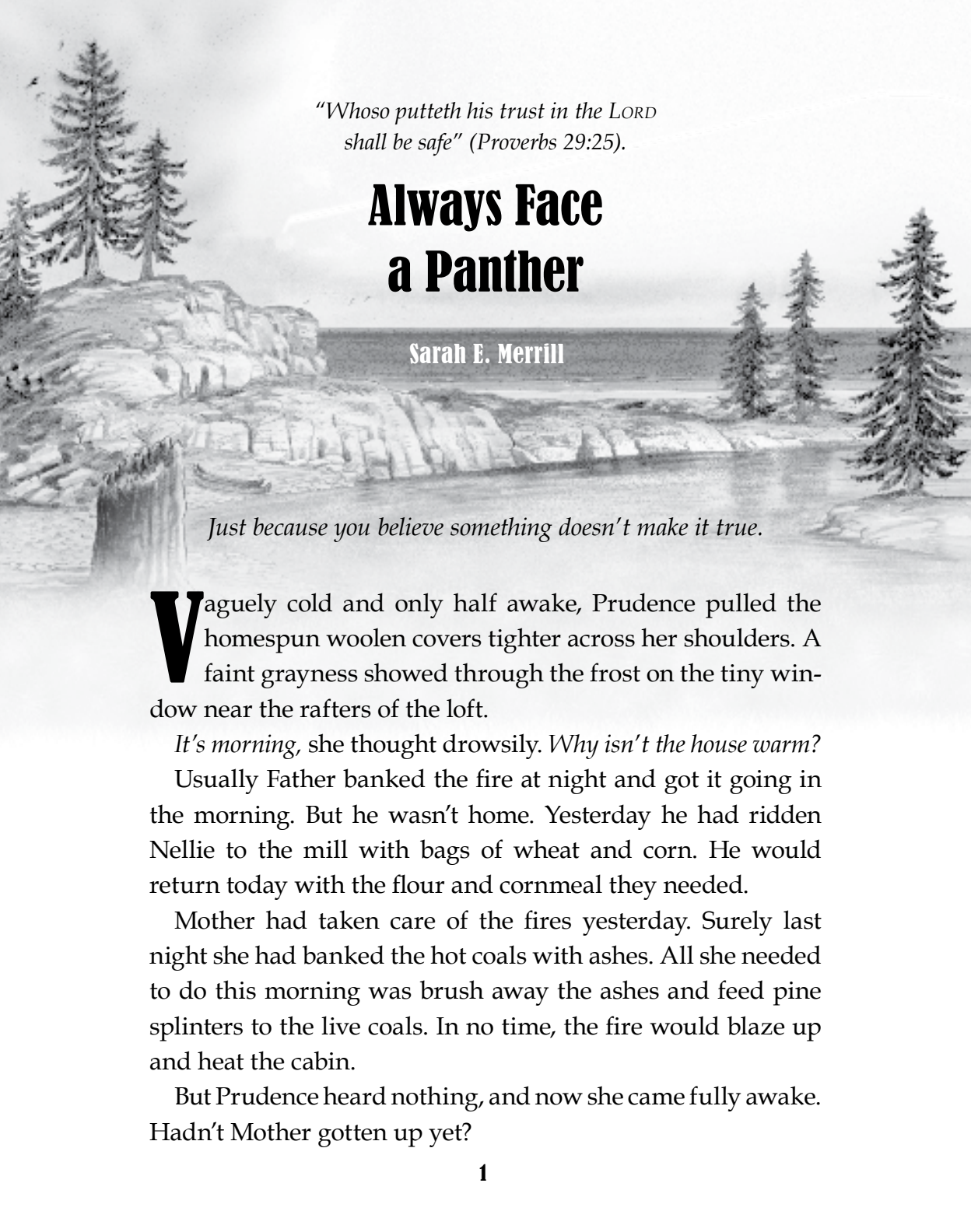


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*"Whoso putteth his trust in the LORD
shall be safe" (Proverbs 29:25).*

Always Face a Panther

Sarah E. Merrill

Just because you believe something doesn't make it true.

Vaguely cold and only half awake, Prudence pulled the homespun woolen covers tighter across her shoulders. A faint grayness showed through the frost on the tiny window near the rafters of the loft.

It's morning, she thought drowsily. Why isn't the house warm?

Usually Father banked the fire at night and got it going in the morning. But he wasn't home. Yesterday he had ridden Nellie to the mill with bags of wheat and corn. He would return today with the flour and cornmeal they needed.

Mother had taken care of the fires yesterday. Surely last night she had banked the hot coals with ashes. All she needed to do this morning was brush away the ashes and feed pine splinters to the live coals. In no time, the fire would blaze up and heat the cabin.

But Prudence heard nothing, and now she came fully awake. Hadn't Mother gotten up yet?



Then she remembered. Two days ago, her older brother Benjamin had come down with a bad sore throat. Mother had been doctoring him with hot goose grease day and night. He still could hardly talk. Mother had lost so much sleep. Maybe she had overslept this morning.

I'll hurry down and get the fire going and let her sleep, Prudence said to herself.

The cornhusk mattress crackled and the rope springs squeaked as she eased out of bed. Shivering in the icy air, she quickly pulled on her homespun woolen dress. She carried her stout leather shoes so as not to waken the others and climbed down the ladder.

The large square room held a homemade table, chairs, benches, and cupboards. Mother lay sleeping in the bed that filled one corner. The baby slept in the cradle beside her.

Kneeling on the hearth, Prudence carefully brushed aside the ashes with a turkey feather as she had seen Father do. She brushed and brushed, but no live coals lay under the ashes.

Fear clutched her heart. No fire! She could not remember ever having no fire in the house. Summer and winter they had to have fire.

"Mother, Mother," she cried, jumping up. "The fire is out. There are no coals at all. What can we do?"

Mother sprang out of bed. "Oh, oh, I forgot to bank it last night!" she cried in great distress. "I am used to Father doing it, and I was so tired I dropped into bed without thinking about the fire at all. Someone will have to go to the Luces' and bring back some live coals."



"I'll go," croaked Benjamin, who had just come down the ladder.

"No, Benjamin. Not with your sore throat," said Mother instantly. "Going out in this weather and breathing cold air is the worst thing you could do. Next thing you will come down with pneumonia."

"Oh, Mother," begged Prudence, "may I go? Then I could see Abigail."

"You are too little," said Benjamin hoarsely. "It would take you too long. Mother, I feel better today. Really I do. I could bring the fire much quicker than Prudence. I am the man of the house when Father is gone. He would blame me if something happened to her."

"I am not too little! Besides, what could happen to me?" demanded Prudence.

"You could get lost. You could meet a bear or a panther or even wolves."

"Ho, you can't scare me. Bears are in their dens for the winter. And Abigail told me what to do if a panther comes after you."

"What did she say?"

"She said someone told her you must always face a panther. As long as you don't turn your back, it won't attack you. That probably would work with wolves too."

"That sounds silly to me," scoffed Benjamin. "If you faced a panther, you'd have to walk backwards. And you couldn't do that very well carrying a pot of coals. You'd fall and spill them. Then the panther would eat you up."



“Benjamin, stop trying to scare your sister,” scolded Mother. “Anyway, you both know that only God can keep us safe in this wilderness.”

“He’s not scaring me, Mother,” said Prudence. “I know the way. The trail goes right past Abigail’s house, so I couldn’t get lost. It is sunny, even if it is cold. I’ll dress warmly. Please, Mother. I haven’t seen Abigail for ever so long.”

“The pot will get too heavy for you,” said Benjamin.

“Hush, children,” commanded Mother, trying to hide her anxiety. “Benjamin, you cannot go. That is out of the question. But you are right. The pot will get very heavy, and there are things in the forest that could frighten you.”

“Mother, I am almost twelve,” said Prudence firmly. “And I can set the pot down and rest if it gets too heavy.”

“Oh, dear,” lamented Mother, “Father could so easily stop at Luces’ for coals on his way home, if only he knew we needed them! Or if he were home, someone could go on Nellie. But he may not come till late afternoon. We cannot wait. We must have fire as soon as possible. Now let me think.”

After thinking a little, Mother said, “Prudence, I shall have to let you go. You are the only one who can. If it weren’t for the baby, I would go myself. But I can’t leave her for that long.”

Prudence could barely restrain her excitement. “Won’t Abigail be surprised to see me? And I’m really not afraid. Even if I see a panther or a wolf, I know what to do. I will be safe.”

“Child, child,” said Mother, “you know that only God can keep you safe. Call on Him if you need help. I will pray that you won’t see a panther or a wolf or anything else too frightening.”



“But come, you must hurry and get started. It is cold in here already. I can’t heat water or cook anything until you bring coals for a fire.”

Mother made Prudence put on extra petticoats, skirts, and shawls until she looked almost as broad as long.

“I’m so bundled up I can hardly walk,” the girl protested, laughing. “Abigail won’t know me.”

Mother lifted an iron pot from the swinging hook in the broad fireplace. She fitted the lid in place and handed it to Prudence. “Bring as many live coals as you can carry. Mistress Luce knows how to make sure they don’t go out on the way home. Only walk carefully, so you don’t stumble. If you fall and spill them, you’ll have to go right back and get more. I hate to let you go, Prudence. Oh, how could I have gone to bed without banking the fire!”

“Mother, you must not feel bad. You couldn’t help that you were so tired. Please, don’t worry about me. I will hurry. I will be careful and not fall.”



Prudence found it difficult to hurry. She could not run because of her heavy wraps. In addition, the iron pot got heavier the farther she went, and it kept bumping against her leg. Even before she reached Lucas’ clearing, Prudence began dreading the return trip.

But she did surprise Abigail. “Prudence,” her friend exclaimed when she opened the door. “How did you get here? Have you come to spend the day? Did you come alone? Come on in by the fire. You must be frozen.”