

Aunt Prue's Adventure

When I was a gal—don't you go asking me how long ago that was, 'cause I aint agoin' to tell you; so there now. When I was a gal I went over to Uncle Adoniram's to pay a visit. It was in a lonesome sort of place, and I hadn't been there before, for they had just bought it, and I wasn't a great hand to find my way about alone. But, one day, aunt was sick and couldn't go down to the village to do the trading, and she jest said to me:

“Prue, you take Blackberry, he's easy riding, and go down to the store and order these things that I've made a list of, and ask 'em to send 'em over tomorrow, for your uncle has taken the wagon, and I can't bring 'em home myself, and we're out of ham, and cheese, and molasses, and sugar, and tea, and soft-soap, and we haint got much pepper nor thyme nor mustard in the house, neither.”

“Yes, auntie,” says I, “I'll go. And while I'm there, can't I stop and take tea with Camilla Smith? I've promised a long time.”

Says aunt:

“Well, yes, you may, Prudence; but, for mercy's sake, don't get belated. You mightn't be able to find your way after dark.”

Well, I promised. I went out to the stable, and Cousin Job fixed auntie's side-saddle on Blackberry for me, and mounted me up. I don't say he didn't kiss me, for Job thought heaps of me, and I thought lots of Job, and uncle wasn't against cousins marrying, though pa was.

Anyhow we had a little talk, and Job said he never saw a girl look so pretty on horseback, and I rode away jest as happy as a queen. I did my errand, and I stopped at Mrs. Roberts' to ask after her sick baby, and then I went on to Camilla's. We had a great deal to say to each other, and after we had had tea we walked about the garden, and she made me a little bouquet. So it was getting dusk when I jumped on Blackberry's back. All along the open road it was very pleasant, and I was not in the least frightened. But the road ended in a piece of woods, and as I entered that the shadows grew thick all about me, and I could see a great crimson light, like a fire, through the trunks of the trees to the westward, and knew that the sun was setting.

Then I did begin to feel nervous, but I rode on, trusting to old Blackberry, until suddenly I found the trees growing smaller and farther apart than they were in the woods, and saw the sky overhead cloudy and with no moon, and felt that I had lost my way altogether. There was no such spot as that in the woods I had crossed in going to the village, and they ended in a road that passed my uncle's door. I remembered now pulling the left bridle by accident at a cross path, and feeling that Blackberry obeyed the movement. I had said then, this happens to be the right way, but now I felt sure that it was not. And now Blackberry seemed quite at a loss. He had slowly gone on until he came to an obstacle of some kind, and there he stopped.

The few stars that had been in the sky were fading out. The night was growing as dark as pitch. What should I do?

At least I could discover what had stopped Blackberry.

I slipped from the saddle as the thought entered my mind, and found that he was standing against a stone wall. This only deepened my perplexity. I felt about me with my hands, and came to what seemed to be a sort of rough bench. On it was something lying. I spread out my fingers and touched it; it was cold and stiff and strange. At first I drove the thought that came into my mind away from me, but it forced itself back. I touched the thing again to convince myself that I was mistaken; but I was certain this time—it was a corpse. The naked dead body of a human being.

Some awful deed had been enacted on the spot; and here—yes, here—came the murderers, for I heard steps and saw the light of a lantern approaching. I could climb a tree as well as a boy. Near me was a low tree of some sort. I seized the drooping branch, and swung myself into it. There I hid, looking down into the darkness. The lantern came nearer, and I saw two men, who stopped where the light fell straight across that horrible object on the bench, showing the gleam of its white flesh, and began to speak to each other.

“He was killed this morning,” said one, “and there’s no telling who may come along before daylight. We’d better carry him away now.”

“Sha’n’t we wait for Jim,” said another voice. “He’s a heavy load.”

I almost fell out of the tree as these words were uttered, for I knew Cousin Job’s voice; and now peering intently I saw his face. It was Job. Job whom I cared so much about, and he was either a murderer, or the accomplice of murderers.

“No; Jim will take his time as he always does,” said the first speaker. “You and I can do it. You take his head and I’ll take his legs, and we’ll cut him up and put him in a barrel tonight. I believe in getting things done up.”

“All right,” said Job. “Wait until I string this lantern up somewhere.”

And to my horror he advanced to the very tree in which I was concealed, and hung his lantern upon one of the lower branches. I shook with horror as he did so; and some movement of mine attracted his attention.

“I say, Sam,” he cried. “There’s something up this tree. It’s too big for a chicken. I vow it’s an animal of some sort. I hear it breathe. Hullo! it’s somebody.”

He held the lantern high.

“Yes, there’s some one here,” he said. “Come down.”

I made no answer.

“Come down, or I’ll shoot you,” yelled Job, and that roused my spirit.

“Shoot me,” I answered; “do it, if you will, Job. I should think the dead, white face you’ve just looked upon would be enough, and that you would not want to see another. But kill me if you will. I don’t care to live, after what has happened this awful night.”

“Why, it’s Cousin Prudence,” cried Job. “Cousin Prue, what’s the matter? What are you up that tree for? What has happened? Come down, Prue. How did you get there?”

“Providence sent me here, Job,” I said. “God led me here to show me that the man I cared so much for was a murderer, to be the witness of his awful deed.”

“Awful deed!” cried Job. “Why, what have you seen? Come down and tell us.”

“I have seen the poor, murdered creature you are about to cut in pieces and put in a barrel,” I said. “There—here I am. Kill me, also, if you will.”

But I shrank from his touch as he helped me out of the tree, not so much from fear as from repugnance.

“Assassin!” I said. “Don’t touch me kindly with your bloody hands! Even now I see the form of your poor victim.”

“Oh,” said Job, “that’s it. Well, I’ve known city folks to be squeamish, but I never knew one to go so far as to call hog-killing ‘murder’ before. Why, Prue, country folks have got to do it, and we took it as far from the house as we could so ’t the women folks shouldn’t hear it squeal.”

“A hog!” I cried. “Was *that* a hog?”

“Why, what else *should* it be?” asked Job. “You thought it was the cow, I suppose, and you’re fond of Mooly.”

But I did not tell him what I thought. I knew now that I had taken a path through the woods that led into my uncle’s orchard, and I was very happy and very much ashamed of myself as I remounted Blackberry and rode along the little path that ended in the garden. I never let Job know all about it until after we were married.

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