



illustrated by Kalon Baughan

# Mary and the Old Sow

by Alice Poling Good

**T**he gate's latch clicked at the yard's edge. I dropped my doll on the steps as I glanced up. Oh, it's Daddy. Does he have an old muddy rag doll in his arms? I see a head and legs. Daddy looks sick!

At that moment he saw me as I sat on the summer kitchen steps. "Hurry, Alice! Tell your Mother to get me some hot water!" he commanded.

As the kitchen door slammed behind me, Mother entered from the opposite side of the room with an armful of bedding for the regular Monday wash. "Daddy needs hot water, quickly!" I called to her.

By that time Mother was opening the kitchen screen to assist Daddy in entering the house with his burden. "It's Mary," he whispered, "She's still breathing. She's alive! Put some of that bedding here on the table." Mother sprang into action with first the bedding and then the water.

Daddy gently laid the child on the table. He placed each mud covered arm to her side and placed her legs out straight. It didn't look like Mary, so still and quiet and all covered with oozy mud. "Daddy, you said Mary was alive, but why doesn't she move?" I asked. "She looks funny. Her hair is stuck to her head. I can't see her eyes. She smells like the pigs."

"Be quiet, Alice, and get back," he ordered brusquely.

By this time Peggy and Billy had joined the little group around the kitchen table. "You children all stand back so Mary can get some air," Daddy said.

Mother filled a wash pan from the copper boiler on the wood range. She cooled the water with more water from the pitcher pump in the kitchen corner. Dad washed the mud from Mary's mouth and nostrils. He washed, then rinsed the cloth, again and again. Mother kept bringing fresh water. The little kitchen seemed overflowing with the real life drama. "We'll not remove all the mud now," Daddy said, "The shock would be too much for your little sister."

"What happened, Bill?" Mother asked. Little by little the story unfolded as they continued to slowly clean the muddy stench from the 3-year-old child.

Daddy said, "I've wanted to castrate those twelve pigs for several days. It was past time to turn them out in the pasture. Billy and Mary stood on the fence when Frank and I headed for the back of the sheep shed where we had them enclosed."

Daddy stopped talking as he put his fingers on Mary's wrist, then he said, "Her pulse is stronger now. I told Billy to take Mary to the house. Apparently, he didn't. The pigs ran and squealed and set up a terrible fuss as we caught them and operated on them. I guess Mary tried to cross the pig wallow to reach us in the back of the shed."

"Let her rest a moment now, Bill," Mother said.

Dad continued, "I knew the squealing pigs excited the old sow. Then I heard her snorting and carrying on in a different way. I looked out and saw her wallowing something in the mud. Suddenly I realized it was one of the kids. I told Frank to follow me with the pitchfork. He beat the sow off while I pulled Mary from the mud. I think we were just in time. I see only one small break here on her forehead."

Three children and their parents watched Mary and patiently waited. Eventually she opened her eyes. When Ashbaugh's huckster wagon arrived later in the day, only Mary got to choose what she wanted from the tempting array on the long shelves of the huckster wagon. Two sisters and a brother stood by, mouths watering, as she slowly sipped on an orange soda pop. For days the family's youngest member had top status. When anyone came to our house, we asked them, "Did you hear about Mary and the old sow?"

And wouldn't you know, should you happen to see Mary one day, she would be happy to verify this story of an experience that happened nearly 60 years ago.

AJ