

The Power of Song

My Own Experience

NEAR the summit of a mountain in Pennsylvania is a small hamlet called Honeyville, consisting of two log houses, two shanties, a rickety old barn, and a small shed, surrounded by a few acres of cleared land. In one of these houses lived a family of seven, — father, mother, three boys, and two girls. They had recently moved from Michigan. The mother's health was poor, and she longed to be out on the beautiful old mountain where she had spent most of her childhood. Their household goods had arrived in Pennsylvania just in time to be swept away by the great Johnstown flood of 1889.

The mother and her two little girls, Nina and Dot, were Christians, and their voices were often lifted in praise to God as they sang from an old hymn-book, one of their most cherished possessions.

One morning the mother sent Nina and Dot on an errand to their sister's home three and one-half miles distant. The first two miles took them through dense woods, while the rest of the way led past houses and through small clearings. She charged them to start on their return home in time to arrive before dark, as many wild beasts — bears, catamounts, and occasionally a panther — were prowling around. These animals were hungry at this time of the year; for they were getting ready to "hole up," or lie down in some cozy cave or hole for their winter's nap.

The girls started off, merrily chasing each other along the way, and arrived at their sister's in good time, and had a jolly romp with the baby. After dinner, the sister was so busy, and the children were so

absorbed in their play, that the time passed unheeded until the clock struck four. Then the girls hurriedly started for home, in the hope that they might arrive there before it grew very dark. The older sister watched until they disappeared up the road, anxiously wishing some one was there to go with them.

Nina and Dot made good time until they entered the long stretch of woods, when Nina said:—

“O, I know where there is such a large patch of wintergreen berries, right by the road! Let’s pick some for mama.”

So they climbed over a few stones and logs, and, sure enough, the berries were plentiful. They picked and talked, sometimes playing hide-and-seek among the bushes. When they started on again, the sun was sinking low in the west, and the trees were casting heavy shadows over the road, which lengthened rapidly. When about half of the distance was covered, Dot began to feel tired and afraid. Nina tried to cheer her, saying, “Over one more long hill, and we shall be home.” But now they could only see the sun shining on the top of the trees on the hill.

They had often played trying to scare each other by one saying, “O, I see a bear or a wolf up the road!” and pretending to be afraid. So Dot said: “Let’s scare each other. You try to scare me.” Nina said, “All right.” Then, pointing up the road, she said, “O, look up the road by that black stump! I see a——” She did not finish; for suddenly, from almost the very spot where she had pointed, a large panther stepped out of the bushes, turning his head first one way and then another. Then, as if seeing the girls for the first time, he crouched down, and, crawling, sneaking along, like a cat after a mouse, he moved toward them. The girls stopped and looked at each other. Then Dot began to cry, and said, in a

half-smothered whisper, "O Nina, let's run!" But Nina thought of the long, dark, lonely road behind, and knew that running was useless. Then, thinking of what she had heard her father say about showing fear, she seized her little sister's hand, and said: "No, let's pass it. God will help us." And she started up the road toward the animal.

When the children moved, the panther stopped, and straightened himself up. Then he crouched again, moving slowly, uneasily, toward them. When they had nearly reached him, and Nina, who was nearest, saw his body almost rising for the spring, there flashed through her mind the memory of hearing it said that a wild beast would not attack any one who was singing. What should she sing? In vain she tried to recall some song, but her mind seemed a blank. In despair she looked up, and breathed a little prayer for help; then, catching a glimpse of the last rays of the setting sun touching the tops of the trees on the hill, she began the beautiful hymn,—

"There is sunlight on the hilltop,
There is sunlight on the sea."

Her sister joined in, and although their voices were faint and trembling at first, by the time the children were opposite the panther, the words of the song rang out sweet and clear on the evening air.

The panther stopped, and straightened himself to his full height. His tail, which had been lashing and switching, became quiet as he seemed to listen. The girls passed on, hand in hand, never looking behind them. How sweet the words,—

"O the sunlight! beautiful sunlight!
O the sunlight in the heart!"

sounded as they echoed and reechoed through the woods.

As the children neared the top of the hill, the rumbling of a wagon fell upon their ears, so they knew that help was near, but still they sang. When they gained the top, at the same time the wagon rattled up, for the first time they turned and looked back, just in time to catch a last glimpse of the panther as he disappeared into the woods.

The mother had looked often and anxiously down the road, and each time was disappointed in not seeing the children coming. Finally she could wait no longer, and started to meet them. When about half-way there, she heard the words,—

“O the sunlight! beautiful sunlight!
O the sunlight in the heart!
Jesus’ smile can banish sadness;
It is sunlight in the heart.”

At first a happy smile of relief passed over her face; but it faded as she listened. There was such an unearthly sweetness in the song, so strong and clear, that it seemed like angels’ music instead of her own little girls’. The song ceased, and the children appeared over the hill. She saw their white faces, and hurried toward them. When they saw her, how their little feet flew! But it was some time before they could tell her what had happened.

What a joyful season of worship they had that night, and what a meaning that dear old hymn has had to them ever since!

A few days later, a party of organized hunters killed the panther that had given the children such a fright. But the memory of that thrilling experience will never fade from the mind of the writer, who was one of the actors in it.—*Nina Case.*