AUNT POLLY SHEDD'S BRIGADE

Author Unknown

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"Something about the Battle of Hampden?" Grandma took off her spectacles and wiped them reflectively "It seems to me already I have told you everything worth telling; but there!" in a sudden burst of recollection, "did I ever tell you about Aunt Polly Shedd's Brigade? That was quite an affair to those of us that belonged to it!"

"Oh, no! do tell us about it!" called out the three childish voices in chorus; and Grandma only waited to knit by the seam needle.

"I've told you all about it so many times that I don't need to describe again that dreadful morning when the British man−of−war came up the river and, dropping her anchor just opposite our little village of Hampden, sent troops ashore to take possession of the place in the King's name. So what I am going to tell you now is how, and where, we youngsters spent the three days that the British occupied our houses. I was about twelve years old at the time. I remember that it was just as we were getting up from the breakfast−table that one of our neighbors, Sol Grant, old General Grant's youngest son, rushed in without knocking, his face as white as a sheet, and his cap on hind−side before, and called out hurriedly:

" 'Mr. Swett, if you love your family, for God's sake find a place of safety for 'em! The British are coming ashore—three boat−loads of 'em, armed to the teeth—and they won't spare man, woman nor child!

"Mother's face grew very pale, but she stepped quietly around, with her baby on her arm, close to where father was standing, and laid one hand on his arm, while she said, in a firm, clear voice:

"'MY place is with you, Benjamin, but we must think of some place of safety for the children. Where can they go?'

"Sol was just rushing out of the door as unceremoniously as he had rushed in, but he stopped when he heard her ask that, long enough to say:

" 'I forgot to tell you that Aunt Polly Shedd will take all the children put in her charge out to Old Gubtil's; that's so out of the way they won't be disturbed, 'specially as the old man's a Tory himself.'

"Mother kissed us all round, with a smile on her face that couldn't quite hide the tears with which her dear eyes were filled, and as she hastily bundled us in whatever garment came to hand, she bade us be good children, and make Aunt Polly and the Gubtils as little trouble as possible. Then we followed father out−of−doors and into the school−house yard where a score or more of children were already gathered—still as mice for intense terror. Aunt Polly, in her big green calash, and a pillow−case of valuables under one arm, was bustling to and fro, speaking an encouraging or admonitory word, as the case might be, and wearing upon her pinched, freckled little face such a reassuring smile that I soon felt my own courage rise and, dashing back the tears that had filled my eyes a moment before, I busied myself in pinning little Sally's blanket more closely about her neck and setting the faded sunbonnet upon the tangled curls that had not yet had their customary morning's dressing.

" 'Come, children,' called out Aunt Polly cheerily, 'you're all here now, and we'll start right off. I'll go ahead, an' all you little ones had best keep close to me; the bigger ones can come along behind.'

"Obedient to her order we started, following her steps across the road by the beeches, and up by the grocery store where a crowd of excited men were congregated, talking loudly with wild gesticulations, while farther down, toward the shore, we could catch glimpses, through the thick morning fog, of the blue uniforms of our militia company that had been summoned in hot haste to defend the town. As we filed past, I remember I heard one of the men on the grocery steps speak:

" 'I tell you they won't leave one stone on another if they get possession of the town, and they'll impress all the able−bodied men and all the big boys into the King's service besides.'

"A cold shiver ran over me and I caught so hard at little Sally's hand that the child cried out with pain, and Aunt Polly said anxiously:

" 'Hurry up, dears! 'Tain't much more'n a mile out to Gubtil's, and you'll have a good nice chance to rest after

we get there.'

"Just then the martial music of a fife and drum announced the landing of the enemy's troops, and I tell you it quickened the lagging footsteps of even the youngest child into a run, and we just flew, helter−skelter, over the rough, little−used road that led to the Gubtil farm. Aunt Polly's gentle tones were unheeded. All she could do was to carry the weakest in her arms over all the worst places, with a word of cheer, now and then, to some child who was not too much frightened to heed it.

"What a haven of safety the low, unpainted old farm−house looked to us, as we rushed, pell−mell, into the dooryard, never noticing, in our own relief, the ungracious scowl with which the master and mistress of the house regarded our advent.

"Aunt Polly soon explained matters, taking care to assure the inhospitable pair that our parents would amply recompense them for the trouble and expense we must, of course, be to them.

"The farmer held a whispered consultation with his wife, and I remember well his harsh, loud tones as he came back to Aunt Polly:

" 'They'll HAVE to stay, I s'pose; there don't seem no help for it now. There's pertaters in the cellar, an' they can roast an' eat what they want. I'll give 'em salt an' what milk an' brown bread they want, an' that's what they'll have to live on for the present. As for housin' 'em, the boys can sleep on the hay in the barn, an' the girls can camp down on rugs an' comforters on the kitchen floor. that's the best I can do, an' if they ain't satisfied they can go furder.'

"I remember just how he looked down at the troubled, childish faces upturned to his own, as if half hoping we might conclude to wander yet farther away from our imperilled homes; but Aunt Polly hastened to answer:

" 'Oh, we'll get along nicely with milk for the little ones, and potatoes and salt for the big boys and girls, and we won't trouble you any more nor any longer than we can help, Mr. Gubtil.'

"She stood upon the door−stone beside him as she spoke, a little, bent, slightly deformed figure, with a face shrivelled and faded like a winter−russet apple in spring−time, and a dress patched and darned till one scarcely could tell what the original was like, in a striking contrast to the tall, broad−shouldered, hale old man, whose iron frame had defied the storms of more than seventy winters; but I remember how he seemed to me a mere pigmy by the side of the generous, large−hearted woman whose tones and gestures had a protectiveness, a strength born of love and pity, that reassured us trembling little fugitives in spite of our ungracious reception. We felt that Aunt Polly would take care of us, let what would come.

"The hours dragged slowly away. Aunt Polly told us that the distant firing meant that our men had not retreated without an effort to defend the village. When this firing ceased, we began to watch and hope that some message would come from our fathers and mothers. But none came. We wondered among our little selves if they all had been put to death by the British, and even the oldest among us shed some dreary tears.

"Dan Parsons, who was the biggest boy among us and of an adventurous turn, went in the gathering twilight gloom down as near the village as he dared. He came shivering back to us with such tales of vague horror that our very hearts stopped beating while we listened.

" 'I crep' along under the shadder of the alders and black−berry bushes,' he began, ' 'til I got close ter De'con Milleses house. 'Twas as still as death 'round there, but jest as I turned the corner by the barn I see somethin' gray a−flappin' and a−flutterin' jest inside the barn door. I stopped, kind o' wonderin' what it could be, when all at once I thought I should 'a' dropped, for it came over me like a flash that it might be'—

" 'What, what, Dan?' cried a score of frightened voices; and Dan replied solemnly:

" 'THE OLD DEACON'S SKULP!'

" 'Oh dear! oh dear!' sobbed the terrified chorus.

"Aunt Polly could do nothing with us; and little Dolly Miles, the deacon's granddaughter, burst into a series of wild lamentations that called Farmer Gubtil to the door to know the cause of the commotion.

" 'What's all this hullabaloo about?' he asked crossly; and when he had heard the story he seized Dan and shook him till his teeth chattered.

" 'What do you mean by tellin' such stuff an' scarin' these young ones ter death?' he demanded.

"Dan wriggled himself from his grasp and looked sulkily defiant:

" 'I didn't say 'TWAS that,' he muttered. 'I said it MIGHT be, an' p'r'aps 'twas; or it might 'a' been the deacon's old mare switchin' 'er tail ter keep off the flies. I'm sure _I_ don't know which 'twas. But girls are always

a−squealin' at nothin'.'

"And with this parting fling at us tearful ones, Dan turned in the direction of the barn; but I was too anxious to hear from father and mother to let him go without a word more. 'Dan,' I whispered with my hand on his arm, 'did you see or hear anything of OUR folks?'

" 'No!' was the rather grump reply; 'after what I saw at the deacon's I didn't want ter ventur' furder, but from there I could see 'em lightin' fires in the village, an' I don't doubt by this time that most o' the houses is in flames.'

"With this comforting assurance Dan went off to his bed upon the haymow, and I crept back into the house and laid my tired head down upon Aunt Polly's motherly lap, where, between my sobs, I managed to tell what Dan had told me.

Aunt Polly laid a caressing hand upon my hair: 'La, child,' said she soothingly, 'don't you worry yourself a bit over Dan Parson's stories. That boy was BORN to tell stories. The Britishers are bad enough, but they ain't heathen savages, an' if the town has surrendered, as I calc'late it has, the settlers will be treated like prisoners o' war. There won't be no sculpin' nor burnin' o' houses—no, dear. And now,' giving me a little reassuring pat, 'you're all tired out, an' ought ter be asleep. I'll make up a bed on this rug with a cushion under your head, an' my big plaid shawl over you, an' you'll sleep jest as sound as if you was ter home in your own trundle−bed.'

"Little Sally shared my rug and shawl, and Aunt Polly, gently refusing the ungracious civility of the old couple, who had offered her the use of their spare bedroom, after seeing every little, tired form made as comfortable as possible with quilts and blankets from the farmwife's stores, laid herself down upon the floor beside us, after commending herself and us to the God she loved and trusted, raised her head and spoke to us once more in her sweet, hopeful, quavering old tones:

" 'Good night, dears! Go to sleep and don't be a bit afraid. I shouldn't wonder if your folks come for you in the mornin'.'

"What comfort there was in her words! And even the very little ones, who had never been away from their mothers a night before in their lives, stopped their low sobbing and nestled down to sleep, sure that God and Aunt Polly would let no harm come to them.

"The next day passed slowly and anxiously for us all. From a stray traveller Aunt Polly learned that the village was still in the hands of the British and—what was no little comfort to us —that no violence had been done to the place or its inhabitants. Some of the older boys were for venturing to return, but Aunt Polly held them back with her prudent arguments. If their parents had considered it safe for them to come home they would have sent for them. The British, she said, had been known to impress boys, as well as men, into service, and the wisest way was to keep out of their sight.

"The gentle, motherly advice prevailed, and even Dan Parsons contented himself with climbing the tallest trees in the vicinity, from which he could see the chimneys of several of the nearest houses. From these pinnacles he would call out to us at intervals:

" 'The smoke comin' out o' Deacon Mileses chimly has a queer look, somethin' like burnin' feathers I shouldn't wonder a mite if them Britishers was burnin' up his furnitoor! Sam Kelly's folks hain't had a spark o' fire in their fireplace to−day. Poor critters! Mebbe there ain't nobody left ter want one.'

"With these dismal surmises, Dan managed to keep our forlorn little flock as uncomfortable as even he could wish; and as the second night drew on, I suppose the homesickness of the smaller ones must have been pitiful to see. Aunt Polly patted and cuddled the forlorn little things to the best of her ability, but it was past midnight before the last weary, sobbing baby was fairly asleep, while all night long one or another would start up terrified from some frightful dream, to be soothed into quiet by the patient motherly tenderness of their wakeful protector.

"Next morning the brow of the farmer wore an ominous frown, and his wife, as she distributed to each the scant measure of brown bread and milk remarked, grudgingly, that she should think 'twas 'bout time that her house was cleared of a crowd o' hungry, squallin' young ones; and then Mr. Gubtil took out his account−book and wrote down the name of each child, with an estimate of the amount of bread, milk and potatoes consumed by each. He did this with the audible remark that 'if folks thought he was a−feedin' an' a−housin' their young ones for nothin' they'd find themselves mightily mistaken.'

"The third morning dragged slowly away. Dinner was over and still no message for us forlorn little ones. At last Aunt Polly slowly arose from her seat upon the doorstep, with the light of a strong, courageous resolve on her little face.

"Children!' she called loudly, and after we had gathered at her call, she spoke to us with an encouraging smile:

" 'I've made up my mind that 'twon't be best for us to stay here another night. We're in the way, and the little ones would be better off at home with their mothers. We know that the fightin' is all over, and I don't believe the English soldiers'll be bad enough to hurt a lot o' little helpless children, 'specially if they're under a flag o' truce.'

"Here she drew a handkerchif from her pocket. This she fastened carefully to a stick. Then putting it into the hands of my brother Ben, a well−grown lad of twelve, she went on with her directions:

" 'We'll form in procession, just as we came, and you, Benjie, may march at the head with this white flag a−wavin' to let them know that we come in peace. I'll follow next with the biggest boys, and the girls, with the little ones, must keep behind where it's safest.'

"Perhaps it was the contagion of Aunt Polly's cheerful courage, but more likely it was the blessed hope of seeing home and father and mother again, that made the little folks so prompt to obey her directions. We formed ourselves in line in less time than it takes to tell about it; we elder girls took charge of the wee ones who were so rejoiced to leave the inhospitable roof of the Gubtils' that they forgot all their fears of the terrible English, and trotted along as blithely over the deserted road as if not a fear had ever terrified their childish hearts, and as if English soldiers were still simply those far−off monsters that had served as bugbears to frighten them now and then into obedience to maternal authority.

"The Gubtils watched us off without a word of encouragement or friendliness. Aunt Polly walked close behind the flag−bearer with a firm step, but I could see that she was very pale, and when we came to descend the little hill that led into the village, and when just at its foot, where then stood the grocery of old Penn Parker, we caught a glimpse of the scarlet uniforms of several soldiers loafing about—then even we children could see that her steps faltered; and I remember I thought she was fearful of some violence.

"But the next moment she was walking steadily along again as if no thought of danger or retreat had ever entered her mind; and as we came opposite the grocery and a tall man in an officer's uniform strolled out toward us with a curious, questioning look upon his handsome face, she gave the word of command to her little brigade in a voice as clear as a bell:

" 'Halt, children!'

"We all stood still as mice, eying the stranger with looks in which fear and admiration were probably curiously blended, while Aunt Polly, taking the white flag from her color−bearer, advanced with a firm front to meet the foe who now, reinforced by several men, stood beside the way, evidently wondering what this queer parade was about.

" 'Sir!' and Aunt Polly's voice trembled perceptibly but she waved the white flag manfully under his very nose, 'sir, I demand a safe passage for these innocent children to their different homes.'

"The officer stared, and his mouth twitched mischievously as if he had hard work to keep from laughing outright. But he was a gentleman; and when he spoke, he spoke like one.

" 'My good woman,' he said kindly, 'these children are nothing to me. If you wish permission for them to go to their own homes you are welcome to it, though in what way the matter concerns me I must confess I am at a loss to imagine."

Then, and not till then, Aunt Polly broke down and sobbed aloud:

" 'Run, children,' she cried as soon as she could speak; 'go home just as fast as you can scud; an' tell your folks,' she added with a gust of gratitude, 'that there's worse folks in the world than an Englishman.'

"You may be sure that we waited for no further urging; and as we flew, rather than ran, in the direction of our different homes, I heard the irrepressible burst of laughter with which the officer and his men received the grateful spinster's compliment which, to the day of her death, she loved to repeat whenever she told the thrilling story of her adventure with the English officer, 'when Hampden was took by the British in 1814;' always concluding with this candid admission:

" 'An' really, now, if he'd 'a' been anybody but an Englishman, an' an inimy, I should 'a' said that I never sot eyes on a better−built, more mannerly man, in all my born days.' "