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Tabby's Tablecloth

Louisa May Alcott · *1884 · English original*

A young Concord messenger earns a tablecloth whose final service comes in another war.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What makes an inherited object worthy of its family's pride?

"quick-witted, stout-hearted, and light-footed."
Opening: 20 March 1775

The cloth preserves Tabby's daring, then extends it through the practical kindness of those who use it to dress wounds.

KEY CHARACTERS

Tabitha Tarbell
Fourteen-year-old Concord girl whose quick observation supports daring action.

Daniel Bliss
Receives the British visitors at the dinner Tabby overhears.

Captain David Brown
Entrusts her with errands and gives her the cloth.

Nurse Hunt
Uses the old linen and tells its history at the bedside.

John Bullard and Carrol
English drummer-boy and wounded Confederate joined by shared care.

Grades 3–5
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The messenger observes

OPENING: 20 MARCH 1775

Tabby carries a concealed message and identifies two strangers whose bearing suggests a military errand.

- On the 20th of March, 1775, Tabitha Tarbell is on a Concord road with a basket of eggs.
- She is a stanch little Rebel of fourteen, hurrying through stirring times.
- The tale is Alcott's Tabby's Table-Cloth from Spinning-Wheel Stories, later retitled A Little Heroine of Concord.

> *"quick-witted, stout-hearted, and light-footed."*
> Opening: 20 March 1775

02

Under the dinner table

THE VISIT TO DANIEL BLISS'S HOUSE

A cat reveals a hiding place; Tabby overhears the officers despite pain and a nearly revealing sneeze.

- Tabby hides and hears what the British officers say at dinner.
- The table-cloth is her cover and, later, a keepsake of that day.
- The tension is local and specific: Concord, stores, and a child's errand.

> *"Where one tabby hides, another can."*
> The visit to Daniel Bliss's house

03

The town prepares and resists

AFTER TABBY'S ESCAPE

Tabby reports what she has heard, later helps conceal arms, and receives the dinner cloth after the fighting.

- The town prepares, and the fight comes on in April.
- Tabby's courage is practical help, not a later legend pasted on.
- Keep Alcott's spelling and the frame of the spinning-wheel evening.

> *"So they escaped; but the warning was given,"*
> After Tabby's escape

04

The keepsake becomes care

FINAL SENTENCE

The family preserves the cloth until wartime need turns it into dressings for wounded soldiers and an occasion for friendship.

- Years later the cloth is still of use in a hospital ward.
- Three hands meet across the beds in a last, peaceful service.
- The last line is that the table-cloth made a beautiful and useful end at last.

> *"So Tabby's table-cloth did make a beautiful and useful end at last."*
> Final sentence

Courage and service

Family memory

Reconciliation through care

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 3–5

1. The action moves from 1775 to a Civil War hospital generations later.
2. Two different men named Brown belong to opposing sides.
3. The tablecloth's usefulness changes as it passes through the family.

Quotations are verbatim from the English original, Project Gutenberg #36221: Louisa May Alcott, Spinning-Wheel Stories (1884), the tale "Tabby's Table-Cloth.", the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/alcott-tabbys-tablecloth/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.