle of his rifle into the mouth of the bear, and pushed with all his strength, until the animal choking and struggling fell backward over the branch of a tree. Joe, excited now, with a courage born of desperation, kept his rifle still thrust into the mouth and throat of the bear. He could feel the blood running down his back from some wound. He felt his strength going away. Rover lay dead not far away. Bell could not lift herself to see, but she knew some terrible struggle was going on. Joe looked up to the sky and cried, "Oh, God, help us!" Ah! there is the sound of a horn! Yes, and a gun is fired! and men are coming! Nearer and nearer the sound of their voices and the trampling. Ah, there is Mick, the Squire's hired man, the Squire himself, and a dozen others.

Joe did not know any more for several hours. When they raised Bell to place her on a litter of branches, she fainted away, and knew nothing of the tedious journey, when the men took turns in carrying the litter until she was laid tenderly on her own bed.

Joe recovered quickly, his wound being only a scratch of the bear's claw. But Bell had months of pain, before the doctor pronounced on her case at all, then the verdict was, that perhaps in time, as she was young, she might be able to walk, but for several years she was to lie on a couch.

The neighbors said they guessed Bell Higgins was over her capers, but they missed her ringing laugh and kind words, and, as often happens they ceased to rail, and began to recount her good deeds, which so far outweighed her merry rompings, that every one came to the conclusion it would be a good thing to see her strong again.

Joe's mother, who was silently thankful that her boy was spared, hovered around him for several days, dressing his wound and doing useless things.

"Mother," said Joe, "I want to tell you about that night in the woods, no one will understand it like you."

"What was it, Joe?" asked his mother.

"Why, when I thought all hope was gone I felt so weak that I couldn't keep on trying to strangle the bear any longer, I prayed; I asked God to help us and that minute I heard the horns and the men came."

"Well, Joe, what of that?"

"Why, mother," said Joe, "I shall always believe in God; He answered me so soon."

"Oh, Joe," said his mother, "it's easy to believe in Him, when He answers like that, it's hard when He doesn't hear and doesn't answer."

"Mother," asked Joe, "you're thinking of Libbie, aren't you? Why, He answered you, only He took Libbie to