

The Brownie Story

As printed in the Brownie Girl Scout Handbook, circa 1963.

Once upon a time two sisters named Mary and Betty lived in a little house in the North of England. They lived with their father and Grandmother.

Their father was a poor tailor who worked very hard all day. Then, at night, he did the best he could to clean the house. He swept the stone floor and washed the dishes. He brought in wood and made the fire.

The grandmother helped too. She made rugs out of pieces of cloth left over from the tailor's work. But Mary and Betty just played all day.



“Bairns are a burden,” said the tailor one day as he sat at work. Children were called “bairns” in the North of England, you know.

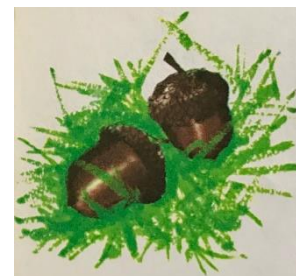
“Bairns are a blessing,” said the grandmother.

“Ah, not my bairns,” said the tailor. “Look at them! What they take out to play with, they lose. What they bring in to play with, I have to clear away. And they lift not a finger to help me. If I ask them to do something, they often forget what they were told to do. I would rather do a thing myself than ask them to do it!”

“But they are not bad bairns, my dear,” said the grandmother. “They are as playful as little squirrels.”

“And about as helpful,” said the tailor.

Just then the door flew open. Mary and Betty ran in. Their arms were full of moss and acorns which they threw on the floor.



“Take that outside,” said the tailor. “I have swept the floor once today, and I will not do it again.”

“Oh, Betty, you take it out!” said Mary, and sat down near the grandmother. Betty kicked the moss across the room and out of the door. The acorns were left on the floor.

“And those acorns, too!” the tailor said as he walked out.

“You pick them up, Mary,” said Betty. “What makes Father so cross, Granny?”

“He is tired, my dear, and you two do not help him a bit.”

“What could we do, Granny?”

“Many little things if you tried. Ah, what this house needs is a brownie or two. The luck of our house left when the brownies left us.”

“What were the brownies, Granny?”

“Very helpful little persons, my dears.”

“What did they do?”

“They came before the family was up. They cleaned the room and watered the flowers and helped in many other ways. They always ran off before we could see them. But often we heard them dancing about the house. They liked to work and made us all happy with their laughter.”



“What darlings! Did you pay them, Granny?”

“No, my dear. The brownies always help for love. But at night we would put out some bread and milk for them.”

“Oh, Granny! Where are they now?”

“Only the Wise Old Owl knows, my dear, I don’t.”

“Who is the Wise Old Owl, Granny?”

“I don’t know, my dear. My mother used to say that when she could not answer our questions.”

“Tell us more about the brownies, please!” said Betty. “did they ever live with anybody else?”

“There used to be many brownies. Some houses had a few.”

“Oh, I wish ours would come back!” cried both children at once. “They would – “

“ - sweep the floor,” said Mary.

“ - wash the dishes,” said Betty.

“ - bring in wood for the fire,” said Mary.

“ - and do everything! Oh, I wish they had not gone away! May we put out some bread and milk for them? Maybe they will come back if we do,” said Betty.

“Well, well,” said the grandmother. “They are welcome if they want to come. There is more than enough work for the brownies to do here.”

Mary and Betty hurried to put out a bowl of bread and milk for the brownies.



That night Mary could not sleep. She kept thinking of the brownies. “There is an owl living in the big tree near the pond,” she thought. “Maybe she is the Wise Old Owl. If she is, she can tell me where to find a brownie. When Father has gone to bed and the moon is out, I will go look for the Wise Old Owl.”

The moon rose like gold and went up into the sky like silver. Mary got out of bed and walked softly into the kitchen. There was the bread and milk – but no brownie had touched it. Mary opened the kitchen door and went out into the night.



In the silver light of the moon, the village looked like a fairy country. Mary hurried to the pond in the woods. All was still, so still that Mary could hear her heart beating.

Then suddenly in the quiet night – “HOOT – HOOT!” A great something flew by. It flew to the big tree near the pond. For a little while Mary was frightened. Then she laughed. “What that is an owl. Maybe it is just the one I am looking for!” She ran to the tree. The owl was sitting on a high branch.



“Come up! Come up!” said the Owl.

The owl could talk! Then it must be the Wise Old Owl! Mary climbed up and sat face to face with it.

“Speak up!” said the Owl. “What do you want?”

“Please,” said Mary, “where can I find a brownie to come and live with us?”

“Oohoo!” said the Owl. “Is that what you want to know? I know of two brownies.”

“Tell me, tell me – where do they live?”

“In your house,” said the Owl.

“In our house! Then why don’t they help us?”

“Perhaps they don’t know what has to be done,” said the Owl.

“Just tell me where to find those brownies. I can show them what has to be done.” said Mary.

“Can you?” asked the Owl. “Oohoo!” Mary was not sure whether the Owl was hooting or laughing.

“Of course I can,” said Mary. “There is plenty to do at our house!”

“Well, Mary, here is the way to find one of the brownies. Got to the north side of the pond when the moon is out. Turn yourself around three times while you say:

‘Twist me and turn me and show me the elf,
I looked in the water and saw_____’

“Then look into the pond to see the brownie. At the very same time that you see the brownie, you will think of the word that ends the magic rhyme.”

“The moon is out tonight,” said Mary. “I will go this minute!” She climbed down from the tree and ran to the north side of the pond.

In the moonlight the pond was like a mirror. Mary stood there, just looking for a while. Then she turned slowly round three times while she said the rhyme:

“Twist me and turn me and show me the elf,
I looked in the water and saw_____”



Then she stopped and looked into the pond. There she saw – only her own face!

“Why, there is no brownie, just me,” she said. “What did I do that was wrong? And there is no word that seems to rhyme with elf. Hef. . . Jelf . . . Melf . . . How silly!”

Many looked into the pond again. “I am supposed to see a brownie and I see only myself! Myself? Myself? But that does rhyme with elf! How strange. I have the rhyme, but no brownie! I will have to go back to the Wise Old Owl.”

So back Mary went to the tree.



“Oohoo,” said the Owl, “and what did you see in the pond?”

“I saw nothing but myself,” said Mary.

“And what did you think you would see?”

“A brownie,” said Mary. “You told me so.”

“And what are brownies like?” asked the Owl.

“Granny says brownies are helpful little people.”

“Ah,” said the Owl, “and the one you saw was not? Are you sure you did not see a brownie?”

“Yes,” said Mary. I am not a brownie.”

“Hoot! Hoot! Are you quite sure?” asked the Owl again. “You go home and speak to Betty about it. Tell her all about the magic rhyme, and maybe together you can find a brownie or two!

“If you find them, come along with them to our magic Brownie Ring. The Ring meets deep in the woods when the moon is full. There all the brownies talk about the helpful things they have done. And I help them find new things to do.”

Mary was surprised. “Brownies meet here in these woods? And no one knows about it?”

“Yes,” said Wise Old Owl. “Every time the moon is full, listen very carefully. You will hear the call to the Brownie Ring:

‘Round and round and round about,
Turn about in and out.
Come into the Brownie Ring,
Ready for most anything!’

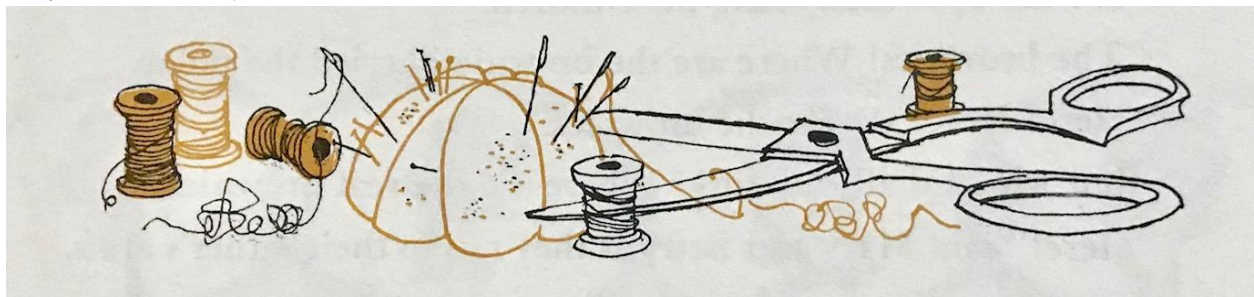


“I will go home and tell Betty everything you have said, and maybe together we can find the brownies!”

“I am sure you can,” said the Owl. “Now hold on to me, and I will take you home.”

Whisk! Whoosh! Before she knew it, Mary was back in her own little bed. It was almost day. She woke Betty at once and told her what had happened. She told her about the magic rhyme that ended with the word “myself.” They thought about it a long time. Then they both laughed out loud as they guessed who the brownies were.

They tiptoed down to the kitchen. There they did every bit of work they could find to do. They even found the scissors their father had lost a week ago. Then they hurried out of the room as they heard his step.



When the poor tailor came into the kitchen, he looked around and rubbed his eyes. He looked around again and rubbed them harder. The fire was going. The kettle was on. The table was set. The floor was clean. The room was as bright and shiny as a new penny.

For a while the tailor could not say a word. Then he called, “Granny! Mary! Betty! Our brownies have come back! And look,” he said as he sat down at the table, “a brownie has even found my scissors!”

The next morning and for mornings after, the tailor tried to get up early enough to thank the brownies. But he was never able to catch them at their work.

One morning, very early, he heard laughter. “It must be the brownies,” he thought. He put on his clothes and went down the stairs.

Now he heard singing, too. “This is my chance to thank them,” he said, and opened the door to the kitchen.

There he saw Mary and Betty dancing round the room. “What is this? What have we here?” The tailor was so surprised.

“It’s the brownies,” sang the children.

“The brownies! Where are the brownies?” cried the tailor.

“Here! Here! We are the brownies.”

“But who did all the work? Where are the real brownies?”

“Here!” said Mary and Betty as they ran to their father’s arms.



When Granny heard the noise, she came down, too. The tailor told her how he had found the brownies.

“What do you think of it all, Granny?” asked the tailor.

“Bairns are a blessing,” said Granny. “I told you so.”

And ever after the tailor’s brownies were the joy of his life. Every day they found more things to do to brighten the little home.

Sometimes the tailor wondered how they learned to do so much. But he never found out the answer. For he never saw them creeping out to join the other brownies in the magic Brownie Ring deep in the woods.

And that is the secret of the Brownie Girl Scout name.

Active version:

If your girls need a little bit of activity as you read, divide them evenly into four parts. Each part should listen for their assigned word. When they hear the word, they should perform the following action:

Father: Slump down and say “I’m so tired!”

Granny: Slap both knees and say “Oh, my!”

Brownies: Stand up, make the Girl Scout sign, and say “Be Prepared!”

Owl: Flap arms and say “Who! Who!”